

CRITERIA FOR SYNTAX ANALYSIS

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 the complete passage first, and then reread, looking for any noteworthy uses of the following elements of syntax.

I. SENTENCES

A. SENTENCE FUNCTION

The use of sentences with these functions, either alone or in combination, plays an important role in syntax. 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.*)
4. exclamatory: expresses strong feeling (*I can't believe you ate my lunch!*)

B. GRAMMATICAL CLASSIFICATION

Sentence classification does not necessarily play a large role in analyzing syntax; however, a combination of the different types 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

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

D. 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:

From *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?

II. 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 or 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 springboard 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.

From *Wuthering Heights* by Emily Brontë

“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 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!”

III. REPETITION

Use of the same words, phrases, or clauses more than one time for emphasis; when the same word starts each phrase or clause, this device is called *anaphora*.

EXAMPLE:

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

(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.

IV. 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:

From John F. Kennedy’s Inaugural Address

Let both sides seek to invoke the wonders of science instead of its terrors. Together let us explore the stars, conquer the deserts, eradicate disease, tap the ocean depths, and encourage the arts and commerce.

Another type of parallelism is *antithesis*, which is used to show contrast.

EXAMPLE:

From *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.

V. RHYTHM 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):

From *Speech before the Virginia Convention* by Patrick Henry

If we wish to be free—if we mean 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):

From “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.

VI. INVERSION

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

EXAMPLE:

From “Thanatopsis” by William Cullen Bryant

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

Normal order would read:

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

VII. EFFECT

Effect is important in the analysis of all stylistic devices (detail, diction, figurative language, etc.), including syntax. Your job is to determine *why* the author used a particular sentence structure to deliver his or her message. For example, look at the antithesis example which is re-written below. Dickens uses syntax here to reveal a paradox—contrasting situations that seem to be in opposition but are actually true. He repeats the structure using different examples, all of which

appear to be contradictory but are accurate. Why does 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 his or her interest.

EXAMPLE:

From *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, it 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.

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

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