

Sibilance



DEFINITION

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

Sibilance is a [figure of speech](#) in which a hissing sound is created within a group of words through the repetition of "s" sounds. An example of sibilance is: "Sadly, Sam sold seven venomous serpents to Sally and Cyrus in San Francisco."

Some additional key details about sibilance:

- The word "sibilant" can also be used more generally to describe any hissing "s" sound, but this entry deals specifically with the figure of speech in which sibilant sounds repeat across multiple words.
- Some people think that other sounds can be used to create sibilance, including "sh," "th," "f," "z," and "v" sounds. More details on this below.

Sibilance Pronunciation

Here's how to pronounce sibilance: **sih**-buh-lence

Sibilance Explained

There are a few important details to understand about sibilance.

- **Sibilance is about the repetition of the "s" sound, not about the repetition of the letter S.** This is important for two reasons. First, the letter C can also produce "s" sounds, as in the word "San Francisco." Second, the letter S itself doesn't always produce an "s" sound. For instance, in the words "doesn't" and "always," the letter S makes a "z" sound that *wouldn't* be called sibilant.
- **Sibilance does *not* require that words with "s" sounds be placed directly next to each other in a sentence.** Instead, sibilance occurs so long as "s" sounds are relatively close together within a sentence or paragraph.
- **Sibilance doesn't depend on *where* the "s" sounds occur within the words.** They can be at the beginning, middle, or end of a word, and in stressed or unstressed syllables.

The Debate Over Other "SH" and Other Letters

There is some disagreement as to what kinds of sounds are really sibilant. For instance, some people also include some or all of the following sounds as being sibilant because they all create a hiss not that different from the "s" sound:

- **"Sh" sounds:** Under this definition, the common tongue-twister "she sells seashells by the seashore" is an excellent example of sibilance that mixes "s" and "sh" sounds.

- **"F" and soft "th" sounds:** For instance, the sentence "she threw a hissy fit" has a hissing sound even though it only has one sibilant "s" sound.
- **"Z" and "v" and hard "th" sounds:** Finally, some people's list of sibilant sounds also includes *buzzing* sounds like "z" and "v" sounds and hard "th" sounds (as in the word "this").

There are also sibilance sticklers, however, who would disagree that any sound other than the "s" sound can produce true sibilance. People in this camp would assert that, while similar to the sibilant "s" sound, "sh," "th," "f," "z," and "v" sounds are *not* truly sibilant.



EXAMPLES

Sibilance can be found in all types of writing, but it's most common in poetry and song lyrics. In the examples below, we highlight all the sibilant S's in green. We use yellow for the other hissing sounds like "sh," "f," and soft "th," and red for buzzing sounds like "z," "v," and hard "th," since some people would argue these are not, properly speaking, sibilant.

Sibilance in John Milton's *Paradise Lost*

At the very beginning of his epic poem, [Paradise Lost](#), Milton uses subtle sibilance to slow the reader down, drawing attention to the density and subtlety of his language. It is difficult, too, not to be reminded of the "s" sound of the serpent who tempts Eve with the "fruit of that forbidden tree," leading to the expulsion of mankind from the garden of Eden.

OF MAN'S first disobedience, and the fruit
Of that forbidden tree whose mortal taste
Brought death into the World, and all our woe,
With loss of Eden, till one greater Man
Restore us, and regain the blissful Seat,
Sing, Heavenly Muse, that, on the secret top
Of Oreb, or of Sinai, didst inspire
That Shepherd who first taught the chosen seed

Sibilance in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*

In this passage from Shakespeare's [Hamlet](#), Bernardo tells Horatio about seeing the Ghost of Old Hamlet, and does so in a hushed and urgent tone. The sibilance here intensifies his hushed tone, causing those assembled (and the audience) to listen more closely.

Sit down awhile;
And let us once again assail your ears,
That are so fortified against our story
What we have two nights seen.

Sibilance in John Donne's "The Flea"

Not all instances of sibilance need to be overwhelming. Here, Donne uses subtly sibilant sounds to cause the first line to "swell" into the second.

And pampered swells with one blood made of two,
And this, alas, is more than we would do.

Bob Dylan, "All I Really Wanna Do"

The sibilance in this excerpt emphasizes Dylan's sense of playfulness in songwriting. Here, sibilance is combined with rhyme to intensify its effect even further.

I don't wanna meet your kin
Make you spin or do you in
Or select you, or dissect you
Or inspect you, or reject you...

Sibilance in the Song "Steam Heat" from *The Pajama Game*

In this example from the musical *The Pajama Game*, the sibilance is [onomatopoeic](#)—that is, the sound of the words mimics the actual sound of steam escaping from a pipe. It's also fun to sing, making it a playful and memorable song.

The radiator's still hiss-in'
Still I need your kiss-in'
To keep me from freezin' each night ...
I've got FSSSSSSSS... steam heat!



WHY WRITERS USE IT

Sibilance can give language a musical element, and can help emphasize words that resonate with the main ideas or themes of the work. All forms of [repetition](#) tend to catch the attention of readers, but the repetition of sibilant sounds is particularly noticeable when spoken aloud. When "s" sounds are strung together, they can add a playful quality to the text, and make it hard to ignore. Here's a rundown of all the reasons a writer might choose to employ sibilance in their writing:

- It can make the words in phrases more memorable because they share sounds in common.

- Like [consonance](#) and [assonance](#), sibilance increases the sonic or "musical" quality of words in a group, making them stand out to the reader. It also encourages the reader to spend more time looking at, sounding out, and thinking about those words.
- Because it encourages readers to pay more attention to language, sibilance can have the effect of *slowing down* the reading process, and strengthening reading-comprehension as a result.
- Sibilance is of special use to poets because it encourages repeated reading of a group of words. Throughout history, poems have been written to be memorized and recited, and sibilance aids in this process.
- Sometimes, sibilant words can have special resonance with the meaning of the lines or sentences in which they occur. Many of the examples given above *imitate*, or *do* the thing that is being described, rather than simply talking about it.



OTHER RESOURCES

- [The Wikipedia page on Sibilance](#): An in-depth examination of the different ways sibilance can be produced in English.
- [The Dictionary Definition of Sibilance](#): A basic definition.
- **Sibilance on YouTube:**
 - [The Gopher](#) from the animated series *Winnie the Pooh* had famously sibilant S's.
 - Also, the fictional snake language from the world of Harry Potter—[parseltongue](#)—is a very sibilant language, which makes sense given its connection to snakes.

HOW TO CITE

MLA

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