

Some Parallel Figures in English Prose

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The search for teachable sentence structures from among the vast body of English prose is more difficult than at first would appear. With the richness and massive quantity of fine English writing, one would think that it is just a matter of opening a “great book” and picking out sentences. However, real world prose is often encumbered with structures and oddities that are irrelevant to a particular lesson on a particular structure, structures and oddities that only cloud the issue at hand. It is in fact fairly difficult to find a sentence that illustrates one grammatical structure without introducing numerous other grammatical structures. Hence, the following collection of teachable sentences might be a welcome time-saver to other instructors. The source authors (H. G. Wells, W. B. Yeats, Jane Austen, Abraham Lincoln, and Hugh Blair) are especially valuable for their use of exceptionally prominent parallels, patterns, and structured sentence divisions. These sentences provide exceptionally clear illustrations of syntax and segmentation.

This sentence, from H. G. Wells’ short story “The Country of the Blind,” is a case in point:

He asked Nunez if he could sleep, and Nunez said that he could, but that before he slept he wanted food.

The sentence can be dissected into four subordinate clauses: “*if* he could sleep,” “*that* he could,” “*before* he slept,” and “*that* . . . he wanted food.” The first three of these clauses show structure very prominently. They each have the “subject and verb pattern” plus the “clause conjunction” starting word. The fourth clause is less easily visible, because the clause conjunction is somewhat separated from the fourth clause. Nonetheless, the principle is the same.

Once these four subordinate clauses are taken out of the sentence, the two independent clauses come into view: “He asked Nunez . . . *and* Nunez said.” Only the conjunction “*but*” remains to be accounted for; it joins the two “*that*-clauses,” subordinate in relation to the main clause but parallel in relation to each other. “Nunez said *that* he could . . . *but*, *that*”

This sentence is highly structured, and, more important, most *visibly* structured. The options for diagramming this sentence on the whiteboard are numerous. Simply underlining the two main clauses, and bracketing the subordinate clauses would constitute a valuable lesson in structure. One could separate the phrase and clause segments spatially in ways that show the structural relationships. One could use colour printing, italics, bold, and so on, to emphasize the different “pieces” visually. All of this is known as sentence diagramming, and most teachers have their own methods for sentence diagramming, depending on what particular structure the class is learning. However, it is not the purpose of this article to demonstrate sentence diagramming in general. The purpose is to show you my list of structured sentences, patiently collected over the years!

A good teaching method is to use the same sentences through a series of different concept lessons. After teaching the compound-complex structure, hand out a fresh copy of the above sentences and ask your students to cross out, bracket, or otherwise mark the prepositional phrases. The prepositional phrase is one of the most teachable of all grammatical structures. The prepositional phrase formula (“starts on a preposition and goes to the next noun”) is extremely, perhaps absolutely, regular. The prepositional phrase formula also establishes the pattern for the infinitive phrase and the participial phrase, which differ only in the key starting word (i.e., an infinitive or a participle instead of a preposition) and in the greater variety as to endings. Here is a set of simple sentences which are particularly rich in clearly structured prepositional phrases:

The long, involved, and intricate sentences of Clarendon are the greatest error in his writing. (Hugh Blair)

Every connecting word should instantly present its referent to the mind of the reader without the least question. (Blair)

Ambiguity arises from a wrong choice of words, or from a wrong collocation of them. (Blair)

In the last example, students will be liable to mistake “or” for a clause conjunction. This is a good moment to distinguish between compound and seemingly compound structures. As used in this case, “or” is merely a *word or phrase conjunction*, not a clause conjunction, simply because it is in fact joining only a word to a word, or a phrase to a phrase, but not a clause to a clause. The core sentence is simple (“Ambiguity arises”), with a noticeably parallel set of four phrases attached. “From a wrong choice of words” is linked (via “or”) to “from a wrong collocation of them.” These two phrase sections further correspond to each other in terms of internal pattern. Parallelism, and compound parallelism, was a habit of mind in these prose writers. Here is one from Blair that presents yet another configuration: “The study of perspicuity requires attention first, to single words and phrases, and then, to the construction of sentences.”

Here is a compound sentence with only one prepositional phrase: “*The rain continued the whole evening without intermission; Jane certainly could not come back*” (Austen). And the following list is a set of purely compound sentences, without the encumbrance of any complex structures:

They shouted, and there was no reply; they shouted and whistled, and for the rest of the night they slept no more. (Wells)

I admire the activity of your benevolence, but every impulse of feeling should be guided by reason; and, in my opinion, exertion should always be in proportion to the requirement. (Austen)

The method of raising revenue ought not to impede the transaction of business; it ought to encourage it. (Calvin Coolidge)

Conservatism is more candid to behold another’s worth; reform is more disposed to maintain and increase its own. (Emerson)

Jonathan Swift, one of our most correct writers, valued himself much on using no words but those of Old English origin, and his language may be considered as the strictest standard in the choice of words. (Blair)

Without clarity, the richest ornaments of style only glimmer through the dark; they mud-

dle instead of informing the reader. (Blair)

In some instances, students will more easily understand the sentence structure with an explanation of the source text. The next sentence, again from H. G. Wells' "The Country of the Blind," explains how this blind community eventually began to measure days by "warm time" and "cold time:" i.e., they reversed (quite sensibly) our usual "light and dark" pattern of day and night into "warm and cold."

In the words of Nunez, this time had been divided into the warm *and* the cold, which are the blind equivalents of day and night, AND it was good to sleep in the warm *and* work during the cold, AND NOW, except for his arrival, the whole town of the blind would have been asleep.

The challenge with this sentence is to distinguish between the *clause conjunction* uses of "and" (capitalized) and the numerous more minor uses (italicized), such as word conjunction or phrase conjunction, of the same word. The above sentence, of course, is *compound* because of the clauses joined by "and," and is *complex* because of the clause joined by "which." Here are additional sentences of the compound-complex variety:

Jane was yielding to the preference which she had developed for him from the first; she was very much in love. (Jane Austen)

A sentence consists always of component parts, and, since these parts may be connected in several different ways, the same thought may often be either brought into one sentence or split into two or three. (Blair)

Is it not certain that the Creator yawns in earthquake and thunder and other popular displays, but toils in rounding the delicate spiral of a shell? (Yeats)

The following sentence, from W. B. Yeats's Autobiography, presents a complex but still very visible clause structure:

I know THAT revelation is from the self, but from that age-long memored self, *that* shapes the elaborate shell of the mollusk and the child in the womb, *that* teaches the birds to make their nest; AND THAT genius is a crisis that joins *that* buried self for certain moments to our trivial daily mind.

The difficulty with this sentence is identifying which instances of the clause conjunction "that" match with each other, and which instances are on a lower level structurally. There are two primary "that's" following the verb "know." No one, including our students, has any trouble reading this sentence, but analyzing it is not so easy. This sentence can show students the remarkable level of linguistic complexity that they process as easily as listening to someone speak.

In the next sentence, "and" is a phrase conjunction joining the two phrases "in " and "in determining." Each of these two phrases in turn is further developed by the addition of a dependent clause:

The rest of the evening was spent in conjecturing *how soon he would return Mr Bennet's visit*, AND in determining *when they should ask him for dinner*.

Here are some sentences which present a kind of "tail-end parallelism." I have capitalized the key juncture words. Again, not every "that" is a key "that," and not every conjunction is a clause conjunction:

It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us – THAT from these honoured dead we take increased devotion to the cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion; THAT we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain; THAT this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom; and THAT government of the people by the people, for the people shall not perish from the earth. (Lincoln)

Mrs Long says THAT Netherfield is taken by a young man of large fortune from the north of England; THAT he came down on Monday in a chaise and four to see the place, and was so much delighted with it that he agreed with Mr Morris immediately; THAT he is to take possession before Michaelmas, and [THAT] some of his servants are to be in the house by the end of next week. (Austen)

We are pleased with an author WHO frees us from all effort of searching for his meaning, WHO carries us through his subject without any difficulty or confusion WHOSE style flows always like a limpid stream, where we see to the very bottom. (Blair)

The words which an author uses to express an idea may be faulty in three respects: they may either not express that which the author intends, but instead some other which only resembles or is related to it, OR they may express that idea but not quite fully and completely, OR they may express it together with something in addition to it. (Blair)

They could DESCRIBE an entertainment with accuracy, RELATE an anecdote with humour, and LAUGH at their acquaintance with spirit. (Austen)

I had an unshakeable conviction, arising how or whence I cannot tell, *that* invisible gates would open, AS they had opened for Blake, AS they had opened for Swedenborg, AS they had opened for Boehme, and *that* this philosophy would find its manuals of devotion in all imaginative literature, and set before Irishmen for special manual an Irish literature, which, though made by many minds, *would seem* the work of a single mind, *and turn* our places of beauty or legendary association into holy symbols. (Yeats)

The next sentences are complex. In each of these an interior clause is presented as a kind of “digression” from the main clause. In each case, I have placed square brackets around the digression segment:

Sentences [which are too long and consist of too many parts] always transgress one of the rules which I shall mention soon. (Blair)

Let us now consider the import of precision in language which, [as it is the highest aspect of clarity,] merits a full explication. (Blair)

One cannot know [what a man really is] by the end of a fortnight. (Austen)

It has long been a grave question whether any government [which is not too strong for the liberties of its people,] can be strong enough to maintain its existence in great emergencies. (Lincoln)

Any proposition [which embraces the restoration of peace, the integrity of the whole Union, and the abandonment of slavery,] will be received and considered by the executive

government of the United States. (Lincoln)

Why should men, [who spoke their opinions in low voices, as though they feared to disturb the readers in some ancient library, and timidly as though they knew that all subjects had long since been explored, all questions long since decided in books whereon the dust settled] – live lives of such disorder and seek to rediscover in verse the syntax of impulsive common life? (Yeats)

Finally, here are some examples of elaborate parallelism, and sentences which are a structural “tour de force,” which I leave to your own ingenuity to diagram:

If my vanity had taken a musical turn, you would have been invaluable, but as it is, I would really rather not play for someone who must be in the habit of listening to the very best performers. (Austen)

The idea came upon him, he has told me, that, if he spoke, he would reveal that he had lost coherence; and for the three days that the idea lasted he spent the hours of daylight wandering upon the Dublin mountains, that he might escape the necessity for speech. (Yeats)

I heard the other day of a Dublin man recognizing in London an elderly man who had lived in that house in Ely Place in his youth, and of the elderly man, at the sudden memory, bursting into tears. (Yeats)

He tells how the party worked their difficult and almost vertical way to the very foot of the last and greatest precipice, and how they built a night shelter amidst the snow upon a little shelf of rock, and, with a touch of read dramatic power, how presently they found that Nunez had gone from them. (Wells)

On the other hand, by giving attention to sentence structure, we acquire the habit of expressing ourselves with clarity and elegance, and if a disorder chance to arise in some of our sentences we immediately see where it lies and are able to rectify it. (Blair)

For a sentence consists always of component parts, which are called its members, and, as these members may be either few or many, and may be connected in several different ways, the same thought may often be either brought into one sentence, or split into two or three. (Blair)

Certainly virtue is like precious odours, which are most fragrant when they are incensed or crushed: for prosperity doth best discover vice; but adversity doth best discover virtue. (Francis Bacon)

Your mother will never see you again if you do not marry Mr Collins, and I will never see you again if you do. (Austen)

If your daughter should have a dangerous fit of illness, if she should die, then it would be a comfort when we found out that it was all in pursuit of Mr Bingley and under your own orders. (Austen)

The world will little note nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here. (Lincoln)