

## Anecdote

The anecdote is the combination of a wise saying with action that shows how the advice or moral instruction is a part of practical life. Typically, the saying is attributed to an historical person whose authority supports the anecdote's advice, or historical figures perform the action to lend credibility to the saying. Some anecdotes are more clever or witty than instructional, but like the fable or proverb most are advice for future action. The anecdote appears in a wide variety of ancient texts, including Greek, Islamic, Rabbinic, and Roman and in a variety of works, including historical, literary, and geographical.

Some claim that the anecdote originates with Cynic philosophy and practice around the 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE, which aimed to teach virtuous living free of social convention. By virtue, they typically meant strength of character, and imparted their wisdom via example rather than systematic doctrine. Some of their precepts include: simplicity of living; self-sufficiency; distrust of abstractions, general ideas, or anything that isn't practical; reducing wants; disregard of fine clothing; distrust of institutions; refusal of wealth; shamelessness; and a refusal to take part in civic life. The Cynics espoused happiness through living a virtuous life based on these points of view.

All of these Cynic precepts can be found in ancient anecdotes, of which there are three main types: verbal, action, and mixed.

- Verbal – a brief account of what someone has said, usually in the form of a saying or maxim: “Isocrates said that the root of learning is bitter, but its fruits sweet.”
- Action – a brief account of what someone has done: “When Diogenes, the Cynic philosopher, saw a young boy misbehaving badly, he struck the boy's tutor because the tutor was responsible for his behavior.”
- Mixed – a brief account that combines the two: “When Diogenes, the Cynic philosopher, saw a young boy misbehaving badly, he struck the boy's tutor, saying, ‘Why did you teach him thus?’”

The contemporary anecdote is a short narrative based on a single incident that makes a moral or humorous point, or illustrates a point made through the example. Some contemporary anecdotes are more apocryphal, like George Washington chopping down the cherry tree. It is meant more to illuminate something true about his character rather than to produce a literal or historical account. In a more general sense, anecdotes can also be based on personal examples. Rather than collect sayings and actions of various philosophers as the *Lives of Eminent Philosophers* did, *The Reader's Digest* has collected personal anecdotes of their readers for a number of decades that are often humorous but also offer advice by relating to the everyday experience of readers. Rhetors, too, can collect or keep a cache of stock personal anecdotes for “spontaneous” use in rhetorically appropriate situations.

### Amplifying Verbal Anecdotes

Like the fable and proverb, the rhetorical exercises for anecdotes tended to expand on them as practice toward deliberative speeches. Amplifying a verbal anecdote had nine guidelines to follow heuristically: in other words, not as a rigid formula but as suggested strategies for invention or development.

- Cite the anecdote
- Praise the author
- Paraphrase and/or explain the anecdote
- Give one or more reasons to support it
- Introduce a contrast
- Add a comparison
- Give one or more examples
- Support with the opinion of others
- Draw a conclusion

### Amplifying Action Anecdotes

Amplifying action or mixed anecdotes follow a similar pattern but typically need the action put in propositional form because the theme of the action isn't always readily apparent. And the encouragement to follow advice typically employs more emphatic language or emotional appeal than a logical conclusion.

- Cite the anecdote
- Praise the author
- Paraphrase and/or explain the anecdote
- Put into propositional form
- Introduce a contrast
- Add a comparison
- Give one or more examples
- Support with the opinion of others
- Conclusion with an exhortation or final appeal