

Carol Brendler
Essay
Uma Krishnaswami, Advisor
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BRUSH UP YOUR CHIASMUS
Lesser-Known Rhetorical Devices Add Punch to Picture Book Read-Alouds
by Carol Brendler

Some picture books make great read-alouds—a pleasure for the reader to read and the listener to hear. They tell engaging stories, using rhythm and lyrical qualities that add to the read-aloud experience. The best read-alouds have a certain poetry in the prose, a music and rhythm to the language that the author attains through careful word choice and syntax. Often an author will use rhyme, alliteration and repetition of words and phrases in a picture book to achieve the lyrical qualities of a great read-aloud. But can other lesser-known rhetorical devices add more than lyrical qualities to a picture book, and hence add to its read-aloud success?

Parallelism, when sentences, clauses or phrases are constructed similarly is a worthy example for consideration. Using parallel construction has the effect of giving each element equal weight in importance and adds balance between the ideas listed. (Harris) In Doreen Cronin's *Duck for President*, we see parallelism used on a description of the farm animals after a hard day of chores:

At the end of each day the pigs are covered in lint bunnies. The cows are covered in weeds. The sheep are covered in dust. And Duck is covered in tiny bits of grass and espresso beans.

Note how the parallel construction not only lends the sentences a balanced construction that is pleasing to the ear but also adds equal weight to each animal's condition. Parallelism also adds to the comic effect by giving the sentences an accumulative feel. Everyone was covered in something; it was out of control! No one escaped the mess. If Cronin had written something like "The animals were covered in lint, weeds, dust, grass, and espresso beans" much of the rhythm,

the humor and hyperbole would have been lost. If she had written, “the pigs are covered in lint bunnies and the other animals are dirty, too” the animals would not have equal importance in the mind of the listener.

In another picture book, *Raising Yoder’s Barn* by Jane Yolen, parallelism appears in the following passage:

*A barn for the cows, for the hay in winter, for the keeping of goats and
hens and chickens, for the tools in their proper order.*

On this page, readers learn how important a barn is to an Amish farmer and this passage uses parallelism to show this. So many things happen in a barn and they are all important. If Yolen had written “The farmer uses his barn for housing cows and other livestock, and hay and tool storage.” It would not have retained its poetic sound and feel, nor would it give us the deeper sense of what a barn means to a farmer, that it is more than just a place to put stuff. Each purpose is as important as the last.

Chiasmus, like parallelism, uses balanced construction but then flips the second phrase or clause, like a mirror image. Here is a line from *Always Room for One More*, by Sorche Nic Leodhas, lyrics adapted from a Scottish folk tune:

*Och, the walls they bulged out and bulged in then/The walls they bulged in
and out.*

Note the way the words “out and [bulged] in” and then “in and out” mimic the action they are meant to describe. Even a child who is not familiar with the word “bulged” will be able to picture walls alternating between out and in; thus, the meaning is enhanced by the use of chiasmus. In addition, these phrases roll musically off the tongue and are a delight to read aloud.

Writers can create the effect of a list that extends beyond the words written by using a device called *asyndeton*, in which the conjunctions between a list of words, phrases or clauses is omitted. The previous example from *Raising Yoder's Barn* shows good use of this device. We are made to understand that the list given is not complete, that there are other activities that take place in the barn beyond those mentioned. Asyndeton can also suggest that the list given is extemporaneous, showing "unpremeditated multiplicity." (Harris) When read aloud, the reader tends to draw out the words' pronunciation and even trail off at the end of the list, giving the asyndeton that aural element that adds so much to a read-aloud story. Here's another example that uses both asyndeton and parallelism, from *When Snow Lay Soft on the Mountain* by Patricia Hermes:

. . . Hallie closed her eyes and ears to the coming spring, to the blooming
of the cottonwood tree, to the rumbling of the stream high above, to the coyote
pups tumbling in and out of moon shadows.

The author's use of asyndeton leads us to conclude that Hallie closes her eyes and ears to everything in the natural world around her, anything that reminds her of her ailing father and their nature walks together. But it suggests that the things listed are ones that casually present themselves to mind, the first things noticed on a cursory look around. Note also the beauty of Hermes's sentence, its cadence, when read aloud.

A companion to asyndeton is *polysyndeton*, in which conjunctions are used between each of the words, phrases or clauses listed. William Mayne uses this in *The Mouldy*:

In [a hole] they heard Mouldy pace back and forth, with grunt and snarl and snap
of teeth.

The villain in this story, the mole called Mouldy is grunting, snarling and so on. But we sense that these are just some of the nasty noises people hear when they listen down Mouldy's hole, and perhaps also that these frightening sounds never let up. Listen for the rhythm of that particular phrase when read aloud, with each onomatopoeic word standing out in relief among the "ands." Polysyndeton suggests a buildup of items, an intensity, an "energetic enumeration," and oddly enough, like its companion asyndeton, a multiplicity beyond what is actually listed. (Harris) In Munro Leaf's *Ferdinand*, the young bull has refused to fight and the reaction of the bullfighting staff is explained this way:

And the Banderillos were mad and the Picadores were madder and the Matador was so mad he cried because he couldn't show off with his cape and sword.

Children can hear how mad one group is, *and* the next group is even madder, *and* it just keeps getting worse and worse, building and building. The conjunctions linking each clause offer a cue for the reader to raise her voice with each added group, intensifying the scene for her young audience.

Epizeuxis, the repetition of a single word several times in succession can be used successfully for emphasis, or to slow the pace of the narrative. *Hide and Seek Fog* by Alvin Tresselt uses epizeuxis to good effect:

A breeze sprang up out of no place and gently, gently, rolled back the fog, back to the wide and empty ocean.

When read aloud, the reader will naturally accentuate and draw out the words "gently, gently." She will likely pronounce them in a gentle fashion that imitates the motion of the breeze itself. So the adverb becomes emphasized; it also slows down the rhythm of the sentence. In

Donna Jo Napoli's *Albert*, we find Albert with a fledgling bird in his hat. He is trying to convince the tiny creature that it can fly:

Albert tossed him up lightly.

He fluttered a little and landed safely back in the hat with a peep.

Albert tossed him higher.

He fluttered a lot and landed back in the hat with a loud chirp.

Albert tossed him high high high.

The fledgling looked around and spread his wings.

By that third toss, we know that Albert is really throwing caution to the wind and sending that baby bird way, way up there. The three “highs” emphasize the action, and the words can be read aloud in such a way that the distance is exaggerated to great effect.

Using a device known as *anaphora*, authors will repeat the same word or words at the beginning of a succession of phrases or clauses. In *The Horse Who Lived Upstairs* by Phyllis McGinley, we find:

*It was a fine stall and Joey was very comfortable there. He had plenty of
oats to eat and plenty of fresh straw to lie on.*

And this, from Rosemary Wells's *Noisy Nora* when Nora has come up missing:

No Nora in the cellar.

No Nora in the tub.

No Nora in the mailbox

Or hiding in a shrub.

Much of what we gain from anaphora is the repetition that gives so much pleasure to our ears when we read these books aloud. Also, there is added emphasis in the words “*plenty* of oats

to eat, and *plenty* of fresh straw.” The repetition of the phrase “No Nora” in the second example imitates the feel of a search, when we look for something there and there and there. If Wells had written “We looked for Nora in the cellar, the tub, the mailbox and a shrub” it would have lost the idea that every time the family looked in a new place, Nora was not there; the sense that they checked many different places, one by one, would be diluted. In addition, both of these examples give the author a chance for alliteration, a common but effective read-aloud device.

Repetition is also at work in *epistrophe*, when the same word appears at the end of a succession of phrases or clauses. Virginia Lee Burton uses this in *Mike Mulligan and his Steam Shovel*: “Mike Mulligan had a steam shovel, a beautiful red steam shovel.” Besides the opportunity for alliteration in that sentence, epistrophe, as in anaphora, causes the repeated last word to become stressed, to stand out. Think what this would have lost had Burton written simply “Mike Mulligan had a beautiful red steam shovel.” In Suzanne Tripp Jurmain’s *George Did It*, the narrator uses epistrophe to tell the reader about the ideas the colonists had for the United States Constitution:

Many people wanted to add a special section called a Bill of Rights to protect important liberties, like the right to speak freely without fear of what the government might think, the right to choose a religion without fear of what the neighbors might think . . .

That last phrase, “without the fear of what the [] might think” ties together the two ideas as similar and accentuates an important point that might otherwise be lost, that these rights will be granted despite the fact that some people may not agree with choices others make.

When a picture book writer has only a few hundred words to tell a story every word, every phrase, must work hard to convey meaning. When that text is also meant to become a read-

aloud, the writer carefully evaluates his choice of words for sound and rhythm. Beyond alliteration, beyond rhyme and musicality, less common rhetorical devices have their place in a picture book writer's toolbox. Devices like parallelism, chiasmus and the rest not only add repetition and rhythm to picture book text but they can also add depth of meaning, balance, emphasis, multiplicity, intensity, or even humor. Achieved through careful phrasing, or with small additions to the text, these devices provide the above benefits without weighing down the text with wordiness or explanation. They are great tools the writer can use to add punch to his read-aloud picture book prose.

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