

SYNTAX, SENTENCE STRUCTURE

Syntax, also referred to as *sentence structure* on the AP exams, requires an ability to look at the whole passage to determine how sentences are used. You have been working with *words* and *phrases*, but now you will go a step farther to analyze the way an author uses sentences to deliver his message. Let's compare analysis to your social calendar. (Sounds like a metaphor!) Detail, diction, figurative language, and imagery -- these are like events on your social schedule: separate, individual events. One Friday night or one Saturday night of one weekend -- that is like diction, or detail, or figurative language, or imagery.

Perhaps your parents would like for you to spend more time studying and less time going out. So they ask you to curb your social life some (!!) and plan some time to study. You decide to prove to them that you are not a social butterfly by pulling out your calendar for last month and showing them how seldom you went out. But when you look at your calendar for the last month, you see that you have been out every Friday and Saturday night and have spent many weeknights involved in extra-curricular activities. The whole month shows that you have been extremely busy having fun! And that is the way that you must look at syntax -- the whole passage.

When analyzing syntax, you cannot just look at a word here and a phrase there. You must look at the entire passage, just as you must look at the whole month on your calendar to see what it will tell you. You must look at every sentence in the passage to see how they work together to deliver the author's message to you. Some authors -- not all -- use syntax in creative ways to express themselves, and your job will be to analyze how they do this. So the first and possibly most important point is to STEP BACK AND LOOK AT THE WHOLE PASSAGE in order to have the right perspective.

Something that students may have a problem with is using quotes in an analysis paragraph about syntax. You have learned the importance of quotes to support your analysis of detail, diction, figurative language, and imagery. However, quotes are not necessary with syntax. It's fine if you can work a quote into your analysis, but often that is cumbersome. When analyzing syntax, you need to say what the sentences do rather than quoting from them.

In this unit you will find a *SYNTAX QUICK CHECK* which you will use to identify and to analyze syntax. You will need to use this for a while until you feel confident without it. P.S. Play it smart and don't show your calendar of events to your parents. It might prove their point!

CRITERIA FOR SYNTAX ANALYSIS

I. The first step in analyzing syntax is to look at the *whole passage*, not just individual words or even individual sentences. Syntax analysis is based on what the sentences do and how they work together with other sentences in the passage. Read and highlight all of the passage first, and then reread, looking for any syntax indicators.

II. SYNTAX INDICATORS These indicators are what you will use to analyze syntax.

A. SENTENCE FUNCTION You remember these; they can certainly play a large role in syntax, either alone or in combination. For example, sometimes you may find a *series of questions and answers (interrogative / declarative.)*

1. declarative: makes a statement: *You ate lunch.*
2. interrogative: asks a question: *Did you eat lunch?*
3. imperative: gives a command: *Eat your lunch now.*
4. exclamatory: expresses strong feeling: *Please eat your lunch!*

B. GRAMMATICAL CLASSIFICATION These sentences do not necessarily play a large role in analyzing syntax. However, a combination of the kinds may be significant.

1. simple sentence: one independent clause and no dependent clauses; may contain compound subject, compound verb, and one or more phrases (*John and Mary waved at Sue.*)
2. compound sentence: contains two or more independent clauses and no dependent clauses; independent clauses may be joined by a comma and a coordinating conjunction (and, or, but, for, nor, so, yet)
(*John and Mary waved, but they did not speak.*)
3. complex sentence: contains an independent clause and one or more dependent clauses (*Although John and Mary waved at Sue, they did not speak.*)
4. compound-complex sentence: contains two independent clauses and at least one dependent clauses (*Although John and Mary waved at Sue, they did not speak, and they did not stop.*)

C. SENTENCE LENGTH:

short, long, combination of lengths; lengthy sentence followed by a very short one will effectively stress a point

D. KINDS OF SENTENCES (RHETORICAL SENTENCES):

1. PERIODIC SENTENCE -- a sentence in which the main idea (subject and verb) comes at the end of the sentence; the sentence is not grammatically complete until the end.

EXAMPLE:

Sitting in her lounge chair, sunglasses shielding her eyes, head tilting to the side, her book lying open on her lap, Susan patiently waited.

The main idea in this passage is that Susan (subject) waited (verb).

2. CUMULATIVE SENTENCE -- a sentence which begins with the main idea (an independent clause) which is followed by phrases and clauses which elaborate upon the main idea

EXAMPLE:

Susan patiently waited, sitting in her lounge chair, sunglasses shielding her eyes, head tilting to the side, her book lying open on her lap.

3. RHETORICAL QUESTION -- a question which does not require an answer because the answer is obvious

EXAMPLE:

The Merchant of Venice by William Shakespeare

"I am a Jew. Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions? Fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer, as a Christian is? If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die? And if you wrong us, shall we not revenge?"

III. PUNCTUATION Look for the use of any punctuation other than a period or a comma. In addition to words, an author may use punctuation to indicate something more than words alone express. For example, he/she may want to show mounting excitement, distress, fear, anger or some other emotion through the use of dashes and exclamation points. A question may prove to be a spring-board for the author to make a particular point or a tonal shift. The lack of punctuation may also

be important. Be aware of the use of punctuation -- it sometimes indicates more than one meaning.

EXAMPLE The display of emotion in this passage is made evident by the use of dashes, exclamation marks, and questions. The tempo of the passage also seems to quicken, especially as a result of the dashes.

Wuthering Heights by Emily Bronte

"'May she wake in torment!' he cried, with frightful vehemence, stamping his foot, and groaning in a sudden paroxysm of ungovernable passion. 'Why, she's a liar to the end! Where is she? Not there -- not in heaven -- not perished -- where? Oh! You said you cared nothing for my sufferings! And I pray one prayer -- I repeat it till my tongue stiffens -- Catherine Earnshaw, may you not rest as long as I am living! You said I killed you -- haunt me, then! The murdered do haunt their murderers. I believe -- I know that ghosts have wandered on earth. Be with me always -- take any form-- drive me mad! Only do not leave me in this abyss, where I cannot find you! Oh, God! It is unutterable! I cannot live without my life! I cannot live without my soul!'"

IV. **REPETITION** use of the same words, phrases, or clauses more than one time for emphasis; in poetry, this device is called *anaphora*.

EXAMPLE

(13) "Thou shalt not kill.

(14) Thou shalt not commit adultery.

(15) Thou shalt not steal.

(16) Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor."

From *Exodus 20: 13 - 16*, *King James Bible*

V. **PARALLEL STRUCTURE** Repetition of the same grammatical structure in phrases and clauses; match a noun with a noun, a verb with a verb, etc.

EXAMPLE *A Tale of Two Cities* by Charles Dickens

"It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, I was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair...."

Another type of Parallelism is **ANTITHESIS**, which is used to show contrast.

EXAMPLE: ANTITHESIS

An Essay on Criticism by Alexander Pope

"Be not the first by whom the new are tried,
Nor yet the last to lay the old aside."

VI. RHYTHM, BEAT, OR MOVEMENT Sometimes authors create a kind of tempo through a pattern of sounds throughout the work. This pattern may be a result of parallel structure and / or repetition.

EXAMPLE (PROSE)

Speech to the Virginia Convention by Patrick Henry

"If we wish to be free -- if we meant to preserve inviolate those inestimable privileges for which we have been so long contending -- if we mean not basely to abandon the noble struggle in which we have been so long engaged, and which we have pledged ourselves never to abandon until the glorious object of our contest shall be attained, we must fight! I repeat it, sir, we must fight!"

In this passage, Henry is using parallel structure and repetition, creating a rhythm which builds up to the point he wants to make: "We must fight!" The reader can almost hear him getting louder and speaking faster.

EXAMPLE (POETRY)

The Tide Rises, The Tide Falls by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

"The tide rises, the tide falls,
The twilight darkens, the curlew calls;
Along the sea-sands damp and brown
The traveler hastens toward the town,
And the tide rises, the tide falls."

In this poem one can almost hear and even feel the tide coming in and going out, creating a cadence as the waves rise and fall.

VII. INVERSION This occurs, usually in poetry, when sentence elements are placed out of their normal order.

EXAMPLE

"To him who in the love of nature holds
Communion with her visible forms, she speaks
A various language...."

Thanatopsis by William Cullen Bryant

*Normal order would read: She speaks a various language
To him who in the love of nature holds
Communion with her visible forms.*

VIII. PURPOSE Purpose is important in the analysis of all stylistic devices (detail, diction, figurative language, etc.), but it is especially important in syntax. Your job is to determine *why* the author used a particular sentence structure to deliver his/her message. For example, look at the parallel structure example which is re-written below. Dickens used syntax here to reveal a paradox -- contrasting situations that seem the opposite but are actually true. He repeated the structure using different examples, all of which appear to be contradictory but are accurate. Why did he do this? This passage comes from the very first page of the novel, the passage that sets the tone for much of the book. It draws the reader into the story because it piques the interest of the reader; it makes the reader curious.

EXAMPLE

A Tale of Two Cities by Charles Dickens

"It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, I was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair...."

Look below at the example from repetition, the first few commandments of the Ten Commandments. Why are the beginnings of all of them the same: "Thou shalt not...." The repetition adds emphasis or strength to them. It "commands" the reader's attention.

EXAMPLE

- (13) "Thou shalt not kill.
- (14) Thou shalt not commit adultery.
- (15) Thou shalt not steal.
- (16) Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor."

From *Exodus 20: 13 - 16, King James Bible*