

Rhetorical Devices Cheat Sheet

1. Parallelism is recurrent syntactical similarity. Several parts of a sentence or several sentences are expressed similarly to show that the ideas in the parts or sentences are equal in importance. Parallelism also adds balance and rhythm and, most importantly, clarity to the sentence.

For the end of a theoretical science is truth, but the end of a practical science is performance. --Aristotle

These critics--who point out the beauties of style and ideas, who discover the faults of false constructions, and who discuss the application of the rules--usually help a lot in engendering an understanding of the writer's essay.

When, at the conclusion of a prolonged episode of agonizing thought, you decide to buy this car; when, after a hundred frantic sessions of begging stonefaced bankers for the money, you can obtain sufficient funds; and when, after two more years of impatience and frustration, you finally get a driver's license, then come see me and we will talk about a deal.

After you corner the market in Brazilian coffee futures, but before you manipulate the price through the ceiling, sit down and have a cup of coffee with me (while I can still afford it).

2. Antithesis establishes a clear, contrasting relationship between two ideas by joining them together or juxtaposing them, often in parallel structure. Human beings are inveterate systematizers and categorizers, so the mind has a natural love for antithesis, which creates a definite and systematic relationship between ideas:

To err is human; to forgive, divine. --Pope

Though surprising, it is true; though frightening at first, it is really harmless.

If we try, we might succeed; if we do not try, we cannot succeed.

Success makes men proud; failure makes them wise.

3. Rhetorical question (erotesis) differs from hypophora in that it is not answered by the writer, because its answer is obvious or obviously desired, and usually just a yes or no. It is used for effect, emphasis, or provocation, or for drawing a conclusionary statement from the facts at hand.

But how can we expect to enjoy the scenery when the scenery consists entirely of garish billboards?

. . . For if we lose the ability to perceive our faults, what is the good of living on? --Marcus Aurelius

Is justice then to be considered merely a word? Or is it whatever results from the bartering between attorneys?

4. Simile is a comparison between two different things that resemble each other in at least one way. In formal prose the simile is a device both of art and explanation, comparing an unfamiliar thing to some familiar thing (an object, event, process, etc.) known to the reader.

After such long exposure to the direct sun, the leaves of the houseplant looked like pieces of overcooked bacon.

The soul in the body is like a bird in a cage.

My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun. . . . --Shakespeare

5. Metaphor compares two different things by speaking of one in terms of the other. Unlike a simile or analogy, metaphor asserts that one thing *is* another thing, not just that one is like another. Very frequently a metaphor is invoked by the *to be* verb:

*Life's but a walking shadow; a poor player, That struts and frets his hour upon the stage. "

Shakespeare, in "Macbeth"

6. Personification metaphorically represents an animal or inanimate object as having human attributes--attributes of form, character, feelings, behavior, and so on. Ideas and abstractions can also be personified.

The ship began to creak and protest as it struggled against the rising sea.

We bought this house instead of the one on Maple because this one is more friendly.

This coffee is strong enough to get up and walk away

7. Hyperbole, the counterpart of understatement, deliberately exaggerates conditions for emphasis or effect. In formal writing the hyperbole must be clearly intended as an exaggeration, and should be carefully restricted. That is, do not exaggerate everything, but treat hyperbole like an exclamation point, to be used only once a year. Then it will be quite effective as a table-thumping attention getter, introductory to your essay or some section thereof:

This stuff is used motor oil compared to the coffee you make, my love.

There are a thousand reasons why more research is needed on solar energy.

8. Oxymoron is a paradox reduced to two words, usually in an adjective-noun ("eloquent silence") or adverb-adjective ("inertly strong") relationship, and is used for effect, complexity, emphasis, or wit:

I do here make humbly bold to present them with a short account of themselves and their art.....--Jonathan Swift

The bookful blockhead, ignorantly read, / With loads of learned lumber in his head . . .
.--Alexander Pope

9. Alliteration is the recurrence of initial consonant sounds. The repetition can be juxtaposed (and then it is usually limited to two words):

Do not let such evils overwhelm you as thousands have suffered, and thousands have surmounted; but turn your thoughts with vigor to some other plan of life, and keep always in your mind, that, with due submission to Providence, a man of genius has been seldom ruined but by himself. --Samuel Johnson

10. Onomatopoeia is the use of words whose pronunciation imitates the sound the word describes. "Buzz," for example, when spoken is intended to resemble the sound of a flying insect. Other examples include these: slam, pow, screech, whirr, crush, sizzle, crunch, wring, wrench, gouge, grind, mangle, bang, blam, pow, zap, fizz, urp, roar, growl, blip, click, whimper, and, of course, snap, crackle, and pop. Note that the connection between sound and pronunciation is sometimes rather a product of imagination ("slam" and "wring" are not very good imitations). And note also that written language retains an aural quality, so that even unspoken your writing has a sound to it.

If you like the plop, plop, plop of a faucet at three in the morning, you will like this record.

No one talks in these factories. Everyone is too busy. The only sounds are the snip, snip of scissors and the hum of sewing machines.

11. Euphemism: substitution of an agreeable or at least non-offensive expression for one whose plainer meaning might be harsh or unpleasant.

“stupid”: A few fries short of a Happy Meal.

12. Paradox: an assertion seemingly opposed to common sense, but that may yet have some truth in it.

*What a pity that youth must be wasted on the young."

George Bernard Shaw

13. Allusion: reference to something in history with a word or phrase-expects readers to know the reference and pick it out