

Rhetorical Devices for Speeches

Alliteration

repetition of initial consonant sound

The initial consonant sound is usually repeated in two neighbouring words (sometimes also in words that are not next to each other). Alliteration draws attention to the phrase and is often used for emphasis.

Examples:

- for the greater good of ...
- safety and security
- share a continent but not a country

Repetition of initial consonant sounds means that only the sound must be the same, not the consonants themselves.

Examples:

- killer command
- fantastic philosophy
- A neat knot need not be re-knotted.

Allusion

indirect reference to a person, event or piece of literature

Allusion is used to explain or clarify a complex problem. Note that allusion works best if you keep it short and refer to something the reader / audience is familiar with, e.g.:

- famous people
- history
- (Greek) mythology
- literature
- the bible

If the audience is familiar with the event or person, they will also know background and context. Thus, just a few words are enough to create a certain picture (or scene) in the readers' minds. The advantages are as follows:

- We don't need lengthy explanations to clarify the problem.
- The reader becomes active by reflecting on the analogy.
- The message will stick in the reader's mind.

Examples:

- the Scrooge Syndrome (allusion on the rich, grieve and mean Ebenezer Scrooge from Charles Dicken's "Christmas Carol")
- The software included a Trojan Horse. (allusion on the Trojan horse from Greek mythology)

- Plan ahead. It was not raining when Noah built the Ark. (Richard Cushing) (allusion on the biblical Ark of Noah)

Many allusions on historic events, mythology or the bible have become famous idioms.

Examples:

- to meet one's Waterloo (allusion on Napoleons defeat in the Battle of Waterloo)
- to wash one's hands of it. (allusion on Pontius Pilatus, who sentenced Jesus to death, but washed his hands afterwards to demonstrate that he was not to blame for it.)
- to be as old as Methusalem (allusion on Joseph's grandfather, who was 969 years old according to the Old Testament)

Anaphora

successive clauses or sentences start with the same word(s)

The same word or phrase is used to begin successive clauses or sentences. Thus, the reader's / listener's attention is drawn directly to the message of the sentence.

Example:

- Every child must be taught these principles. Every citizen must uphold them. And every immigrant, by embracing these ideals, makes our country more, not less, American.
- If we had no winter, the spring would not be so pleasant; if we did not sometimes taste of adversity, prosperity would not be so welcome. (Anne Bradstreet)
- The beginning of wisdom is silence. The second step is listening. (unknown)
- A man without ambition is dead. A man with ambition but no love is dead. A man with ambition and love for his blessings here on earth is ever so alive. (Pearl Bailey)

Anaphora is often used in conjunction with parallelism or climax.

Antithesis

contrasting relationship between two ideas

Antithesis emphasises the contrast between two ideas. The structure of the phrases / clauses is usually similar in order to draw the reader's / listener's attention directly to the contrast.

Examples:

- That's one small step for a man, one giant leap for mankind. (Neil Armstrong)
- To err is human; to forgive, divine. (Pope)
- It is easier for a father to have children than for children to have a real father. (Pope)

Hyperbole

deliberate exaggeration

Used sparingly, hyperbole effectively draws the attention to a message that you want to emphasise.

Example:

- I was so hungry, I could eat an elephant.
- I have told you a thousand times.

Hypophora

question raised and answered by the author / speaker

The author / speaker raises a question and also gives an answer to the question. Hypophora is used to get the audience's attention and make them curious. Often the question is raised at the beginning of a paragraph and answered in the course of that paragraph. Hypophora can also be used, however, to introduce a new area of discussion.

Example:

- Why is it better to love than be loved? It is surer. (Sarah Guitry)
- How many countries have actually hit [...] the targets set at Rio, or in Kyoto in 1998, for cutting greenhouse-gas emissions? Precious few.

Litotes

form of understatement

Litotes is a form of understatement which uses the denied opposite of a word to weaken or soften a message.

Examples:

- That's not bad. (instead of: That's good/great.)
- Boats aren't easy to find in the dark. (instead of: Boats are hard/difficult to find in the dark.)

Metaphor

figurative expression

Metaphor compares two different things in a figurative sense. Unlike in a simile (A is like B.), "like" is not used in metaphor (A is B.).

Example:

- Truths are first clouds, then rain, then harvest and food. (Henry Ward Beecher)
- Through much of the last century, America's faith in freedom and democracy was a rock in a raging sea. Now it is a seed upon the wind, taking root in many nations.

Metonymy

figurative expression, closely associated with the subject

Metonymy (unlike metaphor) uses figurative expressions that are closely associated with the subject in terms of place, time or background. The figurative expression is not a physical part of the subject, however (see synecdoche).

Examples:

- The White House declared ... (White House = US government / President)
- The land belongs to the crown. (crown = king / queen / royal family / monarchy)
- Empty pockets never held anyone back. Only empty heads and empty hearts can do that. (Norman Vincent Peale)
- (empty pockets = poverty; empty heads = ignorance / dullness / density; empty hearts = unkindness / coldness)

Onomatopoeia

word imitating a sound

The pronunciation of the word imitates a sound. Onomatopoeia is used because it's often difficult to describe sounds. Furthermore, a story becomes more lively and interesting by the use of onomatopoeia.

Examples:

- The lion roared.
- The steaks sizzled in the pan.
- The bomb went off with a bang.

Parallelism

parallel sentence structure

Successive clauses or sentences are similarly structured. This similarity makes it easier for the reader / listener to concentrate on the message.

Example:

- We are bound by ideals that move us beyond our backgrounds, lift us above our interest, and teach us what it means to be citizens.
- The mediocre teacher tells, The good teacher explains. The superior teacher demonstrates. The great teacher inspires. (William A. Ward)
- The mistakes of the fool are known to the world, but not to himself. The mistakes of the wise man are known to himself, but not to the world. (Charles Caleb Colton)
- Tell me and I forget. Teach me and I may remember. Involve me and I will learn. (Benjamin Franklin)

Parenthesis

additional information

The normal progression of a sentence is interrupted by extra information or explanations enclosed in commas, brackets or dashes. The extra information can be a single word, a phrase or even a sentence.

Examples:

- We (myself, wife Lorraine and daughters Caroline and Joanna) boarded our boat 'Lynn', a Duchess class vessel barely a year old, at Black Prince Holidays' Chirk boatyard.
- The boats have remarkably few controls and we were given a thorough briefing about 'driving' ours—along with advice on mooring, lock operation and safety considerations—by Pauline, who even set off with us for a few minutes to ensure we were confident.

Personification

attribution of human characteristics to animals, inanimate objects or abstractions

Animals, inanimate objects or abstractions are represented as having human characteristics (behaviour, feelings, character etc.). Personification can make a narration more interesting and lively.

Examples:

- Why these two countries would remain at each other's throat for so long.
- I closed the door, and my stubborn car refused to open it again.
- The flowers nodded their heads as if to greet us.
- The frogs began their concert.

Points of View (or Narration Technique)

first or third person narration

First-person narrator

The narrator tells the story from his / her point of view (I). It is a limited point of view as the reader will only know what the narrator knows. The advantage of the first person narration is that the narrator shares his / her personal experiences and secrets with the reader so that the reader feels part of the story.

Third-person narrator

The narrator is not part of the plot and tells the story in the third person (he, she). Usually the narrator is all-knowing (omniscient narrator): he / she can switch from one scene to another, but also focus on a single character from time to time.

Rhetorical Question

question without a direct answer

The author / speaker raises a question, but doesn't answer it directly as he/she sees the answer (usually Yes or No) as obvious.

Rhetorical questions are used to provoke, emphasise or argue.

Examples:

- When public money brings windfalls to a few, why should the state not take a share?
- But was the best way to win them over to threaten to ignore them altogether? Like so many things this week, the administration's diplomacy needs a smoother touch. ⁽⁶⁾ (Note that the sentence following the question is not an answer to it.)

Simile

direct comparison

Two things are compared directly by using 'like' (A is like B.).

Other possibilities are for example:

- A is (not) like B
- A is more/less than B
- A is as ... as B
- A is similar to B
- A is ..., so is B
- A does ..., so does B

Examples:

- concrete box-style buildings are spreading like inkblots
- The rabbit-hole went straight on like a tunnel
- Personality is to a man what perfume is to a flower. (Charles Schwab)
- My friend is as good as gold.

Understatement

weaken or soften a statement

A statement is deliberately weakened to sound ironical or softened to sound more polite.

Note that understatement is a common feature of the English language (especially British English) used in everyday-life situations.

Examples:

- I know a little about running a company. (a successful businessman might modestly say.)
- I think we have slightly different opinions on this topic. (instead of: I don't agree with you at all.)