

# One Page Concept Review: Paradox

## What is it?

Paradox is nothing more than a contradiction. Two ideas are seemingly at odds, yet nonetheless coexist to reveal some greater truth.

This idea is related to irony since the expectation of an assertion is that it actually assert an idea-- not subtly undermine the assertion of that idea or even undermine the ability to assert the idea in the first place (which is the reality of the paradox).

Oxymoron is a specialized form of paradox that occurs on the language level-- when paired words seem to cancel each other out. However, whether or not words are oxymoronic is something that is more likely to be a multiple choice option than a writing strategy. File this under *Good to Know, but Not Essential*.

## Why should I care?

Paradox is simply the extreme form of what I have called *complexity* or *ambiguity* throughout this course, and I have emphasized (or at least tried to emphasize) this concept because it is one obvious marker of the sort of literature that engages the world in all its contradictions and is (theoretically) opposed to the sort of literature whose chief function is to entertain (which tends to flatten these complexities). This is not to claim that escapist literature cannot reveal real truths about the human condition (even comic books, for instance, intentionally blur the line between good and evil), but if this occurs, it tends to happen *in addition* to adherence to standard genre tropes (even if it deconstructing them), as opposed to producing a text whose primary purpose is to explore these sorts of arguments about the human condition. Again, I am not trying to make a hard distinction between (so-called) high and low art, since I do not believe that the distinction is particularly meaningful except as an abstract idea. Rather, I am suggesting that there are two poles of fiction writing and that different texts tend to circle these poles to greater or lesser degrees. The sort of writing that circles the complexity pole is the sort of writing that appears on the AP test.

Perhaps more significant from your viewpoint, historically College Board uses this idea to separate out those who can write about ideas in a nuanced way and those who cannot. It doesn't take much imagination to guess which group earns higher scores. This doesn't always quite reach the level of paradox, but it is helpful to treat as such. For example, when the word *complex* or *complexity* is used in a prompt (and it occurs quite often), this is AP-speak for *two ideas that seem to be at odds with one another*. Not only is this very close indeed to the definition of paradox, but it is to your advantage to stress the degree of contradiction, since it gives you a ready made structure to break down the idea (body paragraphs and conclusion: contradictory idea<sub>1</sub> + contradictory idea<sub>2</sub> = synthesis). The other (more straightforward) application is that College Boards likes to choose paradoxical poems.

## How do I do it?

- **There are essentially three ways of dealing with contradiction:** one can leave the ideas unreconciled (**it is both *this* and *this***); one can conditionally reconcile them (**it is *this* under *these conditions***); or one can synthesize them (**it is *both*, since the contradiction is more apparent than real**). Your task as a writer is to define which of these approaches best fits the particular circumstances.
- In a timed writing, **consider using paradox to structure the essay.** Body paragraph one develops the first idea. Body paragraph two develops the second idea. The conclusion reconciles the two ideas in some way and explains why the contradiction is important.

- **Paradox is often used to describe the ineffable.** To say that something is *ineffable*, is simply to claim that it cannot be adequately expressed in words. Using paradox to develop this idea is particularly common in attempts to describe mystical or religious experiences. If so, the point is usually to express the idea that some ideas and experiences are simply beyond literal or human comprehension.
- **Paradox is often used to describe human complexity.** There has never been a single human who is 100% consistent in his or her thoughts and actions, and to the extent that literature is trying to mirror this complexity, one would expect this to be true for characters in fiction. Thus, internal contradiction is one obvious way that writers try to make their characters three-dimensional (in order to seem real to the reader). This is a good time to recall Forster's distinction between round and flat characters and the test he used to determine the difference. If a character surprises the reader (i.e., acts on these contradictory impulses)-- but this surprise appears to be shoe-horned in to make the plot work-- we're probably talking about bad writing (where the author is trying, but failing to create the illusion of three-dimensionality). Obviously, if the character never surprises, it lacks complexity and is flat.
- **On the language level, look for paradoxes in the connotation of diction and imagery.** This is a bit of an advanced strategy, since it is sometimes difficult to tease out the implications of this sort of thing in the time that the AP test gives you to write an essay. However, if you make the effort to look for contradictions in the constituent parts of an image or small chunk of text, you can often shine a light on ambivalences within the point of view of the text that are really quite sophisticated (and impressive to graders).

## How do students screw this up?

### Not Connecting a Paradox to Your Argument

- As always, **if you're not connecting a literary strategy to an argument, you're probably wasting your time in pointing it out.** You've got to do something with a paradox beyond just deconstructing it. Luckily this isn't terribly hard to do, since the presence of paradox in writing is almost always there to highlight ambiguities in a concept and/or ambivalences in the point of view of a text. Figure out which one it is (if it is not both) and analyze accordingly.
- **If responding to a complexity prompt, your conclusion should write itself.** Go back to my first bullet point in the *How do I do it?* section of this sheet, and now the end of your concluding paragraph should be sorted (after you've briefly summarized what you've proved, of course). Not only is this way of concluding the best and most direct answer to any prompt that explicitly asks about complexity, if you do it right, it reads as very thoughtful and nuanced.

### Flattening Complexity

- **Complexity gives you something interesting to write about.** Why wouldn't you want to engage it? Nonetheless, student writers love to boil everything down to black and white concepts because it simplifies the writing task for them (never mind if it does violence to the text). Stop doing this. I agree it's easier to ignore counter-examples in the interest of getting it done, but it's worth your time not to take short cuts. For one, your grade will radically improve.
- **Attempting harder tasks (and not quite nailing it) tends to be rewarded more than doing mechanically doing easy tasks.** In general, the AP rubric is set up to reward you for what you do right, not punish you for what you do wrong. There is, therefore, little advantage to you not trying to write about complexity or paradox, even if you're not 100% confident in your ability to pull it off. Go big or go home. (The obvious exception to this is if you are intentionally writing a superficial essay because you have mishandled the timing on the test).