

RHYTHM

TWO TYPES OF RHYTHM

In working with sentences, you may find essentially two types of rhythm:

NUMBER-BASED RHYTHM

This type of rhythm is based on the number of words in a sentence as you will see later.

METER-BASED RHYTHM

This type of rhythm is based on the number of syllables per word per sentence. This type of rhythm is reminiscent of poetic meter, where you are able to count the number of syllables in a line and mirror this construction with additional sentences.

Consider Shakespeare's Rhythm in the following passage:

Tomorrow, tomorrow, and tomorrow,
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day
To the last syllable of recorded time;
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
The way to dusty death....

CHANGES IN RHYTHM

An unexpected change in rhythm every now and then can be a good thing. You can include a longer sentence or a shorter sentence out of the rhythm to achieve a particular effect (such as startling, surprising, or even waking the reader out of long monotonous sets of sentences). Moreover, many instructors like variety. Yet, when you want to move things along, consider rhythm.

Too many sentences of similar lengths may present a pattern of difficulty for the reader; as they may not allow the reader to breathe. Additionally, unlike natural language, the patterns brought forth may be too forced or unnatural.

Consider the examples below (Try to read each passage out loud).

EX: (BETTER)

Last night, I met with Harold. Harold and I talked for awhile. He did not want to talk to Sylvia. Since, she left the party last night. We decided to go to bowling. When we arrived, Sylvia was there. Harold and Sylvia talked for awhile. And, now, things are returning to normal.

Notice the number of words in these sentences:

6. 6. 7. 7. 6. 6. 6. 7.

EX: (WORSE)

I met with Harold last night after the party. We talked for awhile. He decided that he did not want to talk to Sylvia, since she left the party so late last night. So, we decided to go bowling alley and have a guy's night out. Strangely enough, we ran into Sylvia at the bowling alley. They talked and now things are returning to normal.

Notice the number of words in the sentences:
9. 4. 20.13.10. 9.

Now, ask, which seems easiest to read?

Most often, the paragraph with variety. Why? The second paragraph more closely resembles natural language.

RHYTHM AND PERSUASION

A forced or unnatural RHYTHM in a paragraph may affect readers more profoundly than simply helping them to read text more naturally.

EXERCISE

Read/Ask the following questions to a fellow student/colleague. Ask them to answer the questions as quickly as they can:

What do pumpkin seeds make? What do orange seeds make? What do apple seeds make? What do grape seeds make? What do bird seeds make?

DISCOMBOBULATION

When quickly bombarded with the list of questions, most individuals will stumble on the final question.

Why? We hypothesize that such rhythms may discombobulate the reader, forcing them to mindlessly “take in” the text rather than carefully comprehending what they are reading. Therefore, we hypothesize that the use of a forced or unnatural rhythm may provide many more rhetorical/persuasive opportunities.

Now, if your goal as a writer is the retention of information and understanding, we suggest that you carefully consider rhythm as a consideration in the writing and revision of your text.