

# Antimetabole

## Antimetabole Definition

Antimetabole is derived from a Greek word which means “turning about”. It is a literary term or device that involves repeating a phrase in reverse order.

“You like it; it likes you” and “Fair is foul and foul is fair” etc. Chiasmus and antimetabole are usually expected to be overlapped in usage and it is also often used as a synonym for Epanados in modern day books. However, the writer would make them distinct through his use.

## Famous Antimetabole Examples

Just see these examples of how it has been used since the time of Socrates to the present modern age.

- “Eat to live, not live to eat.”- Socrates
- “I go where I please, and I please where I go.” – Attributed to Duke Nukem
- “In America, you can always find a party. In Soviet Russia, Party always finds you!” – Yakov Smirnoff
- “If you fail to plan, you plan to fail.”
- “Ask not what *your country* can do for *you*; ask what *you* can do for *your country*.” John F. Kennedy, *Inaugural Address*, January 20, 1961.
- “He who questions training only trains himself at asking questions.” The Sphinx, *Mystery Men* (1999)
- “The great object of [[Hamlet](#)’s] life is defeated by continually resolving to do, yet doing nothing but resolve.” – Samuel Taylor Coleridge on [Shakespeare](#)’s Hamlet
- “We do what we like and we like what we do.” – Andrew W.K., “Party Hard”
- “We didn’t land on Plymouth Rock. Plymouth Rock landed on us.” Malcolm X, “Malcolm X”
- “If you can’t be with the one you love, love the one you’re with.” –Billy Preston
- “You stood up for America, now America must stand up for you.” Barack Obama – December 14, 2011.

## What Is the Difference Between Chiasmus and Antimetabole?

Antimetabole and chiasmus are very closely related and some experts even use them interchangeably but both the terms still exist to refer to two distinct literary devices. According to scholars, when a sentence is repeated after reversing it so as to convey an idea or stress on a point, it is called chiasmus. Antimetabole is not very much different from chiasmus, only that in an antimetabole the words and grammatical structure is also reversed because just reversing the

meaning is not enough. So in the light of the above mentioned facts, it can be deduced that all the antimetaboles are chiasmus, but not all instances of chiasmus are antimetaboles.

A chiasmus is a sentence repeated inversely and the only condition of a chiasmic sentence is that the two clauses in the phrase are opposite in meanings. For example, the popular saying by Havelock Ellis's, "Charm is a woman's strength, strength is a man's charm," The aforementioned sentence, although, is an example of chiasmus but is not an antimetabole because the two clauses have opposite meanings but the words and the grammatical makeup are dissimilar.

In an antimetabole the word order in a sentence is reversed to contrast the meanings. One very good example is Mae West's catchphrase, "It's not the men in my life; it's the life in my men." As you can see, in this sentence the words, rhythm and grammatical structure used in the second sentence are exactly similar to the first one but only the meaning is opposite. Many experts refer to antimetabole as a subtype of chiasmus.

## **Functions and Effectiveness of Antimetaboles**

For antimetaboles to be effective, they do not only have to be grammatically correct but should also be logical. People after studying literature for a while start thinking that they can churn out antimetaboles with a snap of a finger. They fail to understand the fact that a sentence cannot be called an antimetaboles if it is not based on a logical theme. For instance, you may witness a 'smart Alec' come up with a sentence like this and expect it to qualify for an antimetabole, which clearly is not the case.

Antimetaboles are popular and effective solely because they appeal to reason and are easy to remember. If the first half is relatable, then the reader or listener automatically will make sense out of the second half. For example: "It is not about the years in your life, but about the life in your years." A sentence like this can be called an antimetabole because it is appealing, correct (logic and grammar) and has a message to convey to the readers.