

Syntax

Consider:

The impact of poetry is so hard and direct that for the moment there is no other sensation except that of the poem itself. What profound depths we visit then – how sudden and complete is our immersion! There is nothing here to catch hold of; nothing to stay us in our flight. . . . The poet is always our contemporary. Our being for the moment is centered and constricted, as in any violent shock of personal emotion.

— Virginia Woolf, “How Should One Read a Book?”

Discuss:

1. Woolf uses a variety of sentence types in this selection. Among them is the exclamatory sentence. Identify the exclamatory sentence and explain its effect.

2. Classify each sentence as to length: short, medium, or long. How is the meaning of the passage reinforced and clarified by sentence length?

Apply:

Write a declarative sentence about college entrance examinations. Then write an exclamatory sentence which amplifies or clarifies the declarative sentence. Share your sentences with the class.

Syntax

Consider:

Brother, continue to listen.

You say that you are sent to instruct us how to worship the Great Spirit agreeably to his mind; and, if we do not take hold of the religion which you white people teach, we shall be unhappy hereafter. You say that you are right and we are lost. How do we know this to be true?

— Chief Red Jacket, “Chief Red Jacket Rejects a Change of Religion”

Discuss:

1. The words *you say* are repeated several times in the sentence. What is the repetition’s function?

2. The question at the end of the passage is a rhetorical question. What attitude toward the audience is expressed by the use of a rhetorical question?

Apply:

Write a three-sentence paragraph modeled after Chief Red Jacket’s passage. The first two sentences should contain repetition; the third sentence should be a rhetorical question. Your topic is school uniforms. Share your sentence with the class.

Syntax

Consider:

No sooner had the reverberation of my blows sunk into silence, then I was answered by a voice from within the tomb! – by a cry, at first muffled and broken, like the sobbing of a child, and then quickly swelling into one long, loud, and continuous scream, utterly anomalous and inhuman – a howl! – a wailing shriek, half of horror and half of triumph, such as might have arisen only out of hell, conjointly from the throats of the damned in their agony and of the demons that exult in the damnation.

— Edgar Allan Poe, “The Black Cat”

Discuss:

1. The dashes in this long sentence set off a series of appositives. (An appositive is a noun or noun phrase placed beside another noun or noun phrase and used to identify or explain it.) What noun phrase is explained by the appositives?
2. This sentence makes syntactic and semantic sense if it ends with the first exclamation point. What do the appositives add to the meaning and effectiveness of the sentence?

Apply:

Rewrite Poe’s sentence, changing it into a series of short sentences. Read your sentences to the class and discuss how the use of short sentences changes the overall meaning of the original.

Syntax

Consider:

Now, the use of culture is that it helps us, by means of its spiritual standard of perfection, to regard wealth but as machinery, and not only to say as a matter of words that we regard wealth but as machinery, but really to perceive and feel that it is so. If it were not for this purging effect wrought upon our minds by culture, the whole world, the future as well as the present, would inevitably belong to the Philistines.

— Matthew Arnold, “Sweetness and Light,” *Culture and Anarchy*

Discuss:

1. Put the first sentence into your own words. How does the sentence’s complexity add to its impact?
2. Where are the most important words in the second sentence of this passage – at the beginning or at the end? What effect does this have on the reader?

Apply:

Listen to people’s sentences as you talk to them today and keep a record of where speakers place important words: at the beginning or the end of a sentence. Come to the next class with a record of at least 5 sentences and notation indicating where the important words in those sentences were placed. Which is most common, beginning or end weight? Compare your results with the results of others in your class and discuss the implication of these results for analyzing prose.

Syntax

Consider:

The seven years' difference in our ages lay between us like a chasm: I wondered if these years would ever operate between us as a bridge.

— James Baldwin, “Sonny’s Blues”

Discuss:

1. What function does the colon serve in this sentence?
2. How would the meaning and impact of the sentence change if the sentence read as follows:

The seven years' difference in our ages lay between us like a chasm, and I wondered if these years would ever operate between us as a bridge.

Apply:

Write two independent clauses; join the two with a colon, giving emphasis to the independent clause which follows the colon. Use Baldwin’s sentence as a model. Share your sentence with the class.

Syntax

Consider:

I slowed still more, my shadow pacing me, dragging its head through the weeds that hid the fence.

— William Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury*

Discuss:

1. In this sentence, form imitates meaning. How does Faulkner slow the sentence down, reinforcing the sentence's meaning?

2. How would the impact of the sentence change if we rewrote the sentence to read:

I slowed still more. My shadow paced me and dragged its head through the weed-obscured fence.

Apply:

Using Faulkner's sentence as a model, write a sentence that expresses reluctance. Use at least two phrases and one subordinate clause to reinforce the meaning of your sentence. Share your sentence with the class and explain how your syntax reinforces your meaning.

Syntax

Consider:

I hear an army charging upon the land,
And the thunder of horses plunging, foam about their knees:
Arrogant, in black armor, behind them stand,
Disdaining the reins, with fluttering whips, the charioteers.
— James Joyce, “I Hear an Army Charging Upon the Land”

Discuss:

1. The subject of the verb *stand* in line 3 is *charioteers* at the end of line 4. How does this inversion of the normal word order (subject-verb) affect the impact of those lines?
2. Examine the adjectives and adjective phrases in lines 3 and 4: *arrogant, in black armor*. What word do these adjectives modify? How does this unusual word order affect the impact of the lines?

Apply:

Write a sentence about a car crash. In your sentence invert the normal order of subject and verb. Try to make your sentence sound natural and powerful. Share your sentence with a partner.

Syntax

Consider:

“I’m clean, Carlito, I’m not using.” My voice dropped to a whisper. “I’m not using.” And oh, God, I found my mind, thinking, *Wonder what it would be like again? Wonder what it would be like again? Wonder what it would be like again? Wonder . . .*

— Piri Thomas, *Down These Mean Streets*

Discuss:

1. Thomas repeats the question *Wonder what it would be like again?* three times in the passage. What effect does this repetition have on the impact of the passage?

2. At the end of the passage, Thomas uses ellipses to indicate an omission of words required for complete syntactical construction but unnecessary for understanding. What words are missing? What impact does this omission have on the passage?

Apply:

Imagine that you are very hungry and are on the way to the best restaurant in town. Describe what you feel as you anticipate a great dinner. In your description use questions and ellipses, as Thomas does. Share your description with the class and explain the impact the questions and ellipses have on the description.

Syntax

Consider:

He had been prepared to lie, to bluster, to remain sullenly unresponsive; but, reassured by the good-humored intelligence of the Controller's face, he decided to tell the truth, straightforwardly.

— Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World*

Discuss:

1. What effect does the repetition of infinitives (*to lie, to bluster, to remain*) in the first clause have on the meaning of the sentence? How do these infinitives prepare you for the infinitive phrase (*to tell the truth*) in the second clause?

2. What is the function of the semicolon in Huxley's sentence?

Apply:

Write a sentence with two independent clauses connected by a semicolon. In the first clause use a series of infinitives (as in Huxley's sentence). In the second clause, use an infinitive to contradict your first clause. Your topic is a movie you have recently seen. Share your sentence with the class.

Syntax

Consider:

He slowly ventured into the pond. The bottom was deep, soft clay, he sank in, and the water clasped dead cold round his legs.

— D. H. Lawrence, “The Horse-Dealer’s Daughter”

Discuss:

1. What effect does sentence length have on this passage?
2. Examine the second sentence. How does the structure of the sentence reinforce the meaning?

Apply:

Write a sentence in which you make an inanimate object active by using an active verb. Remember that your verb is not just an action verb (like *talk* or *flow*). The verb must make your inanimate object into an actor, a doer. Share your sentence with the class.

Syntax

Consider:

When I am too sad and too skinny to keep keeping, when I am a tiny thing against so many bricks, then it is I look at trees.

— Sandra Cisneros, *The House on Mango Street*

Discuss:

1. What kind of grammatical structure is repeated in this sentence? What is the effect of the repetition?

2. This is a periodic sentence, a sentence which delays the subject and verb to the end. What idea is emphasized by the end-focus in this sentence?

Apply:

Write a periodic sentence about getting a bad grade on a test. Use Cisneros' sentence as a model. Share your sentence with a partner.

Syntax

Consider:

The graces of writing and conversation are of different kinds, and though he who excels in one might have been with opportunities and application equally successful in the other, yet as many please by extemporary talk, though utterly unacquainted with the more accurate method and more laboured beauties which composition requires; so it is very possible that men, wholly accustomed to works of study, may be without that readiness of conception and affluence of language, always necessary to colloquial entertainment.

— Samuel Johnson, “An Author’s Writing and Conversation Contrasted”

Discuss:

1. The main idea of this sentence is stated in the first ten words. What purpose does the rest of the sentence serve?

2. What is the purpose of the semicolon? How does the use of a semicolon reinforce the meaning of this sentence?

Apply:

Rewrite this sentence in modern English, retaining its meaning and basic structure. Your sentence may be shorter than Johnson’s! Share your sentence with a partner.

Syntax

Consider:

But George sat stiffly on the bank and looked at his right hand that had thrown the gun away.

— John Steinbeck, *Of Mice and Men*

Discuss:

1. The subordinate clause, *that had thrown the gun away*, is used as an adjective to modify the word *hand*. What effect does this have on the meaning of the sentence?
2. Compare Steinbeck's sentence with the following:

George, who had thrown the gun away, sat stiffly on the bank and looked at his right hand.

Both sentences have subordinate clauses that modify nouns, but the clauses modify different nouns. Fill out the following chart indicating the subordinate clauses, the nouns they modify, and the effect of this focus on meaning.

	Subordinate Clause	Noun	Effect on Meaning
Steinbeck's sentence			
New sentence			

Apply:

Write a subordinate clause that completes the following sentence:

Sarah gazed at the road and thought about her plans _____
_____.

Your clause should modify the word *plans* and give meaning to the sentence. Share your sentence with a partner.

Syntax

Consider:

When the moment is ripe, only the fanatic can hatch a genuine mass movement. Without him the disaffection engendered by militant men of words remains undirected and can vent itself only in pointless and easily suppressed disorders. Without him the initiated reforms, even when drastic, leave the old way of life unchanged, and any change in government usually amounts to no more than a transfer of power from one set of men of action to another. Without him there can perhaps be no new beginning.

— Eric Hoffer, “The Fanatics”

Discuss:

1. This passage uses the phrase “without him” three times. What effect does this have on the overall impact of the passage?

2. How does the length of the last sentence affect the meaning of the passage?

Apply:

Start with the following sentence.

Of all the instruments of modern technology, only the computer brings people closer together.

Now add two sentences which amplify the first sentence. Each of these sentences should begin with a prepositional phrase. Share your sentences with the class.

Syntax

Consider:

There is another and curious class of cases in which close external resemblance does not depend on adaptation to similar habits of life, but has been gained for the sake of protection. I allude to the wonderful manner in which certain butterflies imitate . . . other and quite distinct species. . . . The mockers and mocked always inhabit the same region; we never find an imitator living remote from the form which it imitates. The mockers are almost invariably rare insects; the mocked in almost every case abound in swarms.

— Charles Darwin, “Analogical Resemblances,” *The Origin of Species*

Discuss:

1. Why does Darwin use a semicolon rather than a period in the last two sentences of this passage?
2. What effect does the sentence structure have on the meaning of the passage?

Apply:

Write a sentence with two independent clauses describing two schools in your area. Join the two clauses with a semicolon. The two clauses should emphasize the differences between the two schools. Remember not to use a conjunction to join the two clauses. Share your sentence with a partner.

Syntax

Consider:

HIGGINS: Yes: that's what drives me mad: the silly people don't know their own silly business.

— George Bernard Shaw, *Pygmalion*

Discuss:

1. What is the purpose of the two colons in this sentence?
2. What function does the *yes* at the beginning of the sentence serve?

Apply:

Write a sentence about a TV show you deplore. Using Shaw's sentence as a model, state what you don't like about the show in a succinct clause following a colon. Share your sentence with a partner.

Syntax

Consider:

Death be not proud, though some have called thee
Mighty and dreadful, for thou art not so;
For those whom thou think'st thou dost overthrow
Die not, poor Death; nor yet canst thou kill me.
From rest and sleep, which but thy pictures be,
Much pleasure, then from thee much more must flow;

— John Donne, “Death be not Proud”

Discuss:

1. What is the effect of opening the first sentence with the imperative mood of the verb *to be*?
2. In the first clause of the second sentence (lines 5-6), the verb is understood: in the second clause of this sentence, the subject is understood. What verb is omitted? What subject is omitted? What effect does this have on the meaning of the lines?

Apply:

Write a sentence about credit cards which begins with a verb in the imperative mood. Share your sentence with a partner and discuss the attitude toward credit cards your opening verb reveals.

Syntax

Consider:

It occurs to her that she should record this flash of insight in her journal – otherwise she is sure to forget, for she is someone who is always learning and forgetting and obliged to learn again – but the act of recording requires that she remove her gloves, rummage through her bag for her pen and for the notebook itself. This is more than she is capable of doing.

— Carol Shields, *The Stone Diaries*

Discuss:

1. What is the purpose of the dashes in the first sentence?
2. A short sentence follows a much longer sentence in this passage. What effect does this have on the reader?

Apply:

Write a short, emphatic sentence to follow the long sentence below.

It seems inevitable that the Internet, with all of its potential, will be ubiquitous in the future – for technology can both distract us and focus us, make our lives easier and clog our lives with a perplexing array of choices – but the effect it will have on the quality of our lives is still undetermined.

Share your sentence with the class and discuss its effect on the passage.

Syntax

Consider:

While we do these things, these deeply momentous things, let us be very clear, and make very clear to all the world, what our motives and our objects are.

— Woodrow Wilson, “President Woodrow Wilson Presents an Ideal to the War Congress”

Discuss:

1. This is a periodic sentence, one in which the subject and verb are delayed until the final part of the sentence. This creates syntactic tension and emphasizes the ideas at the end of the sentence. What ideas are stressed in this periodic sentence?

2. How would it change the effectiveness of the sentence if we rewrote it as:

Our motives and objects must be clear to all the world while we do these deeply momentous things.

Apply:

Using Wilson’s sentence as a model, write a periodic sentence about music censorship. Read your sentence to the class and explain how the syntax of your sentence affects the meaning.

Syntax

Consider:

She is a woman who misses moisture, who has always loved low green hedges and ferns.

— Michael Ondaatje, *The English Patient*

Discuss:

1. Both of the subordinate clauses in this sentence modify *woman*. What effect does this parallel structure have on the sentence?

2. How would it change the feeling evoked by the sentence if it read:

She misses moisture and has always loved low green hedges and ferns.

Apply:

Write a sentence like Ondaatje's which layers two or more subordinate clauses to evoke a sharp image. Begin with "She was a friend who . . ." Share your sentence with the class.