Adding Eloquence to Your Legal Writing with Figures of Speech

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Adding Eloquence to Your Legal Writing with Figures of Speech

Tenille Fordyce-Ruff

Legal contentions, like the currency, depreciate through overissue.1

Anaphora

You likely recognize anaphora. You likely have read famous works that employ anaphora. You likely have even used anaphora.

Anaphora is starting two or more sentences with the same word or words. Using anaphora — repeated words — joins phrases and ideas together. It will make your writing sound repetitive, but that's the point. It creates an impression. It's also very effective and powerful.

You can create anaphora in your writing by going back through a draft and determining what you would like to emphasize. Then add (or repeat) key words to create a link.

For instance, you have written:

Since Mr. Smith's departure, overall sales were down 5%. Specifically, red widget sales decreased by 3% and blue widget sales decreased 6%.

But, you want to emphasize that Mr. Smith's departure created the decline. You could re-write this with anaphora:

Since Mr. Smith's departure, overall sales dropped 5%. Since Mr. Smith's departure, red widget sales dropped 3%. Since Mr. Smith's departure, blue widget sales dropped 6%.

Repeating the first clause to begin all three sentences makes this idea much stronger.

Like anaphora, antithesis repeats a familiar structure. Antithesis, though, juxtaposes contrasting ideas, words, phrases, or sentences to create balance.

Antithesis and chiasmus

Like anaphora, antithesis repeats a familiar structure. Antithesis, though, juxtaposes contrasting ideas, words, phrases, or sentences to create balance.

Bad arguments infect the good.4

To use antithesis effectively, you need to make sure the opposing parts of the sentence are in parallel structure. (Parallel structure is when parts of a sentence or sentences are in the same grammatical form.) Then, you simply need to create contrast within the parallel structure.

The touchstone of the First Amendment is not secularism, but pluralism.
Write simply and clearly; avoid jargon and legalese.

The court must refrain from basing its decision on its subjective view of the article: whether the article was good or poor, necessary or superfluous.

Chiasmus is a special form of antithesis. It puts parallel phrases in reverse order to make a point.

Ask not what your country can do for you — ask what you can do for your county.³

The careless lawyer betrays the language; and careless language betrays the lawyer.⁶

To create the balance and structure of antithesis or chiasmus, simply find an idea that you want to emphasize, but haven’t expressed as well as you want. Then counter the language with balanced language to create the emphasis you want.

Isocolon

Isocolon can be used to make sentences with anaphora, antithesis, or chiasmus even more emphatic. Isocolon emphasizes parallel structure by using equal parts for the parallel elements.

Veni, vidi, vici

Let each man search his conscience and search his speeches.⁷

To create isocolon, look for parallel constructions in your writing, then revise to create the rhythm of isocolon.

Endnotes


3 Robert H. Jackson, Advocacy Before the United States Supreme Court, 37 Cornell L. Q. 1, 5 (1951).


7 Winston Churchill Speech to the House of Commons, June 18, 1940.

About the Author

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