



ANOTHER INVITATION TO MY LIBRARY

Ways with Words

In this chapter, as in the previous one, I would like to invite you into my library once again. This time, however, I am going to take you on a different kind of tour. We will see some of the same books we saw before, but this time we'll be looking at them with a different focus. This time I want to show you, between the covers of my beloved books, some wondrous ways with words.

I have loved the sound of wondrous words since I was child. At weddings, I was more taken with words than wedding gowns, waiting throughout the ceremony to hear the seesawing rhythm of “For better or worse, for richer or poorer, in sickness and in health. . . .” I would let the sound of those beautiful, loving words ring in my ears for days after I had attended a marriage service. I would wait all year for that great Biblical passage, heard only at Christmas in my church, that began, “And it came to pass in those days that a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all should be taxed. . . .” And on the police shows—so popular when I was growing up—I found myself waiting anxiously to be satisfied, when they got their villain, for those somber, serious words, “You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say can and

will be used against you in a court of law. . . .” I love the sound of words, well-chosen and well-placed.

Through inquiry, my students and I during the past few years have tried to find out how wondrous words happen, how they are chosen and placed together on the page in ways that *sound good*. We have turned our attention to how things are written because we have believed there are things to know about how wondrous words come to be, things beyond “they just come out that way.” We have searched for patterns of language use, trying to understand what wondrous words have in common across many different, beautiful texts. We have listened as Gary Paulsen has said of his writing, “Language, really, is a dance for me and I’ll do anything with it, including getting fast and loose with grammar, to make a story work right” (McClure and Kristo 1996, 276). Oh, show us your dance moves, Gary Paulsen, we have pleaded.

The writers we admire (like Paulsen) have not let us down. They have shown us their moves again and again. By focusing on the small moves writers make to get to wondrous words in their beautiful texts, we have developed a repertoire of understandings about writing well that crosses all genres, all topics, and all audiences. We have tried stripping writing down to its bare bones, down past elements of genre and topic and audience, to study texts at the word, phrase, and sentence level. What we have wanted to know has gone beyond how to develop a good character for fiction, a compelling point of view for persuasive writing, or a focus for memoir. What we have wanted to know is, “Within these larger issues of writing, how do we write this sentence well, this phrase, that last paragraph?” What we have found is that the craft of good writing is more alike than it is different, and seeing the likenesses across texts has helped us as growing writers to come to own good writing techniques for ourselves more easily.

So this tour of my library will be organized around the many, varied ways with words writers use as they craft. Along the way, I will open several different texts for you and show you where writers are using words in similar ways. I hope that what we see will delight you, but I also know that some of what we see may surprise and even challenge you.

You will see that some of the things you were taught as never being a part of good writing are actually quite common and are used in texts in fairly consistent and very meaningful and effective ways—things like artful sentence fragments or “ands” at the beginning of sentences. The ways-with-words

techniques will also challenge us to look at familiar language concepts—such as parts-of-speech names—in new ways. When we consider parts of speech or marks of punctuation as crafting techniques, we think about them in terms of what work they can do for us as writers. As writers we don't need to know some chalkboard definition of an adjective—we need to know what adjectives can do in texts to make them wondrous.

Transforming our existing parts-of-speech knowledge into crafting knowledge is often quite a challenge because we just don't have experience in thinking this way about what we know. But recasting what we know is so important to our teaching. In inquiry we need to become adept at naming and defining for children the wondrous words they discover as they read like writers. A student may know that “waiting cotton-quiet until she cleared her throat” (in *Miz Berlin Walks* by Jane Yolen) is some wondrous language, but not know that the unusual “cotton-quiet” serves as an adverb. As teachers, we give students these labels for what they are seeing as they see them, matching real-world language learning that has worked so efficiently for them throughout their lives.

I hope that, during this library tour of wondrous ways with words, you will begin to transform your existing knowledge about our language into explicit curriculum for how to write well, curriculum you can share with students again and again in conferences and focus lessons. Many of the issues that were relevant the last time I showed you my library of text structures hold true here as well. Once again, I will show you many of my picture books as example texts, as well as a few chapter books. Remember that the choice of these books has to do with their ease and accessibility for classroom study, not because these ways with words are found only in picture books. You will again see books listed several times as example texts for different ways-with-words techniques, indicating that some texts have a lot to offer as mentors for young writers. And just as with learning about new text structures, you will again find it helpful to try envisioning ways-with-words techniques by writing examples of your own “in the air” to go with each set of examples I show you. Write your own examples using different topics and envisioning writers of all ages trying the techniques.

And finally, just as with the listing of stacks of text structures, this outline of ways-with-words techniques is limited to my own library and my own knowledge base of these techniques. In some ways it is even more limited

because I have only included a few defining examples of each technique. These are the crafting techniques I am using in my teaching right now, and these are some of the writers who are helping me to show students how to use them. To really understand the techniques I highlight here, you will need to go and find these books and see the larger contexts in which the crafting is found. And, as before, this outline is meant to be defining, but not definitive. My hope is that it will show you just enough to start you on your way toward looking closely at the writing in the texts you admire.

WONDRIOUS REPETITION

Close-Echo Effect

A writer will often repeat words or phrases very close together when it is not necessary to do so, creating an echo effect in the text. Often, you will see these repetitions in places where a conjunction could easily be used to tie text elements to one key word or phrase, but instead the key words are repeated. This lets the writer both call attention to words and repeat text rhythms because the number of syllables is repeated.

- *Night in the Country* (1986) by Cynthia Rylant: “There is no night *so* dark, *so* black as night in the country” (n.p.).
- *The Whales* (1996) by Cynthia Rylant: “. . . someone is standing on a shore and his heart is *filling up*. *Filling up* and ready to burst. Whales do not know *how they* change people, *how they* make them better, *how they* make them kind” (n.p.).
- *Water Dance* (1997) by Thomas Locker: “I wind through broad, golden valleys *joined by* streams, *joined by* creeks” (n.p.).
- *Miz Berlin Walks* (1997) by Jane Yolen: “*Without missing* a step, *without missing* a word . . .” (n.p.).
- *Dreamplace* (1993) by George Ella Lyon: “. . . and see for the first time across the trees: *like a* dream, *like a* sandcastle this city the Pueblo people built under a cliff” (n.p.).

Repeating Details

Sometimes writers will take specific details and repeat them at different points in a text, creating a thread of continuity through the artful repetition of detail. Sometimes the details are repeated using the exact same words, but not always. Sometimes just the detail will come up again and some small aspect of it has changed.

- *Roxaboxen* (1991) by Alice McLerran. The colors of the desert glass—“amethyst, amber, and sea-green”—are mentioned twice in the text (n.p.).
- *The Relatives Came* (1985) by Cynthia Rylant. Grapes are the repeating detail. They are “nearly purple enough to pick, but not quite” and “almost purple grapes,” and finally, at the end, they are “dark purple grapes” (n.p.).
- *Miz Berlin Walks* (1997) by Jane Yolen. A paper fan and a shiny black umbrella are details mentioned here and there throughout the text (n.p.).

Repeating Sentence Structures

In just one place in a text, writers will sometimes repeat a sentence structure or a series of sentence structures for effect. This is a repetition not of *words*, but of *kinds of words*, and how they are put together. These sophisticated repetitions tie the sentences together in a rhythmic way, adding an interesting sound to the text.

- *Secret Place* (1996) by Eve Bunting: “The growl of traffic, the snort of trains, the *beep-beep* of a backing truck. The secret place has its own noise: The cackle of coots, the quack of teals, the *rah-rah* of the mallards that ring the sky” (n.p.).
- *Night in the Country* (1986) by Cynthia Rylant: “There are owls. Great owls with marble eyes who swoop among the trees and are not afraid of night in the country. Night birds. There are frogs. Night frogs who sing songs for you every night: *reek reek reek reek*. Night songs” (n.p.).

Re-Say

The re-say is the repetition of an *idea* which comes immediately after the idea has been presented. The re-say is the stopping to say something again, another way, right away. Much like a close echo, a word or two are often repeated in the re-say.

- *Dreamplace* (1993) by George Ella Lyon: “. . . and see for the first time across the trees: like a *dream*, like a *sandcastle*, this city the Pueblo people built under a cliff” (n.p.).
- *Baby* (1993) by Patricia MacLachlan: “Only Byrd looked happily satisfied, as if something *wonderful*, something *wished for*, had happened” (18).

WONDROUS WORD CHOICES

Striking Adjectives

Writers will sometimes describe a noun using an adjective that is unusual or unexpected in some way. Sometimes the effect is achieved because of crossed parts of speech—a word that is usually not an adjective is used as an adjective—but often it’s simply an adjective we don’t think of as a “normal” modifier for a particular noun. This craft makes the writing lively because it catches the reader’s eye—it’s surprising.

- *Letting Swift River Go* (1992) by Jane Yolen: “Then I heard my mother’s voice coming to me over the *drowned* years” (n.p.). We don’t think of “years” as something that would be “drowned.”
- *The Relatives Came* (1985) by Cynthia Rylant: “Then it was *hugging* time” (n.p.). In this case we just think of “hugging” more as a verb, and so we are surprised to see it used as an adjective.
- *Miz Berlin Walks* (1997) by Jane Yolen: “And if you listen real hard, you might even hear a *block-long* tale” (n.p.). An unexpected adjective, very specific to the content of the story.

Out-of-Place Adjectives

In English, adjectives typically come before the nouns they modify. With this crafting technique, a writer will place an adjective after the noun it modifies or in some other unexpected place. Doing this draws attention to both the adjective and the noun because of the unexpected language.

- *My Mama Had a Dancing Heart* (1995) by Libba Moore Gray: “. . . and drink lemonade *cold*” and “drink hot tea *spiced*” (n.p.). We expect “cold” and “spiced” to come before their nouns.
- *Baby* (1993) by Patricia MacLachlan: “My mother stood with her hands up to her face, *shocked*” (18).

Writers who use this technique are playing with our ears, playing with what we expect to hear. In the example below, Jane Yolen moves an adjective after an adverb phrase that modifies it, causing readers to hear something quite unexpected.

- *Miz Berlin Walks* (1997) by Jane Yolen: “But one [feather] rained into my hand, and it was all over *gold*” (n.p.). Our ears expect “gold” to come before “all over.”

Striking Verbs

This crafting technique involves the very careful selection of striking verbs that catch a reader’s attention. Like other striking parts-of-speech uses, striking verbs work out of some unexpected quality. Writers will choose verbs that readers don’t expect to see with their subjects. Sometimes the verbs very subtly personify something in the text, but just as often they are just plain surprising with their subjects.

- *My Great-Aunt Arizona* (1992) by Gloria Houston: “For fifty-seven years my great-aunt Arizona *hugged* her students” (n.p.). We just don’t expect this verb in this text about someone who teaches for a long, long time. Hugging hasn’t been mentioned at this point in the text, only

teaching, and so its appearance in this important, summarizing sentence is unexpected and delightfully surprising.

- *The Whales* (1996) by Cynthia Rylant: “In the blackness of the Black sea, the whales are *thinking* today” (n.p.). In this first line of text, we are caught by surprise because we expect whales to be “swimming” or “fishing” or “hunting” or something we associate more with these creatures. But “thinking” personifies them at the outset and sets the gentle tone for the entire text—all with one carefully chosen verb.
- *Maniac Magee* (1990) by Jerry Spinelli: “. . . especially when he got a load of the kid *drowning* in his clothes” (85). This verb creates so much visual imagery it seems to be fighting to be an adjective. We just don’t expect “drowning” to be used in this context, and so its use here is truly stunning.
- *Secret Place* (1996) by Eve Bunting: “There are warehouses with windows *blinded* by dust and names *paint-scrawled* on their brick walls” (n.p.), and “The phone wires *rocked* the moon in their cradle of lines” (n.p.). Two verbs that personify, one created by an unexpected combination of words.
- *Miz Berlin Walks* (1997) by Jane Yolen: “I ran up and touched her hands and we *knitted* our fingers” (n.p.). “Knitting” is usually done with needles, not hands, making it an unexpected choice for this wondrous sentence.

Striking Adverbs

Writers also use adverbs in unexpected ways to create striking textual effects. They can achieve an unexpected quality in adverbs in a number of ways, by creating words to make new adverbs, using another part of speech as an adverb, putting two adverbs unexpectedly together, or just choosing one we’d never think of putting with a particular verb.

- *Miz Berlin Walks* (1997) by Jane Yolen: “I’d walk with Miz Berlin, side by side, step by step, waiting *cotton-quiet* till she cleared her throat” (n.p.). Not only is it an interesting way to wait, Yolen makes up this adverb with a noun-adjective phrase, choosing not to change “quiet” to its adverbial *-ly* form.

- *The Lost and Found House* (1997) by Michael Cadnum: “All night trucks rumble past. But I *hardly really* sleep” (n.p.). A very unusual combination of two adverbs.
- *Nocturne* (1997) by Jane Yolen: “. . . a big moon balloon floats *silent* over trees” (n.p.). Another example of Yolen making an effective decision to use an adverb in adjective form. Crossing the parts of speech makes the language lively and interesting.

Intentional Vagueness

Sometimes writers will be intentionally vague for effect in their texts. This is often achieved by manipulating pronouns and adjectives that modify nouns, making them nonspecific when we expect them to be more specific.

- *The Relatives Came* (1985) by Cynthia Rylant. Rylant brilliantly makes this every reader’s story by choosing not to use a possessive pronoun in front of “relatives.” Throughout the text they are referred to as “*The* relatives” lending an anyone’s-story appeal to the text.
- *The Whales* (1996) by Cynthia Rylant: “They are floating like feathers in *a* sky” (n.p.). The choice of “a” to modify “sky” instead of “*the* sky” (which we expect) is intentionally vague, leaving open the possibility that there are more “skies” than just the one above us and adding a setting to the simile of the whales “floating like feathers.”
- *The Aunt in Our House* (1996) by Angela Johnson. In this story about an aunt who comes to visit, Johnson always refers to her as “the aunt,” in an intentionally vague usage like Rylant’s “the relatives.” the aunt is never named or claimed by a possessive pronoun.

Proper Nouns

Writers know the power of names. Name dropping in texts does so much work for writers: brand names, people names, place names. Using proper nouns gives writing a specificity that makes readers trust the authority of the narrator. Proper nouns, especially in the form of brand names, can almost

take on the role of adjectives because, in their specificity, they call up so many sensory images for readers.

- *Missing May* (1992) by Cynthia Rylant: “Before she died, I know my mother must have loved to comb my shiny hair and rub that *Johnson’s* baby lotion up and down my arms and wrap me up and hold and hold me all night long” (4). Can’t you just smell that lotion?
- *Missing May* (1992) by Cynthia Rylant: “My eyes went over May’s wildly colorful cabinets, and I was free again. I saw *Oreos* and *Ruffles* and big bags of *Snickers*” (8). She could have just said “cookies and chips and candy” but it wouldn’t have had the same specific, sensual detail that the proper nouns have for readers.
- *Baby* (1993) by Patricia MacLachlan: “He danced every evening before dinner, after his six crackers (*Ritz*) with cheddar cheese (extra sharp), between the first glass of whiskey that made him happy and the second that made him sad” (5).

Make-Your-Own Words

Sometimes writers can’t find just the right words they need, but they are not distracted by this. They just make up words! By combining words or word parts that are familiar to readers, writers don’t shy away from making new words that fit most perfectly with their meanings. Often, these new words are hyphenated, but not always. Often, you will see they are adjectives trying to describe the indescribable, but not always.

- *Maniac Magee* (1990) by Jerry Spinelli: “That’s why his front steps were the only *un-sat-on* front steps in town” (17) and “. . . and—*unbefroggable!*—the “ball” was heading back home too!” (27).
- *Home Run* (1998) by Robert Burleigh: “Then there is only the *echoey, nothing-quite-like-it* sound” (n.p.).
- *An Angel for Solomon Singer* (1992) by Cynthia Rylant: “and the *smiling-eyed* waiter told Solomon Singer to come back again to the Westway Cafe” (n.p.).
- *Nocturne* (1997) by Jane Yolen: “in the wraparound *blacksurround* velvet night” (n.p.).

WONDROUS SENTENCES

Artful Use of “And”

Many authors start sentences with “and.” As a matter of fact, it is so common that it almost doesn’t warrant being listed as a crafting technique. I list it because it is something most adults were warned not to do in school but also because there is an art to its use. You and your students will need to collect many examples of this crafting technique to really understand it in use.

Often, you might notice that sentences starting with “and” do not stand alone well, away from the surrounding sentences in the text, thus hinting at the function of the conjunction. Starting a sentence with “and” lets the writer set a part of something off by itself—showing it’s still tied to the rest (by the “and”) but giving it its own sentence significance. Sometimes sentences starting with “and” are meant to show a narrator’s afterthought. Interestingly, writers will often end entire texts with a sentence that begins with “and,” capitalizing on the archetypal feeling and sound all readers know: “And they all lived happily ever after.”

Again, this “technique” is so common that I could have gotten examples of it from almost any text. Here are just a few for your consideration.

- *Missing May* (1992) by Cynthia Rylant: “And then a big wind came and set everything free” (89). Last sentence.
- *When I Was Young in the Mountains* (1982) by Cynthia Rylant: “And that was always enough” (n.p.). Last sentence.
- *What You Know First* (1995) by Patricia MacLachlan: “And so I can remember, too” (n.p.). Last sentence.

Runaway Sentences

To convey a sense of franticness, of desperation, excitement, or being carried away with something, writers will sometimes craft a very long, winding runaway sentence. Taken out of the texts they’re found in, these kinds of sentences are awkward, but it is their awkwardness that makes them *work* in context. The winding length of these seemingly out-of-control sentences matches their meaning in some way.

Sometimes runaway sentences are actually textbook run-on sentences, but often they are not; they are just very long. Runaway sentences are often filled with marks of punctuation, especially commas, that slow and quicken the pace as you read through them.

- *House on Mango Street* (1991) by Sandra Cisneros: “But my mother’s hair, my mother’s hair, like little rosettes, like little candy circles all curly and pretty because she pinned it in pincurls all day, sweet to put your nose into when she is holding you, holding you and you feel safe, is the smell of bread before you bake it, is the smell when she makes room for you on her side of the bed still warm with her skin and you sleep near her, the rain outside falling and Papa snoring. The snoring, the rain, and Mama’s hair that smells like bread” (6–7). The sentence conveys a sense of being carried away with the beauty. Notice the thread-back, textbook fragment that follows the runaway sentence.
- *Missing May* (1992) by Cynthia Rylant: “I searched for topics that had generally interested both of us before, like whether or not we should get a dog and did we think that young guy at the hardware store was drunk or just had a speech problem and maybe this spring we ought to buy one of those Weed Eaters so we could clean out that mess around the old Chevy” (48). Sense of desperation—she can’t get Ob to talk.
- *Amazing Grace* (1995) by Jonathan Kozol: “All the strategies and agencies and institutions needed to contain, control, and normalize a social plague—some of them severe, others exploitative, and some benign—are, it seems, being assembled: defensible stores, defensible parks, defensible entrances to housing projects, defensible schools where weapons-detectors are installed at the front doors and guards are posted, ‘drug-free zones’ in front of the schools, ‘safety corridors’ between the schools and nearby subway stations, ‘grieving rooms’ in some of the schools where students have a place to mourn the friends who do not make it safely thorough the ‘safety corridors,’ a large and crowded criminal court and the enormous new court complex now under construction, an old reform school (Spofford) and the new, much larger juvenile prison being built on St. Anne’s Avenue, an adult prison, a prison barge, a projected kitchen to prepackage prison meals, a projected high school

to train kids to work in prisons and in other crime-related areas, the two symmetrical prostitute strolls, one to the east, one to the west, and counseling and condom distribution to protect the prostitutes from spreading or contracting AIDS, services for grown-ups who already have contracted AIDS, services for children who have AIDS, services for children who have seen their mothers die of AIDS, services for men and women coming out of prison, services for children of the men and women who are still in prison, a welfare office for determining who is eligible for checks and check-cashing stores where residents can cash the checks, food stamp distribution and bodegas that accept the stamps at discount to enable mothers to buy cigarettes or diapers, 13 shelters, 12 soup kitchens, 11 free food pantries, perhaps someday an ‘empowerment zone,’ or ‘enterprise zone,’ or some other kind of business zone to generate some jobs for a small fraction of the people who reside here: all the pieces of the perfectible ghetto, the modernized and sometimes even well-served urban lazaretto, with civic-minded CEOs who come up from Manhattan maybe once a week to serve as mentors or ‘role models’ to the children in the schools while some of their spouses organize benefit balls to pay for dinners in the shelters” (135–36). A single, amazing run-away sentence—more than 350 words—meant to convey a sense of desperateness about life in the South Bronx. I believe this is one of the most amazing sentences I’ve ever read.

Artful Sentence Fragments

In all kinds of writing, good writers will craft sentence fragments for effect. If you take these sentence fragments out of context and place them on a classroom chalkboard, they do appear to be incomplete thoughts. But inside the texts in which they are found they are always quite complete.

We have the grammatical concept of an “understood” part of a sentence. We say that the subject of a command is an understood “you.” And if we look closely at writing in the real world, we see that writers frequently rely on understood parts of sentences to make thoughts complete.

Artful sentence fragments are just that, *artful*, not arbitrary or by accident, and they do fairly consistent work in texts. Most commonly, you will see

artful fragments that clarify, reiterate, exclaim, or list. They are certainly not the leave-you-hanging or chopped-off kinds of fragments that inexperienced writers sometimes write without realizing it. Here are just a few examples I really like.

- *Maniac Magee* (1990) by Jerry Spinelli: “For instance, he would eat dinner with Aunt Dot on Monday, with Uncle Dan on Tuesday, and so on. Eight years of that” (6).
- *I Had Seen Castles* (1993) by Cynthia Rylant: “The mills were fed coal and men so Pittsburgh might live. And it did. Very well” (2). And just a page over in the text: “Evidence of the father’s taste lies behind glass doors of a bookcase. Theory. Darwin. Empiricism. Words to bind you to this room, this house, this planet. Words to make sense of everything” (3).
- *Woodsong* (1990) by Gary Paulsen: “Largely because of Disney and posed ‘natural’ wildlife films and television programs I had preconceived ideas about wolves, about what wolves should be and do. They never really spoke to the killing. Spoke to the blood” (6). The fragment here—“Spoke to the blood”—is actually its own paragraph in *Woodsong*, a feature found in lots of Paulsen’s writing.
- *Baby* (1993) by Patricia MacLachlan: “Mama was covered with flecks and smears of paint, and I could tell by the colors what she was working on. The island” (7).
- *Home Run* (1998) by Robert Burleigh: “Then it is as it should be. Smooth as silk. Easy as air on the face. Right as falling water” (n.p.). He is describing the “one-ness” of Babe Ruth and the ball when Babe hits it.

One-Sentence Paragraphs

Defying the school adage that every paragraph must have five sentences, writers will often set off a sentence as its own paragraph for emphasis. These are not sentences with quotations in them (which are often their own paragraphs). These are simple sentences set off by themselves for effect. When

you look at these sentences in relation to the other sentences around them, you see that by giving them their own paragraphs, writers have used the white space around them as a mark of exclamation.

- *Little by Little* (1987) by Jean Little:

Since Jamie had gotten that Robin Hood book for Christmas, acting out Robin's adventures had become our favorite game. Eight-year-old Jamie was Robin, of course, since he was the oldest and could read the book. Ronnie and Hugh, who was only three, were Will Scarlet, Little John and the Sheriff of Nottingham. I was graciously permitted to be Friar Tuck and the entire outlaw band. But Marilyn was chosen to play Maid Marian every single time.

"Why do you always pick her?" I had asked. Jamie had shown me the illustrations.

"Maid Marian has to have curly hair," he said. "Yours is straight. Besides, Marilyn sounds like Marian."

I was getting sick of Sherwood Forest. (2)

In this case, I think that making "I was getting sick of Sherwood Forest" its own paragraph does more than give it emphasis, I think it gives it tone as well. I can't help but read it and hear a very dead-pan voice, fed up with the turn of events.

- *Baby* (1993) by Patricia MacLachlan:

My mother stood with her hands up to her face, shocked. My father's face was dark and still and bewildered. Only Byrd looked happily satisfied, as if something wonderful, something wished for, had happened.

And it had.

Her excitement was here. (18)

Direct-Contact Sentence

These are sentences—often commands, but they can be of any sentence type—in which the writer interrupts the narrative to speak directly to the reader or to comment on what's happening in the text. These sentences invite readers to be active participants with the writer, either by following the writer's instructions or by listening to the writer's commentary.

- *But I'll Be Back Again* (1989) by Cynthia Rylant. In her memoir chapter on kissing, Rylant is telling the story of one of the most powerful kisses she had ever received as a teenager:

It was like sitting with Tom Cruise, so strong was Robert's manly aura. We had talked for some time, with quite a bit of space between us, when suddenly he asked if he could kiss me.

Well, would you refuse Tom Cruise? (42)

No, I guess I wouldn't—and I love that my favorite author stepped outside her text for a moment and shared this little revelation with me directly.

- *Night in the Country* (1986) by Cynthia Rylant: She interrupts her description of night in the country and suddenly tells the reader, "Listen:" (n.p.). And then we hear an apple fall from the tree.

Seesaw Sentences

Seesaw sentences are crafted with predictable pairs of information or detail, just like seesaw text structures, but on a smaller, one- or two-sentence scale. The pairing effect gives these sentences a two-part rhythm.

- *An Angel for Solomon Singer* (1992) by Cynthia Rylant: "So much of Indiana was mixed into his blood that even now, fifty-odd years later, he could not give up being a boy in Indiana and at night he journeyed the streets, wishing they were fields, gazed at lighted windows, wishing they were stars, and listened to the voices of all who passed, wishing for the conversations of crickets" (n.p.).
- *Whoever You Are* (1997) by Mem Fox: "Joys are the same, and love is the same. Pain is the same, and blood is the same. Smiles are the same, and hearts are just the same" (n.p.).

Taffy Sentences

These sentences begin with a central idea and then pull that idea out a little bit, and then a little bit more, and maybe even a little bit more. Each time the

sentence is stretched, a little more detail is added and the original detail is repeated.

- *Nocturne* (1997) by Jane Yolen: “In the night, in the velvet night, in the brushstroked bluecoat velvet night . . .” (n.p.).

Short, Short, Long Sentences

In a move seemingly borrowed from musicians, writers will often craft a series of three sentences in a rhythmic “duh, duh, duh-duh-duh” three-part rhythm.

- *Welcome to the Green House* (1993) by Jane Yolen: “Welcome to the green house. Welcome to the hot house. Welcome to the land of the warm, wet days” (n.p.).
- *An Angel for Solomon Singer* (1992) by Cynthia Rylant: “He could not have a cat. He could not have a dog. He could not even paint his walls a different color. . .” (n.p.).

Sentences That Make a Long Story Short

Sometimes when writers want to move in a hurry through a lot of time or activity in a text, they will write one sentence that covers lots of ground fast. These sentences compress time and detail and are the opposite of the crafting technique in which writers will stretch a moment out, sometimes making a single action last several pages. Techniques like making a long story short clearly show that writers are in control of time in their texts.

- *The Relatives Came* (1985) by Cynthia Rylant: “So they drank up all their pop and ate up all their crackers and traveled up all those miles until finally they pulled into our yard” (n.p.). She makes the traveling part of the trip pass by very quickly.
- *I Had Seen Castles* (1993) by Cynthia Rylant: “After the war ended, America made Germany its friend, Russia its enemy, and it helped

rebuild Japan” (90). Sums up the entire outcome of the war in one sentence.

WONDROUS MARKS OF PUNCTUATION

Whispering Parentheses

Writers use this technique to communicate directly with readers, stepping “outside” the regular text for a moment to whisper something in the reader’s ear. These are usually asides of explanation that are more characteristic of spoken language than written language, but the form they take in texts is often parenthetical. Whispering parentheses give texts a conversational tone, making readers feel like insiders with an author. Cynthia Rylant is obviously a writer who likes to pull her readers close and make them feel like insiders. Here are three examples of her using this technique in different texts.

- *An Angel for Solomon Singer* (1992) by Cynthia Rylant: “When he reached the end of his list of dreams (the end was a purple wall), he simply started all over again and ordered up a balcony (but he didn’t say the balcony out loud)” (n.p.).
- *Missing May* (1992) by Cynthia Rylant: “May started talking about where they’d hang the swing as soon as she hoisted herself out of the front seat (May was a big woman), and Ob . . .” (5).
- *But I’ll Be Back Again* (1989) by Cynthia Rylant: “When the Beatles came to America in 1964 the boys lost most of us girls to either John Lennon, Paul McCartney, George Harrison, or Ringo Starr (not many to Ringo)” (15).

Commentary Dashes

You will see that another way writers add layers of commentary to a text is to set extra, “by-the-way” details off with dashes. You may have been accustomed to using dashes in journals and notebooks, but didn’t realize they were appropriate for many types of published writing as well. Writers use

“commentary dashes” not just to expand an idea, but to do so with *voice*. They sound like an additional thing the narrator has just thought to tell you. An interesting study is to look at parenthetical asides (like those in the examples above) and compare them to the asides set off by dashes.

- *Missing May* (1992) by Cynthia Rylant: “Ob was an artist—I could tell that the minute I saw them—though *artist* isn’t the word I could have used back then, so young” (6).
- *Canyons* (1990) by Gary Paulsen: “He lived alone with his mother and when he was home—which was less and less as he approached fifteen and his mother spent more and more time working to live, working to be, working to feed and clothe her only son—the two of them existed in a kind of quiet tolerance” (9–10). Notice also the lovely repetition in this stunning sentence.

Items in a Series

If you run for a usage manual every time you write items in a series, trying to remember whether there is a comma after that last “and” or not, you may want to investigate a little more how writers handle such instances. I was always taught that you just followed the “rule” when you needed to list things, but studying the craft of writing has shown me that you have a lot more options with this usage than just one rule provides. And that’s how “items in a series” ended up as a crafting technique, because when you really look at texts, you see that writers often make very deliberate decisions about how a list will be punctuated.

When you look at items in a series in texts, you will see some that are punctuated with all commas and no conjunctions; some that use all conjunctions and no commas; some that place periods between the items in the series, making each one its own sentence; and some that are punctuated following the more traditional “rule” for items in a series.

Toying with how items in a series are punctuated lets the writer play with rhythm and with meaning. Read some of the examples below as if they were punctuated another way and listen to the difference in rhythm it makes. Also, think about how the listed items *mean* what they mean through their listing. Items separated by conjunctions only, with no marks of punctuation, are

items that run more together, as if they are separate parts of one thing, whereas commas or periods between items make them seem like very separate things.

This is another crafting technique for which there are examples in almost every text you encounter. Here are just a few of my favorites.

- *The Relatives Came* (1985) by Cynthia Rylant: “We were so busy hugging and eating and breathing together” (n.p.).
- *Night in the Country* (1986) by Cynthia Rylant: “. . . the groans and thumps and squeaks that houses make when they like you are trying to sleep” (n.p.).
- *The Whales* (1996) by Cynthia Rylant: “Thinking of those things that matter most to them: friends, family, supper. A song they used to know” (n.p.). A combination of commas and a period.
- *Welcome to the Green House* (1993) by Jane Yolen: “If we do not do something soon, there will be no more green house, not for the monkeys and fish and birds and bees and beetles and wild pigs and bats and kinkajous and all the hundreds of thousands of flowers and fruits and trees. And not for us either” (n.p.).
- *Scarecrow* (1998) by Cynthia Rylant: “The earth has rained and snowed and blossomed and wilted and yellowed and greened and vined itself all around him” (n.p.).

Super Colons

Colons are something we never learned much about in school. They were always sort of the last mark of punctuation in the grammar book, and sometimes we didn’t even get to them before the school year was up (probably because we’d spent so much time on all those comma rules). But studying the craft of writing has made me very interested in colons. Writers use them to do lots and lots of artful work in texts (and they are way more fashionable than semicolons!). Colons can set an idea off from others, show that someone is thinking or talking, or serve as markers that something big is about to follow (my students came to call these “on-your-mark, get-set, go colons”).

- *Tulip Sees America* (1998) by Cynthia Rylant: “And we left Ohio and went across America. This is what we saw:”—this colon sets up the entire rest of the text (n.p.). From later in the same text: “You drive between a stand of firs and you think: no ocean. Then you blink, and there it is:”—a description of the ocean scene follows this colon (n.p.).
- *Dreamplace* (1993) by George Ella Lyon: “. . . till we come around a bend and see for the first time across the trees: like a dream, like a sandcastle, this city the Pueblo people built under a cliff” (n.p.).
- *Scarecrow* (1998) by Cynthia Rylant: “They ignore the pie-pan hands and the button eyes and see instead the scarecrow’s best gift: his gentleness” (n.p.).

Super Ellipses

Like colons, those three little periods in a row—known as “ellipses”—do a lot of artful work for writers too. Ellipses can show that an action is continuing, transition from one action to another or from one idea to another, move time or place, or show that there just are not words for something.

- *Dog Heaven* (1995) by Cynthia Rylant: “They turn around and around in the cloud . . . until it feels just right, and then they curl up and sleep” (n.p.).
- *On the Day You Were Born* (1991) by Debra Frasier: “a rising tide washed the beaches clean for your footprints . . . while far out at sea clouds swelled with water drops” (n.p.).
- *The Whales* (1996) by Cynthia Rylant: “There are not enough poems in the world to tell. . .” (n.p.). There is nothing that follows these ellipses in the text that completes them. They show a speechless narrator.
- *Down the Road* (1995) by Alice Schertle: “Then she continued down the road . . . through a meadow . . . across a stream . . . past a house or two . . . down a street . . . around a corner . . . up some steps . . . and into the cool shadows of Mr. Birdie’s Emporium and Dry Goods Store” (n.p.). Those are some real traveling ellipses!

- *Madelia* (1997) by Jan Spivey Gilchrist. Gilchrist uses ellipses again and again across several pages to mark pauses in a long, flowing sermon: “‘There is a place . . . a place,’ Daddy sang out, ‘Oh, yeah . . . a place far away . . . a beautiful place . . . yes, Lord . . . where the streets glisten in the sunlight . . . and shimmer in the moonlight . . . we will go there one day . . . we’ll ride on high . . . we’ll sail through the sky . . . with a host of many’” (n.p.).

Quotation Mark-less Quotations

You may not have realized that quotation marks are not the only method of setting off direct quotations in texts. Writers will sometimes choose to represent speech in other ways for various meaning-making reasons.

- *All the Places to Love* (1994) by Patricia MacLachlan. Quotations in this text are written in italics and not enclosed within quotation marks. This decision might have been made because each quotation in the book is something someone has said in the past about why he or she loves a certain place above all others. The atypical direct speech is therefore marked in an atypical way.
- *House on Mango Street* (1991) by Sandra Cisneros. There are no marks for direct speech of any kind in this text, though the text is full of direct speech that follows traditional markers such as, “He says” and “She says.” Here’s an example:

Where do you live? she asked.

There, I said pointing up to the third floor.

You live *there?* (5).

The only place in the entire chapter book text where quotation marks *are* used is near the end in this context:

I make a story for my life, for each step my brown shoe takes. I say, “And so she trudged up the wooden stairs, her sad brown shoes taking her to the house she never liked” (109).

By using quotation marks only here, Cisneros seems to be making a statement about the permanence or superiority of story language over spoken language.

- *We Had a Picnic This Sunday Past* (1997) by Jacqueline Woodson. This author uses bold print to mark direct quotations: “**The tooth fairy bring you anything?** Paulette wanted to know. **Got a quarter for them,** Astrid said, and held out his hand to show us the shiny quarter there” (n.p.).

WONDROUS PRINT

Interesting Italics

Writers use italics in many interesting ways that add layers of meaning to any text. You will see italics that make noise, give emphasis, distinguish present from past, match speech patterns, show that someone is remembering, and do all kinds of other work in texts. Readers use the context to figure out what that meaning is, and writers make sure the context supports the italicized meaning.

- *Baby* (1993) by Patricia MacLachlan. Italics are used throughout the text in many interesting ways, but especially to set apart Sophie’s memories from the rest of the text.
- *Night in the Country* (1986) by Cynthia Rylant: “Night frogs who sing songs for you every night: *reek reek reek reek*. Night songs” (n.p.). Italics that make noise.
- *Maniac Magee* (1990) by Jerry Spinelli: “You *have* eaten pizza before, haven’t you?” (49). Italics are frequently used to match speech patterns in the text.
- *Water Dance* (1997) by Thomas Locker: “I fill and overflow. *I am the lake*” (n.p.). Italics are used each time the water identifies itself.

Text Shaped to Match Meanings

Sometimes writers will lay out text or the print of a single word on the page in a way that matches the meaning of the text in that place. While this is a very common technique in picture books and in poetry, you will also occasionally see it in other genres.

- *Dreamplace* (1993) by George Ella Lyon. Lyon writes the part of the text where she describes the Anasazi climbing to their homes in the cliffs this way:

hands
 and
 feet
 finding
 slots
 in the
 stone (n.p.)

- *Canyons* (1990) by Gary Paulsen: “It was going to be a long, loong night” (41).

MY WAYS WITH WORDS BOOKLIST

I would like to offer a booklist here of the books in my library that seem to be just filled with interesting ways with words. These are the books I pull out again and again as I teach, and they are the books I use for inquiry when I am teaching students to read like writers for the first time. I am keeping the list short, only including what I consider the best in my private collection.

Robert Burleigh

Home Run (1998)

Nancy White Carlstrom

Raven and River (1997)

Sandra Cisneros

House on Mango Street (1991; chapter book)

Ralph Fletcher

Twilight Comes Twice (1997)

Debra Frasier

On the Day You Were Born (1991)

Libba Moore Gray

My Mama Had a Dancing Heart (1995)

Eloise Greenfield

For the Love of the Game: Michael Jordan and Me (1997)

Thomas Locker

Snow Toward Evening (1990; poetry collection)

Water Dance (1997)

Home (1998)

George Ella Lyon

Dreamplace (1993)

Patricia MacLachlan

Baby (1993; chapter book)

All the Places to Love (1994)

What You Know First (1995)

Thylia Moss

I Want to Be (1993)

Gary Paulsen

Woodsong (1990; chapter book)

Dogteam (1993)

Ruth Yaffe Radin

A Winter Place (1982)

High in the Mountains (1989)

Mary Lyn Ray

Mud (1996)

Cynthia Rylant

When I Was Young in the Mountains (1982)

This Year's Garden (1984)

The Relatives Came (1985)

Night in the Country (1986)

But I'll Be Back Again (1989; chapter book)

Missing May (1992; chapter book)

I Had Seen Castles (1993; chapter book)

Dog Heaven (1995)

The Whales (1996)

Scarecrow (1998)

Tulip Sees America (1998)

Cynthia Rylant and Walker Evans

Something Permanent (1994; poetry and photography collection)

Jane Yolen

Nocturne (1997)

Welcome to the Green House (1993)

Miz Berlin Walks (1997)

Welcome to the Ice House (1998)

References

- Kozol, Jonathan. 1995. *Amazing Grace: The Lives of Children and the Conscience of a Nation*. New York: Crown.
- McClure, Amy A., and Janice V. Kristo. 1996. *Books That Invite Talk, Wonder, and Play*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.