

How to Improve Your Prose

Making Music

Syntacticals (Syntax + Tactics)

One of the most notable features of Alice Walker's prose is its music. Her sentences are flowing and rhythmic, drawing readers in with their easy, enticing sound. Close study of her syntax reveals that Walker achieves these musical effects through various devices that *break* or *interrupt* the stream of her words and thoughts. In the first paragraph of "My Daughter Smokes," Walker alternates very short sentences with longer, more-textured ones. By varying sentence length, she achieves a sudden, abrupt effect, which lends intensity to her hard-hitting confrontation with her daughter's smoking:

"My daughter smokes. While she is doing her homework, her feet on the bench in front of her and her calculator clicking out answers to her algebra problems, I am looking at the half-empty package of Camels tossed carelessly close at hand. Camels."

Walker also makes ample use of the dash—a valuable tool for making sharp interruptions—to show sudden turns of thought. As she recalls her father's smoking habit, she quickly veers into a recollection about his appearance:

"But before he smoked 'ready-mades'—when he was very young and very poor, with eyes like lanterns—he smoked Prince Albert tobacco ..."

Sometimes Walker uses the dash to interrupt a sentence with a series, a list of details that particularize an idea she has just expressed. Note this sentence about Native Americans' use of tobacco as a sacred medicine:

"They have used it extensively—its juice, its leaves, its roots, its (holy) smoke—to heal wounds and cure diseases."

Walker also uses the colon to introduce or announce examples. When she

describes the cigarette advertisements she sees in Third World countries, she uses this technique to provide a feeling of sudden interruption, without the delay the use of the words "for example" would create:

"There are large billboards directed at them both: the tough, 'take-charge,' or dapper older man, the glamorous, 'worldly' young woman, both puffing away."

Also note here how Walker uses coordinate adjectives (tough, "take-charge," glamorous, "worldly"). This technique is another tool that makes her sentences musical. She uses several adjectives, separated by commas, to modify the same noun and to provide special emphasis:

"I drank numerous bottles of terrible sweet, very cheap wine."

Another of Walker's rhythmic devices is the participial phrase, a structure which enables the writer to express a subject's multiple actions, without beginning a new sentence for each one:

"... people starve themselves of both food and air, effectively weakening and addicting their children, eventually eradicating themselves."

Here the author might have used three or four short sentences to express these actions, but she communicates her ideas more emphatically and more musically by interrupting the longer sentence with participial phrases.

Exercise A: Identify which of the techniques discussed above Walker has used in each of the following sentences:

1. In fact, I do weep a little, standing there by the stove holding one of the instruments ... that could cause my daughter's death.

Technique: _____

2. The tobacco was dark brown, pungent, slightly bitter.

Technique: _____

3. I wondered aloud to my sister—who is perennially trying to quit—whether our father realized this.

Technique: _____

4. ... the discarded tins could be used for a number of things: to keep buttons and shoelaces, to store seeds, and best of all, to hold worms for the rare times my father took us fishing.

Technique: _____

5. Because it was a ritual with my buddies—Murl, Leon, and "Dog" Farley—I continued to drink wine.

Technique: _____

Exercise B: Use the technique specified in parentheses to combine each of these sets of short sentences into one.

1. Everything about Muriel irritated Tom. Her smirk, her flirting, her gossip irritated him. (a pair of dashes)

2. Bill was aware of the university's many attractions. These included its low costs, its varied programs, and its robust social life. (colon)

3. The gang stared into the pool. It was dark and murky and deep. (coordinate adjectives)

4. Mr. Ludwig glared at the study hall. He shook his head in disapproval of the group's conduct. (participial phrase)

—DAN LOOSE