

Proverb Definitions

Proverbs are popular sayings which contain advice or state a generally accepted truth. Because most proverbs have their origins in oral tradition, they are generally worded in such a way as to be remembered easily and tend to change little from generation to generation, so much so that sometimes their specific meaning is no longer relevant. For instance, the proverb “penny wise, pound foolish” is a holdover from when America was a British colony and used the pound as currency. Proverbs function as “folk wisdom,” general advice about how to act and live. And because they are folk wisdom, they are often strongly reflect the cultural values and physical environment from which they arise. For instance, island cultures such as Hawaii have proverbs about the sea, Eastern cultures have proverbs about elephants, and American proverbs, many collected and published by Benjamin Franklin, are about hard work bringing success. Proverbs are used to support arguments, to provide lessons and instruction, and to stress shared values.

Proverbs are not clichés

Clichés are widely used, even overused, phrases that are often metaphorical in nature. Clichés often have their origins in literature, television, or movies rather than in folk tradition.

Some Common Features of Proverbs

- Proverbs are passed down through time with little change in form.
- Proverbs are often used metaphorically and it is in understanding their metaphorical nature that we can unravel their meaning. While “a stitch in time saves nine,” “don’t count your chickens before they’ve hatched,” and “don’t throw the baby out with the bathwater” are common proverbs, few of us stitch clothes, count chickens, or throw out bathwater.
- Proverbs often make use of grammatical and rhetorical devices that help make them memorable, including alliteration, rhyme, parallel structure, repetition of key words or phrases, and strong imagery.

Some Common Proverbs

Look before you leap.

Don’t throw out the baby with the bathwater.

Where there’s a will, there’s a way.

All’s well that ends well.

Don’t count your chickens before they’ve hatched.

If it looks like a duck, walks like a duck, and quacks like a duck, it is a duck.

A stitch in time saves nine.

Some Common Clichés

She was white as a sheet.

The tension was so thick you could cut it like butter.

He stood as still as a deer in the headlights.

I’m as fit as a fiddle.

You could read her like an open book.