

The Rhetoric of Chiasmus #1

Introduction

We all like to tell a joke, or impress others with a witty saying. Some of the most famous examples have used a rhetorical device called chiasmus. Even if you've not heard that word before, you've probably seen it in action. Here's why...

Throughout history, the languages of humanity have been many and varied. Despite those variations, however, there is an aspect often used to express some of the cleverest thoughts and sayings – and some of the funniest.

I speak of chiasmus (pronounced kahy-az-muhs), a word that is perhaps more familiar to language academics and experts. Paradoxically, however, the concept and its application are both well known throughout the general population; and best exemplified and recognized with this quotation: "I eat to live, not live to eat." That particular quote is attributed to Cicero, a Roman senator and philosopher who lived from 106-43B.C.

Chiasmus, however, has a history that goes back five thousand years or more, to the ancient civilizations of Asia Minor, Persia and others. As a tool for conveying subtleties of meaning, there is arguably none better. Many of us can make up a good pun or witty saying, but it takes a special turn of phrase to obtain the full effect of chiasmus. And, "turn" is the operative word, because all chiasmus depends upon turning a phrase around in order to express a different or opposite idea.

For an introduction to the concept and some applications, [this information at Wikipedia](#) is useful to review.

Have you encountered chiasmus in your travels? If not before this, then I hope that you do, from now on. I think it would be unusual, however, for somebody to go through life without encountering it at least once.

Consider this: the Cicero quote above homes in on the different ways of viewing the word "live", meanings that are in fact quite at odds with each other. There are, however, many ways of "living", and such a quote can be adapted to suit another aspect. For example, those in the education field might be interested in a thought such as this: "I live to teach, not teach to live." That is just one of the many chiasmic sayings I've developed over the years.

Using chiasmus is, I think, within the reach of most people who like to play with words. It's a staple tool for many writers, politicians, philosophers, teachers, and just about anybody who has a desire to express a different way of looking at an issue, a cause, a goal and so on. For a sample of some of my favorite quotes from famous people, have a look [here](#), at my website.

So, as time passes, I'll be discussing ways for you to start having a go at it yourself; because you can, without any doubt.

To assist your progress, start by thinking upon topics that most interest you. That's what I did, years ago, when I stumbled upon chiasmus during my online surfing with the result that, literally and figuratively, my eyes were opened. By the time I'd thought about what I wanted to say, I'd settled upon the ten following topics: **Food, Just Crazy, Law, Literature, Philosophy, Politics, Family/Relationships, Religion, Society and War.**

For me, those cover a goodly chunk of humanity's successes and failures - in other words, rich pickings for irony, comedy, satire, tragedy and pathos, among others. In that regard, I like to develop jokes with chiasmus as the rhetorical device. So, for now, let me leave you with one of my early chiastic observations about **War** (and a rare example of double chiasmus, about which I'll discuss more another time):

Excited grunt: "Sir, sir, we can't carry on the fight just now – the bridge is under water!"

Bored captain: "Hmmm. Well, I guess that's water under the bridge now – just fight and carry on."