

A Short List of Rhetorical Devices

Alliteration: repetition of the same sound beginning several words in sequence.

*Let us go forth to lead the land we love. J. F. Kennedy, Inaugural

Allusion: An allusion is a short, informal reference to a famous person or event:

- You must borrow me Gargantua's mouth first. 'Tis a word too great for any mouth of this age's size. --Shakespeare
- If you take his parking place, you can expect World War II all over again.
- Plan ahead: it wasn't raining when Noah built the ark. --Richard Cushing
- Our examination of the relation of the historian to the facts of history finds us, therefore, in an apparently precarious situation, navigating delicately between the Scylla of an untenable theory of history as an objective compilation of facts . . . and the Charybdis of an equally untenable theory of history as the subjective product of the mind of the historian --Edward Hallett Carr

Notice in these examples that the allusions are to very well known characters or events, not to obscure ones. (The best sources for allusions are literature, history, Greek myth, and the Bible.) Note also that the reference serves to explain or clarify or enhance whatever subject is under discussion, without sidetracking the reader.

Allusion can be wonderfully attractive in your writing because it can introduce variety and energy into an otherwise limited discussion (an exciting historical adventure rises suddenly in the middle of a discussion of chemicals or some abstract argument), and it can please the reader by reminding him of a pertinent story or figure with which he is familiar, thus helping (like analogy) to explain something difficult. The instantaneous pause and reflection on the analogy refreshes and strengthens the reader's mind.

Analogy: an extended comparison (all the ways men are like computers)

Anaphora: the repetition of a word or phrase at the beginning of successive phrases, clauses or lines.

*We shall not flag or fail. We shall go on to the end. We shall fight in France, we shall fight on the seas and oceans, we shall fight with growing confidence and growing strength in the air, we shall defend our island, . .

Antithesis: opposition, or contrast of ideas or words in a balanced or parallel construction.

*Extremism in defense of liberty is no vice, moderation in the pursuit of justice is no virtue. Barry Goldwater

Litotes: understatement, for intensification, by denying the contrary of the thing being affirmed. A few unannounced quizzes are not inconceivable.

*War is not healthy for children and other living things.

*One nuclear bomb can ruin your whole day.

Loaded language: This is diction that attempts to influence the listener or reader by appealing to emotion. Loaded words and phrases are those which have strong emotional overtones or **connotations**, and which evoke strongly positive or negative reactions beyond their literal meaning. For example, the phrase *tax relief* refers literally to deductions that a person might claim in order to reduce the amount of tax they must pay to their government. However, use of the emotive word *relief* implies that the tax was an unreasonable burden to begin with.

Emotive arguments and loaded language are particularly persuasive because they prey on the human weakness for acting immediately based upon an emotional response, *without* such further considered judgment. They are thus suspect, and many people recommend their avoidance in argument and in speech when fairness and impartiality is one of the goals.

Loaded Question: A question that rests on unwarranted or unjustified assumptions.

A "loaded question", like a loaded gun, is a dangerous thing. A loaded question is a question with a false or questionable presupposition, and it is "loaded" with that presumption. The question "*Have you stopped beating your wife?*" presupposes that you have beaten your wife prior to its asking, as well as that you *have* a wife. If you are unmarried, or have never beaten your wife, then the question is loaded.

Since this example is a yes/no question, there are only the following two direct answers:

1. "Yes, I have stopped beating my wife", which entails "I *was* beating my wife."
2. "No, I haven't stopped beating my wife", which entails "I am *still* beating my wife."

Metaphor: implied comparison achieved through a figurative use of words; the word is used not in its literal sense, but in one analogous to it.

*Life's but a walking shadow; a poor player,

That struts and frets his hour upon the stage. Shakespeare, Macbeth

Oxymoron: apparent paradox achieved by the juxtaposition of words which seem to contradict one another.

open secret

larger half

act naturally

alone together

Parallelism: Refers to the similarity of structure in a pair or series of related words, phrases, or clauses. This basic principle of grammar and rhetoric demands that equivalent things be set forth in coordinate grammatical structures: nouns with nouns, infinitives with infinitives, and adverb clauses with adverb clauses.

- a. "...for the support of this declaration, with a firm reliance on the protection of Divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes, and our sacred Honor"—The Declaration of Independence

- b. "...the love of liberty, jury trial, the writ of *habeus corpus*, and all the blessings of free government...."—John Randolph of Roanoke, "Speech on the Greek Cause.
- c. "So Janey waited a bloom time, and a green time and an orange time."—Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*
- d. "It will be long before our larger life interprets itself in such imagination as Hawthorne's, such wisdom as Emerson's, such poetry as Longfellow's, such prophesy as Whittier's, such grace as Holmes's, such humor and humanity as Lowell's."—William Dean Howells, *Literary Friends and Acquaintance*

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

Rhetorical Question: A question in which the 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?

Often the rhetorical question and its implied answer will lead to further discussion:

- Is this the end to which we are reduced? Is the disaster film the highest form of art we can expect from our era? Perhaps we should examine the alternatives presented by independent film maker Joe Blow
- I agree the funding and support are still minimal, but shouldn't worthy projects be tried, even though they are not certain to succeed? So the plans in effect now should be expanded to include [Note: Here is an example where the answer "yes" is clearly desired rhetorically by the writer, though conceivably someone might say "no" to the question if asked straightforwardly.]

Simile: an explicit comparison between two things using 'like' or 'as'.

*My love is as a fever, longing still

For that which longer nurseth the disease, Shakespeare, Sonnet CXLVII

*Reason is to faith as the eye to the telescope. D. Hume [?]

*Let us go then, you and I,

While the evening is spread out against the sky,

Like a patient etherized upon a table... T.S. Eliot, The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock