

How to Improve Your Prose: Rhythmic Writing

Syntactiles (Syntax + Tactiles)

Some people think that rhythmic writing occurs only in poetry and songs. They're wrong. Rhythm can make prose more interesting as well. In "Just Walk On By," Brent Staples uses forceful syntax to lend strength—and rhythm—to his arresting message. He *interrupts* his sentences frequently, creating rhythmical breaks that reinforce his ideas. He uses several tools to do this:

The Appositive

One structure that Staples uses in this way is the appositive, a group of words set off from the rest of the sentence, usually by a comma, to provide additional information about a person or place just mentioned. We see this in his account of the frightened woman in Chicago:

I came upon her late one evening on a deserted street in Hyde Park, a relatively affluent neighborhood in an otherwise mean, impoverished section of Chicago.

The appositive provides a rhythmical break in the sentence and adds information about Hyde Park.

Coordinating Adjectives

The appositive contains another of Staples' rhythmic techniques: coordinate adjectives, a pair of adjectives ("mean, impoverished") modifying the same noun and separated by a comma. When he writes of "dark, shadowy intersections in Chicago" or "bright, sunny selections from Vivaldi's *Four Seasons*," he places extra emphasis on the image he presents, a kind of useful redundancy.

The Dash and the Colon

Staples uses the dash to provide even sharper breaks in the flow of his

sentences than the comma provides. Sometimes the dash introduces a modifying phrase to clarify or sharpen an image, as we see in his first sentence:

My first victim was a woman—white, well dressed, probably in her early twenties.

Instead of starting a new sentence to describe the woman ("She was white . . ."), the writer abruptly adds this information, which seems to have occurred to him suddenly.

Staples also uses the dash to interrupt his sentences with a series, a group of items which particularize an idea he has just expressed:

*I could cross in front of a car stopped at a traffic light and elicit the *thunk, thunk, thunk, thunk* of the driver—black, white, male, or female—hammering down the door locks.*

At other times, Staples uses the dash to announce an idea with dramatic force, as we see when he discovers the fearful power of his presence:

I first began to know the unwieldy inheritance I'd come into—the ability to alter space in ugly ways.

Here the author discloses a shocking idea with special abruptness. Near the end of the piece, he uses a colon to announce a more pleasant revelation.

I employ what has proved to be an excellent tension-reducing measure: I whistle melodies from Beethoven and Vivaldi and the more popular classical composers.

Perhaps Staples's most common use of interrupters—especially the dash—

comes with sudden turns of thought: ideas which seem to occur to him almost too late but which he must include—right away.

As a softy who is scarcely able to take a knife to a raw chicken—let alone hold it to a person's throat—I was surprised, embarrassed, and dismayed all at once.

Exercise: Punctuate for Emphasis

Using Staples's techniques as models, punctuate the sentences below. In each sentence, which of Staples's tools is the writer using to add rhythm and emphasis to the writing? How?

1. In response to the school district's contract offer, all auxiliary personnel secretaries teacher-aides custodians bus drivers decided to strike.
2. Bursting from the meeting before all the others came Bob jubilant wide-eyed and dying to spread the good news.
3. The principal informed Sue as if she didn't know already that she would be suspended for five days.
4. Ed finally landed a job with Agora a company with a big heart and lots of benefits.
5. The treasurer merely confirmed what the committee already knew that there were no funds left for the project.
6. None of the items on the table the notebooks the file folders the calculators interested the customers in the least.
7. Getting off the plane were the weary drooping members of the team defeated but still proud.