**Rhetorical Grammar: Parallelism**

**Play of the Day: *The Merchant of Venice*, 1598-ish**

Parallelism (also called parallel structure or parallel construction) refers to using the same grammatical construction within a sentence/within multiple sentences.

This particular piece of rhetorical grammar addresses multiple levels of writing. Within a single sentence, parallelism can be used to make sure the sentence is internally consistent. One of the most common problems I see in sentences is the inconsistent use of verb forms. So, for example, a sentence might say:

*Yesterday I went swimming, running, and also rode my bike.*

The sentence is understandable, but by saying *and also rode my bike* rather than *biking*, the grammatical structure of the sentence is disrupted without a good reason. When you’re listing things in a sequence, it’s usually best to maintain the same structure. For example, it’s common to use gerunds (-ing verbs):

*Yesterday I went* ***swimming, running, and biking****.* (“Went” applies to all three gerunds here.)

It’s also common to use infinitive verbs: verbs that start with “to,” as in “to run,” “to jump,” “to be, or not to be.”

***To die, to sleep. To sleep****, perchance* ***to dream****…*

But parallelism applies to all sorts of things.

*I* ***whacked*** *him on the head,* ***jumped*** *off of the bridge, and* ***swam*** *to safety*.

*“****I came, I saw, I conquered.****”* (All of these verbs are in a simple past tense.)

This doesn’t just apply to verbs, although the use of verbs is probably where this issue appears most often.

*“****Tall and tan and young and lovely****, the girl from Ipanema goes walking…”* (Imagine sung by Frank Sinatra)

*“Hey yo, I’m just like my country,* ***I’m young, scrappy and hungry****, and I’m not throwing away my shot!”* –Lin Manuel Miranda

In the above sentence, the adjectives rely on parallel structure, creating a rhythm for both songs. They do not say, for example, “I’m just like my country, I’m young, scrappy, and I feel hunger.” (Of course, that would also ruin the rhyme.)

Parallelism, just like varying your sentence lengths and styles, as we discussed last week, can help create rhythm in your sentences, and thus can help retain your reader’s interest. When parallel structure is used in long sentences, or is used in multiple sentences, it can also draw extra attention to the content of those sentences (just like a particularly long sentence, or a sentence fragment, draws attention to itself and its content).

Here’s an example of parallelism used for rhetorical effect, taken from Michael Chabon’s short essay, “Against Dickitude”:

“Alone, in private, I knew how to treat them with *kindness, tenderness, generosity of feeling and expression*, but whenever we were in public, in particular among my male friends—and when you are a young man you are always in public, always *watching yourself*, *listening to yourself*, audience and judge, *checking your behavior* against that of the mental list of exemplary men that you have been busy compiling—I was kind of a dick, *never serious, never forgiving, never willing to commit to anything that might entangle me in seriousness or the need to forgive*.” (My italics)

Parallel structure creates its own rhythm, creates expectations internal to the sentence—ideally, it creates rhetorical interest for your reader. Of course, the overuse of parallel structure can result in sentences that end up being too repetitive. You could end up with ten sentences in a row that begin with “He said,” and unless you have a reason for creating that monotony, that’s something you should avoid. The important thing here is to be conscious of how you use repetitive sentence structures. Like sentence fragments or extremely long sentences, they draw attention to themselves.

*The Merchant of Venice*, Act 3, Scene 1

Salerio: Why, I am sure if he forfeit thou wilt not take his flesh. What’s that good for?

Shylock: To bait fish withal. If it will feed nothing else it will feed my revenge. He hath disgraced me, and hindered me half a million; laughed at my losses, mocked at my gains, scorned my nation, thwarted my bargains, cooled my friends, heated mine enemies, and what’s his reason? –I am a Jew. Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions; fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer as a Christian is? If you prick us do we need bleed? If you tickle us do we not laugh? If you poison us do we not die? And if you wrong us shall we not revenge? If we are like you in the rest, we will resemble you in that. If a Jew wrong a Christian, what is his humility? Revenge. If a Christian wrong a Jew, what should his sufferance be by Christian example? Why, revenge. The villainy you teach me I will execute, and it shall go hard but I will better the instruction.