

Polysyndeton and Asyndeton

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Summary: Discusses two stylistic devices: polysyndeton and asyndeton. Polysyndeton can be used to emphasize words and phrases because the repeated use of conjunctions slows the reader down. Asyndeton has the reverse effect: the reader speeds up because conjunctions are omitted.

Learning Objectives: To define the difference between polysyndeton and asyndeton. To understand the use of polysyndeton and asyndeton in creative and academic or business writing. To use polysyndeton and asyndeton for stylistic purposes.

“ . . . [W]e shall *pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe* to assure the survival and the success of liberty.” This quote by John F. Kennedy in his 1961 *Inaugural Address* is an example of memorable language though the use of asyndeton. By discussing polysyndeton and asyndeton, we can understand how and why language is memorable and use these two stylistic devices to make our own writing more effective.

Polysyndeton

Polysyndeton is a list or series of words, phrases, or clauses that is connected with the repeated use of the same conjunction. The most common conjunctions used with polysyndeton are *and* and *or*.

Ex. The citizens of the small town demanded a new sheriff and mayor, hoping the change would lead to the elimination of deception *and* fraud *and* corruption.

The purpose of the word *and* is to link two or more words, phrases, or clauses, but, importantly, *and* signifies that the items that are linked are **equal** in some way. In business, academic, or creative writing, each word or group of words connected by the *and* is more emphasized than it would be without the *and*.



The primary effect of polysyndeton is to slow readers down so they can take in all the information. Take the following example, for instance, which could be found in a recommendation letter.

Ex. John West has excellent organizational skills *and* superb interpersonal skills *and* outstanding written communication skills.

Kolln discusses that the repetition slows the reader down because each word in the series or list is read “with a fairly equal beat” (p. 184). In this example, those organizational and interpersonal and written communication skills have the same weight or importance (grammatically speaking, because they’re parallel ideas).



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Notice that, rhythmically, polysyndeton is not only an equalizer of meaning, but also an equalizer of tempo. In this case, polysyndeton creates a feeling of endless continuity or breathlessness because all of those things are happening one right after the other. We get the feeling that John West's lists of skills could go on.

Polysyndeton can also be used effectively in speeches, as shown in the following example from William F. Buckley:

Ex. "In years gone by, there were in every community men and women who spoke the language of duty *and* morality *and* loyalty *and* obligation."

Extended use of polysyndeton creates a kind of sing-song rhythm in the sentence that generates a particular kind of emotional charge and sometimes a ritual quality. While it's rare that a writer would need to generate those effects in a business or academic document, this effect can be useful in short stories, novels, and so on.

Ernest Hemingway used polysyndeton in the following passage from "After the Storm":

I said, "Who killed him?" and he said, "I don't know who killed him but he's dead all right," and it was dark and there was water standing in the street and no lights and windows broke and boats all up in the town and trees blown down and everything all blown and I got a skiff and went out and found my boat where I had her inside Mango Key and she was all right only she was full of water.

This quotation from Hemingway juxtaposes many things: destruction, darkness, death, description of scenery, and personal actions. They all are based on each other and are thus connected and emotionally dulling as they act as a build-up of details that work together in giving the full scene in a way that marks them all as equals (meaning that nature's destruction is as meaningful as finding a boat).

Unlike our example in the previous section (where polysyndeton creates a feeling of endless continuity and the progression is logical), the second example's use of polysyndeton creates a feeling of the reader's being overwhelmed as all of these descriptions are mixed in with the narrative progression.

Asyndeton

Asyndeton is a list or a series in which no *and* is used at all, rather the items are separated by commas. Asyndeton has an effect that is quite different from polysyndeton's.

If the effect of polysyndeton is to slow the reader down, the effect of asyndeton is most often the opposite: to speed the reader up.



Ex. Ida B. Wells, protest writer and speaker, used *explicit*, *vivid*, *horrifying* descriptions of lynchings to prove the need for whites to reinforce white hegemony was the real cause of most lynchings.



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Notice that in the example the lack of *and* functions to speed up the sentence without distracting the reader/listener. Further, we get the sense that this list of adjectives (explicit, vivid, horrifying) could go on to further prove how terrible the lynchings were.

One of the most famous examples of asyndeton is attributed to Julius Caesar.

Ex. "I came, I saw, I conquered." –Julius Casear

Let's briefly consider this example if there been a final *and* placed within it.

Ex. "I came, I saw, and I conquered." –Julius Caesar

The impact of the statement isn't nearly as strong. The flow was interrupted with the use of *and*, which slows down the reader and finalizes the list (meaning, Caesar didn't do anything else). Notice the lack of *and* renders each element (each of the sentences) equal—the act of seeing and conquering are of equal weight (he completed both tasks with the same ease)—and suggests that the series is unfinished, thereby offering additional possibilities.

Asyndeton can also be used to make more effective speeches. Take, for example, the following excerpts from famous speeches or memorable movies:

Ex. "We shall go on to the end, we shall fight in France, we shall fight on the seas and oceans, we shall fight with growing confidence and growing strength in the air, we shall defend our Island, whatever the cost may be, 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; we shall never surrender. . . ." –Winston Churchill, *We Shall Fight on the Beaches*

Ex. "Anyway, like I was saying, shrimp is the fruit of the sea. You can barbecue it, boil it, broil it, bake it, saute it. Dey's uh, shrimp-kabobs, shrimp creole, shrimp gumbo. Pan fried, deep fried, stir-fried. There's pineapple shrimp, lemon shrimp, coconut shrimp, pepper shrimp, shrimp soup, shrimp stew, shrimp salad, shrimp and potatoes, shrimp burger, shrimp sandwich. That--that's about it." –the character Bubba, *Forrest Gump*



Again, the lack of *and* speeds up the sentence without distracting the reader/listener. Notice too that the lack of *and* creates an expectation wherein the reader might feel as if the list could just keep going (Kolln, p. 184).

Finally, in cases of fiction, asyndeton can be used in action scenes to make readers feel as if they are in the fast-paced moment of the character(s). It is a common stylistic device.

Ex. "Why, they've got 10 volumes on suicide alone. Suicide by race, by color, by occupation, by sex, by seasons of the year, by time of day. Suicide, how committed: by poisons, by firearms, by drowning, by leaps. Suicide by poison, subdivided by types of poison, such as corrosive, irritant, systemic, gaseous, narcotic, alkaloid, protein, and so forth. Suicide by leaps, subdivided by leaps from high places, under the wheels of trains, under the wheels of trucks, under the feet of horses, from steamboats. But Mr. Norton, of all the cases on record, there's not one single case of suicide by leap from the rear end of a moving train." – the character Barton Keyes, *Double Indemnity*

Ex. "An empty stream, a great silence, an impenetrable forest. The air was thick, warm, heavy, sluggish." –Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*



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Test Your Knowledge

In the following two questions, determine whether polysyndeton or asyndeton is necessary for the requested effect. Then, using a set list of words, create a sentence using whichever style device you chose.

- 1) Would polysyndeton or asyndeton be used in order to slow down and equalize the rhythm?

Use the following words to create a sentence using the style device that is the correct answer to the previous question.

- The boy
- ran over the grass
- jumped over the puddle
- skipped through the yard
- hopped around the tree
- swam through the stream

- 2) Would polysyndeton or asyndeton be used in order to speed up the rhythm?

Use the following words to create a sentence using the style device that is the correct answer to the previous question.

- The girl in the prom dress
- smiled
- danced
- partied all night

Answers

- 1) The answer is polysyndeton.

An example of how to put the sentence together with polysyndeton is the following: The boy ran over the grass and jumped over the grass and jumped over the puddle and skipped through the yard and hopped around the tree and swam through the stream.

- 2) The answer is asyndeton.

An example of how to put the sentence together with asyndeton is the following: The girl in the prom dress smiled, danced, partied all night.

References

Kolln, M. (1999). *Rhetorical grammar: Grammatical choices, rhetorical effects* (3rd Ed.).

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