

Kenning



DEFINITION

What is a kenning? Here's a quick and simple definition:

A kenning is a [figure of speech](#) in which two words are combined in order to form a poetic expression that refers to a person or a thing. For example, "whale-road" is a kenning for the sea. Kennings are most commonly found in Old Norse and Old English poetry.

Some additional key details about kennings:

- In most cases, kennings consist of two nouns side-by-side combined using hyphens so that they form a single unit known as a compound.
- A kenning is a specific type of circumlocution because it refers to a thing using more words than necessary.
- Because the meaning of a kenning is something more than or different from the literal meaning of its combined words, a kenning is a type of [figurative language](#). In fact, one could say that every kenning involves an implied [simile](#) ("the sea is like a road for whales").
- The person or thing to which a kenning refers to is known as the kenning's "referent."

How to Pronounce Kenning

Here's how to pronounce kenning: **ken**-ing

Kennings in Depth

Kennings are found most commonly in Old English and Norse poetry. They typically consist of two nouns that are joined by a hyphen, forming a compound that stands in for another noun, known as the "referent." The two words that make up a kenning are called the "base word" and the "determinant":

- **The base word** stands-in for the referent, and shares a metaphoric (though not always immediately evident) similarity with the referent.
- **The determinant** modifies the meaning of the base word, much like an adjective modifies a noun, to help reveal the base word's connection to the referent.

So in the kenning "whale-road," the noun "road" is the [base-word](#), since it stands-in for the referent (the sea). The similarity they share is that both are expanses that offer a means of travel. The noun "whale" is the [determinant](#), because it modifies the noun "road" by describing the *type* of road: in this case, a road for whales.

Modern Kennings

While kennings are most common and noticeable in Old English and Norse poetry, there are some modern phrases or [idioms](#) that fit the general kenning form. For instance, take these two examples:

- **Couch potato:** Here the referent (a lazy person) is being compared to a potato (which is similar to the lazy person in its lack of movement), so "potato" is the [base word](#). The noun "couch" describes what *kind* of potato it is (one that sits on a couch), so "couch" serves as the [determinant](#).
- **Bookworm:** In this case, the referent (a voracious reader) is being compared to a worm (a voracious eater), so the "worm" is the [base word](#). The noun "book" describes the *type* of worm, so "book" is the [determinant](#).

The point is not so much that there are still lots of poets thinking up kennings, but rather that the kenning form still has resonance today and crops up even when people are *not* purposely thinking up kennings.

Kennings vs. Epithets

An epithet is a descriptive phrase that is used to characterize a person or thing, and (like kennings) it can often be used in place of or alongside the thing being described. However, kennings and epithets are not the same. For example, in [The Odyssey](#), the goddess Athena is frequently referred to as "grey-eyed Athena." In this case, "grey-eyed" is an epithet for Athena. Similarly, water might be referred to using the epithet "bane of fire." Note the two ways in which these, and all, epithets are unlike kennings:

- **Structurally:** Neither follows the noun-noun "determinant + base word" structure that is a part of kennings.
- **Metaphorically:** Kennings create a simile between their referent, base word, and determinant ("the sea *is like* a road for whales"). Epithets, in contrast, identify a quality or characteristic of a thing or person and use that as the basis of its reference without creating any kind of comparison: Athena *is* grey-eyed; water *is* the bane of fire.



EXAMPLES

As mentioned earlier, kennings are prevalent in Old English and Norse poetry, and much less prevalent anywhere else. The examples below are all from different Old English poems.

kennings in "Beowulf"

kennings are used prolifically throughout Beowulf, one of the oldest surviving works of literature in Old English. In this passage, the compound phrase "battle-sweat" is used as a kenning for blood.

...bright blade, when the blood gushed o'er it,
battle-sweat hot; but the hilt I brought back
from my foes.

And here, "sea-cloth" is used to refer to a sail.

A sea-cloth was set, a sail with ropes,
firm to the mast; the flood-timbers moaned;

kennings in "The Seafarer"

Another Old English poem, "The Seafarer" makes use of kennings like "whale's path" and "whale-road" to describe the sea.

And now my spirit twists
out of my breast,
my spirit
out in the waterways,
over the whale's path
it soars widely
through all the corners of the world

kennings in "The Phoenix"

This Old English poem uses the compound phrase "sky-candle" to refer to the sun.

The bright sky-candle shines from the south,
Bringing warmth and light to middle-earth...



WHY WRITERS USE IT

At the center of every kenning is a [simile](#): the sea is like a road for whales; the sun is like a candle in the sky. So in many ways, people

use kennings to breathe new life into the subjects of their poetry using words that are not synonyms for the thing being described, but that share certain essential characteristics with it. In this sense, kennings help to describe things poetically by using metaphorical or figurative language that can change the way readers see or think about the thing being described. Additionally, it's important to note that kennings are not nearly as common in modern English literature as they were in Old English and Old Norse literature, when they were an essential part of what it meant to write poetry. The same kennings were often used repeatedly by different writers in Old English, so the use of kennings in writing was also simply a way of participating in the poetic style and convention of the time.



OTHER RESOURCES

- [The Wikipedia Page on Kenning](#): A somewhat technical explanation, including various helpful examples.
- [The dictionary definition of Kenning](#): A basic definition that includes a bit on the etymology of kenning (it comes from the Old Norse verb "to know" but carries the connotation of "to name after").
- [A short video](#) explaining kennings and their use in "Beowulf" in under three minutes.

HOW TO CITE

MLA

Bergman, Bennet. "Kenning." LitCharts. LitCharts LLC, 5 May 2017. Web. 31 Aug 2017.

Chicago Manual

Bergman, Bennet. "Kenning." LitCharts LLC, May 5, 2017. Retrieved August 31, 2017. <http://www.litcharts.com/literary-devices-and-terms/kenning>.