30 Rhetorical Devices — And How to Use Them

Rhetorical devices (also known as stylistic devices, persuasive devices, or simply rhetoric) are techniques or language used to convey a point or convince an audience. And they're used by everyone: politicians, businesspeople, even your favorite novelists.

You may already know some of these devices, such as similes and metaphors. Others, maybe not (bdelygmia, we’re looking at you). But whether or not you realized it, you’ve probably run into all of these devices before, and maybe even used them yourself!

If you haven’t, don’t let their elaborate Greek names fool you — rhetorical devices are actually pretty easy to implement. But before we dive into the different types of devices and how to use them, let’s identify the four ways that rhetorical devices work.

Types of rhetorical devices
Although there exists plenty of overlap between rhetorical and literary devices, there’s also one significant difference between the two. While literary devices express ideas artistically, rhetoric appeals to one’s sensibilities in four specific ways:

- **Logos**, an appeal to logic;
- **Pathos**, an appeal to emotion;
- **Ethos**, an appeal to ethics; or,
- **Kairos**, an appeal to time.

These categories haven’t changed since the Ancient Greeks first identified them thousands of years ago. This makes sense, because how we make decisions haven’t changed, either: we still decide with our brain, our heart, our morals, or based on the feeling that we’re running out of time.

**List of rhetorical devices**

**Accismus**

**Accismus** is the rhetorical refusal of something one actually wants, to try and convince themselves or others of a different opinion. Like in one of Aesop’s Fables:

*Driven by hunger, a fox tried to reach some grapes hanging high on the vine but was unable to, although he leaped with all his strength. As he went away, the fox remarked 'Oh, you aren't even ripe yet! I don't need any sour grapes.' People who speak disparagingly of things that they cannot attain would do well to apply this story to themselves.*

**Adnomination**

**Adnomination** is the use of words with the same root in the same sentence. Like many other rhetorical devices, this is a linguistic tricks to make statements sound more persuasive. It's sure to somehow work on someone, somewhere, someday.

**Adynaton**
Adynata are purposefully hyperbolic metaphors to suggest that something is impossible — like the classic adage, when pigs fly. And hyperbole, of course, is a rhetorical device in and of itself: an excessively exaggerated statement for effect.

**Alliteration**

Alliteration is the repetition of consonants across successive, stressed syllables… get it? This most often means repeating consonants at the beginning of multiple words, as opposed to consonance, which is the repetition of consonants anywhere in consecutive words. (Learn more about the difference between alliteration and consonance — and other types of repetition — in this guide!)

Edgar Allan Poe’s *The Raven* makes use of both alliteration and consonance: “And the silken sad uncertain rustling of each purple curtain.” “Silken” and “sad” are alliterative, but the consonance continues into “uncertain” and “rustling.” And as a bonus, it contains assonance — the repetition of vowel sounds — across “purple curtain.”

**Anacoluthon**

An anacoluthon is a misdirection that challenges listeners and/or readers to think deeply and question their assumptions. For example, the opening sentence of Kafka’s *Metamorphosis* is a famous anacoluthon because it ends somewhere entirely different than where it started:

“When Gregor Samsa woke up one morning from unsettling dreams, he found himself changed in his bed into a monstrous vermin.”

Note that anacoluthons are different from non-sequiturs, which are unintentional and incoherent — well, but can anything really be different from anything else?

**Anadiplosis**

Anadiplosis is the repetition of the word from the end of one sentence to the beginning of the next. It has been used by everyone from Shakespeare to Yeats to Yoda:
“Fear leads to anger. Anger leads to hate. Hate leads to suffering.”

Anaphora

On the other hand, anaphora is the repetition of words or phrases at the beginning of subsequent sentences. Like in Ginsberg’s Howl — no, not that famous opening line, but instead those that follow it:

“Who poverty and tatters and hollow-eyed and high sat up smoking in the supernatural darkness of cold-water flats floating across the tops of cities contemplating jazz, who bared their brains to Heaven under the El and saw Mohammedan angels staggering on tenement roofs illuminated, who passed through universities with radiant cool eyes hallucinating Arkansas and Blake-light tragedy among the scholars of war…”

Another, similar rhetorical device is epistrophe: the repetition of words at the end of sentences. And, if you combine the two, you’ve got a symploce.

Antanagoge

Antanagoge involves responding to an allegation with a counter-allegation. Antanagoge doesn't necessarily solve the initial problem, but it does provide an appealing alternative. The quintessential example is, “When life gives you lemons, make lemonade.” 🍋🍋

Someone might also use antanagoge to justify something to themselves: “Well, it's raining today, but that's fine — I wanted to stay inside anyway.”

Anthimeria

Anthimeria is the intentional misuse of one word’s part of speech, such as using a noun for a verb. It’s been around for centuries, but is frequently used in the modern day, as “Facebooking” and “adulting” have seamlessly become part of the lexicon.
Antiphrasis

Antiphrasis is a sentence or phrase that means the opposite of what it appears to say. Like how the idiom, “Tell me about it” generally means, “Don’t tell me about it — I already know.” It’s a subset of a much more common rhetorical device: irony.

Antonomasia

Antonomasia is, essentially, a rhetorical name. Like “Old Blue Eyes,” “The Boss,” or “The Fab Four” — affectionate epithets that take the place of proper names like Frank Sinatra, Bruce Springsteen, or the Beatles.

Apophasis

You may have noticed by now that a lot of rhetorical devices stem from irony. Apophasis — also known as paralipsis, occupatio, praeteritio, preterition, or parasiopesis — is one of these: bringing up a subject by denying that it should be brought up. This is a classic if oft-maligned political tactic, and one frequently utilized by the 45th President of the United States, particularly in his colorful tweets. For example:

“Why would Kim Jong-un insult me by calling me 'old,' when I would NEVER call him 'short and fat?'”

Aporia

Aporia is the rhetorical expression of doubt — almost always insincerely. This is a common tool that businesses use to connect with a consumer base, typically in ads or presentations. For instance, take Steve Jobs’ introduction of touchscreen technology:

“Now, how are we gonna communicate this? We don’t wanna carry around a mouse, right? What are we gonna do?”
Aposiopesis

Aposiopesis is essentially the rhetorical version of trailing off at the end of your sentence, leaving your listener (or reader) hanging. Like the ending of Mercutio’s famous “Queen Mab” speech in Romeo & Juliet:

“This is the hag, when maids lie on their backs,
That presses them and learns them first to bear,
Making them women of good carriage:
This is she...”

Asterismos

Asterismos is simply a phrase beginning with an exclamation. Like every other sentence in Moby-Dick: “Book! You lie there; the fact is, you books must know your places.” But if no sentence follows, it’s exclamatio: an emphatic expression like “My word!” that warrants no follow-up.

Asyndeton

Asyndeton is the removal of conjunctions like “or,” “and,” or “but” from your writing because the sentence flows better, or more poetically, without them. This is a favorite technique of Cormac McCarthy, as seen in this passage from Outer Dark: “A parson was laboring over the crest of the hill and coming toward them with one hand raised in blessing, greeting, fending flies.”

And like most of the enigmatic author’s preferred rhetoric, this asyndeton is almost intentionally confusing; whether the parson is blessing or greeting or swatting flies is never clarified. At other times, McCarthy uses polysyndeton, which is essentially asyndeton's opposite — the addition of extra conjunctions (“and then we walked and then we stopped and then we sat on the ground”).
Bdelygmia

Befitting its ugly spelling, bdelygmia (or abominatio) is a rhetorical insult — the uglier and more elaborate, the better. Like most rhetorical devices, Shakespeare was a big fan. So was Dr. Seuss:

"You're a foul one, Mr. Grinch, You're a nasty wasty skunk, Your heart is full of unwashed socks, your soul is full of gunk, Mr. Grinch. The three words that best describe you are as follows, and I quote, ‘Stink, stank, stunk!’"

Cacophony

Cacophony is simply the use of words that sound bad together. That may sound pretty random, until you remember that Lewis Carroll invented words for his poem “Jabberwocky” just to make it sound harsh and unmelodious:

“’Twas brillig, and the slithy toves
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe:
All mimsy were the borogoves,
And the mome raths outgrabe.”

And it goes hand in hand with euphony — the use of words that sound good together, like this passage from an Emily Dickinson poem:

“Oars divide the Ocean, / Too silver for a seam.”
Chiasmus

“Despised, if ugly; if she's fair, betrayed.” This excerpt from Mary Leapor’s *Essay on Woman* is great example of **chiasmus**: the repetition and/or reversal of words or grammatical structure across two phrases. More specific is **antimetabole**: the switching of words or phrases in order to suggest truth. (Ask not what rhetorical devices can do for you. Ask what you can do for rhetorical devices.)

Climax

**Narrative arcs** aren’t just for novels. Sentences can have a **climax**, too — the initial words and clauses build to a peak, saving the most important point for last. We’ve been using climaxes rhetorically since at least Corinthians: “There are three things that will endure: faith, hope, and love. But the greatest of these is love.”

Dysphemism

**Dysphemism** is a description that is explicitly offensive to its subject and/or its audience. It stands in contrast to a **euphemism**, which strives to avoid outright offense, but nonetheless has unfortunate connotations. Most racial epithets started as the latter, but are recognized today as the former.

Meiosis

If you’ve ever understated something before, that’s **meiosis** — like the assertion that Britain is simply “across the pond” from the Americas. The opposite — rhetorical exaggeration — is called **auxesis**.

Onomatopoeia

Wham! Pow! Crunch! These are all examples of **onomatopoeia**, a word for a sound that phonetically resembles the sound itself. Which means the finale of the 1966 *Batman* is the most onomatopoeic film scene of all time.
Scott Pilgrim vs. The World is also chock full of onomatopoeia. (Image: Universal Pictures)

Personification

**Personification** describes things and concepts using human characteristics. It's easier for humans to understand a concept when it’s directly related to them, which is why this is such an effective rhetorical device!

Personification appears in almost all forms of literature — even simple sentences like "the alarm screamed" or "the wind howled" would qualify as personification. **Anthropomorphism**, which actually turns non-humans into human-like forms, is less common, but frequently seen in children's stories and cartoons like *Peter Rabbit* and *Winnie-the-Pooh*.

Pleonasm

**Pleonasm**s are redundant phrases that emphasize the nature of the subject. Certain words are so overused that they’ve lost meaning — darkness, nice, etc. However, “black darkness” or “pleasantly nice” reinvigorate that meaning, even if the phrases are technically redundant.
Rhetorical comparisons

Some of the most prevalent rhetorical devices are figures of speech that compare one thing to another. Two of these, you surely know: the simile and the metaphor. But there is a third, hypocatastasis, that is just as common... and useful.

The distinctions between the three are pretty simple. A simile compares two things using like or as: “You are like a monster.” A metaphor compares them by asserting that they’re the same: “You're a monster.” And with hypocatastasis, the comparison itself is implied: “Monster!”

Rhetorical question

You’ve probably heard of a rhetorical question, too: a question asked to make a point rather than to be answered. Technically, this figure of speech is called interrogatio, but plenty of other rhetorical devices take the form of questions.

If you pose a rhetorical question just to answer it yourself, that’s hypophora (“Am I hungry? Yes, I think I am”). And if your rhetorical question infers or asks for a large audience’s opinion ("Friends, Romans, countrymen [...] Did this in Caesar seem ambitious?") that’s anacoenosis — though it generally doesn’t warrant an answer, either.

Synecdoche

Synecdoche is a rhetorical device wherein a part of one thing represents its whole. This differs slightly from metonymy, in which a single thing represents a larger institution. So if you referred to an old king as “greybeard,” that would be synecdoche. If you referred to him as “the crown,” it would be metonymy.

Tmesis

Have you ever, in a fit of outrage, referred to something un-effing-believable? If you have, congratulations on discovering tmesis: the separation of one word into two parts, with a third word placed in between for emphasis.
Gordon Ramsay is particularly fond of using tmesis in his expletives. (Image: Kitchen Nightmares)

Zeugma

*Zeugma*, also called syllepsis, places two nouns with different meanings in a similar position in a sentence. This is a grammatical trick that can be used rhetorically as well. *Mark Twain* was a master at this: “They covered themselves with dust and glory.”

Another example might be: “He caught the train and a bad cold.” Though you'd “catch” these things in very different ways, the phrase still works because the same verb applies to both. Authors often use zeugma in clever wordplay, and sometimes it even enters everyday conversation. (My grandmother, for example, uses zeugma to describe staticky clothing: “This shirt attracts everything but a man.”)

Congrats on getting to the end of our rhetorical devices list! Of course, this might feel a bit like a list of fancy names for things you already do. If so, that’s great — you’re already well on your way to mastering the art of rhetoric. And now that you know the specifics, you can take the next step: implementing these techniques in your writing and swaying readers onto your side.