

# A SYNTAX PRIMER WITH EXERCISES

**THE ESSENTIAL IDEA:** Like all literary features, syntax must be examined in terms of how it contributes to purpose, meaning, and effect, and helps an author achieve his/her purpose.

Therefore when analyzing, consider the following:

- 1). **SENTENCE LENGTH** – Are the sentences *telegraphic* (shorter than 5 words), *short* (approximately 5 to 10 words), *medium* (approximately 15 to 20 words) or *long* (approximately 30 words or more)?
- 2). **SENTENCE BEGINNINGS and ENDINGS** – Is there variety or does a pattern emerge? (*Anaphora & epistrophe*, terms to learn here.)
- 3). **WORD ORDER** – Are words set out in a special way for a specific purpose or effect?
- 4). **RHETORICAL QUESTION** – A question that expects no answer, it draws attention to a point or leads a reader to a specific view, answer, etc.  
**Example:** Can't we all just get along?
- 5). **ARRANGEMENT OF IDEAS** – Are ideas set out in a special way for a purpose or effect? The types listed below are just a few basic patterns. There are many more!

A. *loose sentence*: makes complete sense if brought to a close before the actual ending. The main point is “front loaded.”

**Example:** We finally reached San Diego/that morning/after a long delay/ a turbulent flight/ and some exciting adventures with airline food.

B. *periodic sentence*: makes sense only when the end of the sentence is reached. The main point is “end loaded.”

**Example:** That morning, after a long delay/ a turbulent flight/ and some exciting adventures with airline food/ we finally reached San Diego.

C. *parallel structure*: refers to a grammatical or structural similarity between sentences or parts of a sentence. It involves an arrangement of words, phrases, sentences, and paragraphs so that elements of equal importance are equally developed and similarly phrased. In essence, it is a particular kind of repetition.

Wrong: In the winter, I usually like skiing and to skate.

Right: In the winter, I usually like skiing and skating.

Right: In the winter, I usually like to ski and to skate.

**Example:** He was the kind of man who knew what he wanted, who intended to get it, and who allowed nothing or nobody to get in his way.

D. *natural order sentence*: a sentence where the subject comes before the predicate (main verb).

**Example:** Oranges grow in California.

E. *inverted order sentence*: a sentence where the predicate (main verb) comes before the subject.

**Example:** In California grow oranges.

F. *split order sentence*: divides the predicate into two parts with the subject coming in between.

**Example:** In California oranges grow.

G. *interrupted order*: the subordinate elements come in the middle, often set off by dashes.

**Example:** Oranges—beautiful, sweet, and delicious—grow in California

**6). SENTENCE CLASSIFICATIONS** – Consider the following in examining sentence structures. Learn the terminology.

A. Four Basic Sentence Types (purposes)

- *Declarative*: makes a statement  
**Example:** The king seems sick.
- *Imperative*: gives a command  
**Example:** Help him now.
- *Interrogative*: asks a question.  
**Example:** What's the matter with him?
- *Exclamatory*: makes an exclamation  
**Example:** The king is dead!

B. Four Basic Sentence Structures

- *Simple sentence*: one independent clause  
**Example:** The singer bowed to her adoring audience.
- *Compound sentence*: two or more independent clauses (joined by a coordinating conjunction—*and, but, for, or, not, yet, so*—or a semicolon).  
**Example:** The singer bowed gratefully to the audience, but she sang no encores.  
**Example:** The singer bowed gratefully to the audience; however, she sang no encores.
- *Complex sentence*: one independent clause and one or more dependent (subordinate) clauses.  
**Example:** Although the singer bowed gratefully to the audience, she sang no encores.
- *Compound-complex*: two or more independent clauses and one or more dependent (subordinate) clause(s).  
**Example:** Although the audience clapped wildly, the singer sang no encores, but she did bow gratefully.

**DIRECTIONS:**

**1). Make some general observations about the syntax.** Are the sentences predominately simple or complex? Long or short? What's the level of formality? Any fragments or run-ons, any stylistic "violations" of the conventions of grammar? Are there any periodic sentences, parallel structures, or other special features?

**2) Make comments based on your observations about how the author's use of syntax creates specific effects.**

**1. From *Moby-Dick*, page 1**

Call me Ismael. Some years ago—never mind how long, precisely—having little or no money in my purse, and nothing particular to interest me on shore, I thought I would sail about a little and see the watery part of the world. It is a way I have of driving off the spleen, and regulating the circulation. Whenever I find myself growing grim about the mouth; whenever it is a damp, drizzly November in my soul; whenever I find myself involuntarily pausing before coffin warehouses, and bringing up the rear of every funeral I meet; and especially whenever my hypos get such an upper hand of me, that it requires a strong moral principle to prevent me from deliberately stepping into the street, and methodically knocking people's hats off—then, I account it high time to get to sea as soon as I can. This is my substitute for pistol and ball. With a philosophical flourish Cato throws himself upon his sword; I quietly take to the ship. There is nothing surprising in this. If they but knew it, almost all men in their degree, some time or other, cherish very nearly the same feelings towards the ocean with me.

**2. From *All The Pretty Horses*, page 140**

I thought you were my friend, she said.

Tell me what to do, he said. I'll do anything you say.

The nightdamp laid the dust going up the cienaga road and they rode and they rode the horses side by side at a walk, sitting the animals bareback and riding with hackamores. Leading the horses by hand out through the gate into the road and mounting up and riding the horses side by side up the cienaga road with the moon in the west and some dogs barking over toward the shearingsheds and the greyhounds answering back from their pens and him closing the gate and turning and holding his cupped hands for her to step into and lifting her onto the black horse's naked back and then untying the stallion from the gate and stepping once onto the gateslat and mounting up all in one motion and turning the horse and them riding side by side up the cienaga road with the moon in the west like a moon of white linen hung from wires and some dogs barking.

**3. From *All The Pretty Horses*, page 159**

He said he's killed three men.

That's a damn lie, said Blevins.

Rawlins sat slowly on the concrete.

We're dead, he said. We're dead men. I knew it'd come to this. From the time I first seen him.

That aint goin to help us, said John Grady.

Aint but one of em died, said Blevins.

Rawlins raised his head and looked at him. Then he got up and stepped to the other side of the room and sat down again.

Cuidado con el bote, said the old man.

John Grady turned to Blevins.

I aint done nothing to him, said Blevins.

Tell me what happened, said John Grady.

He'd worked for a German family in the town of Palau eighty miles to the east and at the end of two months he'd taken the money he'd earned and ridden back across the selfsame desert and staked out the horse at the selfsame spring and dressed in the common clothes of the country he'd walked into town and sat in front of the tienda for two days until he saw the same man go by with the Bisley's worn gutta-percha grips sticking out of his belt.

What did you do?

You aint got a cigarette have you?

No. What did you do?

Didn't think you did.

What did you do?

Lord what wouldn't I give for a chew of tobacco.

What did you do?

I walked up behind him and snatched it out his belt. That's what I done.

And shot him.

He come at me.

Come at you.

#### **4. From *The Shipping News*, page103**

Quoyle woke in the empty room. Grey light. A sound of hammering. His heart. He lay in his sleeping bag in the middle of the floor. The candle on its side. Could smell the wax, smell the pages of the book that lay open beside him, the dust in the floor cracks. Neutral light illumined the window. The hammering again and a bearing shadow in the highest panes. A bird.

He got up and went to it. Would drive it away before it woke the aunt and the girls. It seemed the bird was trying to break from the closed room of sea and rock and sky into the vastness of his bare chamber. The whisper of his feet on the floor. Beyond the glass the sea lay pale as milk, pale the sky, scratched and scribbled with cloud welts. The empty bay, far shore creamed with fog. Quoyle pulled his clothes on and went downstairs.

On the threshold lay three wisps of knotted grass. Some invention of Sunshine's. He went behind the great rock to which the house was moored and into the bushes. His breath in cold cones.

## 5. From *The Turn of the Screw*, page. 15

In the first weeks the days were long, they often, at their finest, gave me what I used to call my own hour, the hour when, for my pupils, tea-time and bed-time having come and gone. I had before my final retirement a small interval alone. Much as I liked my companions this hour was the thing in the day I liked most and I liked it best of all when, as the light faded-or rather, I should say, the day lingered and the last calls of the last birds sounded in a flushed sky, from the old trees- I could take a turn into the grounds and enjoy, almost with a sense of property that amused and flattered me, the beauty and dignity of the place. It was a pleasure at these moments to feel myself tranquil and justified doubtless perhaps also to reflect that by my discretion, my quiet good sense and general high propriety, I was giving pleasure-if he ever thought of it!-to the person to whose pressure I had yielded. What I was doing was what he had earnestly hoped and directly asked of me, and that I *could*, after all, do it proved even a greater joy than I had expected. I dare say I fancied myself in short a remarkable young woman and took comfort in the faith that this would more publicly appear. Well, I needed to be remarkable to offer a front to the remarkable things that presently gave their first sign.

## 6. From “Letter from a Birmingham Jail”

I guess it is easy for those of you who have never felt the stinging darts of segregation to say wait. But when you have seen the vicious mobs lynch your mothers and fathers at will and drown your brothers and sisters at whim; when you have seen hate filled policemen curse, kick, brutalize and even kill your black brothers and sisters; when you see the vast majority of your twenty million Negro brothers smothering in an air-tight case of poverty in the midst of an affluent society; when you suddenly find your tongue twisted and your speech stammering as you seek to explain to your six-year-old daughter why she can't go to the public amusement park that has just been advertised on television, and see tears welling up in her little eyes when she is told that Funtown is closed to colored children, and see the depressing clouds of inferiority begin to form in her little mental sky, and see her begin to distort her little personality by unconsciously developing a bitterness toward white people; when you have to concoct an answer for a five-year-old son asking in agonizing pathos: Daddy, why do white people treat colored people so mean?; when you take a cross country drive and find it necessary to sleep night after night in the uncomfortable corners of your automobile because no motel will accept you; when you are humiliated day in and day out by nagging signs reading “white men” and “colored men”; when your first name becomes “nigger” and your middle name becomes “boy” (however old you are) and your last name becomes “John,” and when your wife and mother are never given the respected title of “Mrs.”; when you are harried by day and haunted by night by the fact that you are a Negro, living constantly at tiptoe stance never quite knowing what to expect next, and plagued with inner fears and outer resentments, when you are forever fighting a degenerating sense of ‘nobodiness’—then you will understand why we find it difficult to wait.

Martin Luther King, Jr.  
*Letter from a Birmingham Jail*