

THE ACADEMIC SUCCESS CENTER

at **Sam Houston**
STATE UNIVERSITY

Irony Explained

Each instructor develops his or her own assignments. Your instructor and the assignment sheet s/he has provided are the two best sources for guidance as you work toward a final draft. The handouts for the types of essays feature general guidelines to help you write solid essays, but they should be treated only as supplements to your instructor and the assignment sheet.

Getting Started

Irony is a contradiction between appearance or expectation and reality, when a writer's meaning is different from what is actually stated. This may be manifested in a variety of ways.

A discrepancy may exist between what someone says and what he or she actually means, between what someone expects to happen and what really happens, or between what appears to be true and what actually is true.

The term may be applied to events, situations, and structural elements of a work, not just to statements. Three major forms are verbal, situational, and dramatic.

Types of Irony

Verbal Irony: Characterized by a discrepancy between what a character or writer says and what he or she means or believes to be true. In fact, the speaker often says exactly the opposite of what he or she actually means.

Examples:

Hyperbole (overstatement)- "Ms. Paw, I lost my homework on the way to school this morning because I was attacked by a dog, a dinosaur, two samurai, a Jedi, an alien, and a really angry chicken."

Litotes (understatement)- (Scene: Kat arrives home after a day in which she failed a test, totaled her new car, and had a fight with her boyfriend after being attacked by a cloud of mosquitoes. Her roommate, excited to see her, asks about her day.)

Roommate: "Hey! How was your day Kat?"

Kat: "Great. Best day ever."

*Pun (play on words)- "A new type of broom came out. It's sweeping the nation."
"I'm reading a book about anti-gravity. It's impossible to put down."*

Situational Irony: Involves a discrepancy between expectation and reality and derives primarily from events or situations themselves, whether or not the characters understand the situation as ironic.

Example: *In O. Henry's short story, "Gift of the Magi," both husband and wife sell their most prized possessions to give their spouse a gift to complement the other's most prized possession. The woman sells her beautiful long hair to buy a platinum chain for the man's pocket watch; the man sells his watch to buy the woman tortoiseshell combs to hold up her hair.*

Dramatic Irony: Dramatic irony involves a discrepancy between a character's perception and what the reader or audience knows to be true. Lacking material information that the audience possesses, the character creates discord by his or her responses to plot events. Thus, dramatic irony can be revealed by inappropriate statements, expectations, or actions.

Example: *Sophocles' Oedipus Rex is the most widely known example. Oedipus, King of Thebes, vows to find the murderer of the previous king, only to find out what the audience has known all along: he is the guilty party.*

Recognizing Irony

Irony is not sarcasm. Sarcasm is intentional ridicule that usually involves an obvious, even exaggerated form of verbal irony and is generally directed at a specific person with a hurtful aim. Irony is more restrained and is often directed toward a situation rather than a person, and it generally lacks hurtful intent.

Example: *"I never forget a face—but in your case I'll be glad to make an exception."*
This is sarcastic because there are clear identifiers that the statement is meant to be malicious, and it is directed to a specific person.

Irony is not satire. Satire is a literary genre in which irony, wit, and sometimes sarcasm are used to expose human weaknesses, spurring reform through ridicule. Irony is a device or mode, not a genre, and typically lacks the instructive aim of satire.

Example: *Jonathan Swift's, "A Modest Proposal," is a satirical essay in which the Irish lower class might ease their economic disparity by selling their children as food for the rich upper class. Swift mocks heartless attitudes toward lower class citizens and Irish policy as a means of spurring reform.*