

How to Improve Your Prose:

Parallelism

Creating Balance

Syntactics=Syntax + Tactics

In her essay "Why I Write," Amy Tan expresses many of her ideas in pairs or series of words, phrases, or clauses. Her prose has a nice balance and an easy flow because she casts these pairs and series in parallel forms: grammatical structures that match and complement one another. For example, when she recounts her response to a negative criticism, she has two points to make, and she conveys them in parallel structures:

I pointed out that readers are free to interpret a book as they please, and that they are free to appreciate or not appreciate the result.

Tan lends force to her two assertions by expressing them in parallel clauses, each beginning with "that." In fact, the repetition of "that" or other simple words often signals the presence of parallel expressions. For example, note how the repeated "to" serves as a counter in the following sentence:

Apparently, I am driven to capture the immigrant experience, to demystify Chinese culture, to point out the differences between Chinese and American culture, even to pave the way for other Asian-American writers.

Tan expresses each of her supposed motivations for writing in an infinitive phrase ("to" plus a verb, plus related words), using parallel forms to emphasize the wide variety of students' thoughts about the foundations of her work.

Tan also uses noun pairs as parallel expressions, repeating "and" to highlight the pairing. In the following example, she uses a parallel series of noun pairs to accent the sometimes contradictory rewards of the writing life:

Those early obsessions led to a belief that writing could be my salvation, providing me with the sort of freedom and danger, satisfaction and discomfort, truth and contradic-

tion I can't find in anything else in life.

Even when no single word is repeated, the grammatical structures of a sentence can be parallel in form. Tan often uses a pair or series of verb phrases to show multiple actions by the same subject, as we see in her reference to a scene from *The Joy Luck Club*:

The boyfriend brings a bottle of wine as a gift and commits a number of social gaffes at the dinner table.

Here, Tan expresses both the boyfriend's actions in a verb phrase (verb plus related words). She uses the same technique in a later passage about her reasons for writing; this time, she repeats the object ("me") but changes the verb in each phrase:

Because my childhood disturbed me, pained me, made me ask foolish questions.

Sometimes, Tan makes the grammatical parallel a perfect match of parts of speech. Note the balanced adverb-adjective pairs in the following sentence:

In short, her literary sleuthing went on to reveal a ... Byzantine puzzle, which ... proved to be completely brilliant and precisely logical.

To emphasize her parallel expressions, Tan also uses correlative conjunctions—special pairs of words that require parallel forms. One of her favorite correlatives is "not only ... but also." She obeys the rule of following each half of the correlative pair with parallel expressions:

Reviewers and students have enlightened me about not only how I write, but why I write.

Here, Tan follows both "not only" and "but" with short clauses. By contrast, in the next case, she follows both elements of the correlative pair with prepositional phrases:

So I am alarmed when reviewers and educators assume that my very personal, specific, and fictional stories are meant to be representative ... not just of Chinese-Americans but sometimes of all Asian culture.

Exercise A: Finding Parallels.

Underline the parallel expressions in each of the following sentences.

- The platoon leader told the riflemen that their objectives were to find a good hiding place, to secure the area, and to radio their location to the captain.
- Miss Bower handled the class with austerity and charm, thoroughness and whimsy, pressure and patience.
- Sue controls her boyfriend not only by withholding affection but also by manipulating his friends.
- The veteran director's films are sometimes amusing, often moving, and always interesting.

Exercise B: Creating Parallels.

Fill in the blanks in each of the following sentences with phrases parallel in structure to the underlined expressions.

- The members of the visiting team lost hope when they realized that their offense was useless, _____, and _____.
- Because she was late for class, Sharon took a seat in the back of the room, _____, and _____.
- The new rules prohibit talking not only in the classrooms _____.

—DAN LOOSE