**Syntax**

**Syntax** = sentence structure

Syntax controls *verbal pacing* and *focus*. It is important to examine *sentence patterns* and *variety* for their effects.

Syntax includes:

1) Sentence parts

2) Word order

3) Sentence length

4) Punctuation

**1) Sentence Parts (Basic Vocab)**

**The Subject:** is the part of the sentence which expresses *what the sentence is about*. It’s the topic of the sentence.

**The Verb (or predicate)**: is the part of the sentence that *expresses action* or *connects the subject* with the other words in the sentence.

**A Clause**: is a group of related words that **has both** a subject and a verb.

**A Phrase**: is a group of related words that **has no** subject or verb.

**Sentence fragment**: a group of words that is punctuated like a sentence but is not actually a sentence. It *does not meet all the criteria of a sentence*. Think of it as an incomplete thought.

**Independent Clause**: a clause that can *stand alone*; it has *both a subject and a verb* and is a complete thought.

**Subordinate Clause (or dependent clause)**: a clause that cannot stand alone; *it is dependent on the rest of the sentence* because it is an incomplete thought.

A **subordinate clause starts with a subordinator word** such as “when,” “if” or “which.”

Examples: *When* Ronnie gets here,

*If* Denise comes to class late,

*Which* I bought last weekend

**\*\*\*Please remember that a *subordinate clause* is not considered a complete thought and cannot be a sentence by itself. A subordinate clause is a *sentence fragment* *if it is not connected to an independent clause*.\*\*\***

**2) Word Order**

-Changing the word order can *change the meaning of a sentence.*

Jim said that he drives *only* a truck. (He drives nothing else)

Jim said that *only* he drives a truck. (No one else drives a truck)

Jim *only* said that he drives a truck. (He probably doesn’t really drive a truck)

*Only* Jim said that he drives a truck. (No one else said it)

**3) Sentence Length**

**Telegraphic** – less than five words long

**Short** – five words long

**Medium** – approx. eighteen words long

**Long** – greater than thirty words long

**4) Punctuation**

Punctuation helps us *understand the written word*. Understanding how key punctuation marks work will help you analyze syntax.

**Semi-colon**: the semi-colon joins two or more clauses when there is *no connecting word* (and, but, or). When a semi-colon is used, *all clauses are equally important*, and the reader should pay equal attention to them all.

Ex. He is my best friend; I have known him most of my life.

**Colon**: the colon tells the reader that something *important will follow*.

Ex. His is my best friend: he helps me through hard times and celebrates good times with me.

**Dash**: the dash marks a *sudden change* in thought or sets off a summary. Parenthesis can do this, too, but the dash is more informal and conversational.

Ex. John – my best friend – lives right down the street.

**Italics**: are used to *talk about a word as a word* (He used the word *really* too many times in that paragraph) or for *emphasis.* When we handwrite something, we show italics by underlining.

**More Sophisticated Syntax Analysis**

**Sentence Patterns** – What is the *function* of the sentence?

**Declarative sentence:** makes a *statement*

Ex. Tom ate the rat.

**Interrogative sentence:** asks a *question*

Ex. Did Tom eat the rat?

**Exclamatory sentence:** provides *emphasis or expresses strong emotion*

Ex. Tom ate the rat!

**Imperative sentence:** gives a *command*

Ex. Eat the rat. (the subject of the sentence is “you” which is understood)

**Types of Sentences**

**Simple sentence**: a sentence that has only *one subject* and *one verb*

Ex. Tom ate the rat.

**Complex sentence**: a sentence made up of *one independent clause* and *one or more subordinate clauses*

Ex. Because Tom ate the rat, he died.

**Compound sentence**: a sentence made up of *two or more independent clauses*. The clauses are joined by a *comma* *and a coordinating conjunction* (and, but, or) or by a *semi-colon.*

Ex. Tom ate the rat, and he died. OR Ex. Tom ate the rat; he died.

**Compound-complex sentence**: a sentence that contains *two or more independent clauses* and *one or more subordinate clauses*

Ex. Tom ate the rat when he was hungry, and he died.

**Periodic sentence**: a sentence in which the main thought is not complete *until the end.*

Ex. After a lengthy flight and many stops, we reached Edmonton.

**Loose sentence**: a sentence in which the essential meaning is *complete before the end*

Ex. We reached Edmonton after a lengthy flight and many stops.

**Ballanced/Parallel sentence**: the phrases or clauses balance each other in *likeness or structure meaning, and/or length*

Ex. He was walking, running, and jumping.

Ex. To err is human, to forgive divine.

**So, what should I look for?**

Focus on looking at the *four key areas of syntax* and answering the following questions:

**1) Sentence parts**

* *Devices*: How would you describe the author’s use of the following:

o Independent and dependent clauses

o Repetition

o Parallelism

o Fragments

o Comparisons

**2) Word order**

* *Structure*: How are words and phrases arranged within the sentence? What is the author trying to accomplish through this arrangement?
* *Sentence beginnings:* How does the author begin his or her sentences? (Does the author, for example, consistently begin with introductory phrases or clauses?

**3) Sentence length**

* *Sentence length:* How many words are in the different sentences? Do you notice any pattern (e.g., a cluster of short sentences of a particular type)?

**4) Punctuation**

* *Punctuation*: How does the author punctuate the sentence and to what extent does the punctuation affect the meaning?

**Final Questions**

• *Changes:* Are there places where the syntax clearly changes? If so, where, how, and why?

• *Language:* What use does the author make of figurative language or colloquial expressions?

**Characterizing Syntax**

Just like you must provide an adjective when explaining tone, you must provide a description of the syntax in a text as well. Try to answer the following question:

• **How would you characterize the author’s syntax in this text?**

*Options:*

-plain, sparse, unadorned -staccato, abrupt

-ornate, elaborate, flowery -elegant

-jumbled, chaotic, -musical, lyrical, lilting