Refrain

DEFINITION

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

> In a poem or song, a refrain is a line or group of lines that regularly repeat, usually at the end of a stanza in a poem or at the end of a verse in a song. In a speech or other prose writing, a refrain can refer to any phrase that repeats a number of times within the text.

Some additional key details about refrains:

- Refrains can be one or more lines, though in some cases they can be as short as a few words or even a single word. Although refrains generally use the same language every time they're repeated in a poem, the language may vary slightly between repetitions.
- A poem may have more than one refrain.
- Generally speaking, refrains repeat at regular intervals throughout a poem, such as at the end of every stanza. Some poems, however, may repeat the refrain more sporadically.

How to Pronounce Refrain

Here's how to pronounce refrain: re-**frayn**

Refrains in Depth

Refrains first became popular in poetry because of their importance to the lyric poetry forms of the middle ages, which were often recited or sung with musical accompaniment. The repetition of words or phrases between verses was a useful tool for helping writers and performers memorize the words of poems, and refrains also helped the listener to get a sense for the rhythm of the poem, since refrains are generally repeated at regular intervals. The tradition of repeating refrains in lyric poetry has continued into the present day through popular music—most genres of songs with lyrics contain choruses with lyrics that repeat, making those choruses a form of refrain. A chorus, in other words, is just a specialized kind of refrain.

In the 15th and 16th centuries, refrains branched out from lyric poetry and music; they began to be commonly found in non-lyric formal verse (poetry with a strict meter and rhyme scheme) and, to a lesser extent, in blank verse (poetry with a strict meter but no rhyme). Since that time, refrains have been used in all types of poetry (including in free verse) and the conventions that originally determined the ways in which refrains could be used—that repetition had to be identical in each instance and had to occur at regular intervals, for example—were met with new variations and innovations. Thus, the term refrain has expanded over time to encompass any series of words that are repeated throughout a poem.

Poetic Forms That Include Refrains

Although refrains can be used in any type of poetry, some fixed forms of poetry *require* the writer to include a refrain. Below is a list of types of poems that, by virtue of their form, require the use of a refrain in specific places throughout the poem. For more in-depth information about each of these forms, and for examples of how refrains are used in each, visit the individual entries for each type of poem.

- Ballad: A ballad is a type of poem that tells a story and was traditionally set to music. English language ballads are typically composed of four-line stanzas that follow an ABCB rhyme scheme. They *often* use a refrain, but not always.
- Ballade: A ballade is a form of lyric poetry that originated in medieval France. Ballades follow a strict rhyme scheme and typically have three eight-line stanzas followed by a shorter four-line stanza called an envoi. The last line of each stanza is a refrain.
- Sestina: A sestina is a poem consisting of six six-line sestets and a final three-line tercet. In the sestina, no lines are actually repeated in full, but specific words are repeated throughout the poem according to a prescribed pattern, making this form a variation on more conventional refrains.
- Villanelle: A villanelle is a type of poem that consists of five tercets followed by one four-line quatrain. The first and third lines of the first tercet both function as repeating refrains, which alternate as the final line of each subsequent tercet and appear again as the two final lines of the concluding quatrain.

Refrains in Speeches and Prose Writing

The term "refrain" has come to have a meaning that is a bit different, and less specific, in the context of speeches or prose writing. In such writing, a refrain refers simply to any phrase or sentence is regularly repeated. Because a refrain can refer to virtually any kind of repetition in prose writing, it can overlap with other figures of speech that refer to very specific sorts of repetition, including epistrophe and anaphora.

EXAMPLES

Examples of Refrain in Poetry

Refrain in Shakespeare's "When that I was and a little tiny boy"

These are the first two stanzas of a song from Shakespeare's play, *Twelfth Night*. A lyric poem such as this is described as having a "double refrain," because it has two lines that repeat as refrains in each stanza.

> When that I was and a little tiny boy,
> With hey, ho, the wind and the rain,
> A foolish thing was but a toy,
> For the rain it raineth every day.
>
> But when I came to man's estate,
> With hey, ho, the wind and the rain,
> 'Gainst knaves and thieves men shut their gate,
> For the rain it raineth every day.

Refrain in Yeats's "September 1913"

In this example, which shows the first two stanzas of the poem, the final line of each stanza functions as a refrain.

> What need you, being come to sense,
> But fumble in a greasy till
> And add the halfpence to the pence
> And prayer to shivering prayer, until
> You have dried the marrow from the bone;
> For men were born to pray and save:
> Romantic Ireland's dead and gone,
> It's with O'Leary in the grave.
>
> Yet they were of a different kind,
> The names that stilled your childish play,
> They have gone about the world like wind,
> But little time had they to pray
> For whom the hangman's rope was spun,
> And what, God help us, could they save?
> Romantic Ireland's dead and gone,
> It's with O'Leary in the grave.

Refrain in Octavio Paz's "Wind, Water, Stone"

An atypical example of refrain, Octavio Paz's "Wind, Water, Stone" repeats the same set of words as the refrain of each quatrain in the poem, but the words appear in different orders in each occurrence of the refrain. Here are the first two stanzas of the poem:

> Water hollows stone,
> wind scatters water,
> stone stops the wind.
> Water, wind, stone.
>
> Wind carves stone,
> stone's a cup of water,
> water escapes and is wind.
> Stone, wind, water.

Refrain in Allen Ginsberg's "Howl"

"I'm with you in Rockland" is the famous refrain Ginsberg's groundbreaking poem "Howl," which was widely censored at the time of its publication for its vulgar language and explicit themes. In this excerpt the refrain comes at the beginning of sentences and is repeated with such regularity, making it also an example of anaphora.

> Carl Solomon! I'm with you in Rockland
> where you're madder than I am
> I'm with you in Rockland
> where you must feel very strange
> I'm with you in Rockland
> where you imitate the shade of my mother
> I'm with you in Rockland
> where you've murdered your twelve secretaries
> I'm with you in Rockland
> where you laugh at this invisible humor
> I'm with you in Rockland
> where we are great writers on the same dreadful typewriter
> I'm with you in Rockland
> where your condition has become serious and is reported on the radio

Refrain in Ernest Henley's "Ballade (Double Refrain) Of Midsummer Days And Nights"

Here is another, more modern example of a poem with a double refrain. This poem was written in the early 20th century. Excerpted here are just the first two stanzas of the full poem (which in its entirety is three stanzas plus an envoi).

> With a ripple of leaves and a tinkle of streams
> The full world rolls in a rhythm of praise,
> And the winds are one with the clouds and beams--
> Midsummer days! Midsummer days!
> The dusk grows vast; in a purple haze,
> While the West from a rapture of sunset rights,
> Faint stars their exquisite lamps upraise--
> Midsummer nights! O midsummer nights!
>
> The wood's green heart is a nest of dreams,
> The lush grass thickens and springs and sways,
> The rathe wheat rustles, the landscape gleams--
> Midsummer days! Midsummer days!
> In the stilly fields, in the stilly ways,
> All secret shadows and mystic lights,
> Late lovers murmur and linger and gaze--
> Midsummer nights! O midsummer nights!

Refrain in Robert Frost's "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening"

Even lines that are only repeated once in a poem may be called a refrain, as in the ending of this famous poem by Robert Frost.

> The woods are lovely, dark and deep,
> But I have promises to keep,
> And miles to go before I sleep,
> And miles to go before I sleep.

Examples of Refrain in Songs

While refrain is a popular device in poetry, you are probably most familiar with its use in song lyrics. Refrains are an essential part of the form of most songs, and they're often the most memorable and beloved part of a song.

It is worth noting that a refrain and a chorus in a song are not exactly the same thing. A refrain refers to repeated lyrics, and so every chorus (which are marked by repeating lyrics) is a refrain. The term "chorus", however, refers to when all the musical elements—singers and instruments—come together in unison. It is possible for a song to have a refrain without such a coming together of the musical elements. So, while every chorus in a song is a refrain, *not* every refrain is a chorus.

Refrain in "Sweet Caroline"

If you've ever been inside Fenway Park for the 8th inning of a Red Sox game, then you've heard thousands of baseball fans singing Neil Diamond's "Sweet Caroline." Notice in this video that the audience is markedly more enthusiastic during the song's refrain—for many people, the refrain is likely the only part of the song that they know by heart, since the refrain's repetition throughout the song is what makes it memorable and beloved.

> Sweet Caroline
> Good times never seemed so good
> I've been inclined
> To believe they never would

Refrain in "Always on Time"

In Ja Rule's "Always on Time," he brings in Ashanti to sing the refrain:

> Baby, I'm not always there when you call, but I'm always on time
> And I gave you my all, now baby, be mine

This refrain—like many refrains—is a condensation of the central themes of the song, which is about a relationship in which two people really care about one another but don't always treat each other right. The refrain obliquely suggests the couple's difficulties, as well as the fact that they want to make it work anyway, both of which Ja Rule elaborates on during each of the song's verses.

Refrain in "Hey Ya"

A song refrain doesn't always have to make sense—sometimes it can be essentially nonsense and still serve the purpose of pulling the audience in through catchy repetition. Take Outkast's "Hey Ya," the refrain of which is simply:

> Hey ya! Hey ya!
> Hey ya! Hey ya!
> Hey ya! Hey ya!
> Hey ya! Hey ya!

"Hey Ya" is one of the most iconic songs of the (still-young) 21st century, and the refrain is an essential part of its mood, structure, and—believe it or not—message. The song, which is characterized by its exuberant refrain, is deceptively upbeat and danceable, even though its subject is quintessentially depressing: André 3000 is singing about how he thinks that all love is a sham and he's unhappy in his relationship. Consider this part of the song in relation to the refrain (which these lines immediately follow):

> You think you've got it
> Oh, you think you've got it
> But "got it" just don't get it
> 'Til there's nothing at all

André 3000 never specifies what he means by this, but presumably the meaning is multiple. First, it's about love—he thought he had love in his relationship, but he didn't understand that the love was false. Second, these lines can be seen as a small joke on listeners, who are likely not to realize that the song, despite its upbeat sound, is sad. In this sense, these lines might directly refer to the song's refrain: listeners think that the chorus is just an excuse for dancing, when maybe it's meant to express the frustration and incomprehensibility of failed love. Thus, just as Outkast doesn't get love, listeners don't get the refrain of "Hey Ya."

Refrain in Speeches

In speeches and other prose writing, a refrain refers simply to any phrase or sentence that is regularly repeated. Refrains are popular devices in speeches, because repetition is memorable, musical, and can help to give a common structure and meaning to disparate ideas. These qualities are particularly important in speeches, because the audience must be made to understand and remember complex ideas without the ability to "rewind" or parse a phrase for its meaning.

Refrain in "Ain't I a Woman?"

Sojourner Truth uses refrain in her famous speech "Ain't I a Woman?" which she delivered without preparation at a women's rights convention in Ohio in 1851. Her refrain—which later became the name by which her untitled speech is known—is a rhetorical question, repeated to make the point that women are just as capable as men. Below is an excerpt:

> That man over there says that women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mud-puddles, or gives me any best place! And ain't I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! I have ploughed and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And ain't I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man—when I could get it—and bear the lash as well! And ain't I a woman? I have borne thirteen children, and seen most all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out

> with my mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me! And ain't I a woman?

By alternating this rhetorical question with evidence of her equality to men, Sojourner Truth uses refrain in order to make her point seem obvious; each time the question is repeated, the notion of contradicting her seems more and more silly. By the end of the paragraph—once "And ain't I a woman?" has been repeated four times—Sojourner Truth has made it clear that to justify women's oppression on the grounds that women are weaker than men is absurd.

Refrain in "I Have a Dream"

Like Sojourner Truth's "Ain't I a Woman?", Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech—perhaps the most famous speech of the twentieth century—takes its title from its refrain, which repeats during the speech's climax, excerpted below:

> And so even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream.
>
> I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal."
>
> I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia, the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood.
>
> I have a dream that one day even the state of Mississippi, a state sweltering with the heat of injustice, sweltering with the heat of oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice.
>
> I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.

King uses this refrain for many reasons, but among the most important is that the repetition of "I have a dream" creates a rhythm that makes the statement begin to feel inevitable. This is powerful rhetorical momentum in a speech about progress and equality, and it seems to suggest that King's dream is destined to prevail, just as the phrase is destined to recur.

Refrain in Barack Obama's 2008 Election Victory Speech

Barack Obama—who's own speechwriting is deeply influenced by that of Martin Luther King, Jr.—frequently uses refrain in his speeches. The phrase "Yes we can" has been a longtime motto of Obama's, and while it appears in many of his speeches, he used it most iconically as a refrain in his speech after winning the 2008 election. In the excerpt below, Obama repeatedly references Ann Nixon Cooper, a 106 year old black woman from Atlanta who couldn't vote when she was younger because of her gender and race:

> And tonight, I think about all that she's seen throughout her century in America—the heartache and the hope; the struggle and the progress; the times we were told that we can't, and the people who pressed on with that American creed: Yes we can.
>
> At a time when women's voices were silenced and their hopes dismissed, she lived to see them stand up and speak out and reach for the ballot. Yes we can.
>
> When there was despair in the dust bowl and depression across the land, she saw a nation conquer fear itself with a New Deal, new jobs, a new sense of common purpose. Yes we can.
>
> When the bombs fell on our harbour and tyranny threatened the world, she was there to witness a generation rise to greatness and a democracy was saved. Yes we can.
>
> She was there for the buses in Montgomery, the hoses in Birmingham, a bridge in Selma, and a preacher from Atlanta who told a people that 'We Shall Overcome'. Yes we can.

Obama's refrain serves many purposes: it makes a rhetorical point, it uplifts the audience, and it unifies historical events into a narrative of progress. Perhaps most important, though, the refrain makes the audience feel that they are a part of Obama's victory. As you watch the video of the speech here, notice that the repetition of "Yes we can" invites the audience to participate by repeating the line after he does. Obama never explicitly tells the audience that they may do this—it's the very structure of the refrain that stirs the audience into participation, which speaks to the rhetorical power of the refrain.

WHY WRITERS USE IT

The refrain is a versatile literary device that takes many forms and has many purposes. Writers, musicians, and orators use refrains in songs, speeches, and poems in order to drive a point home, aid a reader or listener's memory, establish central themes, and create structure. Repeated words or phrases stick more easily in a reader or listener's mind and accentuate the structure and rhythm of what's being said—a repeated line like "I have a dream," for example, establishes the central theme of change and progress, and creates a rhythm within which progress feels as inevitable as the speech's structure. Sometimes refrains are used simply to condense and repeat the central subject of a poem or song, as in Henley's "Ballade of Midsummer Days and Nights" and Ja Rule's "Always on Time," both excerpted above. Refrains can also organize the content of a speech, song, or poem by providing a memorable rhetorical framework. This is particularly useful in poems or songs that move quickly and wildly between divergent images and ideas, as in Ginsberg's poem "Howl." Last, in songs and in some fixed forms of poetry, refrains are often used simply because their inclusion is traditional to the form in which the poet or songwriter is writing.

OTHER RESOURCES

- The Wikipedia Page on Refrain: A somewhat technical explanation, including various helpful examples of how refrain is used in music.
- The dictionary definition of Refrain: A basic definition that includes a bit on the etymology of refrain.
- A short video that explains refrain and gives a few examples in under two minutes.
- A post on the difference between a refrain and a chorus in a song.

HOW TO CITE

MLA

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

Chicago Manual

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