

# What is syntax?

## SYNTAX

The term *syntax* refers not only to the structure of sentences, their types, their uses, their connection, and the variations authors choose, but also to smaller structures *within* sentences. Phrases (any group of words) and clauses (groups of words that contain a subject and a verb) are also syntactic elements that require a reader's attention.

**Syntax** affects the pace of a piece.

- Short, clipped phrases, sentences and clauses tend to create a feeling of quickness, decisiveness, and speed to a piece. It is important to be aware of the content of a piece and look for connections to syntax. Pay attention to how pacing relates to the action and purpose of a particular piece.
- Long, convoluted sentences, especially with subordinate clauses at the beginning tend to slow the pace of a piece. Often they are connected to a contemplative section, a heavy or serious subject and the writer wants to emphasize it. Sometimes, however, they are placed in a piece for the purpose of demonstrating the ramblings of a character, the ludicrousness of an idea, or the ridiculousness of a situation. Watch for occasional satire or irony in these long sentences.

### Key Questions:

- How does syntax contribute to and enhance the meaning and effect of language?
- How does syntax contribute to tone?

1. "Syntax" refers to the ways words and phrases are arranged to form sentences. The reader must identify an author's syntax and discuss the relationship it has to the content of the passage. Authors may use:
  - a. specific patterns of phrases and sentences
  - b. divisions within a piece with different syntax for each
  - c. parallel structure
  - d. different sentence types
  - e. specific kinds of punctuation
  - f. other syntax techniques
2. To begin studying syntax, follow the following steps:
  - a. Number the sentences in the passage. This will help analyze each sentence and discuss it efficiently.
  - b. Make observations about the content and syntax of each sentence or group of sentences. Look for elements listed above or others observed.
    - i. Does the sentence length fit the subject matter?
    - ii. Why is the sentence length effective?
    - iii. What variety of sentence lengths is present?
    - iv. Sentence beginnings – Variety or Pattern?
    - v. Arrangement of ideas in sentences
    - vi. Arrangement of ideas in paragraph – Pattern?

## KNOWING YOUR GRAMMAR BASICS

### Types of sentences (based on structure)--

There are four basic types of grammatical sentence structure. You should know these so that you can discuss syntax intelligently.

Simple syntax: a single, independent clause.

Ex: “Brad threw the pitcher of water down his pants.”

Compound sentences: two independent clauses joined by a conjunction or a semi-colon:

Ex: “Brad wanted to throw water on his burning trousers, but the pitcher was well out of reach.”

“Brad wanted to throw water on his burning trousers; however, he had lost all control of his arms.”

Complex sentences: an independent clause and one or more subordinate clauses:

Ex: “Brad’s pants were entirely consumed by flames, so he screamed, waved his arms like a little girl, and lunged for the pitcher of water.

Compound Complex: two or more independent clauses, and one or more dependent clauses.

Ex: “Brad’s pants—which his mother had bought for him at Kmart—were entirely consumed, entirely eaten, by the flames; thus he screamed, waved his arms like a little girl, and lunged for the pitcher of water.”

### Types of sentences (based on purpose)--

Types of sentences			
declarative	The king is sick.	makes a statement	assertive
imperative	Cure the king!	gives a command	authoritative
interrogative	Is the king sick?	asks a question	questioning
exclamatory	The king is dead; long live the king!	makes an exclamation	emotional

**These terms OFTEN appear on the multiple choice part of the AP English Language Test:**

**The CUMULATIVE (loose) SENTENCE:** This sentence is a basic statement with a string of details added to it.

**Basic statement:** Bells rang.

**Loose sentence:** Bells rang, filling the air with their clangor, startling pigeons into flight from every belfry, bringing people into the streets to hear the news.

**THE PERIODIC SENTENCE:** In this sentence, additional details are placed **before** the basic statement. The sentence is called *periodic* because the main idea comes near the period.

**Basic statement:** The cat scratched Sally.

**Periodic sentence:** Suddenly, for no apparent reason, the loveable cat scratched Sally.

**THE BALANCED SENTENCE:** A balanced sentence is a sentence consisting of two or more parts (usually clauses) that are parallel in structure.

**Balanced sentence:** “He cometh forth like a flower and is cut down: he fleeth also as a shadow, and continueth not.” –from the book of Job

**ANTITHESIS:** Antithesis is a balanced sentence that expresses contrasting ideas.

**Antithetical sentence:** “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness . . .” —*Charles Dickens, A Tale of Two Cities*

**RHETORICAL QUESTION:** a question that expects no answer; it is used to draw attention to a point and is generally stronger than a direct statement.

If Mr. Ferchoff is always fair, as you have said, why did he refuse to listen to Mrs. Baldwin’s arguments?

<b>Punctuation</b>	
Ellipses	a trailing off; equally etc.; going off into a dreamlike state
Dash	interruption of a thought; an interjection of a thought into another
Semicolon	parallel ideas; equal ideas; a piling up of detail
Colon	a list; a definition or explanation; a result
Italics	for emphasis
Capitalization	for emphasis
Exclamation Point	for emphasis; for emotion

## ANALYZING SYNTAX

**WHEN ANALYZING SYNTAX, CONSIDER SUCH QUESTIONS AS:**

- Are there dramatic **shifts** in sentence length or complexity?
- Are there particular **sentence structures that imitate content** (short sentences that convey abrupt thoughts, repetition of commas to convey hesitation or suspense)?
- Are there **interruptions** in sentences that convey the author’s state of mind or a shift? Interruptions include ellipses (...) and sections of a sentence set off in commas or dashes (–)
- Is there **repetition** for emphasis?
- Do you see any **patterns**? Parallelism? The same structure at the end or beginning of each paragraph?

**What is the author EMPHASIZING with any of the above?**

**Also pay attention if you notice:**

**FRAGMENTS AND RUN ONS:** Even though these are normally considered errors, they can be used purposefully to create an effect.

**Run-on:** “They were poor, they were broken, they were tired, they were many.” -- The run-on conveys how heavy their burden was.

**Fragment:** “The little bit of effort you have shown is not enough to make me want to forgive you. Not nearly enough!” -- The fragment following the sentences conveys anger.