

CRITICAL READING AND THINKING: APHORISMS

Using Aphorisms

An aphorism is a short, pointed statement that expresses a wise, general, observation, or truth. To distinguish between an aphorism and a statement, you should look for a universal quality. For instance, “I believe that we should put an end to England’s tyranny” is not an aphorism because it is a statement of opinion that applies to only one situation. “Tyranny, like hell, is not easily conquered” is an aphorism because it can be applied to many situations.

DIRECTIONS: Read each of the following statements. Write “yes” or “no” to show whether or not each statement is an aphorism. Write a brief paraphrase of each statement that is an aphorism on the lines below it.

1. A common murderer, or highwayman, or a housebreaker has as good a pretence as the king of Britain.

2. Better have too much force than too little, when so great an object is at stake.

3. Not a man lives on this continent but fully believes that a separation must... finally take place.

4. ‘Tis the business of little minds to shrink.

5. I love the man that can smile at trouble; that can gather strength from distress and grow brave by reflection.

Understanding the Effect of Aphorisms

Thomas Paine’s use of aphorisms in *The Crisis* serves two purposes. The first is to provide clear and memorable statements that will motivate America’s citizens to action. The second is to create the impression that the issues at stake are not necessarily tied to the exact circumstances. Aphorisms imply a greater truth.

DIRECTIONS: For each of the following aphorisms, write a brief description of how the aphorism applies to America’s situation in 1776. Then write a brief explanation of what the aphorism means in a more general sense.

1. “Show your faith by your works”

Application in 1776:

General Truth:

2. “The heart that feels not is dead.”

Application in 1776:

General truth:

3. “The summer soldier and the sunshine patriot will in this crisis, shrink from the service of his country.”

Application in 1776:

General Truth:

4. “The blood of his children will curse his cowardice, who shrinks back at a time when a little might have saved the whole.”

Application in 1776:

General truth:

Understanding Style

Benjamin Franklin believed that clarity and brevity are two of the most important characteristics of good writing. These five passages are far from clear and brief.

DIRECTIONS: Read each passage and decide which of Franklin's aphorisms expresses the same idea.

- A. "Love your neighbor; yet don't pull down your hedge."
- B. "He that lives upon hope will die fasting."
- C. "A slip of the foot you may soon recover, but a slip of the tongue you may never get over."
- D. "The rotten apple spoils his companions."
- E. "A small leak will sink a great ship."

1. Some people expect that the best is bound to happen and that problems will just go away. Such people do little or nothing to make the good happen or to solve their problems. Usually, however, their expectations are not met, and they end up without anything good or with even worse problems.

2. It requires the work of many people to construct a large, complicated object. Once completed such an object seems very powerful. Yet even a minor flaw can ruin the object.

3. When farmers gather their crops, they are careful to cull out those that are spoiled or marred because when the crops are stored, these flaws could spread to the healthy specimens with which they come into contact.

4. It is wise to cultivate the friendship of those who live near you- you never know when you may have to help them or they may be able to help you. On the other hand, you do not want to get too close to them or may be forever interfering in your life.

5. We human beings are frail; we can suffer all kinds of accidents that will leave us bruised and broken. But bruises go away and bones heal. On the other hand, if we accidentally say the wrong things, we can end up in a great deal of trouble. Others may never forgive us, we may lose friends or gain enemies, we may be thought foolish, etc.

Recognizing Aphorisms

An aphorism is a short, concise statement expressing a wise or clever observation or truth. In order to fully understand an aphorism, it is a good idea to try to state the meaning of the statement in your own words, or paraphrase. For example you might paraphrase the aphorism "When the cat's away, the mice do play" by saying, "People become unruly when an authority figure is absent."

DIRECTIONS: Use your own words to paraphrase each of the following aphorisms from Benjamin Franklin's "Poor Richard Almanac." Write them on a separate sheet of paper.

- 1. "Fish and visitors smell in three days"
- 2. "If your head is wax, don't walk in the sun"
- 3. "Three may keep a secret if two of them are dead."
- 4. "If you would know the value of money, try to borrow some."
- 5. "Drive thy business; let it not drive thee."
- 6. "The cat in gloves catches no mice."
- 7. "He that lies down with dogs will rise up with fleas."
- 8. "Don't throw stones at your neighbors, if your own windows are glass."
- 9. "Well done is better than well said."
- 10. "Eat to live and not live to eat."