

Rhetorical Devices to Improve Style

Adapted from Oxford Canadian Students' Guide to Language, Literature, and Media (2001)

Rhetorical Device	Use	Example
Abnormal Word Order	Gives variety and emphasis by changing the usual subject-verb sentence pattern.	<i>Normal word order (subject-verb):</i> The actor's worst nightmare stood laughing at him from the shadows. <i>Abnormal word order (verb-subject):</i> Laughing at him from the shadows stood the actor's worst nightmare.
Allegory	Making the characters and setting represent general concepts and ideas.	Fables in which personified animals are used allegorically to teach lessons of human conduct, such as "The Hare and the Tortoise".
Alliteration	Draws attention to words by repeating their initial consonant sounds	He was <i>rarely</i> regretful.
Allusion	An indirect reference to a well-known event, person, thing, or place. By suggestion, it may enhance the significance of a passage.	<u>Alice in Wonderland</u> includes allusions to many political figures, making it a satire for adults as well as a children's story.
Analogy	Helps the reader understand something unfamiliar by comparing it to something well-known.	Comparing a school to an anthill helps convey their shared characteristics of being heavily populated, very busy, and regulated in movement.
Chiasmus	Makes a parallel sentence more memorable by repeating the words in reverse order.	John F. Kennedy: "Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country."
Climactic Word Order	Presents facts from least to most important for impact.	The singer's rise to fame was quick; first she won the local talent show, then she was on national radio, and after five years she had three triple-platinum albums.
Connotation and Denotation	Denotation is what a word literally means; connotation implies meanings of a word not found in a dictionary.	<i>Home</i> denotes where one lives, but also connotes comfort, privacy, and intimacy.
Hyperbole	Emphasizes a fact.	I was so tired, I could have slept for fifty years.
Imagery	Appeals to one or more of the senses by creating a vivid impression through the use of specific and descriptive details.	A daisy's beauty is described with imagery such as "a silver shield with a boss of gold" by William Wordsworth.

Litotes	Understatement creates the reverse effect (and often adds a touch of irony) by making a fact seem less significant.	Paris Hilton is often thought of as a perfectionist singer and actress.
Metaphor	Compares two things directly.	The young boy's mane gave him a wild look.
Onomatopoeia	Draws attention to the sound of a word.	Buzz, splash, burp
Oxymoron	Places words side by side that mean the opposite of one another so that they create a new meaning.	He's such a wise fool!
Parallelism	Repeats specific words, phrases, or structure to emphasize ideas and make them memorable.	Abraham Lincoln's "government of the people, by the people, for the people".
Periodic Sentence	Withholds an important part of the sentence until the end so that it doesn't make complete sense until the very end.	You can always count on one person—Samuel L. Jackson.
Personification	Gives human traits to non-human objects or animals.	The wind's fingers lifted strands of her hair.
Pun	A play on words with the same sound but different meaning. Usually injects some humour into the writing.	Sticks float. They would.
Repetition	Provides emphasis and rhythm.	The class was buzzing, the class was restless—the class was ready for Spring Break!
Rhetorical Question	Asks a question where the answer is already known or implied.	Can anyone deny the importance of the arts to society?
Rhyme	Makes two or more words memorable by having similarly-sounding endings.	<i>Change</i> the <i>strange</i> look on your face before they suspect anything!
Rhythm	The movement in a range of words, such as short syllables with a regular beat that implies fast movement.	Slow is the beating of a sleeping baby's heart.
Sentence Fragment	A deliberately incomplete sentence places emphasis on key words to create an overall effect, such as humour or suspense.	Never. Ever. Again. That's what he told himself as he threw away the gun.
Simile	Points out a similarity between two unlike things with a connector word such as <i>like</i> or <i>as</i> .	He was as bright as a lightbulb.
Symbolism	An object or action that represents something other than what it is.	Sunrise suggests the end of things, such as the end of hope, goodness, life, or a certain era.