

# Climax (Figure of Speech)



## DEFINITION

What is a climax? Here's a quick and simple definition:

Climax is a [figure of speech](#) in which successive words, phrases, clauses, or sentences are arranged in ascending order of importance, as in "Look! Up in the sky! It's a [bird](#)! It's a [plane](#)! It's [Superman](#)!"

Some additional key details about climax:

- Climax has the effect of building excitement and anticipation.
- The device is used in writing of all types, from speeches and songs to novels and plays.
- The term "climax" also has another meaning: climax, the figure of speech, is different from [climax](#), the moment in a plot when the central conflict of the story reaches peak intensity.

## Climax Pronunciation

Here's how to pronounce climax: **cliy**-max

## Understanding Climax

Climax appears all over the place, and it's easy to identify if you know what you're looking for. The definition of climax includes any use of language that is characterized by a feeling of mounting intensity across successive words, phrases, clauses, or sentences, but it's generally agreed that something is only an example of climax if tension is built over the course of three or more discrete words, phrases, clauses, or sentences. So for example, the following phrases do *not* count as climax, since each one contains only [two discrete ideas](#):

- "If you think that's [bad](#), it gets [worse](#)."
- "To [infinity](#), and [beyond](#)!"
- "Out of the [frying pan](#) and into [the fire](#)!"

Here's a handful of examples that *do* contain at least three discrete words or clauses [in order of increasing importance](#), which qualifies them as examples of climax:

- Let a man acknowledge his obligations to [himself](#), his [family](#), his [country](#), and his [God](#).
- Since [concord was lost](#), [friendship was lost](#); [fidelity was lost](#); [liberty was lost](#)—[all was lost](#).

## When Climax is Unclear

It can sometimes be difficult to tell whether the words, phrases, or sentences in a sequence actually have a hierarchy of importance or power, which makes it difficult to know whether climax is at play. For instance, was Abraham Lincoln using climax when he declared in his Gettysburg Address that the Union was fighting to defend a government

"of the people, by the people, for the people."

Some people might argue that government "for the people" is the most revolutionary idea of the three presented here, and that therefore this is an example of climax. However, others might say that there is no hierarchy between these three ideas—that they're all equally important—and that this sequence therefore *isn't* an example of climax.

Here's another example: is the following phrase from the Declaration of Independence an example of climax?

Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

Here, some might argue that it's hard to argue that happiness is "more important" than life itself, and so this isn't climax. But others might point out that the right to life is basic, while liberty and the right to pursue happiness are the hallmarks of a truly free society, and so it is climax.

Ultimately, if you can see a way that the three words or phrases are increasing in importance, then you can make a case that it is an example of climax. But if you're unable to tell whether a sentence is using climax even after you've analyzed its words closely, it's probably safe to say that, even if it is an example of climax, it's not a very good or effective one.

## Climax and Parallelism

Generally speaking, climax works in tandem with [parallelism](#). In parallelism, two or more elements of a sentence (or series of sentences) have the same grammatical structure, which makes lists (or sequences of multiple ideas) easier to read and understand. All of the examples we've looked at so far have used parallelism, and the following is another good example of both climax and parallelism:

Veni, vidi, vici: I [came](#), I [saw](#), I [conquered](#).

The three clauses of the sentence are parallel because each starts off with the pronoun "I" followed by a verb in the past tense, so therefore they have the same grammatical structure. Because the grammatical structure of the clauses is identical, it is easier to see that the ideas in each successive clause grow in intensity and significance.

## Climax vs. Anticlimax

The opposite of climax is a figure of speech called anticlimax. There are two different types of anticlimax.

### The First Type of Anticlimax

In the first type, words are arranged in order of descending importance, as in:

- "For God, for Country, and for Yale." (A Yale University motto.)
- "He has seen the ravages of war, he has known natural catastrophes, he has been to singles bars." (Woody Allen)
- "He lost his family, his job, and his house plants."

### The Second Type of Anticlimax

In the second type of anticlimax, which is similar to but slightly different from the first, words are arranged in order of ascending importance with a sudden shift at the end back to the unimportant, as in:

- "'Oh, poor Mr. Jones,' mourned Mrs. Smith, 'Did you hear what happened to him? He tripped at the top of the stairs, fell down the whole flight, banged his head, and died.' 'Died?' said Mrs. Robinson, shocked. 'Died!' repeated Mrs. Smith with emphasis. 'Broke his glasses, too.'" (Isaac Asimov)
- "Among the great achievements of Benito Mussolini's regime were the revival of a strong national consciousness, the expansion of the Italian Empire, and the running of the trains on time."

Anticlimax generally has a comedic effect, since it subverts the listener's expectations by placing the least important thing at the end of the list, where they would expect to hear the most important thing. Some examples of anticlimax are intended to be funny (like Woody Allen's), and some are funny without intending to be (like the Yale motto).



## EXAMPLES

In all the examples that follow, we'll continue to highlight the instances where climax occurs, using different colors to indicate the increasing importance or power of the words.

### Examples of Climax in Literature

Climax is used throughout literature, from poetry to fiction to nonfiction. Here are just a few examples.

#### Climax in Melville's *Moby Dick*

In this passage from Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*, climax is used very effectively to convey how Captain Ahab feels about the whale.

All that most maddens and torments; all that stirs up the lees of things; all truth with malice in it; all that cracks the sinews and cakes the brain; all the subtle demonisms of life and thought; all evil, to crazy Ahab, were visibly personified and made practically assailable in *Moby Dick*.

#### Climax in Shakespeare's "The Passionate Pilgrim"

Here's an example of climax from a poem by Shakespeare:

Beauty is but a vain and doubtful good;  
A shining gloss that fadeth suddenly;  
A flower that dies when first it gins to bud;  
A brittle glass that's broken presently:  
A doubtful good, a gloss, a glass, a flower,  
Lost, faded, broken, dead within an hour.

The final lines of this stanza contain two examples of climax: in the second-to-last line, words increase in beauty and delicacy, from the middling "doubtful good" to "flower." In the last line, the words once again increase in intensity, but this time in a progression from bad to worse ("lost" to "dead").

#### Examples of Climax in Music

You may be surprised, once you start listening for it, just how often climax is used in songwriting. It's an effective figure of speech for making lyrics memorable.

#### Climax in Van Morrison's "Days Like This"

This song by Van Morrison uses climax in each verse to describe the conditions of a peaceful day. Here, the first verse climaxes with Morrison imagining everything falling into place "like the flick of a switch."

When it's not always raining there'll be days like this  
When there's no one complaining there'll be days like this  
When everything falls into place like the flick of a switch  
Well mama told me there'll be days like this.

#### Climax in Drake's "Too Good"

Here's the chorus from Drake's song "Too Good," featuring Rihanna. This may not seem like a clear example of climax, but we'll explain why it is. The first thing to take note of is the use of parallelism in the repetition of "last night:"

Yeah, and last night I think I lost my patience  
Last night I got high as your expectations  
Last night I came to a realization  
And I hope you can take it  
I hope you can take it:

I'm too good to you  
I'm way too good to you

You take my love for granted  
I just don't understand it

The thing that ultimately makes this an example of climax—even though it's not immediately clear whether any one idea in the sequence is more important than any of the others—is that the subject of the song turns out to be the important realization that Drake arrives at (i.e., that he's too obliging of the woman he's seeing) and *not* that he lost his patience or got high. So in that sense, the sequence follows an order of increasing importance.

## Examples of Climax in Speeches

Climax is a highly effective tool of rhetoric, since it lends structure at the sentence level, builds anticipation in the listener, and makes it clear which idea in a series the speaker assigns the most value.

### Climax in Barack Obama's 2004 DNC speech

This excerpt from a 2004 speech made by Obama contains a great example of climax:

When we send our young men and women into harm's way, we have a solemn obligation not to fudge the numbers or shade the truth about why they're going, to care for their families while they're gone, to tend to the soldiers upon their return, and to never ever go to war without enough troops to win the war, secure the peace, and earn the respect of the world.

Notice how another instance of climax occurs within the broader climactic arc of this passage, when Obama says, at the very end: "win the war, secure the peace, and earn the respect of the world."

### Climax in Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have A Dream" Speech

MLK used climax frequently throughout his speeches. Here are two separate examples from his famous "I Have a Dream" speech:

There are those who are asking the devotees of civil rights, "When will you be satisfied?" We can never be satisfied as long as the Negro is the victim of the unspeakable horrors of police brutality. We can never be satisfied as long as our bodies, heavy with the fatigue of travel, cannot gain lodging in the motels of the highways and the hotels of the cities. We cannot be satisfied as long as the negro's basic mobility is from a smaller ghetto to a larger one. We can never be satisfied as long as our children are stripped of their self-hood and robbed of their dignity by signs stating: "For Whites Only." We cannot be satisfied as long as a Negro in Mississippi cannot vote and a Negro in New York believes he has nothing for which to vote. No, no, we are not satisfied, and we will not be satisfied until justice rolls down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream.

And here's another passage from the same speech that uses climax:

And so let freedom ring from the prodigious hilltops of New Hampshire. Let freedom ring from the mighty mountains of New York. Let freedom ring from the heightening Alleghenies of Pennsylvania. Let freedom ring from the snow-capped Rockies of Colorado. Let freedom ring from the curvaceous slopes of California.

But not only that: Let freedom ring from Stone Mountain of Georgia. Let freedom ring from Lookout Mountain of Tennessee. Let freedom ring from every hill and molehill of Mississippi. From every mountainside, let freedom ring.



## WHY WRITERS USE IT

Putting the most important information at the end of a sentence may not seem that logical if you're trying to convey critical information very quickly—for instance, imagine if every road sign, or every poster for an event, buried the most significant information at the very end. But it proves to be a logical and highly effective way to organize a sentence or paragraph if you have a series of ideas to convey and you want to work your way up to your most powerful ideas instead of giving them all away right off the bat. In addition to this, there are many reasons why a writer might want to use climax to organize their ideas:

- It's a highly effective tool of rhetoric:
  - It lends structure at the sentence level;
  - It builds anticipation in the listener;
  - It makes clear which idea in a series the speaker assigns the most value.
- It makes words (and the order in which they occur) easier to remember—a valuable quality for both songwriting and speechwriting.
- It adds a touch of drama and suspense to the presentation of a list.
- It establishes a clear relationship of hierarchy between things on a list.



## OTHER RESOURCES

- [The Wikipedia Page on Climax](#): A brief overview with a few helpful examples.
- [The Dictionary Definition of Climax](#): A basic definition. The word has several definitions, but in this entry we focused on the third definition listed in this dictionary.

## HOW TO CITE

### MLA

Bergman, Bennet. "Climax (Figure of Speech)." LitCharts. LitCharts LLC, 5 May 2017. Web. 31 Aug 2017.

### Chicago Manual

Bergman, Bennet. "Climax (Figure of Speech)." LitCharts LLC, May 5, 2017. Retrieved August 31, 2017. <http://www.litcharts.com/literary-devices-and-terms/climax>.