

# Understanding Syntax

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## Lesson One

Quickchat: What is  
syntax? Why does it  
matter?

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# Syntax Defined

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- Syntax is from a *Greek* word meaning *order* or *arrangement*.
- THE WAY WORDS ARE PLACED, ARRANGED, OR ORGANIZED
- Syntax deals with the relation of words to each other as component parts of a sentence, and with their proper arrangement to express clearly the intended meaning.



## Sentence Defined

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**A sentence** is the  
expression of a  
thought in words.



# Classification of Sentences

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There are 4 general types or forms of sentences:

- (1) **Declarative**, which puts the thought in the form of a declaration or assertion. This is the most common one.
- (2) **Interrogative**, which puts the thought in a question.
- (3) **Imperative**, which expresses command, entreaty, or request.
- (4) **Exclamatory**, which expresses serious emotion.

# Examples:

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- Declarative: *The echo always has the last word.*
- Imperative: *Love your neighbor.*
- Interrogative: *Are second thoughts always wisest?*
- Exclamatory: *I want to wash the flag, not burn it!*



## Stylistic Choices:

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- Most of the time, writers of English use the following standard sentence patterns:

□ Subject/Verb (SV)

- My father cried.

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□ Subject/Verb/Subject complement (SVC)

- Even the streams were now lifeless.


□ Subject/Verb/Direct object (SVO)

- We believed her.

□ Subject/Verb/Indirect object/Direct object (SVIO)

- Jermaine shows me a graph.



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- To make longer sentences, writers often coordinate two or more of the standard sentence patterns OR subordinate one sentence pattern to another.

# Sentences:

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Sentences can be classified in many ways, and it's helpful to consider the potential effect a particular type of sentence might have on a reader in a certain situation.

## □ Simple Sentence:

- Has a single independent clause.
  - Abraham Lincoln struggled to save the Union.
- Within its single clause, a simple sentence can have a compound subject, and compound verb, or both.
  - Abraham Lincoln and Andrew Johnson struggled to save the Union.
  - Abraham Lincoln struggled to save the Union and persevered.

# Sentences:

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## Compound Sentence:

- Has two clauses, each of which could exist as a simple sentence if you removed the conjunction connecting them.
  - Abraham Lincoln struggled to save the Union, and Andrew Johnson assisted him.
  - Abraham Lincoln and Andrew Johnson struggled to save the Union and persevered, but the leaders of the Confederacy insisted that the rights of the states were more important than the maintenance of the Union.

# Sentences:

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## Complex Sentence:

- Has two clauses, one independent and at least one subordinate to the main clause.
  - When the leaders of the Confederacy insisted that the rights of the states were more important than the maintenance of the Union, Abraham Lincoln and Andrew Johnson struggled to save the Union and persevered.

# Sentences:

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## Compound-complex:

- Has the defining features of both a compound sentence and a complex sentence.
  - When the leaders of the Confederacy insisted that the rights of the states were more important than the maintenance of the Union, Abraham Lincoln struggled to save the Union and persevered, and Andrew Johnson assisted him.

# Examples:

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- Coordinating patterns: (SVO)
  - Yet every one of these disasters has actually happened somewhere, and many real communities have already suffered a substantial number of them.
- Subordinating one pattern to another: (SVO/I)
  - And when they arrived on the edge of Mercury, they carried all the butterflies of a summer day in their wombs.

# Style and Passive Voice

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## □ Active Voice:

■ Doer/Subject → Action/Verb → Receiver/Object

■ The lab technician filtered the solution.

## □ Passive Voice:

■ Receiver/Object → Action/Verb → By Doer/Subject

■ The solution was filtered by the lab technician.

□ I made mistakes vs. Mistakes were made.

□ What are differences between active and passive voice in terms of effect on the sentence?

□ But should you ever use passive voice?

□ Avoiding passive voice entirely is hard. In fact, it can't be done.  
(notice the passive voice here).

# What punctuation is used?

- ... Elipses > an omission, a trailing off, equally, going into a dreamlike state
- -- Dash > interruption of thought, interjection from one thought into another
- ; Semicolon > parallel ideas, equal ideas, piling up of detail
- : Colon > list, definition/explanation, result
- CAPITALIZATION > emphasis, emotion of word
- ! Exclamation point > emphasis, emotion of sentence



# Stylistic Strategy- the HOW and WHY

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- When an author uses an unusual sentence pattern—cumulative, periodic, or inverted—attention is called to that sentence because its pattern contrasts significantly with the pattern of the sentences surrounding it.
- Authors may use these unusual sentence patterns to *emphasize a specific point, parallel/repeat other patterns in the text*, as well as to *control sentence rhythm, signal a shift, increase tension*, or *create a dramatic impact*. (These are the HOWS and WHYS you can utilize in your analysis essays).



## How are the details arranged?

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- Cumulative Sentence
- Periodic Sentence
- Inverted Sentence
- Balanced Sentence

# Cumulative, Periodic, and Inverted Sentences

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- The DOWNSide to sticking with standard sentence patterns, coordinating them, or subordinating them is that too many standard sentences in a row become monotonous. So writers break out of the standard patterns now and then by using a more unusual pattern, such as the cumulative sentence, the periodic sentence, or the inverted sentence.

# The Cumulative Sentence

## (also known as “loose sentence”)

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- The cumulative sentence begins with a standard sentence pattern (shown here underlined) and adds multiple details *after* it. The details can take the form of subordinate clauses or different kinds of phrases. These details accumulate, or pile up—hence, the name *cumulative*.
- 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.

# Periodic Sentence

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- The periodic sentence *begins* with multiple details and holds off a standard sentence pattern – or at least its predicate (shown here underlined) – until the *end*.
  - Crossing a bare common, in snow puddles, at twilight, under a clouded sky, without having in my thoughts any occurrence of special good fortune, I have enjoyed a perfect exhilaration.
    - Ralph Waldo Emerson

# Difference in Meaning?

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Crossing a bare common, in snow puddles, at twilight, under a clouded sky, without having in my thoughts any occurrence of special good fortune, I have enjoyed a perfect exhilaration.

VS

I have enjoyed a perfect exhilaration, crossing a bare common, in snow puddles, at twilight, under a clouded sky, without having in my thoughts any occurrence of special good fortune.

# Natural Order of Sentence

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- **Subject** (first) then **predicate/verb** (after)
- **Omar** loves his cat.
- A shadow of death **was everywhere**.

# Inverted Sentence

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- In every standard English sentence pattern, the subject comes before the verb (SV). But if a writer chooses, he or she can invert the standard sentence pattern and put the verb *before* the subject (VS).
- A couple of examples:
  - Everywhere was a shadow of death.
    - Rachel Carson
  - Under them are evergreen thickets of rhododendron.
    - Wendell Berry





What is the difference in meaning?

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Everywhere was a shadow of death.

VS

A shadow of death was everywhere.

# Cumulative, Periodic, or Inverted???

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- Now when I had mastered the language of this water and had come to know every trifling feature that bordered the great river as familiarly as I knew the letters of the alphabet, I had made a valuable acquisition.—Mark Twain
- **PERIODIC**
  - Notice that the front of the sentence includes many phrases which provide elaborate detail. The vivid descriptions engage us, then the true message of the sentence is revealed.

# Cumulative, Periodic, or Inverted???

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□ In the woods, is perpetual youth. –Ralph Waldo Emerson

## ■ INVERTED

- In this example, Emerson calls attention to “woods” and “youth,” minimizing the verb “is” and juxtaposing a place (“woods”) with a state of being (“youth”). Additionally, the fact that in its context this short sentence is surrounded by much longer, more complex sentence structures adds contrast and helps this sentence to stand out.

# Cumulative, Periodic, or Inverted???

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- It is a wilderness that is beautiful, dangerous, abundant, oblivious of us, mysterious, never to be conquered or controlled or second-guessed, or known more than a little.
  - --Wendell Berry
- **CUMULATIVE**
  - The independent clause in the sentence focuses on one word: *wilderness*. Then the sentence *accumulates* a string of modifiers that describe nature's ambiguity. It is "beautiful" and "abundant" but also "dangerous" and "mysterious." Berry ends with phrases that emphasize nature's independence: "never to be conquered or controlled or second-guessed..." Using a cumulative sentence allows the author to include all of these modifiers in one smooth sentence, rather than using a series of shorter sentences that repeat "wilderness." Furthermore, this accumulation of modifiers takes the reader into the scene just as the writer experiences it, one detail at a time.

# Balanced Sentence

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- Writers often balance similar words, phrases, and clauses to emphasize or unite particular ideas and create pleasing rhythms (e.g., To err is human, to forgive divine). In a balanced sentence, phrases or clauses parallel each other by virtue of their likeness of structure, meaning, or length. The problem with many awkward-sounding sentences is that they are NOT balanced.
- Unbalanced: She doesn't like washing clothes or housework.
- Balanced: She doesn't like washing clothes or doing housework.

# Natural Order of Sentence

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- Subject (first) then **predicate/verb** (after)
- **Chunks of earth** suddenly started to slide down the side of the mountain.
- **The volunteers** covered more than 200 miles during the search.

# Split Order

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- In a sentence arranged in a split order, part of the predicate is placed before the subject. It helps to add variety to the writing. In a split order sentence, the part of the predicate placed before the subject is set off with a comma.
- Suddenly, chunks of earth started to slide down the side of the mountain.
- During the search, the volunteers covered more than 200 miles.

The squirrel ran up the tree.

**SUBJECT**

**PREDICATE**

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Up the tree, the squirrel ran.



# Juxtaposition

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- Placing two ideas (words or pictures) side by side so that their closeness creates a new, often ironic meaning.
- Simply put – by placing comparative or contrasting words, images, or phrases together in a sentence, the author brings attention to some aspect otherwise overlooked.
- Example: an oxymoron such as Shakespeare’s “parting is such sweet sorrow” juxtaposes two words with opposite meanings together so that the audience better gains the understanding of the character’s dilemma at the time.

# Parallelism

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- Parallel structuring is the repeating of phrases or sentences that are similar (parallel) in meaning and structure; repetition is the repeating of the same word or phrase to create a sense of rhythm and emphasis.
- Let every nation know, whether it wishes us well or ill, that we shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe, in order to assure the survival and the success of liberty. –John F Kennedy
- \_\_\_\_ any \_\_\_\_

# Parallelism (sentence structures)

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- If two or more ideas are parallel, they are easier to grasp when expressed in parallel grammatical form. Single words should be balanced with single words, phrases with phrases, clauses with clauses.
  - A kiss can be *a comma, a question mark, or an exclamation point*. (balanced words)
  - This novel is not *to be tossed lightly aside*, but *to be hurled with great force*. (balanced phrases)
  - *In matters of principle, stand like a rock; in matters of taste, swim with the current*. (balanced clauses)

# More Parallelism

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- But, in a larger sense, *we can not dedicate—we can not consecrate—we can not hallow*, this ground—
  - --Abraham Lincoln
- I came, I saw, I conquered.
  - –Julius Caesar
- Humanity has advanced, when it has advanced, not because it has been *sober, responsible, and cautious*, but because it has been *playful, rebellious, and immature*.
  - --Tom Robbins

# Antithesis

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- Antithesis is balancing or contrasting one word or idea against another, usually in the same sentence.
  - Man proposes, God disposes.
  - Let us never negotiate out of fear. But let us never fear to negotiate.
    - John F. Kennedy

# Rhetorical Question

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- a figure of speech in the form of a question that is asked in order to make a point.

O mighty Caesar! dost thou lie so low?

Are all thy conquests, glories, triumphs, spoils,

Shrunk to this little measure?

- (Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*, III.i.148)

# Rhetorical Fragment

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- sentence fragment (not a complete sentence)  
used to deliberately evoke an effect

She is afraid to take the subway. Always afraid.

# Anaphora and Epistrophe

**Anaphora: Repetition at  
beginning**

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**Epistrophe: Repetition at  
end**

**Both are categories of parallel structure**





# Anaphora

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- The deliberate repetition of the same word or group of words at the beginning of successive clauses
- Greek for “carrying back”

**What** the hammer? **what** the chain?

In what furnace was thy brain?

**What** the anvil? **what** dread grasp

Dare its deadly terrors clasp?

**Out of the** cradle endlessly rocking,

**Out of the** mock-bird's throat, the musical shuttle,

**Out of the** Ninth-month midnight,

# Epistrophe

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- The repetition of the same word or words at the end of successive phrases, clauses or sentences.
- Greek for “return”
- When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child.
- ...and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth

# Asyndeton and Polysyndeton

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- Asyndeton – deliberate omission of conjunctions in a series of related phrases or clauses
  - I came, I saw, I conquered (Julius Caesar)
- Polysyndeton – deliberate use of many conjunctions for special emphasis to create continuity
  - “Let the whitefolks have their money and power and segregation and sarcasm and big houses and schools and lawns like carpets, and books, and mostly–mostly–let them have their whiteness.” (Maya Angelou, I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings)



# Miscellaneous Terms

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- Chiasmus
- Zeugma



# Chiasmus

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- Arrangement of ideas or phrases in the second clause is a reversal of the first
  
- “You forget what you want to remember, and you remember what you want to forget.”

**A. Country** *can do for*

**B. You,** *ask what*

**B'. You** *can do for your*

**A'. Country**

**CHIASMUS**

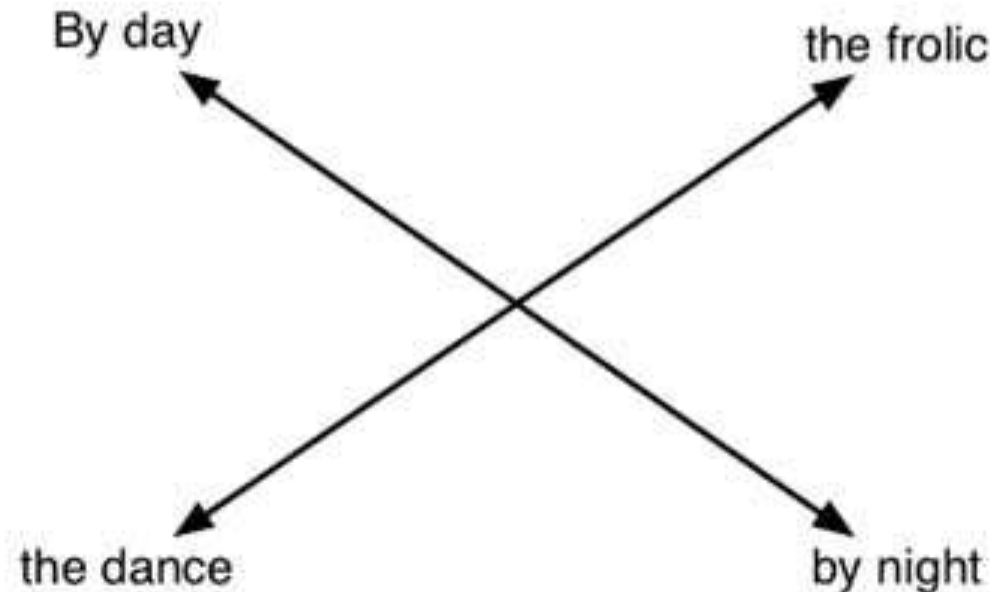
By day

the frolic

the dance

by night

By day, the  
frolic; the dance,  
by night.



# Zeugma (zoog-MA)

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- 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.



# Stylistic Choices

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- The stylistic choices that an author makes usually involves syntax.
- The sentence structures chosen must convey the message, tone, and focus which the author is trying to convey.
- Recognizing syntactical choices that an author makes can help you better understand the message as well when analyzing text.



# Refer to page 9-10 of DIDLS handout

- Categorize the use of syntax in the following examples AND analyze the effects on the meaning of the whole excerpt.
- Authors may use these unusual sentence patterns to *emphasize a specific point*, *parallel/repeat other patterns in the text*, as well as to *control sentence rhythm*, *signal a shift*, *increase tension*, or *create a dramatic impact*. (These are the HOWS and WHYS)
- Ask yourself, “how would the meaning/effect of the sentence differ if the order were changed?”



# Extras not on assessment

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- The following slides

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