

Polysyndeton



DEFINITION

What is polysyndeton? Here's a quick and simple definition:

Polysyndeton is a [figure of speech](#) in which coordinating conjunctions—words such as "and," "or," and "but" that join other words or clauses in a sentence into relationships of equal importance—are used several times in close succession, particularly where conjunctions would normally not be present at all. For instance, the following sentence contains polysyndeton: "We ate roast beef **and** squash **and** biscuits **and** potatoes **and** corn **and** cheese **and** cherry pie."

Some additional key details about polysyndeton:

- The use of polysyndeton can slow down the rhythm of a phrase, make it more memorable, or emphasize each individual item in a list. It can also be used to make the items in a list seem to pile up, one atop another, giving the reader a sense of being overwhelmed.
- Polysyndeton often appears in conversation as a natural way of speaking, and it can also be used in writing when the desired effect is to mimic everyday speech. This is especially true in speeches, dramatic monologues, or when a character or speaker is exuberantly childlike.
- Both the King James Bible and Shakespeare frequently use polysyndeton.

Polysyndeton Pronunciation

Here's how to pronounce polysyndeton: pol-ee-**sin**-dih-tahn

A Primer on Coordinating Conjunctions and Polysyndeton

To more fully understand polysyndeton, it's helpful to understand the basics of what coordinating conjunctions are. To put it simply, conjunctions in general are words that join parts of a sentence and, in joining them, define a relationship between those parts. Those relationships can be equal or unequal:

- **Coordinating conjunctions** create equal relationships between parts of a sentence, such that the parts of the sentence are related but not dependent on each other. The most common coordinating conjunctions are **for**, **and**, **nor**, **but**, **or**, **yet**, and **so** (which conveniently spells out the acronym "Fanboys" to help you remember them). The sentence "I went home and I ate dinner," is one in which the clauses are equal.
- **Subordinating conjunctions** create a relationship in which one clause of the sentence depends on the other. For instance, in the

sentence "I went home because I had to eat dinner" the meaning of the second, dependent clause ("because I had to eat dinner") only makes sense in the context of the first, independent clause.

There's obviously a lot more nuance and detail to coordinating and subordinating conjunctions. But in terms of polysyndeton, you only need to know one main thing: polysyndeton is the inclusion of multiple *coordinating conjunctions*. It won't ever apply to subordinating conjunctions.

Polysyndeton in Single Sentences and Multiple Sentences

Polysyndeton can appear within a single sentence, but it can also appear as a series of independent sentences. This passage from Edgar Allan Poe's story "Silence" contains polysyndeton within individual sentences *and* between sentences (note "And the lynx..."):

And as the Demon made an end of his story, he fell back within the cavity of the tomb **and** laughed. **And** I could not laugh with the Demon, **and** he cursed me because I could not laugh. **And** the lynx which dwelleth forever in the tomb, came out therefrom, **and** lay down at the feet of the Demon, **and** looked at him steadily in the face.

Polysyndeton vs. Related Terms

Polysyndeton is related to two other [figures of speech](#), asyndeton and syndeton, that have to do with how many conjunctions are used to coordinate the words or clauses of a sentence. It is also related to parataxis, which, like polysyndeton, joins ideas in relationships of equal importance.

Polysyndeton vs. Asyndeton

The prefix "a" means "not" or "without," so [asyndeton](#) means that conjunctions have been *omitted* where they would normally appear. Asyndeton, then, is essentially the opposite of polysyndeton. Asyndeton can achieve some of the same effects of emphasis as polysyndeton can, but it is also unique in its ability to speed up the pace of a narrative and eliminate implications of hierarchy. There is a good example of both qualities in Joseph Conrad's novel [Heart of Darkness](#):

"An empty stream, a great silence, an impenetrable forest. The air was thick, warm, heavy, sluggish."

By eliminating the "and" in these sentences, the pace is quickened. The reader is not asked to see a sequence of sights; the hierarchy is eliminated, and all of these sensations and objects should be seen and experienced at once. Because of asyndeton, the reader

experiences the same overwhelming sense of the jungle that the narrator is experiencing.

Polysyndeton vs. Syndeton

Syndeton refers to sentences that have a *single* conjunction between the parts of the sentence being joined. The word comes from the Greek, *sundetos*, which means "bound together with." "Why were you late, unprepared, and wearing the wrong uniform?" is an example of syndeton. Put another way, syndeton is how conjunctions are *normally* handled, and polysyndeton and asyndeton are departures from that normal construction.

Polysyndeton vs. Parataxis

[Parataxis](#) is another figure of speech that's related to polysyndeton. The word parataxis comes from the Greek and means "placing side by side." In parataxis, words, phrases, clauses, or sentences are placed next to each other with equal weight, such that none are subordinated to another. Sometimes these different elements of a sentence are linked as equals using coordinating conjunctions.

So while parataxis focuses on the equality of elements and polysyndeton focuses on the inclusion of an abundance of conjunctions, the two devices can often overlap. There's a good example of this in a description from Joan Didion's book of essays, *Slouching Toward Bethlehem*:

"I was late to meet someone but I stopped at Lexington Avenue **and** bought a peach **and** stood on the corner eating it **and** knew that I had come out of the West **and** reached the mirage. I could taste the peach **and** feel the soft air blowing from a subway grating on my legs **and** I could smell lilac **and** garbage **and** expensive perfume..."

This example is both parataxis and polysyndeton—parataxis because all the clauses have equal weight, with none dependent on any other, and polysyndeton because of all those "ands."

However, not all parataxis involves conjunctions, and so not all parataxis is polysyndeton. In addition, not all polysyndeton is parataxis. The earlier Poe example, "**And** I could not laugh with the demon, **and** he cursed me because I could not laugh..." is an example of polysyndeton, but it isn't parataxis because the sentence contains the subordinating conjunction "because," which makes the clauses uneven, with one dependent on the other.



EXAMPLES

Polysyndeton appears frequently in everyday speech as an unconscious habit, but it is also often used purposefully by writers, orators, and musicians for stylistic effects.

Examples of Polysyndeton in Literature

Because polysyndeton is a common habit of everyday speech, writers often use it to create realistic dialects for their characters, especially when those characters are young or exhibit a childlike excitement. It can also be used to slow down the pace of a passage, or to create an onslaught of description such that the reader experiences a sense of being overwhelmed. Polysyndeton is also prevalent in the Bible, though for that same reason some critics might say that polysyndetons, when overused, can make a story feel didactic or stilted.

Polysyndeton in Carson McCullers's *The Member of the Wedding*

In this example from Carson McCullers's novel *The Member of the Wedding*, polysyndeton allows the reader to enter the frame of mind of the novel's protagonist, Frankie:

"It was four o'clock in the afternoon and the kitchen was square and gray and quiet. Frankie sat at the table with her eyes half closed, and she thought about a wedding."

By placing an "and" between "square" and "gray" and again between "gray" and "quiet," the kitchen is described gradually. A slower pace makes sense for this scene, where 12-year-old Frankie experiences an epiphany. Perhaps this can be best imagined in terms of film: a character has a realization, and slowly, the camera pans around the room as the character becomes hyper aware of their surroundings, and subsequently, their thoughts.

Polysyndeton in Shakespeare's *Othello*

In this example from Act 3, Scene 3 of Shakespeare's [Othello](#), polysyndeton is used for a short but exhausting list:

"If there be cords, or knives, or poison, or fire, or suffocating streams, I'll not endure it."

Here, Shakespeare only lists five possibilities of punishment. However, because of the repeated "or," the items in the list seem to pile up and the entire list feels much longer, making it almost exhausting to read. In this moment, Othello is just beginning to believe that his wife Desdemona might be unfaithful (because Iago is tricking him into thinking such things). The way that polysyndeton makes the list seem overwhelming captures how Othello himself is unable to escape his feverish fears of his wife's infidelity.

Examples of Polysyndeton in Music

Polysyndeton regularly appears in song lyrics. Because it sounds like regular speech and, at the same time, gives that speech a sense of rhythm and emphasis through repeated conjunctions, polysyndeton offers many valuable effects for songwriting.

Polysyndeton in Amy Winehouse's "Valerie"

Amy Winehouse famously recorded a cover of the song "Valerie" (originally by The Zutons) for her *Back to Black* album. This song shows how polysyndeton can create a natural rhythm:

"Well, sometimes I go out by myself / **And** I look across the water / **And** I think of all the things / What you're doing / **And** in my head I paint a picture."

This is the first chorus in a song about missing a loved one. If the conjunction "and" were not repeated, the pace would be significantly faster and would not give the listener time to linger in this feeling of longing.

Polysyndeton in Bob Dylan's "Masters of War"

Dylan's song "Masters of War" shows how polysyndeton can be used to build a specific emotion:

"**And** I hope that you die / **And** your death'll come soon / I will follow your casket / In the pale afternoon / **And** I'll watch while you're lowered / Down to your deathbed / **And** I'll stand over your grave / 'Til I'm sure that you're dead"

Anger and disgust are palpable in the final lines of Bob Dylan's song of protest against the politicians behind the Vietnam War. By using polysyndeton, Dylan continues to add phrase after phrase, far beyond where listeners might expect him to stop, to fully communicate the depth of his fury and his hatred for the politicians he calls the "masters of war."

Examples of Polysyndeton in Speeches

Edgar Allan Poe once said that polysyndeton adds dignity to what we say, a bit like the slow motion of a ceremony. These are desirable qualities for most orators, who seek to deliver a speech that is memorable, powerful, and imparts a specific, desired message.

Polysyndeton in President Ronald Reagan's Speech on the Challenger Disaster

Polysyndeton is used here to lend gravitas. Reagan delivered this speech hours after the space shuttle Challenger broke apart during takeoff:

We will always remember them, these skilled professionals, scientists **and** adventurers, these artists **and** teachers **and** family men **and** women, and we will cherish each of their stories—stories of triumph and bravery, stories of true American heroes.

Polysyndeton inserts natural pauses into the speech. The breaks give the reader time to envision these victims as a diverse group of individuals, who had families, professions, and goals. Through

polysyndeton, Reagan was able to communicate the human scale of the tragedy.

Polysyndeton in Ursula K. Le Guin's "A Left-Handed Commencement Address" at Mills College, 1983

In this example from Ursula K. Le Guin's commencement address, the irregular structure of polysyndeton emphasizes certain words to activate a particular emotion:

"**And** when you fail, **and** are defeated, **and** in pain, **and** in the dark, then I hope you will remember that darkness is your country, where you live, where no wars are fought and no wars are won, but where the future is."

This structure highlights the terms "fail," "defeated," "pain," and "dark." This might initially seem like an odd choice for a commencement address, which is typically expected to uplift and galvanize graduates, but Le Guin masterfully focuses on inevitable failure and darkness in order to bring her audience toward hope. Thus, Le Guin's use of polysyndeton makes the graduating students see that failure and pain are inevitable parts of life, and that the willingness to experience failure and pain is a prerequisite to humility, peace, and progress.



WHY WRITERS USE IT

Writers use polysyndeton for a variety of different effects and purposes, depending upon the context. The more common reasons include:

- The pauses created by polysyndeton can **put extra focus on each item in a list**.
- Polysyndeton can also create the feeling that all of the elements in the list are piling up, one right on top of another, with the result of **overwhelming the reader for rhetorical effect**. Writers can use this effect to communicate the intensity of an experience or the urgency of an issue or idea.
- Polysyndeton can maintain or disrupt established speech patterns and, in doing so, **capture the audience's attention**.
- Connecting a listed series with repeated conjunctions can **mimic some unconscious speech patterns**, particularly those associated with childlike speech. Polysyndeton can therefore be used to **express or capture childlike exuberance**.
- However, polysyndeton can also be used to create an effect opposite to that of childlike exuberance. When speech is slowed down and more focus is placed on the individual elements within the sentence, **the text can feel more stately or dignified**.



OTHER RESOURCES

Check out these resources on other sites for even more information about polysyndeton.

- [The Wikipedia Page on Polysyndeton](#): Somewhat abstract in its description, but it does offer a few good examples.
- [The Dictionary Definition of Polysyndeton](#): A basic definition that includes a bit on the etymology of polysyndeton and a couple of helpful examples.
- [A Technical Explanation of Polysyndeton](#), focusing on grammar and conjunctions more specifically.
- **Polysyndetons on YouTube**
 - Katharine Hepburn's [monologue](#) in the film *The Lion in Winter* is an excellent example of how polysyndeton can emphasize drama: "Oh, my piglets, we are the origins of war—not history's forces, **nor** the times, **nor** justice, not the lack of it, **nor** causes, **nor** religions, **nor** ideas, **nor** kinds of government, **nor** any other thing. We are the killers. We breed wars."

- Peter Finch's famously unhinged [monologue](#) in *The Network* is full of polysyndetons: "Punks are running wild in the street **and** there's nobody anywhere who seems to know what to do, **and** there's no end to it. We know the air is unfit to breathe **and** our food is unfit to eat, **and** we sit watching our TVs while some local newscaster tells us that today we had fifteen homicides and sixty-three violent crimes, as if that's the way it's supposed to be."

HOW TO CITE

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