Teaching Prose Style

Students can gain more and more control over their prose – and take more and more pleasure in improving it – if they have certain concrete principles and devices in mind, a repertoire of stylistic skills can enable them to manipulate their prose toward certain rhythmic effects. What follows is a handout, excerpted from T. R. Johnson's *A Rhetoric of Pleasure: Prose Style and Today's Composition Classroom* (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 2003), which can be distributed among students early in the semester.

When you revise your papers, I want you to think very deliberately about eight different stylistic principles: transition, clarity, emphasis, balance, figurative language, syntax, restatement, and sound. When you look closely at your sentences and paragraphs with these principles in mind, you'll find that these principles allow you to see, quite objectively, where your prose is strongest and where it is weakest. Try to develop the habit of using these principles to revise your prose.

With each of these broad principles that I describe below, you'll find several devices that can help you fulfill the particular principle. Think of these devices as verbal patterns or forms or "tricks" that can make your prose more graceful, more powerful, and more memorable. Think of some of them, on one hand, as ornaments, as a means to take what you've said and recast it in ways that your readers will enjoy. On the other hand, working with these ornaments can also stimulate your imagination – that is, as you work to reshape certain moments in your paper to fit these formulae, you may find all sorts of new ideas popping up. So, as you revise your papers with these devices (and, too, with an awareness of the broad principles that these devices help you fulfill), be open to the possible emergence of wholly new material.

These devices are quite powerful. Many of them were first organized more than two thousand years ago in ancient Greece, and they have had an extraordinary influence on the ways we've used language ever since. Most of the information that follows I've taken from three books -- *A Handlist of Rhetorical Terms* by Richard Lanham, *Writing With Clarity and Style* by Robert Harris, and *Style* by Joseph Williams – all of which I heartily recommend, for they've helped my own writing enormously. Some of these devices have fairly exotic names, but don't be intimidated or put off by them: I'm not especially concerned about whether you learn to pronounce or spell these names correctly. Also, don't feel as though you have to memorize them: at no point in the semester will I ask you to take a quiz or an exam in which you have to define each of these terms. Instead, I only want you to become familiar with these devices as tools that can give you more and more control over your prose, and, in turn, more and more success communicating with your readers.

Remember, I require you to use at least three of these each time you write your short homework papers, and, when you write your longer, out-of-class essays, I require you to use a dozen. Each time you use a stylistic device, number it in parentheses at the end of the sentence, and, then, at the end of the paper, list the devices you used in the order that you used them. For example, if that last sentence that I just wrote was the third one to use a stylistic device, I would put (#3) at the end of the sentence, and then at the end of the paper, when I offered a list of the devices I used, I would put, after the numeral #3 the name of the device that sentence used.

One last point by way of introduction, one that's *very, very important:* don't get hung up trying to fulfill these formulae before you know what you want to say! Rather, after you've done some brainstorming and have a general sense of the ideas and details you want to engage in your paper, then – and only then – should you start trying to make certain moments in your paper fulfill some of these formula. By the same token, you might find that if you can't come up with ideas that you need for your paper, playing around with some of these devices can help generate ideas for writing.

Transitions

We will nearly always make our readers happiest when we give them writing that "flows." But how do you make a piece of writing "flow"? Here is a paragraph that doesn't "flow" particularly well.

Some astonishing questions about the nature of the universe have been raised by scientists exploring black holes in space. The collapse of a dead star into a point perhaps no larger than a marble creates a black hole. So much matter pressed into so little volume changes the fabric of space around it in puzzling ways. My favorite movie of all time actually deals with the issues surrounding black holes.

This version, on the other hand, does "flow" a little better:

Some astonishing questions about the nature of the universe have been raised by scientists exploring black holes in space. A black hole is created when a dead star collapses into a point perhaps no larger than a marble. Because black holes compress so much matter into such small volume, the fabric of space around them changes in puzzling ways. The issues surrounding black holes are actually dealt with in one of my all-time favorite movies.

What changed? Why does the second version seem better? The words are virtually the exact same in both versions, but the words in the second version are presented in a slightly different order; more specifically, in the second version (the good version), each sentence begins with words that, in the context of the paragraph, are familiar to the reader, and each sentence ends with words that are not familiar. To say this another way, your readers will feel that your sentences flow smoothly if and only if each sentence begins with something you've already mentioned and ends with something you've not yet mentioned.

In the second version of the paragraph, each sentence begins with references to black holes, and this concept was introduced in the very first sentence. Therefore, each sentence begins by grounding itself in something that the reader will feel is familiar. Also, each sentence ends by introducing the reader to something new ("a point perhaps no larger than a marble;" "puzzling ways;" "all-time favorite movies"). This steady movement within each sentence from the old to the new, from the familiar to the unfamiliar is the essence of "flow". In the first version, the opposite is true: that paragraph doesn't flow very well because every time the readers start a new sentence, they find themselves on unfamiliar territory and without any immediate sense of continuity. After you've drafted a paper, get in the habit of checking it for "flow." Just look at the beginning and the ending of each sentence, and make sure that each one begins on a familiar note and ends on an unfamiliar note.

A concept closely related to "flow" is called "focus". When writing is incoherent or unfocused, the reader will often simply quit reading. In order to prevent such breakdowns between reader and writer, the writer must make certain to sustain a focus. A paragraph will be well-focused if each sentence begins with a topic that fits with the other topics announced in other sentences in that paragraph. In short, a paragraph is focused if it has a consistent string of topics. Here is an example of a paragraph that flows smoothly, but has no focus:

Saner, Wisconsin is the snowmobile capital of the world. The buzzing of snowmobile engines fills the air, and their tanklike tracks criss-cross the snow. The snow reminds me of Mom's mashed potatoes, covered with furrows I would draw with my fork. Mom's mashed potatoes usually made me sick, that's why I was playing with them. I like to make a hole in the middle of the potatoes and fill it with gravy. This behavior often made my little brother laugh. But, really, making my little brother laugh isn't very hard. He laughs at everything, because he's crazy.

Notice the problem here: the paragraph is not focused on a single topic, but rather jumps from Wisconsin to snowmobile engines to snow to mashed potatoes to a certain kind of behavior to a little brother. In other words, each sentence sets forth a different topic. In order to revise that passage, the writer needs to isolate a central theme and make sure that each sentence begins with a topic that directly echoes that central theme, like this:

Saner, Wisconsin, is the snowmobile capital of the world. All winter, the woods around Saner buzz with the sound of snowmobile engines, and the Saner snow is always criss-crossed with their tank-like tracks. Saner-snowmobilers love to go home to a big meal after a day in the woods, and a great many of them have fallen in love with my mom's mashed potatoes and gravy. We would stuff ourselves with those potatoes, then plan an evening of night races in the woods, much to the delight of my easily-amused - indeed, crazy - younger brother.

Notice the consistency in the string of topics: "Saner" and then "woods around Saner" and then "Saner snow" and then "Saner snowmobilers" and finally "we". Near the beginning of each sentence, a topic is set forth that relates quite closely to the other topics of the other sentences. One more example: if you were reading a paragraph in which the first sentence presents, near its very beginning, the topic of airplanes, and then the next sentence offers the topic of trains, and the third one cars, you know you're in a paragraph that is focused on transportation. But if, in the fourth sentence, the topic that emerges at the opening of the sentence is waterbugs, we know the paragraph is suddenly losing focus.

> *Airplanes make an extraordinary amount of noise. Trains, on the other hand, aren't so bad. Some cars are quite noisy, too, but happily they are required by law to have a muffler. Waterbugs may or may not make a noise, but since I don't live near water, I cannot say for sure.*

When the reader gets to that last sentence, the focus collapses and the reader suddenly begins to feel significantly confused. If that last sentence began by mentioning "the noise-pollution caused by modern transportation" or if it began by mentioning something closely related to that theme, the sentence would be fine – even if it ultimately took up issues relating to waterbugs.

Here's the point: If a paragraph offers, from one sentence to the next, a string of closely related topics, the paragraph will be well focused. If one or more of the topics seems not to fit, then, at exactly that point, the focus will seem to wobble or blur or even disappear altogether. To check your work for focus, simply look at the topics of sentences and ask yourself if they constitute a consistent set. If not, revise the paragraph until the topics are consistent. Although this method works well for testing the focus of a particular paragraph, it can also be used to test the overall focus of an entire essay. Simply look at the topic that is announced at the beginning of each paragraph, and then decide if any of the topics are too far away from the main topic. If one is "off," fix it so that it fits with the others.

In addition to these broad principles of "flow" and "focus," you can make strong transitions in your writing by using what I call logical connectors: these are words or phrases that connect one stretch of material (a sentence or paragraph) to another by relying on particular forms of logic. These forms of logic are Addition, Comparison, Contrast, Time, Purpose, Place, and Result. For example, one stretch of material might essentially function as an addition to an earlier stretch, and so you can introduce this paragraph, let's say, with phases like, "A further X . . ." or "Another X…." or "Too…" or "Also . . ." or "In addition to…" If you'll notice, the paragraph you're reading right now used exactly this latter sort of logical connector in order to begin smoothly and with a strong transition out of the preceding paragraph.

Just as the logic of addition can tighten your transitions, so too can the logic of comparison. If a new paragraph serves as a comparison to the stuff you wrote about in the preceding paragraph, you might begin this new paragraph with phrases like, "A similar X . . ." or "Just as X, so too X…" or "Another version of X….". This paragraph you are reading right now, by the way, began with a transition that relied on precisely this logic of comparison.

The opposite sort of logic can help with transitions – that of contrast. If the new material is meant to function in contrast to the material that just preceded it, you might begin that new paragraph with transitional phrases like "And yet…" or "But another …" or "Otherwise…" or "On the other hand…" or "The opposite …." Again, this very paragraph you're reading right now used this latter sort of logical connector to smooth the transition from the preceding paragraph.

There are many other logical connectors. Some rely on the logic of time: if the material in a new paragraph involves events that have occurred after the events in a previous paragraph, you might begin that new paragraph with words like "After…" or "Later, ….". If the temporal sequence is different, obviously you'll want to use different words like "Before" or "Earlier" or "Now" or "Soon" or "Meanwhile" or some other word or phrase. These words all use the logic of time to connect sentences and paragraphs. Other logical connectors might use purpose, such as "Because of this, President Bush chose …." Or "For these reasons, we must agree that ….". Others might use the logic of place ("Beyond" or "Nearby" or "In front of") and, finally, others might use the logic of result ("And so" or "Then" or "In consequence …"). By the way, can you tell which sort of logical connector I used to make a smooth transition into this paragraph?

There are also five powerful ***verbal devices*** you can use to help with the transitions in your paper:

Procatelpsis – This device for making transitions anticipates an objection or counter-argument that some readers might raise and responds to it. For example, “While some may insist that my interpretation of *Hamlet* ignores important features of the play, those features of the play only become important if one is committed to an interpretation that distorts Shakespeare’s ultimate message.” This sort of device is virtually essential to a successful argumentative paper, and, when used well, it can help create an almost conversational tone, as if the writer were creating a lively, spontaneous dialogue with those who might disagree with his or her point. I strongly recommend that you grow comfortable using this device to make transitions in your argumentative writing.

Hypophora – This device for making transitions involves asking one or more questions and then proceeding to answer them, usually at some length. The most common usage is to ask a question at the beginning of a paragraph, and then devote the remainder of the paragraph to answering the question. This device can work especially well in the latter stages of your paper, when you’ve already said enough that your position naturally raises certain questions that you can then identify and answer. Like procatelpsis, this is a great way to create a conversational tone in your essay.

Metabasis – This is a brief statement that sums up what has already been said and what will follow. For example, “Thus, I’ve proven that *Hamlet* is not necessarily the most perfect of Shakespeare’s tragedies, and now I need to prove why *Macbeth* is.” Obviously, in a short paper, this device will rarely be useful. This device is primarily useful toward the middle of longer essays.

Anadiplosis: This device repeats the last word of one clause to begin the next one. Example: “Students need to respect the rules, rules that were invented for the students’ own good.” Or, “This treatment plant has a record of reliability, a reliability envied by all other treatment plants of its kind in the nation.” This device is especially useful for helping your prose to flow smoothly.

Conduplicatio: This device is very similar to anadiplosis, but, instead of repeating the last word to begin a new clause or sentence, this device just repeats a *key* word from the preceding clause or sentence, as in “Some people love taking on-line courses through the University New Orleans, and, indeed, on-line courses are gaining in popularity throughout the United States.” Again, this device is useful in making your prose flow smoothly.

Clarity

The human mind loves to process information in the form of a story. Indeed, whenever it is presented with particularly complex material, one of its first steps is to turn the material into a dynamic event that stars a character and an action. For these reasons, readers prefer sentences to foreground a character and an action, and the sooner in a sentence the reader finds a character followed by an action, the happier the reader will be. Consider, for example, how horrible this sentence is: “Once upon a time, a walk through the woods by Little Red Riding Hood was occurring, when a jump-out from behind a tree by The Big Bad Wolf caused fright in her.” What makes that sentence so awful is that the main characters are not up front in the subject-position where they belong and their main actions are obscured by the fact that they are not expressed in the verb position. Consider how much better this version is: “Once upon a time, Little Red Riding Hood was walking through the woods, when the The Big Bad Wolf jumped out from behind a tree and frightened her”. This sentence is better because it foregrounds character and action, and, more specifically, because it puts the character in the subject-position and the action in the verb-position. Here’s another example: “The loss of market share to Japan by American auto-manufacturers resulted in the loss of employment by hundreds of thousands of factory workers in Detroit and a decline in the general economy of the upper midwest.” To improve this sentence, we first need to identify the main characters (American auto-manufacturers, Detroit factory workers, the upper midwest’s economy) and then identifiy their main actions (lost market shares to Japan, lost their jobs, declined). And then we can rewrite the sentence to put these characters and their actions in the prominent positions where readers want them, like

this: “When American auto-manufacturers lost a share of the market to Japan, hundreds of thousand of Detroit factory workers lost their jobs and the uppermidwest’s economy declined.”

In addition to this principle of character-and-action, ***here are a number of powerful devices*** you can use to make your message clearer:

Distinctio: This device might also be called simply “definition.” You can make your prose clearer by defining important words that might otherwise remain ambiguous. For example, “It is impossible to make gasoline that costs twenty-five cents a gallon – by *impossible* I mean currently beyond our present technological abilities.” This device is invaluable when you’re arguing about ideas that are relatively abstract, for it allows you to pause and make these abstractions more concrete and less ambiguous. Remember, however, that you should only use this device when a particular word is both important and potentially ambiguous. Again, it is extremely useful when constructing an argument.

Exemplum: This device for clarifying what you mean might also be called simply “example.” Examples often include *visual* details, for readers love to process information not only in stories, as I noted above, but as *pictures.* Whenever your material is relatively abstract, try to use an exemplum – that is, offer a quick picture, a visual version of what you mean, to help your reader grasp what you’re saying. You might also use the exemplum to provide specifics that will concretize your more general idea: for example, “The conifers (evergreens like pine and cypress trees) produce seeds in hard, cone-shaped structures.” Notice how “evergreen” offers something like a picture, and “pine and cypress” offer particular details to concretize what your’re talking about.

Amplification: This device consists of restating a word and adding a little more detail. This sort of repetition not only clarifies, but draws attention and emphasis to something that might otherwise be passed over too casually by the reader. For example, “In my hunger after ten days of overly rigorous dieting, I saw visions of ice-cream – mountains of creamy, luscious ice-cream, chocolate and vanilla, dripping with gooey hot fudge syrup and many millions of calories.” Notice how this second half of the sentence simply repeats ice-cream and adds lots of visual detail and particular meaning. The reader no longer passes casually over the point that the dieter was having visions of ice-cream; rather the reader almost shares those visions and therefore appreciates how much they mean to the writer.

Metanoia: This device qualifies a statement or a part of statement by rejecting it or calling it back and expressing it in a better way, either more strongly or more mildly or just differently. For example, “The most important aspect of a reed for a tenor saxophone is its hardness; no, not its hardness so much as its inner strength. You certainly don’t want one that’s brittle.” This device clarifies, of course, but it also gives emphasis and a tone of spontaneity and conversational directness. Here is another example: “The new gym on campus will improve the fitness level of our faculty and students, or rather the whole well-being, physical *and mental*, of everyone who uses it.” Certain sorts of phrases are useful in building a metanoia: “I mean…” or “More precisely…” or “Or maybe…”

Emphasis

Not every word in a given piece of writing is as important as every other word, and therefore successful writers make certain to place their most important words where these words will get the sort of rhythmic thrust that they deserve. More specifically, a successful writer knows that even when readers are silently reading they still “feel” a certain rhythmic emphasis at the very beginning of each sentence and an even stronger one at the very end of every sentence. Notice how, as you read this sentence out loud, your

voice drops a little after the first word ("notice") and then rises again rather dramatically at the end, like this:

NOTICE how rather DRAMATICALLY at **THE END**
As you as you read this sentence out loud, your voice . . . . and then rises again

Did you catch that extra emphasis falling on the word "end"? Again, these rhythms influence our sense of what's most important in a sentence even when we're reading in silence. Therefore, the successful writer knows that she must put only the most important words at the ends of her sentences, and, at the beginnings of sentences, she should use words that are also worthy of the special rhythmic thrust.

Consider, for example, this pair of sentences:

- I suppose that the evidence that UFO's have actually visited our planet is not very convincing to me for the most part.
- I'm not much convinced by the evidence that our planet has been visited by UFO's.

Most readers will find the second one of the pair much more effective, for the first one has a lot of words that are not relatively important in positions of emphasis. The second one, however, puts only the most important wrds in those positions of emphasis. See if you can tell the difference in the following pair:

- Sociobiologists suggest that our genes control our social behavior in the ways we behave around other people every day of our lives.
- Sociobiogists suggest that our genes control our social behavior.

Some go so far as to say that writers should make sure that the first syllable of every sentence should have a strong, rather than a weak beat, and that the same is true for the final syllable in a sentence. Consider this sentence "Until we know more, we cannot proceed properly." I'll rewrite it exactly, but with the strong beats rendered in all capitals: unTIL we KNOW MORE, we canNOT proCEED PROPerly." Obviously, this sentence breaks that basic rule of syallabic rhythm. Here's how to revise to honor this idea about rhythm: "Nothing can be done until we know more." This way, the syallables that open and close the sentence are strong. Can you tell which one of these two is better:

- Across Kentucky that spring, the rain grew heavier and heavier.
- Everywhere in Kentucky that spring, the rains grew worse.

(Note: if this point about rain in Kentucky is not relatively important in the larger context of the paper, you might choose to write in the less emphatic way).

In addition to this basic concept of emphasis, ***here are several devices*** you can use to make sure your readers experience your sentences the way you want them to – that is, with the most important words in the positions of greatest emphasis. After explaining these devices for organizing rhythm within particular sentences, I'll offer some that will help you emphasize an entire sentence, as a whole, as more important than the sentences that surround it.

<u>Climax</u>: When a sentence offers a list, the items on that list should be arranged in order of increasing importance. This is called climax. Consider this pair of sentences and ask yourself which one uses a climax intelligently and which one, in failing to use climax, sounds absurd:

- When I lost control of the car, it careened over the curb, ran over two park benches, killed a child, and hit a water fountain.
- When I lost control of the car, it careened over a curb, ran over two park benches, hit a water fountain, and killed a child

Can you tell which one uses the stylistic device of climax? Can you see, in this instance, how apparently minor stylistic choices actually carry with them profound ethical implications that significantly impact your readers' willingness to trust you.

<u>Asyndeton</u>: When you omit conjunctions between words, phrases, or clauses, you have an asyndeton, and this device helps to create a feeling of spontaneous overflow and rich abundance. Consider this pair of sentences:

- When he came home from World War II, the government held a grand ceremony, decorating him with medals, ribbons, titles, riches.
- When he came home from World War II, the government held a grand ceremony and decorated him with medals, ribbons, titles, and riches.

The difference is subtle, but distinct. Can you tell which one creates a mood of excess and which one a mood of relative restraint? In the context of a larger passage of prose, you can use this device to add to the mood you're trying to create, pushing toward a feeling of abundance and excitement or, if you avoid the asyndeton, one of comparative solemnity and calm reserve. Again, when you're making an argument, you'll want to create a mood or emotional energy that is appropriate to your message. Sometimes, you'll want to foster a feeling of excitement, sometimes the opposite, and these differences depend, in part, on whether or not you use the device of asyndeton.

Polysyndeton: This the opposite of asyndeton. Instead of omitting conjunctions, you use them at every available opportunity to create a slow, thudding emphasis on each of the items you're connecting. Look at the difference between these two:

- When the police opened the trunk of her car, they found stolen jewerly, loaded guns, high-grade cocaine, suitcases full of thousands of dollars.
- When the police opened the trunk of her car, they found stolen jewelry and loaded guns and high-grade cocaine and suitcases full of thousands of dollars.

Notice how one of these sentences emphasizes the individual items that were in the trunk, whereas the other sentence emphasizes the collection as a whole. Obviously, you should use polysyndeton when you want to single out each particular item in a series for particular attention, but you should use asyndeton when you aren't as concerned with the details and want to emphasize, instead, just the group as a whole with a feeling of abundance or overflow.

Expletive: An expletive is a relatively meaningless word or phrase that writers use to stop the forward momentum of a sentence and thereby give special, emphatic thrust to the words or phrases that are next to the expletive. Consider this pair of sentences,

- The lake was not drained in April.
- The lake was not, in fact, drained in April.

By using "in fact" in the second one, the words on either side of "in fact" pick up special weight, as if this writer is explicitly arguing with someone who claims that the lake actually *was* drained in April. Here's another pair:

- Many of the customers demanded a refund.
- Many of the customers, however, demanded a refund.

Can you see how one of these creates a special rhythmic thrust around "many customers / demanded," which implies that these customers differ from some other customers who don't demand refunds? Expletives are extremely useful when you want to contrast one thing with another by putting a special sort of accent on one of them, and, as such, they serve especially well when you're writing an argument. They lend emphatic force to the distinction you're making. Here are a bunch of expletives: *after all, anyway, as I said, assuredly, generally, I hope, I suppose, naturally, obviously, indeed, moreover, importantly.*

Epanelepsis: This device repeats the first word of the sentence at the end of the sentence, as in "Water was the cause of this war, yes, mere water"or "My eyes saw it, but, honestly, I could not believe my eyes" or "A strange looking man was standing by the side of the road as I drove to work this morning, and this afternoon, as I was driving home, I saw, in the same spot, the same strange looking man." This sort of repetition creates emphasis and draws attention to itself, so only use it when you're sure it feels appropriate.

Epixeuxis: This device repeats one word several times, as in "Louisiana in the spring is lush, lush, lush," or "That poor soul is in trouble, trouble, trouble" Or "Free! Free! Free! This is all I hear

from advertisers these days, and yet they want me to spend, spend, spend." "After the hurricane came through here, our little town was gone, all gone." This device an help you create a sense of emphasis.

Irony: To make an entire sentence more emphatic, you can write it in way that has two meanings: one that is perfectly sensible in itself and another that, in the surrounding context, is completely absurd. For example, "When the tow truck driver arrived and saw the man standing in the rain, his clothes soaked, his shoes caked in mud, his face and hands covered with grease, his car issuing giant clouds of black smoke, he heard the man mumble, 'So, I guess this means that my lovely evening is winding down'. On one hand, there's nothing absurd about observing the end of a lovely evening, but when the surrounding context tells us that the evening could not possibly have been lovely, the man's statement becomes highly ironic. This sort of sarcasm disrupts the surface logic of your paper and draws special attention to itself, so only use this heavy emphasis when its appropriate. Misplaced sarcasm will confuse your readers and turn them off.

Understatement: This device is a particular sort of irony. Simply enough, understatement is when you deliberately articulate an idea as far less important than it is. In a sense, it is a deliberate violation of the principle of emphasis, but, in reversing emphasis, it actually creates a certain humorous sort of emphasis: "After having been lost in the desert for forty days, the two men finally stumbled in town, and one said to the other, 'You know, I feel like a cold beer, how about you?' Again, this sort of sarcasm or irony draws considerable attention to itself, so use it wisely. Misplaced sarcasm, as I said, confuses.

Hyperbole: This device, another sort of irony, is the opposite of understatement. Hyperbole means exaggeration, for example, "Waiter, I told you I wanted my steak rare, not raw – I've seen cows who have been hurt worse than this just get up and walk away without demanding an apology!!!" Again, be careful with this sort of irony, especially when you're making an argument, for many readers will think that you're overstating your case to conceal its essential flimsiness. In that example above, the man is probably using the hyperbole to distract from the fact that the amount of time the steak really needs on the grill is so tiny that the waiter might otherwise ignore him. While hyperbole is great for grabbing your reader's attention, it can get you into trouble with the reader if presented as completely serious and devoid of irony. Only use hyperbole if it fits within the tone of the larger essay, and only when its ironic quality is obvious.

Adianoeta: A clever, but difficult device that is much like a double-entendre, in which a sentence has one meaning on the surface, but another - even opposite - meaning beneath the surface. Example: "Because the jury found him guilty and sent him to the state penitentiary, he will spend the next ten years as a special guest of the governor."

Litotes: This device for drawing attention to a sentence is also known as the "not un-" construction, as in "This movie was not unlike the one we saw last week" or "The meal I ate in the French Quarter with you was not inexpensive." While slightly awkward and unnecessarily wordy, this device, if used carefully, can call attention to itself and thereby help you to emphasize a sentence and make it stand out from the surrounding sentences. Don't use this device with sentences that aren't important enough to warrant this sort of special emphasis.

Rhetorical Question: When you ask a question that has an obvious answer, you pull your reader into a certain level of agreement with you. For example, "Should this business continue with programs that have lost money two years in a row and will likely lose even more money next year?" The answer is obviously no, but by asking the question anyway, a certain dramatic flair pulls the reader closer to your position. This device is very useful when you are developing an argument, for it brings a powerful emphasis to an assertion.

Aporia: This device expresses doubt about a fact, opinion, idea, or conclusion. For example, "The question of whether not schools should enforce dress codes is very tricky: on one hand, dress codes make gang insignia, class affiliation, and conspicous consumption impossible, but on the

other hand they enforce a drab sameness that suppresses individuality and personal tastes." This device is great for introducing an argument, for showing that we need to examine certain matters more deeply. On the other hand, it is also a great way to conclude a discussion that you do not want to continue. Either way, the aporia is useful for emphasizing your key assertions.

Ananpodoton: This device leaves the second half of parallel construction unstated but implied, as in: "If you kill the alligator and eat it, you will have become a man, but if the alligator kills and eats you, well then …" This sort of omission creates a powerful emphasis, so use it carefully.

Balance

Have you ever noticed how easy it is to remember certain famous sentences? Nobody ever has to sit down and memorize sentences like, "We have nothing to fear but fear itself" or "Ask not what your country can do for you but what you can do for your country." Almost like musical jingles from TV commercials, they stick. What makes these sorts of sentences stick is simply their extraordinary degree of balance . ***Here are a couple of devices*** to help you balance your sentences

Parallelism: When ideas of equal importance are put in identical grammatical structures or ordered or phrased similarly, you have a parallelism. For example, "To write carefully and to think clearly are interrelated goals." Notice how different the effect of the sentence if you take away the parallelism: "To write carefully and clear thinking are interrelated goals." Here is another pair of sentences:

- Julie likes playing the saxophone more than homework.
- Julie likes playing the saxophone more than doing homework.

The difference is subtle, but one of them has a balanced rhythm that the other lacks. Can you tell which one? Though the difference might seem minor in these short sentences, the difference becomes more and more powerful in longer sentences, especially in the context of a great many sentences in a long paper.

Chiasmus: This is a fancier, more complex version of parallelism. In chiasmus, the elements that are to be balanced with one another are put in reverse order. For example, here is a parallelism: "The committee worked constantly but succeeded rarely." And here is the same parallelism turned into a chiasmus: "The committee worked constantly but rarely succeeded." Do you see the difference? In the first one, a verb is followed by an adverb (worked / constantly) and then another verb is followed by another adverb (rarely / succeeded). But the second example is a chiasmus because the verb-adverb pattern isn't simply repeated but reversed: worked / constantly is followed by rarely / succeeded. Though the chiasmus might not seem like an important or powerful extension of the parallelism in these small examples, increasingly elaborate uses of chiasmus can be enormously powerful, as we'll see in the next device.

Antimetabole: This device is an elaborate version of the chiasmus, though it requires even more cleverness. It requires the second half of the sentence to repeat the first half but in reverse order, as in "Alison's job is to find a location suitable for the wedding, and Robin's job is to design a wedding suitable for the location." Or, "Instead of increasing publicity to boost our sales, we should boost our sales to increase publicity." Here is a very famous antimetabole: "Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country." When you can achieve balance at this level, you create a sentence that people will instantly remember. This sort of writing is, of course, extremely persuasive and powerful, so you certainly don't want to frame a minor, trivial point in your paper this way; instead, save these sorts of fireworks for your most important assertions.

Antithesis: When you place two terms closely together in a parallel structure to make their contrast as striking as possible, you have an antithesis. This is a great device for clarifying differences or conflicts that, otherwise, might be too complicated for the reader to engage. Consider this pair of sentences:

- If we try, we might succeed, but if we do not put forth some effort we'll never know whether or not we really had a chance.
- If we try, we might succeed, but if we don't, we can't.

This is an especially useful device when you're developing an argument, for it allows you to contrast your own position to that of your opponent quite forcefully. Here are a few more pairs of sentences – can you tell which ones have been stylized with an antithesis and which ones haven't?

- After we parachuted out of the airplane, Lashonda said she felt completely thrilled, but my feeling was a very different one – I was still consumed with pure terror.
- After we parachuted out of the airplane, Lashonda felt thrilled and I felt terrified

- The blueprint calls for a wall that is thick and strong, but it also says that the wall can't be very heavy because we have to be able to move it around.
- The blueprint calls for a wall that is thick and strong but also light and moveable.

Antanagoge: This device points out a fault, but balances it with a positive quality. Example: "The car sounds terrible, but it runs well"

Dirimens Copulatio: The "not only X, but also Y" construction. It is much like antanagoge, but instead of balancing positive and negative, it simply adds positive to positive or negative to negative. Example: "This book is not only hard to read, but also impossible to enjoy." "That dog is not only extremely intelligent, but also intensely loyal."

Isocolon: This device strings together phrases of nearly identical length. Example: "The movie was good – serious but never merely pretentious, funny but never merely vulgar, strange but never merely weird."

Disjunctive Proposition: This device offers two propositions, closely related, one of which must be true and the other of which must be false. Example, "Either his car broke down or he forgot our appointment."

Syncresis: This device offers a contrast in parallel clauses. Example: "The purpose of living is not to live long, but to live well." Or, "A coward dies a thousand deaths. A hero dies but once".

Figurative Language

Whenever writers must explain something to a reader that the reader may find unfamiliar, the writer naturally tries to associate that unfamiliar thing with something more familiar. For example, "Because I used too much fertilizer on the palm tree, the leaves began to look like strips of bacon." There are many types of devices for adding figures to your prose, but be extremely careful to avoid figures that have been used too often. Never say, "free as a bird" or "slept like a log" or "happy as a clam." If you do, your reader will feel that your prose is dead as a doornail or flat as pancake, like this sentence is. ***Here are some devices*** for making your prose more figurative:

Simile: This device is quite simple, quite common, almost unconscious. In simile, an unfamiliar thing is explained or clarified by being associated with a more familiar thing. Importantly, the image in the simile should be quite familiar, and the subject of the simile should be something that is unclear enough to require this sort of anchoring image. For example, "I always tell my first year medical students to think of the presence of monosodium triglycerides in the bloodstream as something like a bad hair day for their heart." Notice how awful it would be to say, "A bad hair

day is like having monosodium tryglycerides in your bloodstream." In this latter example, the subject is too familiar to really need any explanation, and the image that is supposed to explain it is too unfamiliar and obscure to explain much of anything to those who aren't already specialists in the subject of the bloodstream and its health. One more rule: the difference between the subject and the image should be substantial. In this example -- "This particular kind of grass is as green as a grasshopper" -- the simile is weak, because grasshoppers are usually the same color as grass. On the other hand, if the subject and the image are wildly different, you might need to fill in a little explanation.

Analogy: This device is just like a simile, only more elaborate. Usually, it offers several points of connection between its subject and its image, and it is explicitly designed not simply to provide a certain imaginative richness to your prose but also real conceptual clarity. As such, analogies are especially useful when dealing with abstract concepts, but, when you're developing an argument, be very careful that the links in your analogy aren't simply trying to take the place of strict logic. For example, here is a faulty analogy:

- We should get rid of all those old books in the library. After all, you don't keep worn out socks in your dresser drawer. You get rid of them!

Obviously, this analogy suffers from faulty logic, for socks are very different from books in their purpose. Also, just because the books are old doesn't mean they are worn out. Here is a stronger anology:

- Flash memory chips work like a chalkboard, in that, when information is written on one, the information remains present even when the power is turned off. Only when the information is deliberately erased will it disappear. And, like the chalkboard, the memory chip can be written on and erased an unlimited number of times.

Metaphor: This device also compares two different things, but goes a step further to actually identify one thing with another. For example, "My mind is barren soil" or "That man is a monster" or "Lake Ponchartrain is not a giant garbage can, and people who treat it that way are themselves nothing but trash!" "I love listening to WWOZ when I first wake up – those jazz programs are my morning coffee." In other words, a metaphor is very much like a simile, the only difference being that the metaphor does not use a "like" or an "as" between the subject and the image. Here are some more important tips when using metaphors: first, make sure the image is something greater or more important than the subject, for if the subject is greater, the metaphor risks trivializing the subject. For example, "The waterfall poured tears upon the rock". Obviously, tears are much tinier that what usually falls from a waterfall, and so the metaphor seems ridiculous. Notice how much better this sounds, "When she heard about the tragedy, her eyes became waterfalls." Also, if you're worried that your metaphor might seem overly strong, even distracting for your reader, you can soften it by adding an adjective: "I got caught in the thunderstorm for an hour, and my beautiful new necktie hung pitifully across my chest, a drowned snake." Notice how, if I didn't have the word "drowned" before the word snake, the sentence seems only bizarre rather than precise: "After I got caught in the thunderstorm for an hour, my beautiful new necktie hung pitifully across my chest, a snake." Putting in the word "drowned" has a way of grounding the image in the earlier information of the sentence that makes the metaphor much more effective – and much less weird.

Metonymy: This device is a version of metaphor. It doesn't simply identify one thing with another, but actually substitutes one thing for another. For example, instead of saying, "In any war, propaganda is more important than military equipment," you might use metonymy to say, "In any war, the pen is mightier than the sword." Instead of saying, "You have to work hard every day in order to earn enough money for your meals," you might use a metonymy to say, "You have to sweat for your bread." Notice how metonymy is highly visual and very concise. That is the key to its power. Here are a few more examples: "The orders came from the White House" or "You cannot fight City Hall."

Synecdoche: This device is also a version of metaphor and is very similar to metonymy. In this case, a particular part of some whole is substituted for the whole itself. For example, "If I could

save a buck, I'd buy some wheels, put on my best threads, take Jane for a ride in the moonlight, and ask for her hand." In this example, "buck" subs for money, "wheels" for car, "threads" for clothing, and "hand" (in marriage) for Jane's whole person. Here is another example: "The bosses have got our blood on their hands!" Because the synechdoche is so closely associated with a certain "hipster" slang and with political slogans, be careful how you use it: if it isn't appropriate to your overall tone, avoid it.

Personification: This device metaphorically gives human attributes to things that are not human. For example, "My old car began to groan and protest as it struggled up the hill." "This computer is not very friendly." "This coffee is so strong it could pour *me* into a cup and start drinking."

Allusion: This device simply makes reference to a famous person to emphasize or add a little flash to your point. For example, "You should always remember to plan ahead – Noah couldn't have built his ark in the middle of the flood!". "If you want to play the saxophone the way John Coltrane did, you have to practice the way John Coltrane did." (Notice, in this latter example, the use of parallelism).

Eponym: This is a particular sort of allusion, one in which the particular quality of a famous person is implied simply by the mention of that person's name. "She does so well in her math classes – I swear, she is the Michael Jordan of math." "That guy thinks he's Casanova, but none of the women can actually stand to be around him." "Up until now, that politician was nothing less than a Houdini, but the forces of justice have finally closed in on him and there's no way he can escape."

Apostrophe: This device is a direct address to someone, whether real or imaginary or personified. It serves as a dramatic outlet for pent up emotion. For example, in an essay about movies, let's say, when the writer is describing how he watches movies every night to take his mind off his loneliness, the writer might say, "O, movies, you are my only friends!" This dramatic, abrupt switch to the second person ("you," as the focus, instead of "I") will certainly draw attention to itself and so you should use this special sort of emphasis only when appropriate – at the end of an essay, or at the end of a particularly poignant stretch of argument.

Syntax

category that involves how words are arranged or sequenced. Obviously, your writing is best when it is arranged or sequenced in ways that maximize the clarity and the efficiency of your message. ***Here are several devices*** that involve matters of syntax.

Zeugma: There are many forms of zeugma, and they all involve linking two or more words, phrases, or clauses by another word that is stated in one place and only implied in the rest of the sentence. The simplest example is the use of one verb to serve two subjects: "Jack and Jill went up the hill." Another very common form of zeugma is in the following sentence, which has one subject but several direct objects: "She grabbed her purse from the closet in the front hall, her gloves from the table near the front door, and her car keys from the hook where she always hangs them."

Diazeugma: This is a version of the above, in which you have a single subject linking multiple verbs, as in, "Babe Ruth pitched two no-hitters, hit more than seven hundred home runs, and committed very few defensive errors." Here's another example, "We wept, fasted, prayed, preached, sacrificed, and finally succeeded."

Prozeugma: In this version, the linking word is usually a verb, and, after stating it once, you omit it, as in "The freshmen usually do best in Math; the sophomores, in music; the juniors, in chemistry."

Mesozeugma: In this version of zeugma, the linking word is placed near the middle of the sentence, as in "At eight o'clock, dinner and dessert will be served, then coffee and cigars." The link – "will be served" – comes in the middle of the sentence.

Hypozeugma: Here the linking word is placed after the words it links, as in, "An elephant, a giraffe, a rhinoceros, and a python all escaped from the Audubon Zoo early Sunday morning." What links this list of animals is "all escaped," and it comes after the list.

Syllepsis: This is primarily a device of wit, for it means using a linking word, usually a verb, to bring two different words, phrases, or clauses together, but in way that involves slightly different meanings of the linking word. For example, "He lost his heart in San Francisco and his shirt in Las Vegas." Or, "On her way out the door, she grabbed a jacket and a kiss." Or, "Because her date had drunk eleven beers, she decided to catch a ride home with someone else – she didn't want to risk her life or her reputation."

Hyperbaton: This syntactic device describes any deviation from normal word-order, as in "Books they have demanded and books they shall get!" or "Disturb me not!" This sort of syntactical flip-flop always draws attention to itself and creates an effect of strong emphasis.

Anastrope: This transposition of words usually involves putting an adjective after the noun it modifies, as in "She had a personality indescribable by words appropriate for polite company" or "His was a countenance sad." Or, "It was a long, difficult operation, but successful." Or, "She displayed an air of confidence unusual for one so young." Be careful with this device, for it can create some very awkward sentences. It seems to work best when the adjective is actually a long adjectival phrase, as in that last example, "unusual for one so young."

Appositive: This device is simply the use of a noun to modify or describe another noun, as in "Mr. Wilkins, the manager, saw the suspect fleeing the store with his gun drawn" or "The ability to evaluate gem-stones, a skill requiring experience, knowledge, and ethics, cannot be learned overnight from a textbook." In the first example, "the manager" is a noun that modifies another noun, "Mr. Wilkins." In the second example, "a skill . . ." is a noun that modifies the earlier noun, "The ability."

Disjunctio: This device uses different verbs to express similar actions of one subject in successive clauses. Example: "By the Roman people, Cypress was destroyed, Carthage razed, Corinth burned, and Sicily over-run." Or, "This summer, her band recorded a best-selling album, drew sell-out crowds all over Europe, gave twenty nine interviews to national magazines in the U. S., and then started its own record-label."

Epiplexis: Asking a series of questions, not to gather information, but to attack. Example: "How long do you intend to test my patience? How long do you think you can get away with this? Do you want me to explode?"

Restatement

On one hand, your readers will be very turned off by your writing if they find themselves reading some particular point more than once. They'll feel that you must not have much to say if you have to keep saying the same thing over and over. Similarly, if you keep using the same words, the reader will begin to feel that those words are stale, even increasingly useless in your efforts to communicate. On the other hand, certain forms of repetition, if used strategically, can serve you quite well in connecting with your reader. ***Here are some devices*** that will allow you to repeat yourself in a way that helps rather than hinders your efforts to connect with readers:

Anaphora: This device repeats the same words at the beginning of successive clauses or sentences. Example: “They kept walking, not knowing if the mugger was still pointing the gun at them, not knowing whether they might soon die, not knowing where to contact the police.” This device is useful for creating an emotionally charged mood.

Epistrophe: This device is the opposite of anaphora, for here the repetition of words comes at the end successive phases, clauses, or sentences, to create a slow, methodical effect, as in “In order for us to gain an understanding of the situation, the photographs must be analyzed, the intercepted email must be analyzed, the reports from human operatives on the ground in Pakistan must be analyzed. We cannot simply rush to judgement.”

Symploce: This device combines anaphora and epistrophe, repeating words at both the beginnings and the endings of clauses or sentences, as in “It is not enough simply to install smoke detectors in every bedroom; smoke detectors must be maintained in every bedroom.” Here’s another: “The problem was created by humans, and therefore the problem can be solved by humans.”

Diacope: This is a direct repetition of a word or phrase after an intervening word or phrase, as in “The blew up the statue of Buddha, those villains! They blew up the statue of Buddha!” Or “The stock market did fairly well today – can you believe it? – the stock market did fairly well!” This device is good for expressing powerful, dramatic emotions and so it is also a technique for emphasis. So emphatic is the diacope, in fact, that you should only use it when you’re making the most important point in your essay. In fact, I would only use it as a final sentence in my paper, though using it elsewhere is certainly possible. Difficult, but certainly possible. Incidentally, did you notice the diacope in the preceding sentence?

Accumulatio: This device heaps up terms of praise or of condemnation to summarize the points you’ve made. It works especially well in the conclusion of your paper. Example: “Thus, we see that the Mayor Smith has been arrogant, uninformed, disloyal, greedy, deceitful, unreliable, and destructive.”

Sound

Even when readers are reading silently, tiny movements register in their vocal chords, sending subtle signals throughout the body that undoubtedly play a role in the reader’s pleasure. Certain stylistic devices can capitalize directly on this potential for sound to stimulate a subtle pleasure in the reader.

Alliteration: This device works by repeating certain consonant sounds at the beginning of successive words. For example, “The late delivery of the data resulted in a disheartening delay and caused the entire department to miss the deadline for distributing their reports.”

Onomontopoeia: This term refers to a word that, when pronounced, imitates the sound that the word names. For example, “Plop,” “Buzz,” “Fizz,” “Ooze,” “Slam,” “Scratch,” “Rattle.”

Assonance: This device repeats vowels sounds, as in, “A whole boat load of tourists from Oklahoma are hoping to float down the Bogachitta River most of the day, then go back their to hotels to enroll for that evening’s ghost tour.”

Consonance: This device repeats consonant sounds at the ends of words. It’s much like alliteration, therefore, only focusing on the ends of words rather than their beginnings. For example, “He gave me a helpful tip – just rip the cap off the top and, when you sip, don’t cut your lip.”