

Syntax

AP English Language and Composition

What is syntax?

SYNTAX

The term *syntax* refers not only to the structure of sentences, their types, their uses, their connection, and the variations authors choose, but also to smaller structures *within* sentences. Phrases (any group of words) and clauses (groups of words that contain a subject and a verb) are also syntactic elements that require a reader's attention.

Syntax affects the pace of a piece.

- Short, clipped phrases, sentences and clauses tend to create a feeling of quickness, decisiveness, and speed to a piece. It is important to be aware of the content of a piece and look for connections to syntax. Pay attention to how pacing relates to the action and purpose of a particular piece.
- Long, convoluted sentences, especially with subordinate clauses at the beginning tend to slow the pace of a piece. Often they are connected to a contemplative section, a heavy or serious subject and the writer wants to emphasize it. Sometimes, however, they are placed in a piece for the purpose of demonstrating the ramblings of a character, the ludicrousness of an idea, or the ridiculousness of a situation. Watch for occasional satire or irony in these long sentences.

Key Questions:

- How does syntax contribute to and enhance the meaning and effect of language?
 - How does syntax contribute to tone?
1. "Syntax" refers to the ways words and phrases are arranged to form sentences. The reader must identify an author's syntax and discuss the relationship it has to the content of the passage. Authors may use:
 - a. specific patterns of phrases and sentences
 - b. divisions within a piece with different syntax for each
 - c. parallel structure
 - d. different sentence types
 - e. specific kinds of punctuation
 - f. other syntax techniques
 2. To begin studying syntax, follow the following steps:
 - a. Number the sentences in the passage. This will help analyze each sentence and discuss it efficiently.
 - b. Make observations about the content and syntax of each sentence or group of sentences. Look for elements listed above or others observed.
 - i. Does the sentence length fit the subject matter?
 - ii. Why is the sentence length effective?
 - iii. What variety of sentence lengths is present?
 - iv. Sentence beginnings – Variety or Pattern?
 - v. Arrangement of ideas in sentences
 - vi. Arrangement of ideas in paragraph – Pattern?
 - c. Write down what is observed. These observations will be the paper's examples.

Syntax-analysis Chart

Complete this chart for the BEST BODY paragraph. Then, on the back of the chart, draw conclusions about your writing (200 word minimum) using specific examples to support your analysis.

	First 4 words	Verbs (write all verbs)	Special Features: imagery, periodic sentence, figurative language, etc.)	Transitions	# of words
1.					
2.					
3.					
4.					
5.					
6.					
7.					
8.					
9.					

Sentence Structure

- Examine sentence beginnings. Is there a good variety or does a pattern emerge?
- Examine the arrangement of ideas in a sentence. Are they set out in a special way for a purpose?
- Examine sentence patterns.

Describe the sentence structure by considering the following:

1. Examine the sentence length. Are the sentences *telegraphic* (shorter than 5 words in length), *short* (approximately 5 words in length), *medium* (approximately 18 words in length), or *long and involved* (30 or more words in length)? Does the sentence length fit the subject matter? What variety of lengths is present? Why is the sentence length effective?

Sentence lengths	
telegraphic	shorter than 5 words in length
short	approximately 5 words in length
medium	approximately 18 words in length
long	long and involved – 30 words or more length

2. Examine sentence beginnings. Is there a good variety or does a pattern emerge?
3. Examine the arrangement of ideas in a sentence. Are they set out in a special way for a purpose?
4. Examine the arrangement of ideas in a paragraph. Is there evidence of any pattern or structure?
 - the beginning and ending of the passage
 - a particular sequence that is important
 - a noticeable chronology
 - prominent literary techniques
 - a focus or emphasis on any one part that makes it stand out
5. Examine the sentence patterns. Some elements to consider are listed below:

Types of sentences			
declarative	The king is sick.	makes a statement	assertive
imperative	Cure the king!	gives a command	authoritative
interrogative	Is the king sick?	asks a question	questioning
exclamatory	The king is dead; long live the king!	makes an exclamation	emotional

Sentence Structures	
simple sentence	contains one subject and one verb has only one main, complete thought <i>The singer bowed to her adoring audience.</i>
compound sentence	contains two independent clauses joined by a coordinate conjunction (and, but, or) or by a semicolon has two or more main, complete thoughts. Two or more simple sentences are joined, usually with <i>or, but, or and.</i> <i>The singer bowed to the audience, but she sang no encores.</i>
complex sentence	has one simple sentence and one or more clauses. These clauses are connected to the simple sentence with words like <i>because, while, when, if, as, although, since, unless, after, so, which, who, and that.</i> contains an independent clause and one or more subordinate clauses <i>After she bowed to the audience, the singer sang an encore.</i>
compound-complex sentence	a combination of the above contains two or more principal clauses and one or more subordinate clauses <i>The singer bowed while the audience applauded, but she sang no encores.</i>

Loose sentence	makes complete sense if brought to a close before the actual ending We reached Edmonton/that morning/after a turbulent flight/and some exciting experiences.
Periodic sentence	makes sense only when the end of the sentence is reached That morning, after a turbulent flight and some exciting experiences, we reached Edmonton.
Balanced sentence	the phrases and clauses balance each other by virtue of their likeness of structure, meaning, or length He maketh me to lie down in green pastures; he leadeth me beside the still waters

The Cumulative or Loose Sentence

A cumulative or loose sentence is a type of parallel sentence which builds through parallel constructions (dependent phrases or clauses) *after* a main clause. Remember: in the cumulative sentence, the main clause (with the subject and verb) comes first.

Formula: Main clause + Parallel Dependent phrases or clauses

A *loose* or *cumulative sentence* is one in which the main idea (independent clause) comes first, followed by dependent clauses and phrases; therefore, a loose sentence makes complete sense if brought to a close before the actual ending: e.g., “We reached Edmonton that morning after a turbulent flight and some exciting experiences, tired but still exhilarated, full of stories to tell our friends and neighbors.” The sentence *could* end before the modifying phrase without losing its coherence. Loose sentences are the most natural for English speakers, who almost always talk in loose sentences: even the most sophisticated English writers tend to use loose sentences much more often than periodic sentences.

The brilliant assembly filed past us, the marshals with their batons and ceremonial red hats, the professors draped in their doctoral hoods, the graduates in somber black that contrasted with their jubilant mood.

Nothing could deflect that wall of water, sweeping away trees and boulders, engulfing streets and villages, churning and roaring like a creature in pain.

Then I saw that the child had died, never more to enjoy getting into trouble with his friends, never again to tell innocent lies to his parents, never to look with hopeful shyness at a girl he desires.

Cumulative sentences add parallel elements at the end. These sentences are especially effective for description, even if they use only a single detail at the end.

The student sat quietly, trembling at the thought of writing an essay. [using a single detail]

The hounds continued to bray—uncontrollably, maddeningly, horribly. [using multiple details]

Famous Cumulative Sentence

George was coming down in the telemark position, kneeling, one leg forward and bent, the other trailing, his sticks hanging like some insect's thin legs, kicking up puffs of snow, and finally the whole kneeling, trailing figure coming around in a beautiful right curve, crouching, the legs shot forward and back, the body leaning out against the swing, the sticks accenting the curve like points of light all in a cloud of snow.

[An example of a complex cumulative sentence from Hemingway's *In Our Time* --quoted in Miles, Bertolaso and Karns, *Prose Style: A contemporary Guide* (1991)]

The Periodic Sentence

A periodic sentence is a type of parallel sentence which builds through three or more parallel constructions (dependent phrases or clauses) to a main clause.

Remember: in the periodic sentence, the main clause (with the subject and verb) comes last.

Formula= Parallel Dependent Clauses and Phrases + Main Clause

A *periodic sentence* (also called a *period*) is a sentence that is not grammatically complete until its end. Periodicity is accomplished by the use of parallel phrases or clauses at the opening or by the use of dependent clauses preceding the independent clause; that is, the kernel of thought contained in the subject/verb group appears at the end of a succession of modifiers: e.g., "That morning, after a turbulent flight and some exciting experiences, we finally reached Edmonton." The periodic sentence has become much rarer in formal English writing over the past hundred years, and it has never been common in informal spoken English (outside of bad political speeches). My own biased opinion is that this is a result of our fast-food approach to contemporary life and all aspects of culture, including both non-fiction and literature. In fact, I think this is regrettable, because periodicity is a powerful rhetorical tool. An occasional periodic sentence is not only dramatic but persuasive: even if the readers do not agree with your conclusion, they will read your evidence first with open minds. If you use a loose sentence with hostile readers, the readers will probably close their minds before considering any of your evidence. Therefore, when it is used to arouse interest and curiosity, and to hold an idea in suspense before its final revelation, a periodic sentence is most effective.

But if life hardly seems worth living, if liberty is used for subhuman purposes, if the pursuers of happiness know nothing about the nature of their quarry or the elementary techniques of hunting, these constitutional rights will not be very meaningful. (E. Warren)

As long as politicians talk about withdrawal while they attack, as long as the government invades privacy while it discusses human rights, as long as we act in fear while speak of courage, there can be no security, there can be no peace. If students are absorbed in their own limited worlds, if they are disdainful of the work of their teachers, if they are scornful of the lessons of the past, then the great cultural heritage which must be transmitted from generation to generation will be lost.

The Balanced Sentence

A balanced sentence is a type of parallel sentence in which two parallel elements are set off against each other like equal weights on a scale. In reading the sentence aloud, one tends to pause between the balanced parts, each seeming equal. When writing a balanced sentence, be certain that both parts of the sentence have the clear parallels of **form**, that they appear **parallel grammatically**.

In a *balanced sentence*, the phrases or clauses balance each other by virtue of their likeness of structure, meaning, or length: e.g., “He maketh me lie down in green pastures; he leadeth me beside still waters.”

George Bernard Shaw said of writers: The ambition of the novice is to acquire the Literary Language; the struggle of the adept is to get rid of it. [Each part of the sentence follows the same pattern: subject, verb, infinitive phrase.]

Content of a Balanced Sentence

Balanced sentences are particularly effective if you have an idea that has a contrast or antithesis. Balanced sentences can emphasize the contrast so that the rhetorical pattern reflects and supports the logical pattern.

No man has ever seen anything that Burne-Jones cannot paint, but many men have painted what Burne-Jones cannot see.

(Shaw)

And so my fellow Americans—ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country.

(Kennedy)

If a free society cannot help the many who are poor, it cannot save the few who are rich.

(Kennedy)

It is not that today’s artists cannot paint, it is that today’s critics cannot see.

(Rothko)

Some of the above examples illustrate not only balanced sentences but also a device called “antimetabole,” in which the order of words is reversed in one of the parallel structures to produce a clever effect. The following are examples of antimetabole:

When the **going** gets *tough*, the *tough* get **going**.

You can take the **gorilla** out of the *jungle*, but you can't take the *jungle* out of the **gorilla**.

The Balanced Paragraph

One can also develop an entire paragraph by balance. This is particularly useful if you are developing a series of contrasts.

I felt myself in rebellion against the Greek concept of justice. That concept excused Laius of attacking Oedipus, but condemned Oedipus for defending himself. It tolerated a king’s deliberate attempt to kill his baby son by piercing the infant’s feet and abandoning it on a mountain, but later branded the son’s unintentional killing of his father as murder. It held Oedipus responsible for his ignorance, but excused those who contributed to that ignorance. (Krutch)

Natural order of a sentence	involves constructing a sentence so the subject comes before the predicate Oranges grow in California.
Inverted order of a sentence (sentence inversion)	involves constructing a sentence so the predicate comes before the subject (this is a device in which normal sentence patterns are reversed to create an emphatic or rhythmic effect) In California grow oranges.
Split order of a sentence	divides the predicate into two parts with the subject coming in the middle In California oranges grow.

Juxtaposition	a poetic and rhetorical device in which normally unassociated ideas, words, or phrases are placed next to one another, creating an effect of surprise and wit The apparition of these faces in the crowd; /Petals on a wet, black bough.
Parallel structure (parallelism)	refers to a grammatical or structural similarity between sentences or parts of a sentence; it involves an arrangement of words, phrases, sentences, and paragraphs so that elements of equal importance are equally developed and similarly phrased He was walking, running and jumping for joy.
Repetition	a device in which words, sounds, and ideas are used more than once to enhance rhythm and create emphasis “...government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth”
Rhetorical question	a question that expects no answer; it is used to draw attention to a point and is generally stronger than a direct statement If Mr. Ferchoff is always fair, as you have said, why did he refuse to listen to Mrs. Baldwin’s arguments?
Rhetorical fragment	a sentence fragment used deliberately for a persuasive purpose or to create a desired effect Something to consider.
Anaphora	the repetition of the same word or group of words at the beginning of successive clauses “We shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing-grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills.”
Asyndeton	a deliberate omission of conjunctions in a series of related clauses “I came, I saw, I conquered.”
Chiasmus/ Antimetabole	a sentence strategy in which the arrangement of ideas in the second clause is a reversal of the first “Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country”
Polysyndeton	the deliberate use of many conjunctions for special emphasis to highlight quantity or mass of detail or to create a flowing, continuous sentence pattern The meal was huge – my mother fixed okra and green beans and ham and apple pie and green pickled tomatoes and ambrosia salad and all manner of fine country food – but no matter how I tried, I could not consume it to her satisfaction.
Stichomythia	dialogue in which the endings and beginnings of each line echo each other, taking on a new meaning with each new line “Hamlet, thou hast thy father much offended. Mother, you have my father much offended.”
Zeugma	the use of the verb that has two different meanings with objects that complement both meanings He stole both her car and her heart that fateful night.

Punctuation	
Ellipses	a trailing off; equally etc.; going off into a dreamlike state
Dash	interruption of a thought; an interjection of a thought into another
Semicolon	parallel ideas; equal ideas; a piling up of detail
Colon	a list; a definition or explanation; a result
Italics	for emphasis
Capitalization	for emphasis
Exclamation Point	for emphasis; for emotion