

Literary Devices and Simple Tricks To Improve Your Prose

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Rhetorical Devices

A rhetorical device is a use of language that is intended to have an effect on its audience. Repetition, figurative language, and even rhetorical questions are all examples of *rhetorical devices*.

Anaphora: Repeating a word or phrase at the beginning of three or more successive phrases, clauses or sentences. The first three are always in a row.

Epistrophe: Repeating the last word or phrase three or more times.

Symploce: Repeating words or phrases both at the beginning and at the end of sentences.

Asyndeton: Eliminating conjunctions in a list.

Polysyndeton: Using a string of conjunctions without commas.

Allusion: A quick reference to a famous person or event. If you're going to use it, be creative about it:

Eponym: Reference to a famous person who is recognized for an attribute wherein the author substitutes their name for that attribute.

Conduplicatio: Starting a sentence or clause with a word from the previous sentence.

Anadiplosis: Repeating the last word of one sentence at or near the beginning of the next (generally for the purpose of emphasizing the word).

Epizeuxis: Repetition for emphasis.

Zeugma: When the last item out of sync with the others. Can also refer to situations where the verb is implied:

Enallage: Using a word as a different part of speech

Backloading: Putting the most important word at the end of the sentence, scene, or chapter. See the subtle difference:

Parallelism: Recurrent syntactical similarity.

- *Before*: She enjoys reading, naps, and cooking.
- *After*: She enjoys reading, napping, and cooking.
- *Or*: She loves to read, to nap, and to cook.
- *Or*: She loves to read, nap, and cook.

Rhythm, Cadence, and Beats: To ensure you're taking advantage of this trick, read your story aloud.

A few more tips

- Eliminate tautologies (redundancies like sit down, stand up, follow behind)
- Eliminate most wasted, qualifying, and over-used, words: Some, very, just, that, suddenly, etc.
- Avoid passive voice—sentences in which the subject is being acted upon, i.e. The ball was thrown.
- Avoid phrases like “started to,” or “began to.” instead of “he started to run,” say “he ran.”
- Discover your personal weasel words and eliminate them

How to put this into practice

- Master one rhetorical device at a time.
- Start with your most important scene and write down the last word of each sentence. Search for opportunities to backload your sentences for greater impact. Try to make it a habit to search for ways to backload your prose.
- Read your stories aloud and listen for rhythm, cadence, beats, and parallelism.
- Search and destroy tautologies, marginalizing, and weasel words.
- REMEMBER: CLARITY TRUMPS STYLE. If your reader doesn't understand what you mean or if your new sentences are awkward, then edit until they're clear and smooth.

Want more?

- More rhetorical devices to try: metaphor, simile, analogy, onomatopoeia, personification, amplification, assonance, alliteration, and litotes.
- More examples: <http://www.literarydevices.com>
- More practice? Check out Margie Lawson's course, *Deep Editing, Rhetorical Devices, and More* at MargieLawson.com