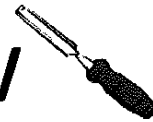




Syntax Overview



Syntax is the way an author designs sentences to have an effect on the reader or listener. In other words, *a writer or speaker can manipulate through grammar*. The author can slow you down, speed you up, or even force you to pay attention to a particular word (diction!) by placing it strategically in a sentence.

Look at the difference between these passages:

"I closed my eyes so I couldn't see the darkness, scrunching them together in terror, clamping my mouth shut so I wouldn't scream. Edward let me fall. It was silent and short. The air whipped past me for just half a second, and then, with a huff as I exhaled, Alice's waiting arms caught me."

Meyer, Stephanie. *New Moon*. New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2006.

"Beyond the fire were two mattresses made of deerskin and stuffed, presumably, with reeds; and neatly rolled on top of each was a wolf fur. Ellen and Jack would sleep there, with the fire between them and the mouth of the cave. At the back of the cave was a formidable collection of weapons and wicked daggers, a carefully made wooden lance with its tip sharpened and fire-hardened; and, among all those primitive implements, three books."

Follett, Ken. *Pillars of the Earth*. New York: Penguin Books, 1989.

Pace

You may have noticed that the first passage contains shorter sentences than the second and that the second passage has more description than the first. That's because short sentences speed up a reader and are often used to describe action. Longer sentences slow a reader down and provide a medium for physical description, often of settings that are vital to the purpose of the passage. *Remember that all devices you discuss must point back to author's purpose.*

Emphasis

Short sentences put the brakes on a reader and make him or her pay attention. The sentence "Edward let me fall" would have much less effect if it were long and involved rather than short and loose. The placement of "three books" at the end of the sentence in the second passage is meant for emphasis: *Three books? Isn't this a cave, after all? Why are there books in a cave?*

Basic Syntax

ELEMENTS

There are two categories of syntax elements, the basics and advanced techniques. You will see references to these devices on the multiple choice section of the AP Exam, and you may write about these devices on the style analysis question on the essay section of the Exam.

BASICS

Clauses: main (independent) and dependent (subordinate)

A clause is a group of words with a subject and a verb. An **independent clause (main clause)** has at least one subject and at least one verb and can stand on its own. A **dependent clause** has the same elements but cannot stand on its own. In the following example, the independent clause is bold faced; the dependent clause is in italics.

Example: *When I was a small child,* **I knew no fear.**

Sentence Types: The four sentence types, simple, compound, complex, and compound-complex; are important in part because of their role in creating sentence variety.

- A **simple sentence** has one independent clause.
Example: Katelyn and Damarius are partners on this project.
- A **compound sentence** has two or more independent clauses.
Example: Katelyn and Damarius are partners on this project, but each of them wants to be partners with someone else.
***The independent clauses in compound sentences are separated by a coordinating conjunction (For, And, Nor, But, Or, Yet, So—FANBOYS) or a semicolon (;).
- A **complex sentence** has one independent clause and one or more dependent clauses.
Example: Because Katelyn was absent on Tuesday, she was unable to choose her partner.
- A **compound-complex sentence** has at least two independent clauses and at least one dependent clause.
Example: Because Katelyn and Damarius were absent on Tuesday, they were unable to choose their partners, so the teacher put them together.

Sentence Purposes

- **Declarative** I am a vegan.
- **Imperative** Eat your vegetables.
- **Exclamatory** That leather couch is made from dead cows!
- **Interrogative** Do you have any soy milk for my coffee?

Basic Syntax (page 2)

Sentence Length

A **telegraphic sentence** is shorter than five words in length.

A **short sentence** is five to eight words in length.

A **medium sentence** is approximately eighteen words in length.

A **long and involved sentence** is more than 30 words in length.

***Keep in mind that short sentences (and length is relative!) tend to be emotional, and long sentences tend to be descriptive with polysyllabic diction.

Placement of Sentence Parts

- In a **loose sentence**, the subject and verb come at the beginning of the sentence. Loose sentences can be rhythmic and descriptive.

Example: I balance work, home, and church life with no small amount of resentment.

- In a **periodic sentence**, the subject and verb come at the end of the sentence. Periodic sentences tend to be dramatic.

Example: At the dawn of time before light or dark, solid or liquid, he spoke.

- In a **balanced sentence**, the phrases or clauses balance each other by virtue of their similarity in length, structure, or meaning.

Example: He maketh me to lie down in green pastures; he leadeth me beside still waters.

- In a **split order sentence**, the subject is in the middle of the predicate, which is split into two parts.

Example: In Arizona undocumented workers are in constant fear of deportation.

- In a **natural order sentence**, the subject comes before the verb and may be followed by modifiers.

Example: The woman chewed her fingernails.

- In an **inverted order sentence**, the typical subject-verb-modifier order is switched for effect.

Example: Her fingernails the woman chewed.

- In an **interrupted sentence**, dashes set off non-essential information.

Example: Shawn's first challenge—and there were many—was to confess his crime to his mother.