Isocolon

Definition of Isocolon

Isocolon is a rhetorical device that involves a succession of sentences, phrases, and clauses of grammatically equal length. In this figure of speech, a sentence has a parallel structure that is made up of words, clauses, or phrases of equal length, sound, meter, and rhythm. Isocolon is the repetition of similar grammatical forms.

Types of Isocolon

Examples of isocolon may fall under any of the following types:

> **Bicolon** – Bicolon has two grammatically equal structures. An example for this is Harley Davidson's slogan "American by Birth. Rebel by Choice."
> **Tricolon** – If there are three grammatically equal structures, it is called a tricolon. Such as: "That government of the people, by the people, and for the people shall not perish from the earth." (Abraham Lincoln)
> **Tetracolon** – "I'll give my jewels for a set of beads, /My gorgeous palace for a hermitage, /My gay apparel for an almsman's gown, /My figured goblets for a dish of wood…" (*Richard II*, by William Shakespeare). This is an example of tetra colon, where four parallel grammatical structures are written in succession. Tetracolon is also known as quatrains.

Examples of Isocolon in Literature

Example #1: *Community* (By John Donne)

> "Good we must love, and must hate ill,
> For ill is ill, and good good still;
> But there are things indifferent,

> Which we may neither hate, nor love,
> But one, and then another prove,
> As we shall find our fancy bent..."

Donne has used contrasting ideas of love and hate, good and ill, which are placed in a parallel format of equal lengths. He wants to lay emphasis on the main point that humans love good because it is good, whereas they hate bad because it is actually bad.

Example #2: *The Tyger* (By William Blake)

> "What the hammer? what the chain?
> In what furnace was thy brain?
> What the anvil? what dread grasp
> Dare its deadly terrors clasp?"

Blake makes effective use of isocolon in this poem. Here, the parallel structures start with a question that creates a regular rhythm inside the text.

Example #3: *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (By James Joyce)

> "Pity is the feeling which arrests the mind in the presence of whatsoever is grave and constant in human sufferings and unites it with the sufferer. Terror is the feeling which arrests the mind in the presence of whatsoever is grave and constant in human sufferings and unites it with the secret cause..."

This is also one of the famous isocolon examples, where the successive clauses are written in the same length, and with parallel structure. This device is useful in creating a beautiful rhythm.

Example #4: *Henry VIII* (By William Shakespeare)

"My lord, we have
Stood here observing him: Some strange commotion
Is in his brain: he bites his lip, and starts;
Stops on a sudden, looks upon the ground,
Then, lays his finger on his temple; straight,
Springs out into fast gait; then, stops again,
Strikes his breast hard; and anon, he casts
His eye against the moon: in most strange postures."

In this example, isocolon is converted into diazeugma, where multiple verbs are connected to a single subject. These multiple verbs with the same length create special dramatic effect, and make the description more vivid.

Example #5: *A Tale of Two Cities* (By Charles Dickens)

"It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair…"

Due to the repeated phrase "it was…" in the passage, readers are provoked to focus on the characteristics of "age."

Function of Isocolon

The use of isocolon in speech and in writing helps in maintaining consistency and creating balanced ideas. Because parallel phrases and clauses are recurring in isocolons, this can be a very effective persuasive device. Isocolon brings rhythm and balance to sentences, hence, it gives a smooth flow to the ideas expressed in a piece. For this reason, famous lawyers and politicians extensively employ this technique of persuasion. Isocolons are found in literary works, as well as in political, social, and ordinary conversation.