Introduction to Rhetorical Analysis

I. Language of Analysis – Use these terms in your analytical writing and speaking (instead of “says” or “states”)

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II. Transitional Words / Phrases

To list – first, second, third, last
To indicate time sequence – before, previously, now, later, meanwhile, then, afterward
To establish a spatial relationship – below, above, along, beside, beneath, behind, in front
To amplify – that is, in fact, in other words
To establish a logical relationship – therefore, consequently, thus, as a result, for, in order to
To add information – and, also, too, in addition, furthermore, moreover
To compare – similarly, likewise
To contrast – but, however, on the other hand, conversely, nevertheless

III. Analyzing Syntactical Choices


Four Basic Questions:
1. What is the order of the basic elements in the sentence – subject, verb, complement? Is it regular or inverted?
2. Is the meaning of the sentence concentrated mainly in its verbs (verbal) or in its nouns (nominal)?
3. What is the architecture of the sentence? Does meaning build periodically (periodic sentence) or cumulatively (loose sentence)?
4. How are connections made? How do words, phrases, clauses, sentences link up grammatically and / or rhetorically?

Use the answers above to analyze how the writer’s choices contribute to the meaning and effect of the text.

A. Question 1: Order

English sentences tend to move from subject to verb to complement, in that order: S-V-C. “The sea is deep and dark.” If you invert that and write “Deep and dark is the sea” (C-V-S), something a little unusual is felt to be happening, a change in mood perhaps, and in tone, even in genre: the inverted sentence feels not only more somber and more formal, but more poetic.

[Inversion in other instances might create an archaic air, a colloquial texture, an aphoristic impression, and even a mysterious or uncertain feeling.]

B. Question 2: Nominal or Verbal

In nominal (i.e. noun-centered) style, the verbs—grammatically indispensable though they are—pale into the background by being kept at a minimum, with relatively colorless, weak, or general meanings; the message of the sentence clusters into its nouns and noun phrases (subject phrases, complement phrases, prepositional phrases), gliding over the verbs as if they were so much filler glue.
Still, although species may be discrete, they have no immutable essence. Variation is the raw material of evolutionary change. It represents the fundamental reality of nature, not an accident about a created norm. Variation is primary; essences are illusory. Species must be defined as ranges of irreducible variation.  

Stephen Jay Gould — “Of Wasps and WASPs”

The working verbs here are primarily forms of the verb “to be”: “may be,” “is,” “are,” “must be”; add to those the bland verbs “have,” “represents,” and the passive “must be defined.” The meaning of the passage, in its fine exactitude, is concentrated not in its verbs but in its nouns and their related adjectives: “species . . . discrete,” “immutable essence,” “variation,” “raw material,” “evolutionary change,” etc.

A dominantly verbal style, on the other hand, exploits the concreteness and specificity of verbs to create a vigorous and/or evocative prose that dispenses with all but structurally essential nouns; action and movement tend to subdue, even overwhelm, agency and condition.

The cod attack in mid-depth. The gulls smother the surface and press the capelin back among the submarine hunters. The murrels and puffins fly underwater, their beating wings, turning them rapidly back and forth. They meet the cod, flail wings in desperate haste, are caught, crushed, and swallowed. Now seabirds tangle wings. Silver walls of capelin flicker, part, reform. Some seabirds surface abruptly, broken wings dangling. Others with leg or legs torn off, fly frantically, crash, skitter in shock across the water.  

Frank Russell — “A Madness of Nature”

In this passage verbs and their participial forms graphically render the underwater killing melee, thickening into twos and threes around nouns: in this bloody havoc, identity ceases to matter along with agency; there is only killing and being killed.

C. Question 3: Architecture - Periodic and Loose (Cumulative) Sentences

One of the most resonant and riveting arguments in King’s “Letter from Birmingham Jail” begins: “We have waited for more than 340 years for our constitutional and God-given rights.” It’s easy, King points out, “for those who have never felt the stinging dart of segregation to say ‘Wait.’” Then comes this famous passage—a single sentence:

But when you have seen vicious mobs lynch your mothers and fathers at will and drown your sisters and brothers at whim; when you have seen hate-filled policemen curse, kick, and even kill your black brothers and sisters; when you see the vast majority of your twenty-million Negro brothers smothering in an airtight cage of poverty in the midst of an affluent society; when you suddenly find your tongue twisted and your speech stammering as you seek to explain to your six-year-old daughter why she can’t go to the public amusement park that has just been advertised on television, and see tears welling up in her eyes when she is told that Funtown is closed to colored children, and see ominous clouds of inferiority beginning to form in her little mental sky, and see her beginning to distort her personality by developing an unconscious bitterness toward white people; when you have to concoct an answer for a five-year-old son who is asking, “Daddy, why do white people treat colored people so mean?”; when you take a cross-country drive and find it necessary to sleep night after night in the uncomfortable corners of your automobile because no motel will accept you; when you are humiliated day in and day out by nagging signs reading “white” and “colored”; when your first name becomes “nigger,” your middle name becomes “boy,” (however old you are) and your last name becomes “John,” and your wife and mother are never given the respected title “Mrs.”; when you are harried by day and haunted by night by the fact that you are a Negro, living constantly at tiptoe stance, never quite knowing what to expect next, and are plagued with inner fears and outer resentments; when you are forever fighting a degenerating sense of “nobodiness” — then you will understand why we find it difficult to wait.
[This] sentence, if you read it aloud, will take your breath away—literally. Trying to get through it all in a single breath won’t work; take a new breath at each of those long, internally complicated “when . . .” clauses, and you find yourself unable to pump it all back out because of the powerful sense of being mid-stream, not yet finished—not finished, in fact, ‘till you get to “then you will understand . . .” That, of course, is the main clause one waits throughout those ten consecutive subordinate clauses leading up to it. It’s only with the main clause that the sense is complete and the sentence ends. This kind of suspension of meaning across the unfolding syntax creates a sentence design known as periodic . . . Its sustained suspension, the long-delayed completing clause, has the effect of evoking in the very pace and patterning of language the realities of experience King is attempting to portray: how very long the wait for racial justice has been, how slow is the passage of 340 years.

And here, utterly different in subject, feeling, purpose, and impact, is another very long sentence (also a single sentence from the standpoint of grammar—the exclamation mark near the beginning is purely expressive):

I can see her now! And beyond her, a jumbled shifting picture of the huge casino floor, the pools of its lights on the green felt of the gambling-tables, the gesticulating beefy figures throwing crap, the ladderman high on his chair above the baccarat players, the ceaseless movement of the dealers’ hands, the slow watchful patrol of the floorwalkers and pitbosses, the long, long, line of holiday-makers being ushered by security men, guns at the hips, toward their evening with Mr. Englebert Humperdink in the Celebrity Room (itself sealed like a lush bordello) beside the cashiers’ cage—and all around, dimly glowing, the crowded ranks of the fruit machines, clanking, winking, sometimes attended by dim crouched figures holding paper cups, and now and then erupting into a shrill ringing of bells, a clatter of jackpot coins and raucous shrieks of triumph.  

Jan Morris—“Fun City”

With the word “floor” ends a perfectly satisfactory sentence—short (and cut into by the exclamation mark) but grammatically complete: “I” = subject; “can see” = verb; “her . . . And . . . a jumbled picture” = direct object complement. All that follows (“the pools of its lights . . . the gesticulating beefy figures . . . the ladderman . . . “ etc., etc.) is pure elaboration; this long string reopens the sentence by building detail upon detail to amplify its complement. Rather than delaying completion of the sentence, this one achieves grammatical completeness at the start, then lets details accumulate afterwards (theoretically ad infinitum), after the basic sentence has already closed. This kind of sentence is known as cumulative, also called running or loose. It tends to create the illusion—only an illusion—of utter spontaneity, as though the mind were spinning itself out naturally, portraying itself in the very process of thinking.

Periodic Sentences: oratorical, premeditated, builds tension, dramatic

Loose (Cumulative): spontaneous, off-the-cuff, writer in the process of thinking

D. Question 4: Making Connections - Polysyndeton, Asyndeton, Subordination, Parallelism

1. Polysyndeton/Asyndeton — Coordination and the Lack of Coordination

Here are two brief quotations from W. E. B. DuBois’s “On Being Black,” an essay of subtle stylistic artistry:

I arise at seven. The milkman has neglected me. He pays little attention to the colored districts. My white neighbor glares elaborately.
You are apt to have the company of a sheriff and a couple of meek or sullen black prisoners on part of your way, and dirty colored section hands will pour in toward night and drive you to the smallest corner.

The two passages not only look different on the page, they have a very different momentum when you read them; they engage the mind in distinct ways. The first passage is made up of four very short, grammatically simple sentences set end to end; the spaces between them are indeterminate, as are the logical relationships that underlie the sequence. The unexpressed link between the first and second sentence is surely temporal: “When (or “whenever”) I arise at seven (I discover that) the milkman has neglected me.” The third sentence appears to make an inference from the second—or is it the other way around? And what is the link between the neighbor’s glare and the milkman’s neglect? Is the former the result of the latter, or is it, in some intricate sociopolitical way, the cause of the latter? It is only by attending to the essay as a whole that the reader can begin to construe and interpret these unexpressed relationships; the power of this prose lies in recording with such apparent simplicity what is by no means simple—what is, for this essayist, the central riddle of his social existence.

Now for the second passage: it is, most obviously, a single sentence compounded of two clauses (“You . . . your ways” + “dirty . . . corner”) each of which, in turn, contains two smaller compounded elements; these compounds, at both the clausal and the phrasal level, are created by the conjunction “and.” One moves through this sentence with great ease—no spaces, no pauses (except for the brief syntactical one at the medial comma). The idea is to say what it’s like to travel in a Jim Crow car, and the sentence gets through it all in one smooth step. One may be as hard put to diminish logical relationships among the parts as in the first passage, but this sentence doesn’t invite that kind of scrutiny; it averts it by a unity of effect, of things adding up and falling into place with terrible coherence.

The first passage suppresses connections by omitting conjunctions; this is known as asyndeton (from the Greek, “not bound together”). The second passage emphasizes connections by repeating the coordinating conjunction “and”; this is polysyndeton (“many/much + “bound together”). Other coordinating conjunctions that can create similar effects are so, or, nor, for, but, yet.

In a general sense polysyndetic writing is artful coherence, asyndetic writing a mode of artful incoherence. To understand how each might be working in a given essay, one needs, of course, to consider the whole discourse—its subject, voice, form, purpose, stylistic shifts and range. . . . A characteristic feature of polysyndeton—connection by coordinating conjunctions—is the leveling of the sentence’s structural hierarchies. . . . The mere fact of connection takes over as the ranking of sentence elements collapses; the longer it gets, the more the sentence seems merely to be running on and on.

2. Hypotaxis—Subordination

Coordinating conjunctions are not the only means of grammatical connection; there are the subordinating conjunctions (if, when, although, because, while, as, so, that, etc.) and the relatives pronouns (that, which, who, whom, by which, etc.). These grammatical links clarify hierarchical patterns in complex sentences to show exactly how elements are ranked in relation to each other. Where this means of connection predominates, the result is hypotaxis (from the Greek, “to arrange under”). Try these two excerpts from Baldwin’s “Equal in Paris,” the first one a single sentence, the second a shorter sentence followed by a very long one:

As in movies I have seen, I was placed against the wall, facing an old-fashioned camera, behind which stood one of the most completely cruel and indifferent faces I have ever seen, while someone next to me and, therefore, just outside my line of vision, read off in a voice from which all human feeling, even feeling of the most base description, had long since fled, what must be called my public characteristics—which, at that time and in that place, seemed anything but that.
I knew very well what Americans saw when they looked at me and this allowed me to play endless and sinister variations on the role which they had assigned me; since I knew that it was, for them, of the utmost importance that they never be confronted with what, in their own personalities, made this role so necessary and gratifying to them, I knew what I was doing; so that I moved into every crucial situation with the deadly and rather desperate advantages of bitterly accumulated perception, of pride and contempt.

Both passages bristle with relative pronouns and subordinating conjunctions (in italics). It is these logical links that enable Baldwin to render so precise a dramatic situation in the first sentence, so exact and finely analyzed an interior reality in the second passage. Hypotaxis, because it builds logical relationships among sentence elements rather than merely linking them serially, is able to articulate ideas with great conciseness and clarity—but only if the reader pays close attention. It’s in that sense that hypotactic styles are demanding: your wits must be fully engaged in the syntax; it will not let you daydream between clauses or encourage you to glide along a smooth path of “ands.” But a good stretch of hypotaxis leaves very little unsaid: there are no spaces to get lost in, no gaps to construe, no loose joints to wonder about.

3. **Parallelism – Balance, Chiasmus, Balance**

Any syntactic entity can participate in a parallel series: a sentence, a dependent clause, a subject phrase, a verb phrase, a complement phrase, a phrasal modifier, a single word.

Here, from Bacon’s “Of Studies,” is a series of three short sentences bound by parallelism:

To spend too much time in studies is sloth; to use them too much for ornament is affectation; to make judgment wholly by their rules is the humour of a scholar.

Bacon’s analysis of how studies may be misused—and by implication, how they may be rightly used—is clear and coherent despite the lack of grammatical connections. [Bacon’s sentence also illustrates anaphora, emphatic parallelism by initial repetition. This is a favorite device of rhetorical connection. However, parallelism can be observed in many variations:

Speak as you think, be what you are, pay your debts of all kinds. Emerson—“Illusions”

Malaria was endemic, typhus never absent, bubonic plague a regular visitor, dysentery, without benefit of plumbing, a commonplace. Huxley—“Hyperion to a Satyr”

The Ordinary lets us live out our humanity; it doesn’t scare us; it doesn’t excite us; it doesn’t distract us—it brings us the safe return of the school bus every day, it lets us eat one meal after another, put one foot in front of the other. Ozick—“The Riddle of the Ordinary”

**Balance**

A special case of parallelism with unusually strong connective force is **balance**: the paring of syntactic elements whose similar form expresses similar or associated ideas, as in the following:

Their characteristics are respectable; their motives, I am willing to believe, were laudable. Macaulay—“On the Royal Society of Literature”

The gaiety and frolic of a bottle companion improves with him into a solid friendship: and the ardor of a youthful appetite becomes an elegant passion. Hume—“Of the Delicacy of Taste and Passion”

Macaulay sets two clauses side by side without grammatical connection. The first subject balances the structurally identical and semantically associated second subject; the verb “are” is balanced with the verb “were”; the parenthetic clause, “I am willing to believe,” in the second member creates a pleasing
asymmetry. In the more subtle Hume excerpt, two grammatically compounded clauses achieve an easy forward movement of thought along two balanced parts.

**Chiasmus**

A skillful variation of balance is *chiasmus: the inverted or crossed parallel*. Here are two straightforward examples (members of the chiasmus are in italics):

In the poetical quarter, I found there were *poets who had no monuments and monuments which had no poets.*

Addison—*Spectator No. 26*

But this act of comparison means that our attitude has changed; we are no longer the friends of the writer, but his judges; and just as *we cannot be too sympathetic as friends, so as judges we cannot be too severe.*

Woolf—“How Should One Read a Book”

But even if the *church does not come to the aid of justice, I have no despair about the future. I have no fear about the outcome of our struggle in Birmingham, even if our motives are at present misunderstood.*

King—“Letter from Birmingham Jail”

**Balance with Antithesis**

Perhaps the most elegant variant of parallelism is *balance with antithesis: similarity (even identity) of syntactic form with difference (even opposition) of meaning.*

Alas, art is long, and life is short. Franklin—“The Ephemera”

The truth of it is, that a man in much business must either make himself a knave, or else the world will make him a fool . . .” Cowley—“The Dangers of an Honest Man in Much Company”

For instance, when mistaking certain things called gravity, canting, blustering, ostentation, pomp, and the like for wisdom, piety, magnanimity, charity, true greatness, etc., we give to the former the honour and reverence due to the latter.

Fielding—“An Essay on Nothing”

An unjust law is a code that a numerical or power majority group compels a minority group to obey but does not make binding on itself. This is difference made legal. By the same token, a just law is a code that a majority compels a minority to follow and then it is willing to follow itself. This is sameness made legal.

King—“Letter from Birmingham Jail”

[The economy of balance with antithesis creates a powerful bond between idea and syntax, so powerful that it creates a feeling of palpable logic.]

**IV. Language of Syntax** — These terms describe particular syntactical choices. As with any terminology, naming the strategy is only half of the task. You must analyze *how* the writer’s choice to use the strategy contributes to the *meaning and effect* of the text.

- anastrophe
- asyndeton
- ellipsis
- loose (cumulative) sentence
- periodic sentence
- polysyndeton
- repetition
- rhetorical fragment
- rhetorical question
- stichomythia

**Types of Parallelism:**

- anaphora
- antimetabole
- antithesis
- balance
- chiasmus
- epistrophe
- polysyndeton
- symplece