

A Practical Guide to Understanding Syntax: Grades 9-12

All writers take special care in creating a special arrangement of and relationship with words. Understanding the slight or delicate variations of syntax, and the effect it creates, or the purpose it fulfills is crucial to understanding a passage. Make a section in your journal for each of the following categories of syntax and add examples to each category as you discover them through reading, listening, observing, and sensing life around you.

Experiment with improving your style by adding more of these interesting sentence structures to your own writing; however, heed Daniel Defoe's warning: The perfect style is one "in which a man speaking to five hundred people, of all common and various capacities, Idiots and Lunatics excepted, should be understood by them all."

Parentheses:

The parenthesis are used to whisper a witty aside to the reader. Note how the parenthesis in each of the following examples makes the remark seem more confidential:

"When a nimble Burman tripped me up on the football field and the referee (another Burman) looked the other way, the crowd yelled with hideous laughter." George Orwell

"Tourists . . . swarm all over the Statue of Liberty (where many a resident of the town has never set foot), they invade the Auto mat, visit radio stations, St. Patrick's Cathedral, and they window shop." E. B. White

"Twice has she condescended to give me her opinion (unasked too!) on this subject." Jane Austen

"In a trice (which, in Bangladesh, is two and a half hours) we were back in our hired cab." P. J. O'Rourke

"The hoses were set much alike between distance and tenderness of spray (and quite surely a sense of art behind this compromise, and a quiet deep joy, too real to recognize itself), and the sounds therefore were pitched much alike." James Agee

"The words promised that I would not (yet) be alone." John Berger

"Most of the recent propaganda about pit bullsóthe crazy claim that they 'take hold with their front teeth while they chew away with their rear teeth' (which would imply, incorrectly, that they have double jaws)ócan be traced to literature published

by the Humane Society of the United States during the fall of 1987 and earlier."
Vicki Hearne

Add a parenthesis to the following sentence correctly:

"One may speak the same language but in such a way that one's antecedents are revealed or one hopes hidden." James Baldwin

**Add more of your own in your journals you discover them through
reading, listening, observing, and sensing life around you.**

The Dash:

The dash is a sentence interrupter used to announce a series, or elaborate on a previously stated general idea. When this second strategy is used, the meaning of the sentence changes drastically. In fact, many times good writers will use a dash to create an anomaly, a departure from the expected, an abnormality. Note how the dashes in the following examples create an unexpected meaning or satire.

"The chamber of commerce was in the Motijheel Commercial Area, right around the corneróand therefore thirty or forty minutes awayófrom the Biman airline office." P. J. O'Rourke

"There is a sumptuous variety about the New England weather that compels the strangerís admirationóand regret. " Mark Twain

"In Moulmein, in Lower Burma, I was hated by large numbers of peopleóthe only time in my life that I have been important enough for this to happen to me." George Orwell

"The black and bottomless pool gleams in the shining rockóa sinister paradox, to a fanciful mind." Edward Abbey

"It is now fast becoming a traditionóif one can use that word to describe a habit about which I feel a certain amount of shamefacednessófor our household to watch the Miss America contest on television every year." Gerald Early

Punctuate the following sentence correctly:

"The day happened to be magnificent the finest of the year"

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The Colon:

The colon is used to announce. Notice how the opening statement in the following examples prepare the reader for an announcement which flows smoothly after the colon.

"I looked it up in the Oxford English Dictionary. It went like this: Fault: Deficiency, lack, want of something . . ." Meena Alexander

"I was right about the tar: it led to within half a mile of the shore." E. B. White

"My voice splintered in my ears into a cacophony: whispering cadences, shouts, moans, the quick delight of bodily pleasure, all rising up as if the condition of being fractured had freed the selves jammed into my skin, multiple beings locked into the journeys of one body." Meena Alexander

"All government, in its essence, is a conspiracy against the superior man: its one permanent object is to police him and cripple him." H. L. Mencken

Punctuate the following sentence correctly:

"By the time we had reached the top of the long ridge on which my cousin had set his traps the morning had slipped toward noon and our count had risen to seven animals three raccoons three skunks and the pregnant fox." T. H. Watkins

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The Semicolon:

The semicolon is used to separate different but related sentences. Notice how the semicolons in the following examples also create balanced expressions.

"But the poor lady was wrong; it was not a swan that they had hatched; it was an eagle." Lytton Strachey

"I have in my own life a precious friend, a woman of sixty five who has lived very hard, who is wise; who listens well; who has been where I am and can help me understand it; an who represents not only an ultimate ideal mother to me but also the person I'd like to be when I grow up." Judith Viorst

Punctuate the following sentence correctly:

"In a rural family practice such as mine much of every workday is taken up with disease I look forward to the prenatal visit with Barb to the continuing relationship with her over the next months to the prospect of birth."

Add more of your own as you discover them through reading, listening, observing, and sensing life around you:

Parallelism:

Parallelism is the repetition of similar beginnings to create balanced expressions. This is done when the writer wants to express a pair or series of ideas. Making each item parallel--making each item look alike grammatically--provides emphasis and establishes rhythm and balance.

One of the most powerful aspects of John F. Kennedy's Inaugural Address was his use of parallel expressions. Notice how the repeated verbs in following two sentences create parallelism.

"Let every nation know, whether it wishes us well or ill, that we shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hard ship, support any friend, oppose any foe to assure the survival and the success of liberty."

"Together let us explore the stars, conquer the deserts, eradicate disease, tap the ocean depths, and encourage the arts and commerce."

Notice how the repetition of the infinitive (to plus a different verb) in following sentence creates parallelism.

"To that world assembly of sovereign states, the United Nations, our last best hope in an age where the instruments of war have far outpaced the instruments of peace, we renew our pledge of support--to prevent it from becoming merely a forum for invective--to strengthen its shield of the new and the weak--and to enlarge the area in which its writ may run."

**For each of the following sentences,
provide parallel expressions that logically complete the thought:**

- 1. Propaganda is a systematic effort to influence people's opinions, to _____, or to _____.**
- 2. He spends most of his evenings sitting on the couch, watching TV, and _____.**

Add more of your own as you discover them through reading, listening, observing, and sensing life around you:

Prepositions:

Commonly Used Prepositions

about	between	over
above	beyond	past
across	but	since
after	by	through
against	concerning	throughout
along	down	to
amid	during	toward
among	except	under
around	for	underneath
at	from	until
before	in	unto
behind	into	up
below	like	upon
beneath	of	with
beside	off	within
besides	on	without

Prepositions are used by good writers to interrupt or end the sentence with lively description. Note the examples:

"The train smells of oil and soot and orange peels and lurches groggily as we rock our way inland." Joy Kogawa

"I remember a horse I rode for a while named Targhee whose Hocks were scarred from tangles in barbed wire when he was a colt and who spooked a lot in high grass." Barry Lopez

"In the city we see entropy in the rundown subways and worn-out sidewalks and torn-down buildings, in the increasing disorder of our lives." K. C. Cole

"Inside, on the shelf next to the ice-cube-tray compartment, is a row of tall stemmed dessert glasses, each one filled with its own golden dollop of butterscotch pudding." Sue Hubbel

Add more of your own in your journals you discover them through reading, listening, observing, and sensing life around you:

The Appositive:

An appositive is another noun, set off by double commas or dashes, that renames the subject. Notice how the appositives in the examples that follow, add additional information to the person, place, or thing just mentioned.

"Wooden-headedness, the source of self-deception, is a factor that plays a remarkably large role in government." Barbara Tuchman

**"I came upon her late one evening on a deserted street in Hyde Park, a relatively affluent neighborhood in an otherwise mean, impoverished section of Chicago."
Brent Staples**

**"Mama's house a place built for children where anything that could be broken had already been broken by my grandmother's early batch of offspring." Judith Ortiz
Coffer**

Combine each of the following groups of related sentences or phrases together by making one new sentence with an appositive:

**1. "Name calling is a propaganda technique in which negatively charged names are hurled against the opposing side or competitor. By using such names, propagandists try to arouse feelings of mistrust, fear, and hate in their audience."
Ann McClintock**

2. "Guns are a particularly sensitive topic for parents, and many of us feel uncomfortable when our children lust for the plastic ones." Jean Marzollo

Add more of your own in your journal as you discover them through reading, listening, observing, and sensing life around you:

Participle Phrases:

Participle phrases beginning with a word ending in "ing." Notice how the participle phrases in the following examples add more information to the noun of the sentence.

"We found a sleepy hillside and sprawled out on it, soaking up the early-spring sunshine." Gretel Ehrlich

"On the broad lobby desk, lighted and bubbling, was a ten-gallon aquarium containing one large fish . . ." Annie Dillard

"Madame Bovary was hovering over the cosmetics counters, clutching the current issue of Cosmopolitan." Francine du Plessix Gray

**"Hiking the tree-lined streets of our St. Louis borough en route to school, I felt common names spring up in my mouth, waving their leafy syllables." Naomi
Shihab Nye**

"My friend Danny Chapman, the Ringling Bros. clown, had a sliding, circus sort of face, marked by the sun, wind, pain, bad luck and bad dealings, the standard lusts

and equivocations, like a stone the water had slid over for sixty years." Edward Hoaglund

Add more of your own in your journal as you discover them through reading, listening, observing, and sensing life around you:

Absolute Phrases:

Absolute phrases are made of nouns or pronouns followed by a participle and any modifiers of the noun or pronoun. Absolute phrases contain a subject (unlike participial phrases), and no predicate. Usually set off by commas, they modify an entire sentence rather than a specific word.

Joan looked nervous, her fears creeping up on her.

noun/subject: her fears

participle: creeping

modifier: up on her

absolute phrase: her fears creeping up on her

Tom paled when he came home, his mother standing in the doorway.

noun/subject: his mother

participle: standing

modifier: in the doorway

absolute phrase: his mother standing in the doorway

Formula for an Absolute Phrase = noun/pronoun + participle + modifiers

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Cumulative Sentences:

A cumulative sentence is one in which the emendations are added after the main clause is completed. In the following example, the main sentence—the underlined portion—comes first, and is followed by a number of descriptive phrases.

"I could live two days in a den, curled, leaning on mouse fur, sniffing bird bones, blinking, licking, breathing musk, my hair tangled in the roots of grasses." Annie Dillard

Underline the main sentence in the following examples of cumulative sentence structure:

"While she ate, I watched the clouds of blue butterflies spring azuresque squeezing into nearly opened blackberry blossoms to lay their eggs." Sue Hubbel

"We held our breaths, imagining a crash as the parts clanged together, or a terrible disaster if the piece were to slip loose." Naomi Shihab Nye

"The Greek woman is short and heavy, waistless, and is wearing a black dress, a black scarf pulled low around her eyes, a black sweater, thick black stockings, black shoes." Alice Bloom

Combine the following three related sentences to make one cumulative sentence.

"My truck is named Dodge. The name came with it. I don't know if it was named after the verb or the man who invented it." Barry Lopez

Add more of your own in your journal as you discover them through reading, listening, observing, and sensing life around you:

Periodic Sentences:

A periodic sentence is one in which the emendations are added before the main clause is completed. In the following example, the main sentence—the underlined portion—comes last, and is preceded by a number of descriptive phrases.

"Curled, leaning on mouse fur, sniffing bird bones, blinking, licking, breathing musk, my hair tangled in the roots of grasses, I could live two days in a den." Annie Dillard

Underline the main sentence in the following examples of periodic sentence structure:

"By the last day of the tour, when a limousine picked me up at my Beverly Hills hotel for my last round of satellite TV interviews, I knew I had to stop." Randy Shilts

"In our constitution and the works of law, philosophy, social thought, and science, in its every day uses in the service of justice and clarity, what I call the father tongue is immensely noble and indispensably useful." Ursula K LeGuin

"Long before I am near enough to talk to you on the street, in a meeting, or at a party, you announce your sex, age, and class to me through what you are wearing." Alison Lurie

"Ten years ago, when I first noticed the symptoms that would be diagnosed as MS, I was probably looking my best." Nancy Mairs

"Three thousand miles to the west, where I live now, on a much-traveled hill road winding eastward from the coast, there is a standing pipe called the Lombardi Spring." Adrienne Rich

Add more of your own in your journal as you discover them through reading, listening, observing, and sensing life around you:

Strung-along Sentences:

A strung-along sentence is one in which the emendations are added in the middle, separating the main clause into two parts. These emendations can come in the form of absolute phrases, participle phrases, prepositions, gerunds, etc. and can be punctuated with a colon, a comma, a double comma, a dash, parentheses, etc. Here is an example:

"I have the impression that many people, if they think of this city at all, consider Duluth a cold kind of joke, a Peoria of the North, the last outpost on the northernmost edge of the middle of nowhere." Barton Sutter

Emend simple sentence patterns to create more mature constructions. Think of the basic elements of the sentence, the subject, verb, and object. Add words to describe these basic elements. The result is an immediately more mature and graceful sentence. Examples:

Basic sentence: John participated in football.

Emendation: John, the 145 pound weakling, cautiously participated in the barbaric game of football.

Basic sentence: Emerson believes that adversity is a blessing.

Emendation: Emerson, a respected essayist and philosopher, believes that adversity, even incredible misfortunes, can turn into blessing.

Basic sentence: Our society has prejudices.

Emendation: Our society, both as a country and internationally, has prejudices--preconceptions, narrow-mindedness, intolerance, and even blatant bigotry--that we need to overcome.

Basic sentence: These people have a variety of personalities.

Emendation: Although not representing the average person, these people tend to possess a strong insight based on the variety of their personalities.

Basic sentence: This can occur on a smaller level, too.

Emendation: This influence of man on nature can also commonly occur on a smaller, less scientific level.

Now you try some:

Basic sentence: Love strikes when least expected.

Emendation:

Basic sentence: Every culture has a differing view on morality.

Emendation:

Basic sentence: Often religion becomes a convenience.

Emendation:

Basic sentence: Most literature supports a belief in creation.

Emendation:

Basic sentence: A friend portrays good listening habits.

Emendation:

Add more of your own as you discover them through
reading, listening, observing, and sensing life around you:

Conciseness:

Most of the suggestions thus far have been ways to make longer sentences by combining or emending shorter ones. At the same time, it must be cautioned that every word added must add a new meaning in the sentence. Note the conciseness of the following two examples:

"Above and below the ship, this blue." John Blight

"After the sea, the harbor." Edgar Daniel Karma

Many times the end result of emendation is wordiness, rather than gracefulness.
Correct the following emendations by crossing out all unnecessary words.

The only way, pure and simple, to remain satisfied and content with the government, politics, and politicians is to remain, as always, involved by reading and perusing newspapers, exercising your voting rights, etc. and simply not letting the politicians own you.

The rise upward of most modern successful champions is almost, but not always, accompanied hand in hand by proud arrogance and awfully disdainful behaviors.

Love, in retrospect, is a very strong, powerful emotional feeling that does not spontaneously occur each and every day of the year.

In a way everybody every man, woman, and child every person fear, to some degree, greatly or not, some aspect of death that affects their own life personally.

A uniquely unusual young man in his teens named Joe enjoyed savoring the essence of the mouth-watering smell of slow-cooked bacon during a fancy luxury continental breakfast at the local, drab, leaky-roofed hotel, while wearing bell-bottoms and a polyester plaid shirt.

Repetition:

The conciseness exercise implies that every repeated word is unnecessary. We all know that is not true. Sometimes repeated words are necessary for emphasis. Sometimes repetition is needed in the topic sentences so that they echo the thesis more clearly. But perhaps the most graceful use is the subtle repetition of an idea. In the essay "Dull and Out of It" from Cold Comfort, Life at the Top of the Map, Barton Sutter refers to Duluth as "the last outpost on the northernmost edge of the middle of nowhere." Elsewhere in his collection of essays called Cold Comfort, he refers to Duluth as "the northern edge of the known universe." Notice how Sutter's changed description of the repeated idea adds to his description of Duluth's remoteness. Can you make other phrases that would similarly describe the isolation of Duluth?

Variety:

The best practice for variety is to revisit an old essay and change the wording so that a better variety exists by beginning in more ways than Subject first. Use the following suggestions:

A. Begin with an adverb: a word that describes the action of the sentence. Other neat adverbs can be found in the chapter on DICTION. Here are some examples:

"Exactly why the Germans banished intelligence is a vast and largely unanswered question." Neil Postman

"Now, three years later, after the last bad fall, she had managed to forget the fatigue and loneliness and, in these free-wheeled excursions back through time, to capture happiness." Russell Baker

"Suddenly the whole room broke into a sea of shouting, as they saw me rise." Langston Hughes

"How much we need, and how arduous of attainment is that steadiness preached in all rules for holy living. How desirable and distant is the ideal of the contemplative, artist, or saint--the inner inviolable core, the single eye." Anne Morrow Lindbergh

"Mainly I try to remind them that the road ahead is a long one and that it will have more unexpected turns than they think." William Zinsser

"Never in my life have I gotten the attention of a waiter, unless it was an off-duty waiter whose car I'd accidentally scraped in a parking lot somewhere." Barbara Ehrenreich

Practice beginning with an "ly" word by doing the exercise which follows:

Begin with the word "Normally" followed by an adjective that names a personality trait, then describe a behavior you find yourself doing that contradicts that trait.

Example: Normally rather restrained, I found myself speaking to everyone I met.

Use words like the following to fill in the blank: combative, energetic, belligerent, enterprising, adventurous, venturesome, resourceful, alert, lethargic, studious, reflective, conversable, cordial, debonair, sportive, frivolous, rattle-brained, flighty, auspicious, flippant, reliable, trustworthy, unfailing, steady, uncertain, clamorous, imperious, ambitious, insistent, apprehensive, solicitous, phobic, timorous, diffident, tremulous, fainthearted, penitent, conscience-smitten, rational, judicious, flexible, etc. (The list is never-ending. You can probably pick better ones.)

Your turn:

Normally _____, I found myself _____.

B. Begin with an adjective: Any of the words listed in the assignment described above are adjectives since they describe people. Begin a sentence with one of those words or with any word that describes some other person, place or thing in the same sentence. Other neat adjectives can be found in the chapter on **DICTION**. Here are some examples:

"Subdued, resigned, Papa's lifeóall our livesótook on a pattern that would hold for the duration of the war." Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston

"This frail boy bent under his load said more to me about poverty than a dozen poor fathers." Gordon Parks

"These hopeless end-of-the-line visits with my mother made me wish I had not thrown off my own past so carelessly." Russell Baker

"Vague as this definition may be, I believe most people are aware of periods in their lives when they seem to be 'in grace' and other periods in their lives when they feel 'out of grace,' even though they may use different words to describe these states." Anne Morrow Lindbergh

"Long gone are the days of the "gentleman's C," when students journeyed through college with a certain relaxation, sampling a wide variety of courses--music, art,

philosophy, classics, anthropology, poetry, religionóthat would send them out as liberally educated men and women." William Zinsser

"An unscrupulous theatrical producer has figured out that it is relatively easy to turn a buck by producing a play that fails." Neil Postman

Now try some of your own.

C. Begin with an infinitive: Here are some examples:

"To explain what I am getting at, I find it helpful to refer to two films, which taken together embody the main lines of my argument." Neil Postman

"To provide some verification of this, I conducted a survey a few years back on the subject of the Iranian hostage crisis." Neil Postman

Now try some of your own.

D. Begin with a subordinate clause:

Commonly used Subordinate Conjunctions:

after, although, as, as much as, because, before,
how, if, in order that, inasmuch as, provided, since,
than, that, though, unless, until, when, where, while.

Here are some examples:

"Although there was no evidence of subversion, soon after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, President Franklin D. Roosevelt authorized the expulsion of West Coast Japanese-Americansómany of them born in this countryófrom their homes and businesses." Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston

"When she was young, with life ahead of her, I had been her future and resented it." Russell Baker

"When you are inside the jungle, away from the river, the trees vault out of sight." Annie Dillard

Now try some of your own.

E. Begin with a gerund: Begin with a verb form (ending in "ing") that acts as the subject of the sentence. Here are some examples:

Acting responsibly is an important concept to consider when discovering freedom.

"Looking at it, holding it, thinking of things to do with it displace other activities once thought essential." Neil Postman

Now try some of your own.

F. Begin with a participle phrase: Here are some examples:

"Breathing hard, balancing a tin of water on his head, a small boy climbed toward us." Gordon Parks

"Sitting at her bedside, forever out of touch with her, I wondered about my own children, and their children, and children in general, and about the disconnections between children and parents that prevent them from knowing each other."
Russell Baker

Now try some of your own.

G. Begin with a list of noun phrases: Here are some examples:

"The wretched prisoners huddling in the stinking cages of the lock-ups, the grey, cowed faces of the long term convicts, the scarred buttocks of the men who had been flogged with bamboos—all these oppressed me with an intolerable sense of guilt."
George Orwell

"Each whorl, each faint knob, each criss-cross vein in its egg-shell texture, is as clearly defined as on the day of creation." Anne Morrow Lindbergh

Now try some of your own.

Short and Simple Sentences:

For variety and a change in pace, shorter sentences are needed. One way to do this is to combine a few two or three word sentences into one. This is called a short and simple sentence. Examples follow:

"He ruminates, he dreams, he remembers." Malcolm Cowley

No minors, no food, no pets. (Motel Notice)

"The baby frets, the maid sulks." Joan Didion

Another way to shorten sentences is to write a simple sentence with compound parts. The result is a fast-paced sentence with parallel parts. Examples follow:

"The M.P., the soldiers, the turnkey, and the girl on the beach are white." John McPhee

"Nature has no sense of humor: In its beauty, as in its ugliness, or in its neutrality, there is no laughter." Joyce Carol Oates

"The student comes to his desk. On it, neatly arranged by the instructor, he finds his laboratory manual, a dissecting board, instruments, and a mimeographed list." Walker Percy

"Its as simple and as threatened as that." Adrienne Rich

"The facts are a mess. They are filled with gaps, chuck holes, switch backs, and dead ends--just like life." Scott Russell Sanders

Yet another way to shorten sentence structure is to add two really short sentences together with a comma.

They were alone, no one had seen them. Fyodor Dostoevsky

Add more of your own in your journal as you discover them through reading, listening, observing, and sensing life around you:

Inverted Sentences:

The following sentences are called inverted because the natural order is switched. This is usually done for emphasis, but always creates variety. Note the list of examples that follow:

Had he and I but met.óHad we but world enough, and time.óI ought before this to have reply'd.óBackward we look regretful, forward we glance with regret.óBefore my face the picture hangs.óBite deep and wide, o axe, the tree.óBy the side of a murmuring stream a gentleman sat.óThe earth with thunder torn.óat dawn of night, when sunset summer on autumn shoneóForward the crackling lashes send.óFrom a frightened face I flee.

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