Anaphora

DEFINITION

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

> Anaphora is a figure of speech in which words repeat 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..."

Some additional key details about anaphora:

- Anaphora is related to epistrophe, which is the repetition of words at the *end* of successive clauses, phrases, or sentences.
- The term "anaphora" comes from the Greek for "to carry up or back."
- The Psalms of the Bible, which contain many instances of anaphora, helped to influence later writers to use anaphora as a way to capture they rhythms and structures of the Bible.

How to Pronounce Anaphora

Here's how to pronounce anaphora: uh-**naf**-er-uh

Anaphora can Include Variations

The repeated words that make anaphora can vary slightly in each instance and still count as anaphora. In fact, a writer can use such variations to amplify anaphora's effect. In his poem "London," William Blake makes use of anaphora with variation:

> In every cry of every Man,
> In every infant's cry of fear,
> In every voice, in every ban,
> The mind-forg'd manacles I hear

The variation from "every cry" to "every infant" sharpens Blake's claim. The next variation, located in the third line, shortens the phrase and repeats it twice, accelerating the poems rhythm and urgency. Taken as a whole, the variations of anaphora in the poem drive home Blake's message that no one in all of London is immune from the "mind-forg'd manacles" that imprison its inhabitants.

Anaphora vs. Epistrophe

Among anaphora's closest relatives is epistrophe, which is identical to anaphora except that its the repetition of one or more words at the *end* of successive phrases, clauses, or sentences. The oath taken by courtroom witnesses (and oft-repeated on police procedurals) is a prime example of epistrophe:

> Do you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth?

Anaphora + Epistrophe = Symploce

Using both anaphora and epistrophe at once creates a third figure of speech called symploce. This proverb provides an example of symploce in action:

> For want of a nail the shoe was lost.
> For want of a shoe the horse was lost.
> For want of a horse the rider was lost.
> For want of a rider the message was lost
> For want of a message the battle was lost.
> For want of a battle the kingdom was lost.
> And all for the want of a horseshoe nail.

EXAMPLES

Anaphora appears frequently in literature, politics, and music. Below are a few famous examples of anaphora, which offer some insight into the way it works in various contexts.

Anaphora in the Bible

The Song of Songs, in the Old Testament of the Bible, contains many examples of anaphora. In this instance (from Chapter Four, Verses One and Two), there are two separate uses of anaphora: the first is the speaker's celebration of the beauty of his bride, and the second is a list of her admirable qualities.

> Look at you! You are beautiful, my darling.
> Look at you! You are so beautiful.
> Your eyes behind your veil are doves
> your hair is like a flock of goats
> coming down from Mt. Gilead.
> Your teeth are like a flock of sheep about to be sheared,
> who are coming up from being washed.

Note that "like a flock" also repeats twice in this excerpt from the Song of Songs. While this is a kind of repetition, it's not anaphora because it doesn't come at the beginning of a sentence or phrase.

Anaphora Examples in Literature

Anaphora in JD Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*

In this excerpt from Chapter 20 of *The Catcher in the Rye*, Salinger makes use of anaphora as Holden Caulfield recalls a miserable visit to his deceased brother's grave.

> It rained on his lousy tombstone, and it rained on the grass on his stomach. It rained all over the place.

Here, Salinger's use of anaphora conveys both the relentlessness of the rain and Holden's obsessive focus on the painful memory of his brother's death.

Anaphora in Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*

In the famous opening lines of *A Tale of Two Cities*, Dickens sets the scene by using anaphora to convey the chaotic turbulence of the French Revolution, whose violent divisions form the backdrop for his story. The anaphora creates a rhythmic anchor that forces Dickens's contradictory descriptions to remain connected.

> It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way—in short, the period was so far like the present period, that some of its noisiest authorities insisted on its being received, for good or for evil, in the superlative degree of comparison only.

Notice that Dickens also uses other types of repetition in addition to anaphora in this passage. For instance, in this line he combines anaphora and epistrophe to make symploce:

> It was the best of times, it was the worst of times ... we had everything before us, we had nothing before us ...

Anaphora in Allen Ginsberg's "Howl"

In part one of his poem "Howl," Allen Ginsberg offers many breathless lines connected through anaphora. In this excerpt, Ginsberg uses an extended metaphor to compare New York to a monster named Moloch, whose name is an allusion to a false god of the Old Testament. Moloch's name becomes an anaphora that is repeated multiple times within each line, as in the excerpt below:

> Moloch whose eyes are a thousand blind windows! Moloch whose skyscrapers stand in the long streets like endless Jehovahs! Moloch whose factories dream and croak in the fog! Moloch whose smokestacks and antennae crown the cities!

The use of anaphora in this part of "Howl" creates a religious tone, as Ginsberg's repetitive verses rise to the cadence of a sermon. It also allows Ginsberg to tie together the various industrial images of the city together and connect them to his idea of Moloch, and in so doing condemn capitalist society for making what he sees as such anonymous, monstrous structures.

Anaphora in *The Great Gatsby*

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.

Anaphora Examples in Political Speeches

Anaphora is an important tool for speechwriters, because its repetition can set a tone, rally a crowd, and focus attention on the points that the speaker *wants* those listening to focus on. Anaphora has been used to powerful effect by some of the most influential public figures throughout history.

Anaphora in Winston Churchill's "We Shall Fight on the Beaches" (1940)

In this iconic speech from World War II, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill was tasked with delivering the dismal news that France's position in the war against Germany was weakening. He had to warn his nation that a German invasion of Britain might be on its way while also rallying British determination to continue the fight at all costs. Churchill uses anaphora in this section of the speech to create a rallying cry, forcefully emphasizing his nation's dogged persistence in every possible arena of the war.

> ....We shall fight in France, we shall fight on the seas and oceans, we shall fight with growing confidence and growing strength in the air, we shall defend our island, whatever the cost may be. We shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills; we shall never surrender...

This excerpt of Churchill's speech also shows how anaphora can help to give structure and therefore meaning and interest to a list. Without the "we shall fight" to link all of the things that Churchill is saying here, they might all come across as a muddle. But the repeated "we shall fight" focuses attention on each and every item in the list.

Anaphora in Robert F. Kennedy's speech announcing the death of Martin Luther King, Jr. (1968)

After the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., presidential candidate Robert F. Kennedy made an impassioned, impromptu speech in which he announced the civil rights leader's death to a largely African-American crowd in Indianapolis, and made a plea for peace. Kennedy uses anaphora to focus on the tragedy of the day's events, while implicitly begging the question: what *do* we need as a nation to move forward? His anaphora sets up an antithesis between the dark present and a hopeful future offered later in the passage.

> What we need in the United States is not division; what we need in the United States is not hatred; what we need in the United States is not violence or lawlessness, but love and wisdom, and compassion toward one another, and a feeling of justice towards those who still suffer within our country, whether they be white or whether they be black.

Anaphora Examples in Song

Songwriters also make frequent use of anaphora to create catchy, rhythmic lyrics that will remain lodged in the listener's memory, or to convey strong emotion.

Anaphora in "Every Breath You Take" by The Police

In their number-one-selling single of 1983, the Police make use of anaphora to help build a feel of claustrophobia within the song. Sting, the band's frontman and songwriter, has written that he intended the lyrics to capture the jealous, overbearing attitude of an obsessed ex-lover, or even the surveillance power of a Big Brother state like the one in George Orwell's 1984. In this context, the anaphora serves to emphasize the inescapability of the singer's stalker-like gaze.

> Every breath you take
> Every move you make
> Every bond you break
> Every step you take
> I'll be watching you

Anaphora in "If I Had" by Eminem

In "If I Had," Eminem uses anaphora to align his list of complaints with the rhythm of the song, and to emphasize just how tired he is of feeling trapped in poverty.

> I'm tired of jobs startin' off
> at $5.50 an hour, then this boss wonders why I'm smartin' off
> I'm tired of bein' fired every time I fart and cough
> Tired of havin' to work as a gas station clerk
> For this jerk, breathin' down my neck, drivin' me berserk
> I'm tired of usin' plastic silverware
> Tired of workin' at Builder's Square
> Tired of not bein' a millionaire

WHY WRITERS USE IT

On the simplest level, writers use anaphora to give a series of repeated words emphasis. More broadly, anaphora can produce a variety of stylistic effects. It can:

- Express a strong feeling.
- Create rhythm in text, whether that rhythm is pleasing, rousing, or relentless.
- More clearly link two or more ideas through the repeated phrasing.
- Make a phrase more memorable for the reader/listener.
- Give structure to a lengthy list.

OTHER RESOURCES

- **The Wikipedia page for anaphora:** Wikipedia offers its concise take on anaphora, with a wide range of examples from history, literature, and religion.
- **Sound bites from history:** Examples of anaphora in political speeches of the last sixty years, including targeted audio clips artfully cut from each speech. Examples range from Franklin Delano Roosevelt to Hillary Clinton.
- **A useful blog post**: Provides a clear and simple overview of anaphora from the perspective of a former lawyer and public speaking enthusiast.
- **Poets.org:** A poet's perspective on this figure of speech, with the option to search the poets.org database for poems from across the centuries that have been tagged as containing anaphora. Simply scroll to the end of the explanation, and click the "read more poems featuring anaphora" button.

HOW TO CITE

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