Paradox

The best way to understand what a paradox is would be to contrast it with the related concept of logical contradiction. A contradiction is a statement that simply does not follow the rules of logic and must thus be dismissed as unsound on the basis of the laws of reason. A paradox, on the other hand, is also generally unsound on a purely rational basis; but then, the whole point is that the statement points to a truth that lies beyond the bounds of reason.

Definition

A paradox is a rhetorical device that is made up of two opposite things and seems impossible or untrue but is actually possible or true. A paradox can also mean a person who does two things that seem to be opposite each other, or who has opposite qualities. Finally, a paradox can be a statement that seems to say two opposite things and yet is still true. Paradox is derived from the Latin word paradoxum, the Greek word paradoxon, and from the neuter of paradoxos, meaning contrary to expectation. Its first known use was in 1540. Synonyms of paradox are dichotomy, incongruity, and contradiction.

Examples of paradox

Paradox can mean contrary to expectations, existing belief, or perceived opinion. Often, a paradox is a statement that seems to be contradictory to itself, or even amusing; yet it may contain hidden or obvious truth. Paradox is often used to illustrate the speaker or writer’s opinion which is contradictory to accepted traditional thought on the subject. Paradox is used in literature to cause innovative thinking or ideas. The following are examples of paradox:

“The enemy of my enemy is my friend.”

“What a pity that youth must be wasted on the young.” – George Bernard Shaw

Many examples of paradox are humorous, because of both the context and the often unusual ideas they represent. Paradox is also used to comment upon politically charged circumstances in many situations and avoid confrontation.

In George Orwell’s famous literary parody Animal Farm, one of society’s rules is that “All animals are equal, but some are more equal than others.” This statement implies that no animals are equal, upon close inspection.
How to use a paradox

Many paradoxes are similar to riddles; there are famous paradoxes that have withstood the test of time and provided years of befuddlement for human beings. Some paradoxes are just a play on words, similar but different from a pun. Paradoxes can have false premises which can be proven false; however some never achieve universally accepted resolutions. The following is an example.

The Liar Paradox (Epimenides Paradox)

This paradox was written by the logician Chrysippos, and Philetus of Cos (a poet, grammarian, and critic) was so exhausted attempting to solve it that he died.

“A Cretan sails to Greece and says to some Greek men who are standing upon the shore, “All Cretans are liars.” Did he speak the truth?

One answer is no, because the man is Cretan, and he would be calling himself a liar, as well, which would make him not a liar. One answer is yes, because if he is a Cretan, he is a liar, and he is admitting it.

“A week later, the Cretan sailed to Greece again and said, “All Cretans are liars and all I say is the truth.”

In this case, the Cretan is a liar, and so are all Cretans, because the man only speaks the truth. This paradox is more familiar to most in its modern version:

“If a man says he is always lying, is he telling the truth, or lying? The answer is impossible to discern; only the man knows whether or not he is lying.

If you're having trouble using paradoxes in your writing, our writers are experts at including paradoxes in an essay (they can even write an essay about paradoxes) or dissertation.