Rhetorical Question

DEFINITION

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

> A rhetorical question is a figure of speech in which a question is asked for a reason other than to get an answer—most commonly, it's asked to make a persuasive point. For example, if a person asks, "How many times do I have to tell you not to eat my dessert?" he or she does *not* want to know the exact number of times the request will need to be repeated. Rather, the speaker's goal is to emphasize his or her growing frustration and—ideally—change the dessert-thief's behavior.

Some additional key details about rhetorical questions:

- Rhetorical questions are also sometimes called *erotema.*
- Rhetorical questions are a type of figurative language—they are questions that have another layer of meaning *on top of* their literal meaning.
- Because rhetorical questions challenge the listener, raise doubt, and help emphasize ideas, they appear often in songs and speeches, as well as in literature.

How to Pronounce Rhetorical Question

Here's how to pronounce rhetorical question: reh-**tor**-ih-kuhl **kwes**-chun

Rhetorical Questions and Punctuation

A question is rhetorical *if and only if* its goal is to produce an effect on the listener, rather than to obtain information. In other words, a rhetorical question is not what we might call a "true" question in search of an answer. For this reason, many sources argue that rhetorical questions do not need to end in a traditional question mark. In the late 1500's, English printer Henry Denham actually designed a special question mark for rhetorical questions, which he referred to as a "percontation point." It looked like this: ؟ (Here's a wikipedia article about Denham's percontation point and other forms of "irony punctuation.")

Though the percontation point has fallen out of use, modern writers do sometimes substitute a traditional question mark with a period or exclamation point after a rhetorical question. There is a lively debate as to whether this alternative punctuation is grammatically correct. Here are some guidelines to follow:

- In general, rhetorical questions *do* require a question mark.
- However, there are a few exceptions that usually arise in written dialogue:
  - **When a question is a request in disguise, you may use a period.** For instance, it is ok to write: *"Will you please turn your attention to the speaker."* or *"Can you please go to the back of the line."*
  - **When a question is an exclamation in disguise, you may use an exclamation point.** For instance, *it is okay to write: "Were they ever surprised!"*
  - **When asking a question emotionally, you may use an exclamation point.** For instance, "*Who could blame him!"* and *"How do you know that!"* are both correct.

Rhetorical Questions vs. Hypophora

Rhetorical questions are easy to confuse with hypophora, a similar but fundamentally different figure of speech in which a speaker poses a question and then immediately answers it. Hypophora is frequently used in persuasive speaking because the speaker can pose and answer a question that the audience is likely to be wondering about, thereby making the thought processes of the speaker and the audience seem more aligned. For example, here is an example of hypophora used in a speech by Dwight Eisenhower:

> When the enemy struck on that June day of 1950, what did America do? It did what it always has done in all its times of peril. It appealed to the heroism of its youth.

While Eisenhower asked this question without expecting an answer from his audience, this is an example of hypophora because he answered his own question. In a rhetorical question, by contrast, the answer would be *implied* in the question—to pose a rhetorical question, Eisenhower might have said instead, "When the enemy struck, who in their right mind would have done nothing to retaliate?"

Rhetorical Questions vs. Aporia

Rhetorical questions are also related to a figure of speech called aporia. Aporia is an expression of doubt that may be real, or which may be feigned for rhetorical effect. These expressions of doubt may or may not be made through the form of a question. When they are made through the form of a question, those questions are sometimes rhetorical.

Aporia and Rhetorical Questions

When someone is pretending doubt for rhetorical effect, and uses a question as part of that expression of doubt, then the question is rhetorical. For example, consider this quotation from an oration by the ancient Greek orator Demosthenes:

> I am at no loss for information about you and your family; but I am at a loss where to begin. Shall I relate how your

> father Tromes was a slave in the house of Elpias, who kept an elementary school near the Temple of Theseus, and how he wore shackles on his legs and a timber collar round his neck? Or how your mother practised daylight nuptials in an outhouse next door to Heros the bone-setter, and so brought you up to act in tableaux vivants and to excel in minor parts on the stage?

The questions Demosthenes poses are examples of both aporia and rhetorical question, because Demosthenes is feigning doubt (by posing rhetorical questions) in order to cast insulting aspersions on the character of the person he's addressing.

Aporia Without Rhetorical Questions

If the expression of doubt is earnest, however, then the question is not rhetorical. An example of aporia that is *not* also a rhetorical question comes from the most famous excerpt of Shakespeare's *Hamlet:*

> To be or not to be—that is the question.
> Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
> The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
> Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,
> And by opposing end them?

While Hamlet asks this question without expecting an answer (he's alone when he asks it), he's not asking in order to persuade or make a point. It's a legitimate expression of doubt, which leads Hamlet into a philosophical debate about whether one should face the expected miseries of life or kill oneself and face the possible unknown terrors of death. It's therefore not a rhetorical question, because Hamlet asks the question as an opening to actually seek an answer to the question he is obsessing over.

EXAMPLES

Rhetorical Question Examples in Literature

Rhetorical questions are particularly common in plays, appearing frequently in both spoken dialogue between characters, and in monologues or soliloquies, where they allow the playwright to reveal a character's inner life.

Rhetorical Questions in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*:

In his speech from Act 3, Scene 1 of Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, Shylock uses rhetorical questions to point out the indisputable similarities between Jews and Christians, in such a way that any listener would find him impossible to contradict:

> I am a Jew. Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions? fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer, as a Christian is? If you prick us, do we not bleed? if you tickle us, do we not laugh? if you poison us, do we not die? and if you wrong us, shall we not revenge? If we are like you in the rest, we will resemble you in that. If a Jew wrong a Christian, what is his humility? Revenge. If a Christian wrong a Jew, what should his sufferance be by Christian example? Why, revenge. The villainy you teach me, I will execute, and it shall go hard but I will better the instruction.

Rhetorical questions in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*:

In this soliloquy from Act 2, Scene 2 of *Romeo and Juliet*, Juliet poses a series of rhetorical questions as she struggles to grasp the difficult truth—that her beloved Romeo is a member of the Montague family:

> Thou art thyself, though not a Montague.
> What's Montague? it is nor hand, nor foot,
> Nor arm, nor face, nor any other part
> Belonging to a man. O, be some other name!
> What's in a name? that which we call a rose
> By any other name would smell as sweet;
> So Romeo would, were he not Romeo call'd
> Retain that dear perfection which he owes
> Without that title. Romeo, doff thy name,
> And for that name which is no part of thee
> Take all myself.

Rhetorical Question Examples in Political Speeches

Rhetorical questions often "challenge" the listener to contradict what the speaker is saying. If the speaker frames the rhetorical question well, it gives the impression that his or her view is true and that it would be foolish, or even impossible, to contradict the speaker's argument. In other words, rhetorical questions are great for speeches.

Rhetorical Questions in Ronald Reagan's 1980 Republican National Convention Acceptance Address:

In this speech, Reagan uses a series of rhetorical questions—referred to as "stacked" rhetorical questions—to criticize the presidency of his predecessor and running opponent, Jimmy Carter:

> Can anyone look at the record of this Administration and say, "Well done"? Can anyone compare the state of our economy when the Carter Administration took office with where we are today and say, "Keep up the good work"? Can anyone look at our reduced standing in the world today say, "Let's have four more years of this"?

Rhetorical Questions in Hillary Clinton's 2016 Democratic National Convention Speech:

In this portion of her speech, Clinton argues that her opponent Donald Trump is not temperamentally fit to become president:

> A president should respect the men and women who risk their lives to serve our country—including Captain Khan and the sons of Tim Kaine and Mike Pence, both Marines.
> So just ask yourself: Do you really think Donald Trump has the temperament to be commander-in-chief?

Rhetorical Question Examples in Song Lyrics

Love has left even the best musicians of our time feeling lost, searching for meaning, and—as you might expect—full of rhetorical questions. Musicians such as Tina Turner, Jean Knight, and Stevie Wonder have all released hits structured around rhetorical questions, which allow them to powerfully express the joy, the pain, and the mystery of L-O-V-E.

Rhetorical Questions in "What's Love Got to do with It" by Tina Turner

What's love got to do, got to do with it
What's love but a second hand emotion
What's love got to do, got to do with it
Who needs a heart when a heart can be broken

Rhetorical Questions in "Mr. Big Stuff" by Jean Knight

Now because you wear all those fancy clothes (oh yeah)
And have a big fine car, oh yes you do now
Do you think I can afford to give you my love (oh yeah)
You think you're higher than every star above

Mr. Big Stuff
Who do you think you are
Mr. Big Stuff
You're never gonna get my love

Rhetorical Questions in "Isn't She Lovely" by Stevie Wonder

Isn't she lovely
Isn't she wonderful
Isn't she precious
Less than one minute old
I never thought through love we'd be
Making one as lovely as she
But isn't she lovely made from love

Stevie Wonder wrote "Isn't She Lovely" to celebrate the birth of his daughter, Aisha. The title is a perfect example of a rhetorical question, because Wonder isn't seeking a second opinion here. Instead, the question is meant to convey the love and amazement he feels towards his daughter.

WHY WRITERS USE IT

Authors, playwrights, speech writers and musicians use rhetorical questions for a variety of reasons:

- To challenge the listener
- To emphasize an idea
- To raise doubt
- To demonstrate that a previously asked question was obvious

The examples included in this guide to rhetorical questions have largely pointed to the persuasive power of rhetorical questions, and covered the way that they are used in arguments, both real and fictional. However, poets also frequently use rhetorical questions for their lyrical, expressive qualities. Take the poem below, "Danse Russe (Russian Dance)" by William Carlos Williams:

> If when my wife is sleeping
> and the baby and Kathleen
> are sleeping
> and the sun is a flame-white disc
> in silken mists
> above shining trees,—
> if I in my north room
> dance naked, grotesquely
> before my mirror
> waving my shirt round my head
> and singing softly to myself:
> "I am lonely, lonely.
> I was born to be lonely.
> I am best so!"
> If I admire my arms, my face,
> my shoulders, flanks, buttocks
> against the yellow drawn shades,—
> Who shall say I am not
> the happy genius of my household?

The rhetorical question that concludes this poem has the effect of challenging the reader to doubt Williams' happiness—daring the listener to question this intimate, eccentric portrait of the poet's private world. By ending the poem in this way, Williams maintains a delicate balance. Throughout the poem, he draws the reader in and confides secrets of his interior life, but the question at the end is an almost defiant statement that he does not require the reader's approval. Rather, the reader—like the mirror—is simply there to witness his happy solitude.

OTHER RESOURCES

- **The Wikipedia Page on Rhetorical Questions:** A general explanation with a variety of examples, as well as links to specific resources with punctuation rules.
- **The Dictionary Definition of Rhetorical Question:** A basic definition with some historical information.
- A detailed explanation of rhetorical questions, along with related figures of speech that involve questions.

- **Rhetorical Questions on Youtube**
  - A video of Ronald Reagan's 1980 Republican National Convention Speech, in which he asks stacked rhetorical questions.
  - An article listing the greatest rhetorical questions in the history of pop music.

HOW TO CITE

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