

Rhetorical Devices

Device list and samples courtesy of K. Tully's AP materials.

Schemes of Construction

1. Schemes of Balance

Parallelism--similarity of structure in a pair or series of related words, phrases or clauses. This basic principle of grammar and rhetoric demands that equivalent things be set forth in coordinate grammatical structures: nouns with nouns, infinitives with infinitives, and adverb clauses with adverb clauses. Examples follow.

a. “. . .for the support of this declaration ,with a firm reliance on the protection of Divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes, and our sacred Honor.” —The Declaration of Independence

b. “The love of liberty, jury trial, the writ of habeas corpus, and all the blessings of free government...” —John Randolph of Roanoke

“Speech on the Greek Cause”

c. “It will be long before our larger life interprets itself in such imagination as Hawthorne’s, such wisdom as Emerson’s, such poetry as Longfellow’s, such prophesy as Whittier’s, such grace as Holmes’s, such humor and humanity as Lowell’s.”

—William Dean Howells Uterary Friends and Acquaintance

Isocolon is a scheme of parallel structure which occurs when the parallel elements are similar not only in grammatical structure but also in length (the number of words or even the number of syllables.) This is very effective, but a little goes a long way.

a. “His purpose was to impress the ignorant, to perplex the dubious, and to confound the scrupulous.”

b. “An envious heart makes a treacherous ear.”

Zora Neale Hurston

Their Eyes Were Watching God

c. “So Janey waited a bloom time, and a green time and an orange time.”

—Zora Neale Hurston, Their Eyes Were Watching God

Antithesis—the juxtaposition of contrasting ideas, often in parallel structure. The contrast may be in words or in ideas or both. When used well, antithesis can be very effective, even witty.

a. ‘What if I am rich, and another is poor—strong, and he is weak—intelligent, and he is benighted—elevated, and he is depraved? Have we not one Father? Hath not one God created us?

—William Lloyd Garrison, “No Compromise with Slavery”

b. 'Your forefathers crossed the great water and landed on this island. Their numbers were small. They found friends and not enemies. They told us they had fled from their own country for fear of wicked men, and had come here to enjoy their religion. They asked for a small seat. We took pity on them, granted their request, and they sat down amongst us. We gave them corn and meat; they gave us poison in return.

—Red Jacket

2. Schemes of Inversion or Unusual Word Order

Anastrophe--inversion of the natural or usual word order. This deviation can emphasize a point or it can just sound awkward. It is most effective if the author rarely writes awkwardly, as clarity draws special attention to the inverted clause or phrase. a. "As the saint of old sweetly sang, 'I was glad when they said unto me, let us go into the house of the Lord': so ought we to be glad when any opportunity doing good is presented to us.

—Cotton Mather, "The Reward of Well-Doing"

b. "Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country."

—John F. Kennedy, Inaugural Speech

Parenthesis--insertion of some verbal unit in a position that interrupts the normal syntactical flow of the sentence. The parenthetical remark is off on a tangent, grammatically unrelated to the rest of the sentence. While the obvious way to use parenthesis is with the punctuation parentheses, there are other ways to insert a comment into a sentence. One might use commas or dashes, for example.

a. "Those two sports are among the darkest of our whole civilization—pardon me, our whole culture (an important distinction, I've heard) which might sound like a hoax, or a contradiction, but that (by contradiction, I mean) is how the world moves: not like an arrow, but a boomerang."

—Ralph Ellison, Invisible Man

b. "And they went further and further from her, being attached to her by a thin thread (since they had lunched with her) which would stretch and stretch, get thinner and thinner as they walked across London; as if one's friends were attached to one's body, after lunching with them, by a thin thread, which (as she dozed there) became hazy with sound of bells, striking the hour or ringing to service, as a single spider's thread is blotted with rain-drops, and burdened, sags down. So she slept."

—Virginia Woolf, Mrs. Dalloway

Apposition--placing side by side two coordinate elements, the second of which serves as an explanation or modification of the first. In grammar, this is the appositive or noun cluster.

a. "The mountain was the earth, her home."

—Rudolfo Anaya, Albuquerque

b. "Here was the source of the mistaken strategy—the reason why activists could so easily ignore class and could consider race along a sufficient measure of social oppression."

—Richard Rodriguez, *The Hunger for Memory*

3. Schemes of Omission

Ellipsis--deliberate omission of a word or of words which are readily implied by the context. This can make clear, economical sentences, but if the understood words are grammatically incompatible, the resulting sentence may be awkward.

a. "So singularly clear was the water that when it was only twenty or thirty feet deep the bottom seemed floating on the Yes, where it was even eighty feet deep Every little pebble distinct every speckled trout, every hand's breadth of sand."

—Mark Twain, *Roughing It*

b. "And he to England shall along with you."

—William Shakespeare, *Hamlet III*, iii

Asyndeton--deliberate omission of conjunctions between a series of related clauses. The effect of this device is to produce a hurried rhythm or assertive tone in the sentence.

a. "I came, I saw, I conquered." —Julius Caesar

b. "They may have it in well doing, they have it in learning, they may have it even in criticism."

—Matthew Arnold

c. "...that we shall pay any price, bear any burden meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe to assure the survival and the success of liberty."

—John F. Kennedy

(This last example would have been called **brachylogia** during the Tudor period, but it is still correct to refer to the omission of conjunctions between a series of related phrases as **asyndeton**.)

Polysyndeton--deliberate use of many conjunctions. The effect of polysyndeton is to slow down the rhythm of the sentence.

a. "I said, 'Who killed him?' and he said, 'I don't know who killed him but he's dead all right,' and it was dark and there was water standing in the street and no lights and windows broke and boats all up in the town and trees blown down and everything all blown and I got a skill and went out and found my boat where I had her inside Mango Key and she was all right only she was full of water."

—Ernest Hemingway, "After the Storm"

b. On and on she went, across Piccadilly, and up Regent Street, ahead of him, her cloak, her gloves, her shoulders combining with the fringes and the laces and the feather boas in the windows to make the spirit of finery and whimsy which dwindled out of the shops onto the pavement, as the light of a lamp goes wavering at night over hedges in the darkness."

• —Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*

4. Schemes of Repeition

Alliteration--repetition of initial or medial consonants in two or more adjacent words. Used sparingly, alliteration provides emphasis. Overused, it sounds silly.

a. "Already American vessels have been searched, seized, and sunk.:

—John F. Kennedy, Profiles in Courage

b. "It was the meanest moment of eternity."

—Zora Neale Hurston

Their Eyes Were Watching God

c. "Her 'No Deals for Drug Dealers' campaign helped rally the different constituencies around her."

—Rudolfo Anaya, Albuquerque

Assonance--repetition of similar vowel sounds, preceded and followed by different consonants, in the stressed syllables of adjacent words.

a. "Whales in the wake like capes and Alps! Quaked the sick sea and snouted deep."

—Dylan Thomas "Ballad of the Long Legged Bait"

b. Refresh your zest for living.

—advertisement for French Line ships

Anaphora--repetition of the same word or groups of words at the beginnings of successive clauses. This device produces a strong emotional effect, especially in speech. It also establishes a marked change in rhythm.

a. "We shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the street, we shall fight in the hills."

—Winston Churchill

Speech to the House of Commons, 1940

b. "Why should white people be running all the stores in our community? Why should white people be running the banks of our community? Why should the economy of our community be in the hands of the white man? Why?"

—Malcolm X

Epistrophe--repetition of the same word or groups of words at the ends of successive clauses. Like anaphora, epistrophe produces a strong rhythm and emphasis.

a. "But to all of those who would be tempted by weakness, let us leave no doubt that we will be as strong as we need to be for as long as we need to be."

b. "When you first came we were very many and you were very few. Now you are many and we are getting very few." —Red Cloud

Epanalepsis--repetition at the end of a clause of the word that occurred at the beginning of the clause. Like other schemes of repetition, epanalepsis often produces or expresses strong emotion. Example:

“Blood hath bought blood, and blows have answer’d blows:
Strength match’d with strength, and power confronted power.”

—William Shakespeare, King John

Anadiplosis--repetition of the last word of one clause at the beginning of the following clause.

a. “The crime was common, common be the pain.”

—Alexander Pope, “Eloise to Abelard”

b. “Aboard my ship, excellent performance is standard. Standard performance is sub standard. Sub-standard performance is not permitted to exist.”

—Herman Wouk, The Caine Mutiny

c. “Trees and buildings rose and fell against a pale-blue clouded sky, beech changed to elm, and elm to fir, and fir to stone: a world like lead upon a hot fire, bubbled in to varying shapes now like a flame, now like a leaf of clover.

—Graham Greene, Orient Express

Climax--arrangement of words, phrases or clauses in an order of increasing importance.

a. “More than that, we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit which has been given to us.”

- —St. Paul, Romans

Antimetabote--repetition of words, in successive clauses, in reverse grammatical order.

a. “One should eat to live, not live to eat.”

—Moliere, L’Avare

b. “The Negro needs the white man to free him from his fears. The white man needs the Negro to free him from his guilt.”

—Martin Luther King, 1966

c. “The truth is the light and the light is the truth.”

—Ralph Ellison, Invisible Man

Chiasmus--reversal of grammatical structures in successive phrases or clause. This scheme is also called the “criss-cross.” Chiasmus is similar to **antimetabole** in that it involve a reversal of grammatical structures in successive phrases or clause, but it is unlike antimetabole in that it does not involve a repetition of words. Both chiasmus and antimetabote can be used to reinforce antithesis.

a. “Exalts his enemies, his friends destroys.”

—John Dryden, “Absalom and Achitophel”

b. “His time a moment, and a point his space.”

—Alexander Pope, *Essay on Man*

Polyptoton—repetition of words derived from the same root.

a. “But in this desert country they may see the land being rendered useless by overuse.”

—Joseph Wood Krutch *The Voice of the Desert*

b. “We would like to contain the uncontainable future in a glass.”

—Loren Elseley, quoted in Harper’s

Tropes

Metaphor--implied comparison between two things of unlike nature.

a. “The symbol of all our aspirations, one of the student leaders called her. the fruit of our struggle.” —John Simpson, “Tianamen Square”

b. “A breeze blew though the room, blew curtains in at one end and out the other.. .twisting them up toward the frosted wedding-cake of a ceiling, and then rippled over the wine-colored rug, making a shadow on it....”

—F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*

Simile--explicit comparison between two things of unlike nature.

a. “The night is bleeding like a cut.” —Bono

b. “Ah, my!” said Eustacia, with a laugh which unclosed her lips so that the sun shone into her mouth as into a tulip and lent it a similar scarlet fire.”

—Thomas Hardy, *The Return of the Native*

Synecdoche--figure of speech in which a part stands for the whole.

a. The British Crown has been plagued by scandal.

b. There is no word from the Pentagon on the new rumors from Somalia. Metonymy--substitution of some attributive or suggestive word for what is actually meant.

a. “I have nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears, and sweat.”

—Winston Churchill, 1940

b. “In Europe, we gave the cold shoulder to De Gaulle, and now he gives the warm hand to Mao Tse-tung.”

—Richard Nixon, 1960

Antanaclasis--repetition of a word in two different senses.

a. “Your argument is sound, nothing but sound.”

—Benjamin Franklin

b. “Mr. Stryver, a man of little more than thirty, but looking twenty years older than he was, stout, loud, red, bluff, and free from any drawback of delicacy, had a pushing way of

shouldering himself (morally and physically) into companies and conversations, that argued well for his shouldering his way up in life.”

—Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities*

c. “If we don’t hang together, we’ll hang separately.”

—Benjamin Franklin

Paronomasia--use of words alike in sound but different in meaning. a. “Ask for me tomorrow and you will find me a grave man.”

—William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*

b. “The Bustle: A Deceitful Seatful” —Vladimir Nabokov, *Lolita*

Syllepsis-use of a word understood differently in relation to two or more other words, which it modifies or governs.

a. “There is a certain type of woman who’d rather press grapes than clothes.”

—Advertisement for Peck & Peck

b. “The ink, like our pig, keeps running out of the pen.”

—Student paper

Anthimeria—the substitution of one part of speech for another.

a. “I’ll unhair thy head.” —William Shakespeare, *Antony and Cleopatra*

b. “Me, dictionarying heavily, ‘Where was the one they were watching?’”

—Ernest Hemingway, *The Green Hills of Africa*

Periphrasis (autonomasia)--substitution of a descriptive word or phrase for a proper name or of a proper name for a quality associated with the name. a. “They do not escape Jim Crow; they merely encounter another, not less deadly variety.”

—James Baldwin, *Nobody Knows My Name*

b. ‘in his later years, he became in fact the most scarifying of his own creatures: a Quixote of the Cotswolds...’ —Time, referring to Evelyn Waugh Personification (prosopoeia)--investing abstraction for inanimate objects. a. “The night comes crawling in on all fours.”

—David Lowery

b. “And indeed there will be time! For the yellow smoke that slides along the street! Rubbing its back upon the window panes.”

—T.S. Eliot,

“The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”

Hyperbole--the use of exaggeration terms for the purpose of emphasis or heightened effect.

a. “It rained for four years, eleven months, and two days.”

—Gabriel Garcia Marquez

One Hundred Years of Solitude

b. 'We walked along a road in Cumberland and stooped, because the sky hung so low.' —Thomas Wolfe, Look Homeward, Angel

Litotes--deliberate use of understatement.

a. "Last week I saw a woman flayed, and you will hardly believe how much it altered her appearance for the worse." —Jonathan Swift, A Tale of a Tub

b. "It isn't very serious. I have this tiny little tumor on the brain."

—J.D. Salinger, The Catcher in the Rye

Rhetorical question--asking a question, not for the purpose of eliciting an answer but for the purpose of asserting or denying something obliquely.

a. "Isn't it interesting that this person to whom you set on your knees in your most private sessions at night and you pray, doesn't even look like you?"

—Malcolm X

b. 'Wasn't the cult of James a revealing symbol and symbol of an age and society which wanted to dwell like him in some false world of false art and false culture?'

—Maxwell Geismar, Henry James and His Cufi

c. 'You say there is but one way to worship and serve the Great Spirit. If there is but one religion, why do you white people differ so much about it?'

—Red Jacket, 1805 speech

Irony--use of a word in such a way as to convey a meaning opposite to the literal meaning of the word.

a. "This plan means that one generation pay for another. Now that's just dandy."

—Huey P. Long

b. "By Spring, if God was good, all the proud privileges of trench lice, mustard gas, spattered brains, punctured lungs, ripped guts, asphyxiation, mud, and gangrene might be his."

—Thomas Wolfe, Look Homeward Angel
Onomatopoeia--use of words whose sounds echoes the sense.

a. "Snap, crackle, pop!"

—Commercial

b. "... From the clamor and the clangor of the bells!"

—Edgar Allan Poe, "The Bells"

Oxymoron--the yoking of two terms which are ordinarily contradictory.

a. "The unheard sounds came through, each melodic line existed of itself stood out clearly from all the rest, said its piece, and waiting patiently for the other voices to

speak" —Ralph Ellison, Invisible Man

b. "Still waking sleep, that is not what it is!! This love I feel, that feel no love is this."

—William Shakespeare, Romeo and Juliet

Paradox--an apparently contradictory statement that nevertheless contains a measure of truth.

a. And yet, it was a strangely satisfying experience for an invisible man to hear the silence of sound."

—Ralph Ellison, Invisible Man

b. "Art is a form of lying in order to tell the truth."

—Pablo Picasso