

One Page Concept Review: Situational Irony

What is it?

Situational irony is a situation in which actions have an effect that is opposite from what was intended, so that the outcome is contrary to what was expected. It is the gap between expectations and reality.

In order to reach the threshold of ironic, then, this means that there has to be a reasonable expectation that outcome of an action would be other than what it is. Thus, situational irony is not the same thing as bad luck or coincidence (though this obviously doesn't preclude instances of bad luck or coincidences from being instances of irony).

The distinction between situational and verbal irony is similarly straightforward. If you are talking about things that happen, it is situational irony. If you are talking about words or an attitude that someone is advancing, then it is verbal irony. In other words, situational irony requires a reversal of outcome (in terms of events or situations). It must be materially quantifiable.

Related ideas like cosmic irony (or ironies of fate), peripeteia, and poetic justice are good to know, but are more relevant to the multiple choice portion of the test. They are not, in other words, terribly essential to nail down (beyond knowing what they are).

Why should I care?

Despite the fact that when someone talks about irony in everyday speech they are probably talking about situational ironies, in writing about literature, one is generally much more concerned about irony in attitude, tone, and words.

That said, situational irony is still an important concept in many contexts. It is, for instance, a marker of some degree of irony in the tone (as it could suggest the text's critique of the character that is experiencing the reversal). It is also obviously important in texts that have some sort of twist ending that depends on a reversal of expectation.

How do I do it?

- **Use the language of expectation and reality.** This isn't terribly complicated; you just have to remember to do it. If you do this, then writing the explanation that breaks down the irony is fairly easy.
- **Consider using irony to structure essays or paragraphs within essays.** If you do this, it's really just a variant of the contrast structure and very much like the one that I have advocated that you use for dealing with ambiguity, complexity, and paradox. Here the contrast is between expectation (body paragraph one / point one of a body paragraph) and reality (body paragraph two / point two of a body paragraph). The conclusion, then, analyzes the gap in terms of what the text is arguing about the topic (a theme). You would only want to use this structure if the situational irony is central to the text (ideally a structural element, such as when a text is organized to set up a twist ending or an unexpected resolution to a conflict).
- **Remember that irony is a means to an end.** Even if the irony seems jokey or otherwise intended to entertain, it still implies a comparison. Things didn't work out the way they were

supposed to work out. The question, then, is to ascertain why the text set events up in this manner. Answer that question and you're halfway to uncovering a theme.

How do students screw this up?

Not Knowing What You Are Talking About

- **Use the terms accurately.** Because there is so much imprecision about how people talk about situational irony in everyday speech, this can bleed over into student writing. Remember, do not use irony as a synonym for *bad luck* or *coincidence*. There has to be an actual expectation that events *should* have transpired differently than how they unfolded. The trick is to establish that there truly was a reasonable expectation that the outcome should have been other than what it was.
- **Do not overcomplicate explanations.** It really is as simple as writing about the expectation (and how that expectation was formed) versus reality (what actually happened and how this was a reversal). In other words, you are simply contrasting two possible series of events and the ideas that surround them (one hypothetical and one actual).

Not Connecting It to an Argument

- **Identifying a literary element is useless unless it is advancing your point.** This is the cardinal sin of writing about literature, and it's no less true here than it is with writing about any other literary element.
- **Analyzing the structure of a narrative twist isn't good enough.** You need to be connecting this idea to theme. Often this is as simple as thinking about the worldview that the text seems to be advocating. One common example is how reversals in outcomes often reveal limitations in human being's ability to control their environment. In other words, plans go awry because the universe doesn't play along with human ambition.

Not Analyzing the Source of the Irony

- **If the situational irony arises out of the actions of characters, the text is probably commenting on human foibles or weaknesses.** In this case, given the fact that there is a reversal, the text is probably criticizing something about people or society. If the character is sympathetic, it's probably society. If the character is unsympathetic, it is probably human vanity.
- **If the situational irony arises out of fate, the gods, society, or other circumstances beyond human control, the text is probably commenting on the nature of the world or the society in which the characters live.** The text could, for example, could be advancing the idea that the universe is absurd, is hostile to human happiness, or is otherwise just a miserable place to live. On a smaller scale, the text could be commenting about the nature of a *society* that is somehow opposed to the achievement of happiness or the realization of one's ambitions.