

# Tautology

<http://www.literarydevices.com/tautology/>

## Definition of Tautology

A tautology states the same thing twice in slightly different wording, or adds redundant and unnecessary words. Tautological reasoning is logic that uses the premise as the conclusions, or is too obvious as to be necessary. For example, saying, “When we get a pet we will either get a dog or some other animal” is tautological, as every pet is necessarily either a dog or not a dog. Other examples of tautologies based on redundancy are “new innovation,” “male widower,” and “added bonus.”

The word tautology is a compound of the Greek words *tauto* and *logos*, meaning “same” and “word,” respectively. Thus the definition of tautology harkens back to the idea of using the same word or idea more than once.

## Difference Between Tautology and Repetition

While some think that any instance of repetition instantly constitutes an example of tautology, this is not true. The two devices also have very different aims and aesthetics. Repetition means using the same word or a variation of the same word more than once in close proximity. Repetition is generally used to add emphasis and power to the word or phrase being repeated. Tautology, on the other hand, is often unintentional and can sound a bit foolish or humorous. Tautology is stating the same thing twice in a redundant way, and thus actually takes away from the power of the word or argument being repeated. It is relatively rare to find tautologies that are rhetorically pleasing.

## Common Examples of Tautology

We use tautology examples all the time in everyday conversation, often without realizing it. Any time you start a sentence with “In my opinion, I think...” this is a tautology, since it’s clear that if you “think” something it must be your opinion.

There are also plenty of tautology examples from famous people. Here is a short list:

- “With malice toward none, and with charity for all.”—Abraham Lincoln
- “It’s no exaggeration to say the undecideds could go one way or another.”—George H.W. Bush
- “They are simply going to have to score more points than the other team to win the game.”—John Madden
- “If we do not succeed, we run the risk of failure.”—Dan Quayle
- “Smoking can kill you, and if you’ve been killed, you’ve lost a very important part of your life.”—Brook Shields.

Some people also use tautologies for comedic purposes, such as in the following quotes from Yogi Berra:

- “It’s deja vu all over again.”
- “You can observe a lot by watching.”
- “It ain’t over ’til it’s over.”

Some examples of idiom in English are also tautological in nature, such as the following:

- It's always in the last place you look.
- I am my father's son.
- Wherever you go, there you are.
- Boys will be boys.
- You've got to do what you've got to do.

## Significance of Tautology in Literature

Generally, authors try to avoid tautology examples in their works of literature. From the common examples of tautology above, you can see that some tautological statements are truly ridiculous. It is especially absurd to explain one thing with its own definition (such as Dan Quayle's quote, "If we do not succeed, we run the risk of failure"). However, there are some examples of tautology which can be aesthetically pleasing in literature. The main reason an author would purposefully use tautology examples is to be humorous, as we will see in Example #4. However, there are a few other examples of tautology in which the repetition of an idea in slightly different wording does not detract from its strength.

## Examples of Tautology in Literature

### Example #1

HAMLET: Oh, that this too, too sullied flesh would melt,  
Thaw, and resolve itself into a dew.

(*Hamlet* by William Shakespeare)

In this famous line from William Shakespeare's tragedy *Hamlet*, the eponymous character wishes himself dead. He wishes his flesh would "melt, / thaw, and resolve itself into a dew." Technically, this is tautological as melting, thawing, and resolving into a dew are synonymous actions. "Thaw" and "resolve itself into a dew" are thus redundant. However, Shakespeare masterfully does not make this redundancy seem foolish, but instead shows how deeply Hamlet desires his own death.

### Example #2

Presently my soul grew stronger; hesitating then no longer,  
"Sir," said I, "or Madam, truly your forgiveness I implore;  
But the fact is I was napping, and so gently you came rapping,  
And so faintly you came tapping, tapping at my chamber door,  
That I scarce was sure I heard you"—here I opened wide the door;—  
Darkness there and nothing more.

("The Raven" by Edgar Allen Poe)

Similarly to Shakespeare, Edgar Allen Poe uses some redundancy in his famous poem "The Raven" without lessening the sentiments. In this stanza, Poe writes "so gently you came rapping, / And so faintly you came tapping." This is redundant, and yet it is aesthetically pleasing because of the internal rhyme of the two lines. Again, like with Hamlet, this use of tautology speaks more to the character's mental state, which is very anxious, rather than Poe's lack of facility with the language.

### Example #3

“Well, she was less than an hour old and Tom was God knows where. I woke up out of the ether with an utterly abandoned feeling, and asked the nurse right away if it was a boy or a girl. She told me it was a girl, and so I turned my head away and wept. ‘All right,’ I said, ‘I’m glad it’s a girl. And I hope she’ll be a fool – that’s the best thing a girl can be in this world, a beautiful little fool.’”

*The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald

Daisy has a somewhat surprising reaction to finding out that she has just given birth to a daughter. She says she hopes her daughter will “be a fool— that’s the best thing a girl can be in this world, a beautiful little fool.” This may surprise some readers of *The Great Gatsby*, as Daisy is certainly no fool and the statement seems misogynistic. However, Daisy is fully aware of how difficult it is to be a woman in her world, and thinks that being ignorant would be the only way to tolerate it. Therefore she explains her thinking only by repeating it in slightly different words.

### Example #4

“When I was a kid,” Orr replied, “I used to walk around all day with crab apples in my cheeks. One in each cheek.”

... A minute passed. “Why?” [Yossarian] found himself forced to ask finally.

Orr tittered triumphantly. “Because they’re better than horse chestnuts....When I couldn’t get crab apples,” Orr continued, “I used horse chestnuts. Horse chestnuts are about the same size as crab apples and actually have a better shape, although the shape doesn’t matter a bit.”

“Why did you walk around with crab apples in your cheeks?” Yossarian asked again. “That’s what I asked.”

“Because they’ve got a better shape than horse chestnuts,” Orr answered. “I just told you that.”

(*Catch-22* by Joseph Heller)

This is perhaps the best, and most absurdly comical, example of tautology in this group. The character of Yossarian is very frustrated with his colleague Orr because Orr insists on using tautological reasoning. The exchange starts with Orr averring that he used to walk around with crab apples in his cheeks. When Yossarian continues to question him, Orr says only that the reason he did it is “Because they’ve got a better shape than horse chestnuts.” Indeed, this is complete nonsense. Joseph Heller used many absurd exchanges such as this one to highlight the absurdity of war.

---

(<https://examples.yourdictionary.com/examples-of-tautology.html>)

## Tautologies From Famous Speakers

Even the best speakers and writers will sometimes let tautology slip into their work. Politicians are particularly prone to this verbal tic as they speak for hours on end and often give slightly different versions of prepared remarks during many campaign stops.

- "It's no exaggeration to say the undecideds could go one way or another." - George H. W. Bush
- "Our nation must come together to unite." - George W. Bush
- "It's deja vu all over again." - Yogi Berra
- "They are simply going to have to score more points than the other team to win the game" - John Madden
- "If we do not succeed, we run the risk of failure." - Dan Quayle
- "Smoking can kill you, and if you've been killed, you've lost a very important part of your life." - Brooke Shields.
- "With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right." - Abraham Lincoln

## Tautology in Literature

Occasionally tautologies are more than just needless repetition; they can add beauty or cause the reader to think about a subject more deeply. Examples of tautologies in literature show them at their best, whether for dramatic or comedic effect:

- "To be or not to be, that is the question." - William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*
- "But the fact is I was napping, and so gently you came rapping, And so faintly you came tapping, tapping at my chamber door" - Edgar Allan Poe, "The Raven"
- "If I perish, I perish." - Esther 4:15
- "And as for me, if I am bereaved of my children, I am bereaved." - Genesis 43:14
- "I'm willing to tell you. I'm wanting to tell you. I'm waiting to tell you." - George Bernard Shaw, *Pygmalion*

## Tautology in Song

Song lyrics are often a treasure trove of tautologies, as in this case repetition can be artistic. Additional words can help fill out the rhythm or make a rhyme in song, so this repetition is often in service of the artistic work as a whole rather than accidental:

- "I want to live while I am alive" - Bon Jovi
- "There's nothing you can do that can't be done. There's nothing you can sing that can't be sung" - The Beatles
- "Qué será, será. Whatever will be, will be" - Jay Livingston and Ray Evans
- "Only the lucky ones ... get lucky" - Loverboy
- "Shout it, shout it, shout it out loud!" - Kiss