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Rhetorical question used in a sentence

A rhetorical question is a question (such as "How could I be so stupid?") that's asked merely for effect with no answer expected. The answer may be obvious or immediately provided by the questioner. Also known as erotesis, erotema, interrogatio, questioner, and reversed polarity question (RPQ). A rhetorical question can be "an effective persuasive device, subtly influencing the kind of response one wants to get from an audience" (Edward P.J. Corbett). See Examples and Observations, below. They may also be used for dramatic or comedic effect, and may be combined with other figures of speech, such as puns or double entendres. In English, rhetorical questions are commonly used in speech and in informal kinds of writing (such as advertisements). Rhetorical questions appear less frequently in academic discourse. Pronunciation: ri-TOR-i-kal KWEST-shun Anthypophora and Hypophora Epilexis Erotesis "Something [rhetorical] questions all have in common . . . is that they are not asked, and are not understood, as ordinary information-seeking questions, but as making some kind of claim, or assertion, an assertion of the opposite polarity to that of the question." (Irene Koshik, Beyond Rhetorical Questions, John Benjamins, 2005) "Marriage is a wonderful institution, but who would want to live in an institution?"(H. L. Mencken) "It did not occur to me to call a doctor, because I knew none, and although it did occur to me to call the desk and ask that the air conditioner be turned off, I never called, because I did not know how much to tip whoever might come--was anyone ever so young?"(Joan Didion, "Goodbye to All That," Slouching Towards Bethlehem, 1968) "The means are at hand to fulfill the age-old dream: poverty can be abolished. How long shall we ignore this under-developed nation in our midst? How long shall we look the other way while our fellow human beings suffer? How long"(Michael Harrington, The Other America: Poverty in the United States, 1962) "Must I argue the wrongfulness of slavery? Is that a question for republicans? Is it to be settled by the rules of logic and argumentation, as a matter beset with great difficulty, involving a doubtful application of the principle of justice, hard to understand?"(Frederick Douglass, "What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?" July 5, 1852) "Hath not a few eyes?Hath not a few hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions?If you prick us, do we not bleed, if you tickle us, do we not laugh?If you poison us, do we not die?(Shylock in William Shakespeare's Merchant of Venice) "Can I ask a rhetorical question? Well, can I?"(Ambrose Bierce) "Aren't you glad you use Dial?Don't you wish everybody did?"(1960s television advertisement for Dial soap) "To actually see inside your ear canal--it would be fascinating, wouldn't it?"(Letter from Sonus, a hearing-aid company, quoted in "Rhetorical Questions We'd Rather Not Answer." The New Yorker, March 24, 2003) "If practice makes perfect, and no one's perfect, then why practice?"(Billy Corgan) "Isn't it a bit unnerving that doctors call what they do 'practice'?"(George Carlin) "Am I alone in thinking it odd that a people ingenious enough to invent paper, gunpowder, kites, and any number of other useful objects, and who have a noble history extending back three thousand years, haven't yet worked out that a pair of knitting needles is no way to capture food?"(Bill Bryson, Notes From a Small Island, Doubleday, 1995) "The Indians [in the Oliver Stone movie The Doors] serve the same function they did in Dances With Wolves: they make the far more highly paid white movie actors seem soulful and important and in touch with ancient truths. Do Indians enjoy being used this way, as spiritual elves or cosmic merit badges?"(Libby Gelman-Waxner [Paul Rudnick], "Sex, Drugs, and Extra-Strength Excedrin." If You Ask Me, 1994) Rhetorical questions are those so worded that one and only one answer can be generally expected from the audience you are addressing. In this sense, they are like the unmentioned premises in abbreviated reasoning, which can go unmentioned because they can be taken for granted as generally acknowledged. Thus, for example, Brutus asks the citizens of Rome, "Who is here so base that would be a bondman?" adding at once: "If any, speak, for him have I offended." Again Brutus asks: "Who is here so vile that will not love his country?" Let him also speak, "for him I have offended." Brutus dares to ask these rhetorical questions, knowing full well that no one will answer his rhetorical questions in the wrong way."So, too, Marc Antony, after describing how Caesar's conquests filled Rome's coffers, asks: "Did this in Caesar seem ambitious?" And after reminding the populace that Caesar thrice refused the crown that was offered him, Antony asks: "Was this ambition?" Both are rhetorical questions to which one and only one answer can be expected."(Mortimer Adler, How to Speak How to Listen. Simon & Schuster, 1983) "By arousing curiosity, rhetorical questions motivate people to try to answer the question that is posed. Consequently, people pay closer attention to information relevant to the rhetorical question. . . ."At this point, I think it is important to note that the fundamental problem in the study of rhetorical questions is the lack of focus on the persuasive effectiveness of different types of rhetorical questions. Clearly, an ironical rhetorical question is going to have a different effect on an audience than an agreement rhetorical question. Unfortunately, little research has been conducted on how different types of rhetorical questions operate in a persuasive context."(David R. Roskos-Ewoldsen, "What Is the Role of Rhetorical Questions in Persuasion?" Communication and Emotion: Essays in Honor of Dolf Zillmann, ed. by Jennings Bryant et al. Lawrence Erlbaum, 2003) "From time to time, people become dissatisfied with the broad application of the question mark and try to narrow it down, usually by proposing distinct marks for the different kinds of question. Rhetorical questions have attracted particular attention, as--not requiring any answer--they are so different in kind. An Elizabethan printer, Henry Denham, was an early advocate, proposing in the 1580s a reverse question mark (ʋ) for this function, which came to be called a percontation mark (from a Latin word meaning a questioning act). Easy enough to handwrite, some late 16th century authors did sporadically use it, such as Robert Herrick. . . . But printers were unimpressed, and the mark never became standard. However, it has received a new lease of life online. . . ." (David Crystal, Making a Point: The Punctious Story of English Punctuation. St. Martin's Press, 2015) -Howard: We need to ask you a question.-Professor Crawley: Really? Let me ask you a question. What does an accomplished entomologist with a doctorate and twenty years of experience do when the university cuts all his funding?-Rajesh: Ask uncomfortable rhetorical questions to people?(Simon Helberg, Lewis Black, and Kunal Nayyar in "The Jiminy Conjecture." The Big Bang Theory, 2008)-Penny: Sheldon, have you any idea what time it is?-Sheldon: Of course I do. My watch is linked to the atomic clock in Boulder, Colorado. It's accurate to one-tenth of a second. But as I'm saying this, it occurs to me that you may have again been asking a rhetorical question.(Kaley Cuoco and Jim Parsons in "The Loobenfeld Decay." The Big Bang Theory, 2008)-Dr. Cameron: Why did you hire me?-Dr. House: Does it matter?-Dr. Cameron: Kind of hard to work for a guy who doesn't respect you.-Dr. House: Why?-Dr. Cameron: Is that rhetorical?-Dr. House: No, it just seems that way because you can't think of an answer.(House, M.D.)"I forget, which day did God create all the fossils?"(An anti-creationism bumper sticker, cited by Jack Bowen in If You Can Read This: The Philosophy of Bumper Stickers. Random House, 2010)Grandma Simpson and Lisa are singing Bob Dylan's "Blowin' in the Wind" ("How many roads must a man walk down/Before you call him a man?"). Homer overhears and says, "Eight!"-Lisa: "That was a rhetorical question!"-Homer: "Oh. Then, seven!"-Lisa: "Do you even know what 'rhetorical' means?"-Homer: "Do I know what 'rhetorical' means?"(The Simpsons, "When Grandma Simpson Returns") Our Story A rhetorical question is a question for which no answer is expected. A rhetorical question is typically asked to make a point or to introduce a subject. Formal Definition A rhetorical question is a question not intended to require an answer. (Merriam Webster Dictionary) Here are some examples of rhetorical questions: A rhetorical question can be used to make a positive point: What's not to like? (It's like saying "I like it", which is a statement.) Who doesn't love pizza? ("I love pizza.") Wow, who knew? ("This is surprisingly good.") A rhetorical question can be used to make a negative point: Does it look like I'm bothered? ("I'm not bothered.") What is the matter with kids today? ("Kids today have issues.") What have the Romans ever done for us? (from Monty Python's Life of Brian) ("The Romans have done nothing for us.") Why should you take by force that from us which you can have by love? (from the 1607 speech to white settlers by Chief Powhatan, father of Pocahontas) ("We'd have provided for you if you'd asked nicely.") A rhetorical question with an obvious answer (if it were answered) can be used to answer a real question: Is your boss still ignoring you? Do bears, er, live in the woods? A rhetorical question can be used to introduce a subject: What are super foods? Why do we need to reduce carbon emissions? What happened to your vote? In the 1580s, to recognise that the rhetorical question was not a normal question, an English printer called Henry Denham invented the "rhetorical-question mark", which was a reversed question mark (i.e., a vertically reflected one). For a few decades, it seemed like the rhetorical-question mark might catch on. It didn't. That said though, even today, some people consider a rhetorical question to be more statement than question, and they don't end one with a question mark, opting instead for a full stop (period, in the US) or an exclamation mark. Perhaps there's some merit to that, but it's not a popular convention. You're far more likely to be red-penned for avoiding a question mark than praised for it. Use a question mark with a rhetorical question. Here are two commonly cited rhetorical questions written by Playwright William Shakespeare: "If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die? And if you wrong us, shall we not revenge? (Shylock from Shakespeare's play "The Merchant of Venice") What's in a name? That which we call a rose By any other name would smell as sweet. (Juliet from Shakespeare's "Romeo and Juliet") Using a rhetorical question to introduce a new subject or idea is a useful trick to keep up your sleeve. There are two benefits: Look at this title for a magazine article: Who Was Responsible for the Genocide in Srebrenica? (This is far more engaging than a title like "Responsibility for the Genocide in Srebrenica.") As well as making it clear what follows, a rhetorical question is useful for engaging readers because it encourages them to consider the answer before reading. Rhetorical questions are particularly useful for paragraph titles in business documents. Of interest, some argue that a rhetorical question that introduces an idea isn't actually a rhetorical question because the answer is provided immediately after the question (i.e., it's just a normal question with an answer). There's some logic to that argument, but, as such questions don't expect answers from those being "asked," they are rhetorical.) Look at this title for a lecture: Who was the first to reach the summit of Mount Everest? Let's imagine this were a lecture for students at the University of Auckland (attended by Sir Edmund Hillary). If it were entitled "Sir Edmund Hillary was second, not first, to conquer Mount Everest," it would likely alienate the audience from the outset, and they might not listen with an open mind. A rhetorical question can have the effect of a soft statement. So, when some diplomacy is required, using a rhetorical question might be a good option. Of course, a rhetorical question doesn't have to be a title. It could be in the middle of your text. Sir Edmund Hillary is credited for being the first man to conquer Mount Everest. But, who did reach the summit first? Some believe that Englishman George Mallory, who led an expedition to Everest in 1924, reached the summit first. However, Mallory died on the mountain, and it is unknown whether he reached the top. Key Points Use a rhetorical question as a title to engage your readers. Use a rhetorical question like a soft statement when some diplomacy is required. 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