

Polysyndeton

Definition of Polysyndeton

Polysyndeton is a stylistic device in which several coordinating conjunctions are used in succession in order to achieve an artistic effect. Polysyndeton examples are found in literature and in day-to-day conversations.

The term polysyndeton comes from a Greek word meaning “bound together.” It makes use of coordinating conjunctions like *and*, *or*, *but*, and *nor* (mostly ***and*** and ***or***) which are used to join successive words, phrases, or clauses in such a way that these conjunctions are even used where they might have been omitted. For example, in the sentence, “We have ships and men and money and stores,” the coordinating conjunction “and” is used in quick succession to join words occurring together. In a normal situation, the coordinating conjunction “and” is used to join the last two words of the list, and the rest of the words in the list are separated or joined by a comma.

Polysyndeton vs. Asyndeton

Polysyndeton is opposite to another stylistic device known as “[asyndeton](#).” In an asyndeton, the words in a list are separated by commas, and no conjunctions are used to join the words in a list. Thomas S. Kane describes the difference between the two devices, saying that they are nothing more than the techniques of handling a long series of words or lists.

Polysyndeton uses conjunctions after every word or term, while asyndeton uses no conjunctions but only commas. For example: “Jane’s days became a blur of meaningless events – **wake up, brush teeth, make the coffee, get the mail, fix dinner, watch TV**. It was hard to keep depression at bay.”

Examples of Polysyndeton in Literature

Example #1: *The Holy Bible, Joshua 7:24* (By the Prophet Joshua)

“**And** Joshua, **and** all of Israel with him, took Achan the son of Zerah, **and** the silver, **and** the garment, **and** the wedge of gold, **and** his sons, **and** his daughters, **and** his oxen, **and** his asses, **and** his sheep, **and** his tent, **and** all that he had.”

This is among the best examples of polysyndeton found in classical or religious text. See how the conjunction “and” has been used in quick succession to join all the items given in this text.

Example #2: *After the Storm* (By Ernest Hemingway)

“I said, ‘Who killed him?’ and he said ‘I don’t know who killed him, but he’s dead all right,’ **and** it was dark **and** there was water standing in the street **and** no lights or windows broke **and** boats all up in the town **and** trees blown down **and** everything all blown and I got a skiff **and** went out **and** found my boat where I had her inside Mango Key **and** she was right only she was full of water.”

Hemingway has used “and” as a polysyndeton in this passage taken from “*After the Storm*.” Using this literary device, Hemmingway is able to make his readers feel the anxiety that his [character](#) is feeling.

Example #3: *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (By Maya Angelou)

Maya Angelou, a popular female poet, is well known for her use of polysyndeton, which can seem excessive at times. This is what she has written in her story *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*.

“Let the whitefolks have their money **and** power **and** segregation **and** [sarcasm](#) **and** big houses **and** schools **and** lawns like carpets, **and** books, **and** mostly–mostly–let them have their whiteness.”

The continuity in the entire sentence is remarkable, and the [rhythm](#) is exhilarating.

Example #4: *Dombey and Son* (By Charles Dickens)

“There were frowzy fields, **and** cow-houses, **and** dunghills, **and** dustheaps, **and** ditches, **and** gardens, **and** summer-houses, **and** carpet-beating grounds, at the very door of the Railway. Little tumuli **of** oyster shells in the oyster season, and **of** lobster shells in the lobster season, and **of** broken crockery and faded cabbage leaves in all seasons, encroached upon its high places.”

Charles Dickens is also well-known for his use of polysyndeton, as well as commas – often using both of these devices. You can see the effects in this passage taken from *Dombey and Son*.

Function of Polysyndeton

Polysyndeton performs several functions. Not only does it join words, phrases, and clauses, bringing continuity to a sentence, but it acts also as a stylistic device that brings rhythm to the text with the [repetition](#) of conjunctions in quick succession. It is also employed as a tool to lay emphasis to the ideas the conjunctions connect.