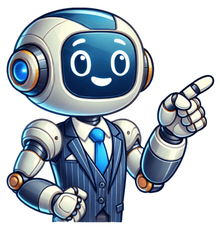
Click Here



Example of an epigram

Epigrams can be hard to find because they have a very broad definition. What one person considers an epigram, another may consider an elegy, poem, or perhaps even a song. The most basic definition of an epigram is a brief, clever, and memorable statement. Some of them are formulated with satirical purposes in mind, and others are purposely meant to be confusing. For example, John Donne uses an epigram in his poem "Hero and Leander" when he writes: "Both robb'd of air, we both lie in one ground Both whom one fire had burnt, one water drown'd." While there is certainly no apparent humor in this poem, there is a contradiction. How could two people die by both fire and water? Examining the other uses and purposes of epigrams helps to answer that question. Epigrams most commonly appear in poetry. Some very famous writers throughout history have used them in their writings. Perhaps most well known for his plays, Shakespeare also published a vast number of sonnets. The last four lines of Sonnet 76, a part of the Fair Youth sequence, has quite a number of epigrams for such few lines. The Faith Youth sequence refers to a selection of Shakespeare's sonnets that some scholars believe were written to a young man for which Shakespeare had romantic feelings. The last two couplets of the sonnet read as follows: So all my best is dressing old words new, Spending again what is already spent: For as the sun is daily new and old, So is my love still telling what is told. Those four lines are packed with epigrams. Twice he refers to items and ideas as being both old and new at the same time, and he states that he is spending something that has already been spent. The purpose is to show his confusion with the lover, and perhaps about his own feelings regarding his sexuality, as some scholars will suggest. Well known by anyone studying religious poetry, Blake wrote about some almost existential concepts for his day, including his poems "The Tyger" and "The Lamb" where he questions whether the same God could have possibly made the gentle lamb and the ferocious tiger. His "Augueries of Innocence" included quotations that became quite popular, and packed a great deal of punch and emphasis within them. The lines "To see a world in a grain of sand, And a heaven in a wild flower, Hold infinity in the palm of your hand, And eternity in an hour" are short enough to remember, yet their message could relate to any number of situations. A perfect example of their resonance is the fact that they were spoken by Lara Croft in the film Lara Croft: Tomb Rader. Not all epigrams are parts of larger works. Some stand by themsleves, although they are still considered poetry because of their schematic form. Examples include: "Little strokes/Fell great oaks." - Benjamin Franklin"Here's my wife: here let her lie! Now she's at rest-and so am I." - John Dryden"Candy/Is dandy,/But liquor/Is quicker." - Ogden Nash"I mean the opposite of what I say./You've got it now? No, it's the other way." - Bruce Bennett, "Ironist""To be safe on the Fourth/Don't buy a fifth on the third." - James H. Muehlbauer"It comes once a year/But it fades with fear."- Harry Potter Although these are epigrams, they will commonly be referred to as quotations. Brief epigrams could be considered quotations; however, there are other examples that are completely not in the field of poetry at all. For example, Lara Croft was using a poetical device; however, she was using it in the context of a movie. Compiling a list of all the non poetic epigrams is difficult, if not impossible, because any witty saying can be considered to be one. Familiar epigrams include: "I can resist everything but temptation." - Oscar Wilde"No one is completely unhappy at the failure of his best friend." - Groucho Marx"If you can't be a good example, you'll just have to be a horrible warning." - Catherine the Great"It is better to light a candle than curse the darkness." - Eleanor Roosevelt"The only 'ism' Hollywood believes in is plagiarism." - Dorothy Parker"Mankind must put an end to war, or war will put and end to mankind." - John F. Kennedy"Great people talk about ideas, average people talk about things, and small people talk about wine." - Fran Lebowitz Clearly, the reasons for using epigrams are plentiful. They cause the reader or listener to think a bit more about the statement being made.They are examples of pure humor.They all leave an impression. Many of them, whether through humor or blatant statements, are making a commentary on some sort of issue, whether it be political, social, religious, or just about day-to-day life. Greeks began the tradition of using epigrams, often in memory of deceased loved ones. Therefore, the elegy and the epigram are closely linked, and in ancient times, the distinction was not so great as it is today. Epigrams were often much lengthier than a simple line or two. Additionally, the Greeks did not always use the tools of satire, comedy, and twists that have become a popular trademark of the epigram today. The Latin poet, Martialis, who died in the beginning of the second century A.D., became the model for later European and American versions of the epigram. He is the one who added the different tone to the genre, as he was influenced by his contemporary Juvenal, a Roman poet most known for his work in the satirical arts. Epigrams are the materialization of a famous William Shakespeare quote that says brevity is the soul of the wit. Delivering a memorable speech or writing a poem can always be a challenge. But with the help of peppering rhetorical devices such as epigrams in your compositions, it can be a surefire way of making your written compositions unforgettable. Epigrams are short but packed with wit and humor at the same time. It will definitely create an impact on your audience. Learn more about epigrams with the help of this article. We also provided examples and tips on how to create your very own epigram. Defining Epigram Epigram is derived from the Greek word epigramma which means to inscribe or inscription. Epigram is a rhetorical device aimed to be express in a brief manner; however, it should be memorable, interesting, paradoxical, and funny. Writing epigrams challenges the ability of the writer to deliver witty statements with brevity. When to Use Epigrams Epigrams are more effective when you would deliver it at a time where it would be appreciated and that you wouldn't get eye rolls from the audience. There are some people who do not appreciate hearing witty remarks. It is best if you are able to insert epigrams during the best moments like when you are to present a speech or even just a comeback in conversations. You can make use of this rhetorical device when you deliver speeches or when you would write a prose/poem. Epigrams are also widely used in the entertainment industry. You can hear a lot of epigrams, particularly in situational comedies, in dramas, television shows, and films. The perfect timing of delivering an epigram is important because this makes your epigram memorable and timeless. Function of Epigram Epigrams point out the sweet and bitter truths of life. The main function of epigrams is similar to that of proverbs which is to help us to reflect on the world and life. However, epigrams aims to leave a positive impact on the audience with the use of wit and humor but never void of wisdom. Hearing epigrams at first may amuse the listeners at first, but if an epigram is effective enough, its relevance will soon dawn into the listeners and they will soon realize the depth of its meaning. How to Create Your Own Epigram Creating your very own epigram can be quite challenging especially if you are not on the humorous side. However, with the help of this simple tips, you can create your own epigram. 1. If you have a difficulty to find a place to start, you can always refer to famous epigrams. We are providing examples below. You can study previously published epigrams and look at how they were composed. 2. If you have a message you want to convey but you do not want to offend or hurt someone's feelings, you can do wordplay with the help of epigrams. 3. If you are writing a speech, do not overload with epigrams. Remember that one of the aims of an epigram is to be memorable. Sure, you want to make your speech memorable but also remember that not all people have the capacity to absorb a lot of information. You can make use of an epigram to summarize your entire speech which will be remembered by the audience. Writing epigrams can be pretty hard since you would really have to make sure that you have provided enough impact to affect the audience. The best thing to do is just keep on practicing. Read more, watch more shows, do not be afraid to make mistakes, widen your horizons, and then you will finally be able to master writing epigrams. Examples of Epigrams Below are some examples of epigrams. Famous Epigrams by Famous People "Must I do all the evil I can before I learn to shun it? Is it not enough to know the evil to shun it? If not, we should be sincere enough to admit that we love evil too well to give it up." —Mohandas Gandhi "With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation's wounds." — Abraham Lincoln "The ballot is stronger than the bullet." — Abraham Lincoln "Your children need your presence more than your presents." — Jesse Jackson "Winners never quit, and quitters never win." – Lombardi "The best thing to hold onto in life is each other." – Audrey Hepburn "Mankind must put an end to war, or war will put and end to mankind." – John F. Kennedy "If we don't end war, war will end us." – G. Wells "What is an Epigram? a dwarfish whole, Its body brevity, and wit its soul." — Samuel Taylor Coleridge "Some can gaze and not be sick But I could never learn the trick. There's this to say for blood and breath; They give a man a taste for death." — A. E. Housman "Little strokes Fell great oaks." — Benjamin Franklin "Happiness is like a butterfly: the more you chase it, the more it will elude you. But if you turn your attention to other things, it will come and sit softly on your shoulder." – Henry David Thoreau. "Here lies my wife: here let her lie! Now she's at rest – and so am I." — John Dryden "It is better to light a candle than curse the darkness." – Eleanor Roosevelt "No one can make you feel inferior without your consent." – Eleanor Roosevelt "A word to the wise ain't necessary; it's the stupid ones who need all the advice." – Bill Cosby "Live simply, so that others may simply live." – Mother Teresa "I am His Highness' dog at Kew; Pray tell me, sir, whose dog are you?" — Alexander Pope "I'm tired of Love: I'm still more tired of Rhyme. But Money gives me pleasure all the time." — Hilaire Belloc "I hope for nothing. I fear nothing. I am free." — Nikos Kazantzakis "To define the beautiful is to misunderstand it." — Charles Robert Anon "This Humanist whom no belief constrained Grew so broad-minded he was scatter-brained." — J.V. Cunningham "All things pass Love and mankind is grass." — Stevie Smith "I'm starting with the man in the mirror." – Michael Jackson "This is the moment when we must come together to save this planet. Let us resolve that we will not leave our children a world where the oceans rise and famine spreads and terrible storms devastate our lands." – Barack Obama "Blessed are the peacemakers." – Jesus Christ Epigrams in Literature "To see a world in a grain of sand, And a heaven in a wildflower, Hold infinity in the palm of your hand, And eternity in an hour." – Auguries of Innocence by William Blake "Of all my verse, like not a single line; But like my title, for it is not mine. That title from a better man I stole: Ah, how much better, had I stol'n the whole." – Underwoods: Epigram by Robert Louis Stevenson "A man said to the universe: 'Sir, I exist!' 'However,' replied the universe, 'The fact has not created in me A sense of obligation..' – A Man Said to the Universe by Stephen Crane "So all my best is dressing old words new, Spending again what is already spent: For as the sun is daily new and old, So is my love still telling what is told." – Sonnet 76 by William Shakespeare "Both robb'd of air, we both lie in one ground Both whom one fire had burnt, one water drown'd." – Hero and Leander by John Donne Epigrams of Oscar Wilde Oscar Wilde's mind is, perhaps, rich in wit and wisdom since he has written a lot of epigrams. In his novel The Picture of Dorian Gray, he has written a total of twelve epigrams. Here are some of his famous epigrams: "There is only one thing in the world worse than being talked about, and that is not being talked about." – The Picture of Dorian Gray "Women are a decorative sex. They never have anything to say, but they say it charmingly." – The Picture of Dorian Gray "There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written or badly written. That is all." – The Picture of Dorian Gray "I can resist everything but temptation." "There is only one thing in the world worse than being talked about, and that is not being talked about." "As long as war is regarded as wicked, it will "To love oneself is the beginning of a lifelong romance." "As long as war is regarded as wicked, it will always have its fascination. When it is looked upon as vulgar, it will cease to be popular." Epigrams have the capacity to deliver wit and brevity in one package that improves your writing or your speech. We hope that with the help of this article, you will be able to deliver your own epigrams with no sweat at all. The HyperTexts Examples of Epigrams: the Best Epigrams of All Time Examples: The examples of epigrams below are among the best of all time, in one person's opinion. The examples are followed by a definition and brief history of the epigram form, after which more examples of the various genres and sub-genres of epigrams are presented. Never tell me the sky's the limit when there are footprints on the moon.—Unknown It is better to light a candle than curse the darkness.—Eleanor Roosevelt If you can't be a good example, you'll just have to be a horrible warning.—Catherine the Great In the depths of winter, I finally learned that within me there lay an invincible summer.—Albert Camus No one can make you feel inferior without your consent.—Eleanor Roosevelt Warmthless beauty attracts but does not hold us; it floats like hookless bait.—Capito, translation by Michael R. Burch Little sparks may ignite great Infernos.—Dante, translation by Michael R. Burch If life were fair, Elvis would be alive and his impersonators would be dead!—Johnny Carson Some cause happiness wherever they go; others whenever they go.—Oscar Wilde A man may be a fool and not know it, but not if he is married.—H. L. Mencken To err is human, but it feels divine.—Mae West I'm not offended by dumb blonde jokes because I'm not dumb, and also I'm not blonde.—Dolly Parton It takes a smart brunette to play a dumb blonde.—Marilyn Monroe For most of history, Anonymous was a woman.—Virginia Woolf An eye for an eye leaves the whole world blind.—Mohandas Gandhi Truths are more likely discovered by one man than nations.—René Descartes, translation by Michael R. Burch Love distills the eyes' desires, love bewitches the heart with its grace.—Euripides, translation by Michael R. Burch The danger is not aiming too high and missing, but aiming too low and hitting the mark.—Michelangelo, translation by Michael R. Burch Nothing enables authority like silence.—Leonardo da Vinci, translation by Michael R. Burch My objective is not to side with the majority, but to avoid the ranks of the insane.—Marcus Aurelius, translation by Michael R. Burch Truths are more likely discovered by one man than by nations.—René Descartes, translation by Michael R. Burch Elevate your words, not their volume. Rain grows flowers, not thunder.—Rumi, translation by Michael R. Burch A man may attempt to burnish pure gold, but who can think to improve on his mother?—Gandhi, translation by Michael R. Burch The depressing thing about tennis is that no matter how good I get, I'll never be as good as a wall!—Mitch Hedberg He does not believe, who does not live according to his belief.—Sigmund Freud Definition: An epigram is a brief, pithy, memorable statement which is often (but not necessarily) ironic, satirical, humorous and/or clever. Terms commonly used to describe epigrams include: ingenious, witty, pointed, terse, concise, cutting, scathing and paradoxical. But epigrams can also be wonderfully warm, wise and tender. One might argue with some of the dictionary definitions and say the term "epigram" has come to simply mean a brief, impactful statement. That has become my personal definition. — Michael R. Burch, editor, The HyperTexts History: Epigrams go back to the ancient Greeks and the first great lyric poet we know by name, Sappho of Lesbos (c. 630-570 BC). You're welcome to share my translations if you like them, but please be sure to credit the original poet and the translator (which you can do by copying the credit that follows each epigram). Eros harrows my heart: wild winds whipping desolate mountains, uprooting oaks. —Sappho, fragment 42, translation by Michael R. Burch A short transparent frock? It's just my luck your lips were made to mock! —Sappho, fragment 155, translation by Michael R. Burch She keeps her scents in a dressing-case. And her sense? In some undiscoverable place. —Sappho, fragment 156, translation by Michael R. Burch Related Pages: The Greatest Epigrammatists, An Extensive Collection of Epigrams by Michael R. Burch Types of Epigrams: Adage, anecdote, antic, aphorism, apophthegm, axiom, banter, bon mot, boondoggle, buffoonery, burlesque, buzzword, byword, caper, caprice, catchphrase, chestnut, chiasmus, clowning, commonplace, couplet, daffodil, dictum, doggerel, double entendre, drollery, elegiac couplet, elegy, encomium, enthymeme, epitaph, epithet, equivoque, escapade, farce, folk wisdom, formula, frolic, gag, gambol, game, gnome, ha-ha, haiku, heroic couplet, hillbilly humor, homily, hoodwink, horseplay, humorous verse, jape, jargon, jest, jibe, jig, jingle, joke, lampoon, lark, laugh, leg-pulling, light verse, limerick, maxim, mischief, monkeyshines, moral, moralism, motto, mummery, one-liner, parody, payoff, platitude, play, pleasantry, prank, precept, preface, proverb, pun, put-on, quote, quip, quirk, raillery, rallying cry, repartee, revel, rib, ribbing, riddle, riposte, rule, rule of thumb, sally, saw, saying, sententia, sentiment, sermon, shenanigan, shibboleth, slogan, snow job, spoonerism, sport, spree, stunt, syllogism, tomfoolery, trick, truism, tweet, twist, vagary, waggery, war cry, watchword , wisecrack, whimsy, wisdom saying, witticism, words of wisdom, word-play, yarn, zinger Diversity: Epigrams can be wonderfully diverse, ranging from morals and proverbs to quips and quirks. For instance, the stand-up comedian's one-liner is a modern form of epigram. Here are current examples of the genre: If Donald Trump gets elected, there'll be hell toupée.—Anonymous Donald Trump showed his birth certificate to reporters. Who cares about his birth certificate? I want to know if that thing on his head has had its vaccinations.—Craig Ferguson Teddy Roosevelt spoke softly and carried a big stick; Donald Trump speaks loudly and carries a big shtick.—Michael R. Burch Exemplars: The great epigrammatists include Woody Allen, Aristotle, Marcus Aurelius, Yogi Berra, William Blake, Lenny Bruce, Buddha, Johnny Carson, George Carlin, Winston Churchill, Dante, Albert Einstein, Gandhi, Bob Hope, Jesus, JFK, MLK, Abraham Lincoln, Martial, Groucho Marx, Michelangelo, Mohammed, Marilyn Monroe, Napoleon, Plato, Dorothy Parker, Dolly Parton, Will Rogers, Eleanor Roosevelt, Sappho, Shakespeare, Socrates, Mark Twain, Mother Teresa, Voltaire, Mae West, Oscar Wilde and Virginia Woolf. Brief Examples of the Exemplars: • Raise your words, not their volume. Rain grows flowers, not thunder.—Rumi, translation by Michael R. Burch • No wind is favorable to the man who lacks direction.—Seneca the Younger, translation by Michael R. Burch • Little sparks ignite great flames.—Dante, translation by Michael R. Burch • You can crop all the flowers but you cannot detain spring.—Pablo Neruda, translation by Michael R. Burch • The danger is not aiming too high and missing, but aiming too low and hitting the mark.—Michelangelo, translation by Michael R. Burch • He who follows will never surpass.—Michelangelo, translation by Michael R. Burch • Nothing enables authority like silence.—Leonardo da Vinci, translation by Michael R. Burch • My objective is not to side with the majority, but to avoid the ranks of the insane.—Marcus Aurelius, translation by Michael R. Burch • Blinding ignorance misleads us. Myopic mortals, open your eyes!—Leonardo da Vinci, translation by Michael R. Burch • It is easier to oppose evil from the beginning than at the end.—Leonardo da Vinci, translation by Michael R. Burch • Fools call wisdom foolishness.—Euripides, translation by Michael R. Burch • A man may attempt to burnish pure gold, but who can think to improve on his mother?—Mahatma Gandhi, translation by Michael R. Burch • One true friend is worth ten thousand kin.—Euripides, translation by Michael R. Burch • Not to speak one's mind is slavery.—Euripides, translation by Michael R. Burch • I would rather die standing than kneel, a slave.—Euripides, translation by Michael R. Burch • Fresh tears are wasted on old griefs.—Euripides, translation by Michael R. Burch • Improve yourself by other men's writings, attaining less painfully what they gained through great difficulty.—Socrates, translation by Michael R. Burch • Hypocrisy may deceive the most perceptive adult, but the dullest child recognizes and is revolted by it, however ingeniously disguised.—Leo Tolstoy, translation by Michael R. Burch • Just as I select a ship when it's time to travel, or a house when it's time to change residences, even so I will choose when it's time to depart from life.—Seneca, speaking about the right to euthanasia in the first century AD, translation by Michael R. Burch Length: Most epigrams are short in length, but there is no precise word limit. Here is a longish epigram by an American war hero and president: If by a Liberal they mean someone who looks ahead and not behind, someone who welcomes new ideas without rigid reactions, someone who cares about the welfare of the people—their health, their housing, their schools, their jobs, their civil rights and their civil liberties—someone who believes we can break through the stalemate and suspicions that grip us in our policies abroad, if that is what they mean by a Liberal, then I'm proud to say I'm a Liberal.—John F. Kennedy History: We can trace the epigram back at least 2,500 years, to the ancient Greeks. The earliest Greek epigrams were poems, usually brief, inscribed on votive offerings at sanctuaries and on headstones (i.e., epitaphs) and other funerary monuments. Our main extant source of ancient Greek epigrams is the Greek Anthology (also called the Anthologia Graeca), which was compiled from two earlier manuscripts: the Palatine Anthology of the 10th century and the Anthology of Planudes (or Planudean Anthology) of the 14th century. According to J. W. Mackail, editor of Select Epigrams from the Greek Anthology, "The Greek word 'epigram' in its original meaning is precisely equivalent to the Latin word 'inscription' and it probably came into use in this sense at a very early period of Greek history, anterior even to the invention of prose. Inscriptions at that time, if they went beyond a mere name or set of names, or perhaps the bare statement of a single fact, were necessarily in verse, then the single vehicle of organised expression." In other words, the first epigrams were poems that were inscribed on things such as gravestones and monuments. Why poetry? According to Mackail: "Even after prose was in use, an obvious propriety remained in the metrical form as being at once more striking and more easily retained in the memory; while in the case of epitaphs and dedications—for the earlier epigram falls almost entirely under these two heads—religious feeling and a sense of what was due to ancient custom aided the continuance of the old tradition." Herodotus (c. 484-425 BC) quoted epigrams of both kinds in his History; at the time he wrote the word epigramma was just beginning to acquire its current literary denotation. He quoted inscriptions found at the temple of Apollo at Thebes and on funeral monuments at Thermopylae, where the Greeks, led by a contingent of valorous Spartans, famously held off a much larger Persian army at the "Hot Gates." The most famous of the Thermopylae inscriptions is the one attributed to Simonides. Here is my modern English translation or "interpretation" of his celebrated epigram: Passerby, tell the Spartans we lie lifeless at Thermopylae: Dead at their word, obedient to their command. Have they heard? Do they understand? —Simonides translation by Michael R. Burch Simonides (c. 556-467 BC) was considered by many to be the most eminent of the Greek lyric poets, although Sappho is better known today. Mackail says of him: "Beyond the point to which Simonides brought it the epigram never rose. In him there is complete ease of workmanship and mastery of form together with the noble and severe simplicity which later poetry lost. His dedications retain something of the antique stiffness; but his magnificent epitaphs are among our most precious inheritances from the greatest thought and art of Greece." Here is my "take" on an inscription that has been attributed to Simonides: These men earned a crown of imperishable glory, nor did the maelstrom of death obscure their story. —Simonides translation by Michael R. Burch One of the best and most famous lyric poets of antiquity (or of any era) was a woman, Sappho. She was born on the island of Lesbos, circa 630 BC. According to the Parian Marble, she was exiled to Sicily sometime between 604 and 594, while Cicero mentioned that a statue of her stood in the town hall of Syracuse. "She is a mortal marvel," wrote Antipater of Sidon, before proceeding to catalog the Seven Wonders of the World. As J. B. Hare, one of her translators, said: "Sappho the poet was an innovator. At the time poetry was principally used in ceremonial contexts, and to extoll the deeds of brave soldiers. Sappho had the audacity to use the first person in poetry and to discuss deep human emotions, particularly the erotic, in ways that had never been approached by anyone before her. As for the military angle, in one of the longer fragments (#3) she says: 'Some say that the fairest thing upon the dark earth is a host of horsemen, and some say a host of foot soldiers, and others again a fleet of ships, but for me it is my beloved.' In the ancient world she was considered to be on an equal footing with Homer, acclaimed as the 'tenth muse.'" Anacreon (c. 582-485 BC) was a Greek lyric poet renowned for his drinking songs and hymns. Later Greeks included him in the canonical list of nine lyric poets. Here is my translation of an epigram that has been attributed to him: He lies in state tonight: great is his Monument! Yet Ares cares not, neither does War relent. —Anacreon, translation by Michael R. Burch Many of the earliest and best epigrams are couplets, although some of the best ancient epigrams have up to six or eight lines. Mackail provides us with this excellent definition of the epigram: "In brief then, the epigram in its first intention may be described as a very short poem summing up as though in a memorial inscription what it is desired to make permanently memorable in any action or situation. It must have the compression and conciseness of a real inscription, and in proportion to the smallness of its bulk must be highly finished, evenly balanced, simple, and lucid. In literature it holds something of the same place as is held in art by an engraved gem. But if the definition of the epigram is only fixed thus, it is difficult to exclude almost any very short poem that conforms externally to this standard ..." Here is my translation of an epigram that has been attributed to Plato (c. 424-347 BC): Mariner, do not ask whose tomb this may be, but go with good fortune: I wish you a kinder sea. —Plato, translation by Michael R. Burch I love the wisdom and spirit of Hafiz in this subversive (pardon the pun) little poem. I can see Trump putting refugees in cages, while Hafiz goes around letting them out for a moondance! The imbecile constructs cages for everyone he knows, while the sage (who has to duck his head whenever the moon glows) keeps dispensing keys all night long to the beautiful, rowdy, prison gang. —Hafiz, loose translation by Michael R. Burch The way we think of epigrams has changed over time. Today, according to the Wikipedia article on epigrams, we tend to "think of epigram as having a 'point'—that is, the poem ends in a punchline or satirical twist. [But] by no means do all Greek epigrams behave this way; many are simply descriptive. We associate [the] epigram with [a] 'point' because the European epigram tradition takes the Latin poet Martial as its principal model; he copied and adapted Greek models (particularly the contemporary poets Lucillius and Nicarchus) selectively and in the process redefined the genre, aligning it with the indigenous Roman tradition of 'satura', hexameter satire, as practised by (among others) his contemporary Juvenal. Greek epigrams [were] actually much more diverse, as [indicated by] the Milan Papyrus." For example, many of the epigrams in the Greek Anthology are sad and/or tender love poems. According to Wikipedia, Marcus Valerius Martialis, known in English as Martial, was born circa 38 AD and died circa 104 AD. He was a Latin poet from Hispania (the Iberian Peninsula) who wrote twelve books of epigrams, published during the reigns of the emperors Domitian, Nerva and Trajan. His epigrams tend to be short, witty affairs in which he cheerfully satirizes Roman-era city life and the scandalous activities of his acquaintances. He wrote a total of 1,561 poems, of which 1,235 are in elegiac couplets. He is generally considered to be the creator of the modern epigram. Here are a few of my favorite Martial epigrams: There is no glory in outstripping donkeys.—Marcus Valerius Martial Lie lightly on her, turf and dew ... She put so little weight on you. —Marcus Valerius Martial You ask me why I've sent you no new verses? There might be reverses. —Martial, loose translation/interpretation by Michael R. Burch Readers and listeners praise my books; You swear they're worse than a beginner's. Who cares? I always plan my dinners To please the diners, not the cooks. —Marcus Valerius Martial, translated by R. L. Barth While Roman epigrams owe much to their Greek predecessors, they are often more satirical, and sometimes employ obscene language. Latin epigrams could take the form of graffiti, such as this one found at Pompeii (circa AD 79): I'm astonished, wall, that you haven't collapsed into ruins, since you're holding up the weary verse of so many poets. Since Martial and other Roman poets adopted and adapted epigrams for their own purposes, the form has continued to evolve. Today most epigrams are prose rather than poetry, and include: The Tweet The Tweet is a popular new form of epigram. Here's my favorite Tweet to date: The Capitol looks beautiful and I am honored to be at work tonight.—Gabrielle Giffords Gabrielle Giffords is the Arizona congresswoman who was shot and nearly killed. While so many other American politicians rage and imagine vain things, I find her words wonderfully touching and encouraging. Reading her poetic Tweet, I can actually see our nation's Capitol lit up at night, shining like a beacon, and feel her sincerity. How many senators and congressmen are humble enough to feel honored to work for their country, I wonder? In any case, I'm glad to have Gabby back, and to know that she's not only recovering from her injuries, but wants to help her country recover from its own deep-seated (albeit self-inflicted) wounds. I only hope that other Americans will exhibit some of her grace under fire. After all, if she pulled through her harrowing ordeal, so can we as a nation, if only we emulate her courage and resolve. And as I write this, I am reminded of Gabby's favorite epigram, which appears on her Facebook page: With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation's wounds.—Abraham Lincoln The Pun, or Word-Play The ballot is stronger than the bullet.—Abraham Lincoln Your children need your presence more than your presents.—Jesse Jackson Absinthe makes the tart grow fonder.—Ernest Dowson, a pun on "Absence makes the heart grow fonder." A pun is defined as: "A joke exploiting the different possible meanings of a word or the fact that there are words that sound alike but have different meanings." Raillery If you can't be a good example, you'll just have to be a horrible warning.—Catherine the Great As blushing may make a whore seem virtuous, so modesty may make a fool seem sensible.—Jonathan Swift Catherine the Great's epigram is a stellar example of raillery, which has been defined as "light, teasing banter," "gentle mockery" and "good-humored satire or ridicule." It is also an example of drollery: something whimsically comical. Raillery can be both wonderfully funny, and wonderfully effective. Here's a bit of rather gentle raillery of my own, called "Saving Graces": Life's saving graces are love, pleasure, laughter ... wisdom, it seems, is for the Hereafter. —Michael R. Burch My epigram is dedicated to Christians who claim they'll inherit heaven at the expense of everyone else. Here is an example of political raillery: Joni Ernst is an "onion of crazy."—Debbie Wasserman-Schultz Waggery Perhaps at the opposite end of the spectrum from raillery would be waggery (the wisecrack, the bald-faced jest, the ribald joke which is sexual, excretory or somehow offensive, to someone): A man who says he can see through a woman is missing a lot.—Groucho Marx A man's only as old as the woman he feels.—Groucho Marx Another name for Marx's method is "the zinger," a potent form of the comedian's one-liner. The zinger requires upsetting the applecart of our polite polities. But there are many other "flavors" of epigrams ... The Bon Mot One of my favorite categories is best exemplified by the Divine Oscar Wilde, who upsets the applecart in an entirely different way: Questions are never indiscreet, answers sometimes are.—Oscar Wilde What a wickedly scathing line! This is a wonderful example of the bon mot ("good word"), the best way of saying something. There has never been a better critic of gossip, innuendo and scandal-mongering than Oscar Wilde (perhaps because so many prudes, busybodies and gossips considered him to be scandalous, when the real scandal was that they refused to mind their own business): Scandal is gossip made tedious by morality.—Oscar Wilde Wilde is every moralist's worst nightmare, because he was wise in the ways of the world and human nature, while moralists are usually up to their eyeballs in hypocrisy. Centuries before Wilde, Aristotle proved the ancient Greeks could be scintillantly scathing: Wit is educated insolence.—Aristotle But epigrams can also be wonderfully touching and moving: The births of all things are weak and tender, therefore we should have our eyes intent on beginnings. —Michel de Montaigne If we are to have real peace in the world, we shall have to begin with the children. —Mohandas Gandhi As an Israeli, I have come to understand: there is no way to love Israel and reject a two-state peace, no way to love Israel and reject Palestine. —Yael Dayan, daughter of Moshe Dayan, Israel's most famous general Epigrams can also be wise, and liberating: It takes courage to push yourself to places that you have never been before, to test your limits, to break through barriers. And the day came when the risk it took to remain tight inside the bud was more painful than the risk it took to blossom.—Anaïs Nin Shake off all fears of servile prejudices, under which weak minds are servilely crouched. Fix reason firmly in her seat, and call on her tribunal for every fact, every opinion. Question with boldness even the existence of a god; because if there be one, he must more approve of the homage of reason than that of blindfolded fear.—Thomas Jefferson Aphorisms Epigrams which convey truths or principles are called aphorisms: An aphorism can never be the whole truth; it is either a half-truth or a truth-and-a-half.—Karl Kraus Certain brief sentences are peerless in their ability to give one the feeling that nothing remains to be said.—Jean Rostand My ambition is to say in ten sentences what everyone else says in a book. —Friedrich Nietzsche Civility is the ability to disagree agreeably.—Michael R. Burch The epigram is the simple, elegant black dress of literature; it leaves nearly everything bared and yet still temptingly open to the imagination. The best epigrammatists produce belle lettres ("beautiful letters" or "fine writing") en brief ("in brief"). But there is as much diversity among epigrammatists as there is in the sea. Take the one below from the master of relativity himself, Albert Einstein. Einstein, who was quite the ladies' man, was asked to explain relativity. He chose to describe the perception of time as an aspect of human nature and physical attraction: Sit next to a pretty girl for an hour, it seems like a minute. Sit on a red-hot stove for a minute, it seems like an hour. That's relativity!—Albert Einstein The Limerick Another popular form of the epigram is the limerick. Here's one that delves into the zanier aspects of relativity: There once was a woman named Bright who traveled much faster than light. She set out one day in a relative way and came back the previous night! —Unknown Monkeyshines Einstein's epigram might be assigned any of a number of sub-terms: leg-pulling, horseplay, whimsy, a monkeyshine . . . perhaps even a hoodwink, boondoggle or snow job (since the "relativity" being discussed has little to do with physics, but much to do with physiques, body chemistry and sex). Still, Einstein's epigram, whatever we choose to call it, contains considerable wisdom. But sometimes epigrams can be entirely for amusement, such as this one of mine. I call it "Nun Fun Undone": Abbesses' recesses are not for excesses! —Michael R. Burch An epigram like mine that is entirely for the sake of humor might earn sobriquets like: tomfoolery, buffoonery, mummery, a chestnut, a gag, a ha-ha, a jape, a jest, a lark, a rib, a sally, a quirk, a whim, a vagary. The One-Liner A similar form of epigram is the comic's one-liner, or quip. One of the most famous one-liners is: Take my wife ... please!—Rodney Dangerfield, who "borrowed" it from Henny Youngman The Chiasmus Other types of epigrams also play on words. For instance the chiasmus repeats the same or very similar words in a different order: It's not the size of the dog in the fight that counts, it's the size of the fight in the dog.—Dwight D. Eisenhower It's not the men in your life that count, it's the life in your men.—Mae West I do not believe in a fate that will fall on us no matter what we do. I do believe in a fate that will fall on us if we do nothing.—Ronald Reagan The Spoonerism One of the more creative types of epigram is the spoonerism, a type of pun, or word-play. In effect, a spoonerism is an aural chiasmus: the sounds of words are reversed, rather than the same or similar words being reversed: I'd rather have a bottle in front of me than a frontal lobotomy. —Dorothy Parker Doggerel Then there is short light verse: poetry too un-serious about itself and its aims to assume literary airs. In its silliest and least "literary" forms, light verse is called doggerel. Masters of English light verse include Lord Byron (the author of "Don Juan") and my personal favorite, Ogden Nash: The turtle lives 'twixt plated decks which practically conceal its sex. I think it clever of the turtle in such a fix to be so fertile. —Ogden Nash The Anecdote Another category of epigram is the anecdote, a brief account or narrative, often to make or stress an important point: I came, I saw, I conquered.—Julius Caesar I have not come to praise Caesar, but to bury him.—Brutus Et tu, Bruté?—Julius Caesar Epigrams in Unexpected Places Epigrams can be found in every genre of writing. Here's one I love, by a sports columnist: If you win, you're colorful. If you lose, you're incompetent.—David Climer Epitaphs Then there are "dead serious" epigrams, called epitaphs. These are the inscriptions that appear on headstones or in obituaries and other tributes. Here's one of mine called "Epitaph for a Palestinian Child": I lived as best I could, and then I died. Be careful where you step: the grave is wide. —Michael R. Burch Encomium Sometimes the lines blur. Here's an epitaph that is also a chiasmus, from the headstone of the famous boxer Jack Dempsey: A gentle man and a gentleman.—Unknown The epigram above is also an example of encomium (praise or eulogy). The opposite type of epigram, when offered as invective, is the epithet. Epithet An epithet defines or characterizes someone or something. In Homer's day epithets were often complimentary. But today epithets are generally non-complimentary, if not insulting or downright offensive. Modern epithets often descend into derogatory slang and racial invective. But in the hands of a master epigrammatist like Will Rogers, they can still be sublime in effect: An economist's guess is liable to be as good as anybody else's.—Will Rogers Make crime pay. Become a lawyer.—Will Rogers A fool and his money are soon elected.—Will Rogers Literary critics can be champion insulters: Ezra Pound "has taken all culture for his province, and is naturally a little provincial about it."—Randall Jarrell W. H. Auden has become "a rhetoric-mill grinding away at the bottom of Limbo."—Randall Jarrell "After reading 'Under Sirius,' another poet is likely to feel, 'Well, back to my greeting cards.'"—Randall Jarrell "If poetry were nothing but texture, Dylan Thomas would be as good as any poet alive."—Randall Jarrell Adam Gopnik called Randall Jarrell the "best-equipped" American poetry critic of the past century and he may have been the "best quipped" as well.—Michael R. Burch Political Epigrams Political epigrams can be equally scathing, whether aimed at liberals, conservatives or politicians in general: I am not a member of any organized political party. I am a Democrat.—Will Rogers A conservative is a man with two perfectly good legs who, however, has never learned how to walk forward.—Franklin D. Roosevelt Politics is the art of looking for trouble, finding it, misdiagnosing it, and then misapplying the wrong remedies.—Groucho Marx As a snow-drift is formed where there is a lull in the wind, so, one would say, where there is a lull of truth, an institution springs up.—Henry David Thoreau Hillbilly Humor A sub-genre of the epithet consists of racial, ethnic or cultural ribbing. Southerners often poke fun at themselves and their neighbors with "hillbilly humor": You know you're a redneck if your family tree don't fork.—Unknown You know you're a redneck if your cars sit on blocks and your house has wheels.—Unknown Parody Another genre of epigrams engages in parody and lampooning. Here's one I hope to someday include it in a book of poems to be titled Why I Left the Religious Right: I've got Jesus's name on a wallet insert and "Hell is for Queers" on the back of my shirt and I uphold the Law, for grace has a flaw: the Church must have someone to drag through the dirt. —Michael R. Burch Proverb Yet another class of epigram (although one that is generally less entertaining) has any number of names. Let's begin with "proverb" and a famous illustration by one of the world's best-known epigrammatists: Early to bed, early to rise makes a man healthy, wealthy and wise. —Ben Franklin Miguel de Cervantes defined a proverb as "a short sentence based on long experience." There are, it seems, a bazillion other names for such bits of homey wisdom: adage, moral, homily, bromide, aphorism, apophthegm, axiom, dictum, maxim, motto, folk wisdom, platitude, precept, saw, saying, truism, catchphrase, formula, gnome, pithy saying, etc. But alas!, many proverbs are boring and some are untrue, to boot. How many men got up early every morning, were poor as dirt, and died early deaths? Surely multitudes! But many epigrams contain both vital wisdom and sparkling humor. Sometimes the epigram is the salvo a brilliant, battle-savvy cynic launches against human ignorance, intolerance, cruelty and insanity: There are many humorous things in the world; among them, the white man's notion that he is less savage than the other savages.—Mark Twain To determine the truth of Twain's remark, just inquire with any black American slave, or any Native American who walked the Trail of Tears, or any Palestinian who's been herded inside the walled ghetto of Gaza and had the gates slammed shut in his face. None of them will praise the white man's