

# Repetition



## DEFINITION

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

Repetition is a literary device in which a word or phrase is repeated two or more times. Repetition occurs in so many different forms that it is usually *not* thought of as a single [figure of speech](#). Instead, it's more useful to think of repetition as being a *category* that covers a number of more specific figures of speech, all of which use repetition in different ways.

Some additional key details about repetition:

- Figures of speech that employ repetition usually repeat single words or short phrases, but some can involve the repetition of sounds while others might involve the repetition of entire sentences.
- Repeating information has been scientifically shown to increase the likelihood of changing people's minds. The persuasive power of repetition is one of the reasons it is so common.

## Repetition Pronunciation

Here's how to pronounce repetition: rep-ih-**tish**-un

## Figures of Speech that Use Repetition

There are many different figures of speech that use repetition, all in different ways. These figures of speech can vary in the things they repeat (sounds, words, phrases, etc.) as well as in the specific order in which the repeated words appear in clauses or sentences. The most common repetition figures of speech are:

- **Alliteration:** The repetition of the same sound in a group of words, such as the "b" sound in: "Bob brought the box of bricks to the basement." The repeating sound must occur either in the first letter of each word, or in the stressed syllables of those words.
- **Anadiplosis:** Occurs when a word or group of words located at the end of one clause or sentence is repeated at or near the beginning of the following clause or sentence. This line from the novelist Henry James is an example of anadiplosis: "Our doubt is our passion, and our passion is our task."
- **Anaphora:** The repetition of words at the beginning of successive clauses, phrases, or sentences. For example, Martin Luther King's famous "I Have a Dream" speech contains anaphora: "So let freedom ring from the prodigious hilltops of New Hampshire. Let freedom ring from the mighty mountains of New York. Let freedom ring from the heightening Alleghenies of Pennsylvania..."

- **Antanacsis:** A repetition of a word or phrase in which the that word or phrase means something different each time it appears. A famous example of antanacsis is Benjamin Franklin's statement that: "We must all hang together, or assuredly we shall all hang separately."
- **Antimetabole:** The repetition of a phrase, but with the order of words reversed. John F. Kennedy's words, "Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country," is a famous example of antimetabole.
- **Assonance:** The repetition of the same vowel sound within a group of words. An example of assonance is the repetition of the "oo" sound in: "Who gave Newt and Scooter the blue tuna? It was too soon!"
- **Consonance:** The repetition of the same consonant sound within a group of words. An example of consonance is the repetition of the "f" sound in: "Traffic figures to be tough on July Fourth."
- **Diacope:** The repetition of a word or phrase with a small number of intervening words. The repetition of "unhappy" in the first line of *Anna Karenina* is an example of diacope, "Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way," is an example of diacope.
- **Epanalepsis:** Occurs when the beginning of a clause or sentence is repeated at the end of that same clause or sentence, with words intervening. The sentence "The king is dead, long live the king!" is an example of epanalepsis.
- **Epistrophe:** In epistrophe, one or more words repeat at the end of successive phrases, clauses, or sentences. In his Gettysburg Address, Abraham Lincoln urged the American people to ensure that, "government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth." His repetition of "the people" at the end of each clause is an example of epistrophe.
- **Epizeuxis:** The repetition of a word or phrase in immediate succession, with no words in between. When the character Kurtz in *Heart of Darkness* says, "The horror, the horror," that's an example of epizeuxis.
- **Polysyndeton:** Occurs when coordinating conjunctions—words such as "and," "or," and "but" that join other words or clauses in a sentence into relationships of equal importance—are used several times in close succession, particularly where conjunctions would normally not be present at all. For instance, the following sentence contains polysyndeton: "We ate roast beef and squash and biscuits and potatoes and corn and cheese and cherry pie."
- **Polyptoton:** Occurs when words that share the same root, but are not identical, are repeated. The question, "Who shall watch the watchmen?" is an example of polyptoton.
- **Refrain:** 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.



## EXAMPLES

Here are additional examples from literature for each of the most common figures of speech that use repetition.

### Repetition Example from Literature: [Alliteration](#)

This example from lines 5-6 of the Prologue of [Romeo and Juliet](#) has two sets of alliteration, one with “f” sounds and one with “l” sounds.

From forth the fatal loins of these two foes  
A pair of star-cross'd lovers take their life;

### Repetition Example from Literature: [Anadiplosis](#)

In [Lolita](#), the morally bankrupt Humbert Humbert defends his relationship to the young Lolita to an imagined jury. Here, he reveals that what he presented as another person's letter was actually written by him, ostensibly from memory.

What I present here is what I remember of the letter, and  
what I remember of the letter I remember verbatim  
(including that awful French.)

A tactic of his deceit involves convincing the jury of the improbable—that is, that he remembers a letter verbatim—and his use of anadiplosis as a persuasion tool reflects both his charming and incredibly slimy personality.

### Repetition Example from Literature: [Anaphora](#)

In this short excerpt from [The Great Gatsby](#), F. Scott Fitzgerald uses anaphora in a description of the apartment that Tom Buchanan keeps as a secret location for his extramarital affair. The anaphora emphasizes the smallness of this gaudy apartment, which also reflects the pettiness of the affair.

The apartment was on the top floor—a small living-room, a  
small dining-room, a small bedroom, and a bath.

### Repetition Example from Literature: [Antanaclasis](#)

Shakespeare often used antanaclasis in his plays. For instance, in Act V of [Henry V](#) a character named Pistol promises to sneak off to England and there engage in crime:

To England will I steal, and there I'll steal.

### Repetition Example from Literature: [Antimetabole](#)

The dashing trio's rallying cry in [The Three Musketeers](#) is a famous example of antimetabole. The saying has remained in circulation until today—in part because antimetabole makes it so memorable.

All for one and one for all!

### Repetition Example from Literature: [Assonance](#)

In these lines from Book XII of Lattimore's translation of Homer's [Iliad](#) the assonance helps reinforce the lulling effect of the winds' sleep:

"When Zeus ...  
stills the winds asleep in the solid drift ..."

### Repetition Example from Literature: [Consonance](#)

In this line from chapter 9 of [Moby-Dick](#), the “s” and “h” sounds mirror the activity of the scene—singing—by making the prose musical.

Nearly all joined in singing this hymn, which swelled high  
about the howling of the storm ...

### Repetition Example from Literature: [Diacope](#)

In [Othello](#), just before he kills Desdemona in Act V, Othello utters this line that contains the repetition of diacope:

Put out the light, and then put out the light.

It's worth noting that Othello's line here is *also* an example of antanaclasis, as he is using “put out the light” to mean two different things.

### Repetition Example from Literature: [Epanalepsis](#)

In this excerpt from a speech by Ralph Nader, the repetition of “minimum wage” underscores its role as a major concern in both his speech and his political priorities.

A minimum wage that is not a livable wage can never be a  
minimum wage.

### Repetition Example from Literature: [Epistrophe](#)

In this example from Chapter 28 of the [The Grapes of Wrath](#), Steinbeck's use of epistrophe in Tom Joad's farewell dialog with his mother emphasizes Joad's desire both to provide her with some reassurance and continue to be there for her:

Wherever they's a fight so hungry people can eat, I'll be  
there. Wherever they's a cop beaten' up a guy, I'll be  
there...I'll be in the way guys yell when they're mad an'—I'll  
be in the way kids laugh when they're hungry and they know

supper's ready. An' when our folk eat the stuff they raise  
n'live in the houses they build—why, I'll be there.

Joad's repetition of his presence wherever poor people need help also emphasizes his dedication to the cause he believes in, and turns him into an almost mythological or godly presence who is always there to protect and support the downtrodden.

### Repetition Example from Literature: [Epizeuxis](#)

One of the most famous examples of epizeuxis occurs in [Hamlet](#), as Hamlet is speaking to (and mocking) Polonius in Act 2. When Polonius asks Hamlet what he's reading, Hamlet responds:

Words, words, words.

Here Hamlet both mocks what he sees as the stupidity of Polonius's question, but at the same time the repetition communicates a kind of awful weariness, in which Hamlet can't bring himself to care about the meaning of the words.

### Repetition Example from Literature: [Polysyndeton](#)

Bob Dylan won the nobel prize for literature for the genius of his lyrics. His song "Masters of War" shows how polysyndeton can be used to build a specific emotion:

"**And** I hope that you die  
**And** your death'll come soon  
I will follow your casket  
In the pale afternoon  
**And** I'll watch while you're lowered  
Down to your deathbed  
**And** I'll stand over your grave  
'Til I'm sure that you're dead"

Anger and disgust are palpable in the final lines of this song of protest against the politicians behind the Vietnam War. By using polysyndeton, Dylan continues to add phrase after phrase, far beyond where listeners might expect him to stop, to fully communicate the depth of his fury and his hatred for the politicians he calls the "masters of war."

### Repetition Example from Literature: [Polyptoton](#)

In Shakespeare's play *Troilus and Cressida*, the character Troilus uses polyptoton three times in two lines. In all three cases, the repetition emphasizes the might of the Greeks:

The Greeks are strong and skillful to their strength,  
Fierce to their skill and to their fierceness valiant;

### Repetition Example from Literature: [Refrain](#)

These are the first two stanzas of a song from Shakespeare's play, [Twelfth Night](#). This poem actually contains 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.



## WHY WRITERS USE IT

Given the large number of figures of speech that use repetition, it stands to reason that writers use repetition for all sorts of different reasons. That said, it's possible to describe some general reasons that writers might choose to use repetition:

- **Emphasis:** The repetition of a word or phrase naturally serves to highlight its importance within a text and as a thing or idea.
- **Persuasion:** Scientific studies have shown that simply repeating something is one of the most effective ways to convince people of its truth. Figures of speech that use repetition are common in speeches for just this reason.
- **Contrast:** Sometimes by repeating the same thing in slightly different contexts it is possible to illuminate contrasts. For instance, in the sentence, "What you own ends up owning you," the repetition of "own" highlights the contrast or twist in the sentence, which argues that the things you buy to improve your life can end up limiting and influencing your life choices.
- **Rhythm:** Repetition creates a natural rhythm, like beats of a drum, within a sentence. Repetition, then, is not just valuable for how it can allow a writer to control the meaning of sentences. It also can help a writer to affect the *feel* of those sentences.



## OTHER RESOURCES

- [Wikipedia entry on repetition](#): A pretty basic discussion of repetition as a device.
- [Youtube video on repetition](#): This video covers the basics of repetition.

## HOW TO CITE

### MLA

Florman, Ben. "Repetition." LitCharts. LitCharts LLC, 5 May 2017. Web. 31 Aug 2017.

### Chicago Manual

Florman, Ben. "Repetition." LitCharts LLC, May 5, 2017. Retrieved August 31, 2017. <http://www.litcharts.com/literary-devices-and-terms/repetition>.