

THE ART OF SYNTAX



Some Wisdom...by Gary Provost

This sentence has five words.

Here are five more words.

Five-word sentences are fine. But several together become monotonous. Listen to what is happening. The writing is getting boring. The sound of it drones. It's like a stuck record. The ear demands some variety.

Now listen. I vary the sentence length, and I create music. Music. The writing sings. It has a pleasant rhythm, a lilt, a harmony. I use short sentences. And I use sentences of medium length.

And sometimes when I am certain the reader is rested, I will engage him with a sentence of considerable length, a sentence that burns with energy and builds with all the impetus of a crescendo, the roll of the drums, the crash of the cymbals--sounds that say listen to this, it is important.

So write with a combination of short, medium, and long sentences. Create a sound that pleases the reader's ear. Don't just write words. Write music.

Syntax: A definition

Syntax is a set of rules in a language. It dictates how words from different parts of speech are put together in order to convey a complete thought.

Syntax: A definition

Syntax and diction are closely related. Diction refers to the choice of words in a particular situation while syntax determines how the chosen words are used to form a sentence. Most often than not, adopting a complex diction means a complex syntactic structure of sentences and vice versa. In combination, syntax and diction help writers develop tone, mood and atmosphere in a text along with evoking interest of the readers.

Syntax: Analysis

Example #1

“That night I sat on Tyan-yu’s bed and waited for him to touch me. But he didn’t. I was relieved.”

(*The Joy Luck Club* by Amy Tan)

Example #2

“They left me alone and I lay in bed and read the papers awhile, the news from the front, and the list of dead officers with their decorations and then reached down and brought up the bottle of Cinzano and held it straight up on my stomach, the cool glass against my stomach, and took little drinks making rings on my stomach from holding the bottle there between drinks, and watched it get dark outside over the roofs of the town.”

(*A Farewell to Arms* by Ernest Hemingway)

The two syntax examples above show a distinct use of syntax. Amy Tan uses short sentences to communicate in a powerful and concise manner. Ernest Hemingway, on the other hand, uses long and complex structures to emphasize the laziness of his character.

Syntax: Analysis

I would recommend that you discuss syntax *after* you have discussed the basics: diction, tone, and imagery.

Alternatively, you might discuss syntax *in relation to* the basics.

For example, you might discuss how the final lines in *1984* convey the sense of detachment that Winston feels since he has given in to Big Brother and lost himself completely.

Syntax: Analysis

When you see very long sentences, consider:

1. Is the author trying to replicate the physical movement of the character
2. Is the author trying to suggest confusion or simulate the rapid flow of ideas or emotions?
3. Is the author piling on detail after detail to illustrate the enormity, weight, or extensiveness of something?

Syntax: Analysis

When you see very short sentences, consider:

1. Is the author trying to stress a key idea?
2. Is the author trying to sound objective and/or factual?
3. Is the author trying to convey anxiety or quicken the pace in contrast to longer, more complex ideas?

Syntax: Analysis

When you see repetition of key words or phrases, consider:

1. Is the author trying to stress a key idea?
2. Is the author using repetition to convey emotion, such as anger, bitterness, joy?

Syntax: Arrangement Of Ideas

Loose sentence (main point is at the beginning, it is “front loaded”):

Example: We reached Edmonton that morning after a turbulent flight and some exciting experiences.

Periodic sentence (main point at the end, “end loaded”):

Example: That morning, after a turbulent flight and some exciting purposes, we reached Edmonton.

Natural order (subject before main verb).

Example: Oranges grow in California.

Inverted order (verb before subject).

Example: In California grow oranges.

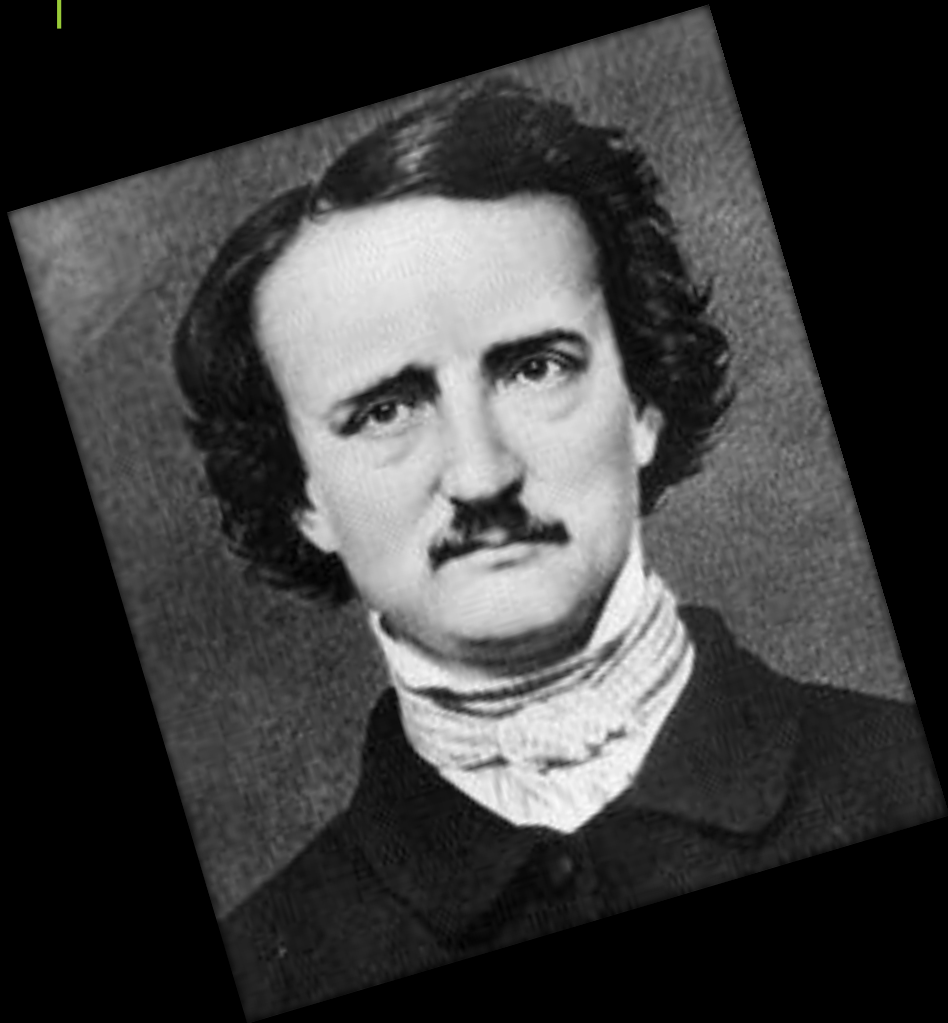
Split order (divides the predicate into two parts with the subject coming between).

Example: In California oranges grow.

Interrupted sentences: subordinate clauses come in the middle, set off by dashes or commas

Example: These had been her teachers, -- stern and wild ones, -- and they had made her strong...

Syntax: Edgar Allen Poe... the master of syntax



*I would define, in brief,
the poetry of words as
the rhythmical
creation of Beauty.*