

## Repetition and Parallelism

**Brief:** Repetition and parallelism are stylistic devices used in many languages and cultures around the world in poetry, epics, songs, written prose, and speech.

**Learning Objective:** Demonstrate when and how to use repetition and parallelism:

**Key Terms:**

- **Parallelism:** The proximity of two or more phrases with identical or similar constructions, especially those expressing the same sentiment, but with slight modifications.
- **Repetition:** The reuse of words, phrases, ideas, or themes in your speech.

### Repetition and Parallelism

Repetition and parallelism are stylistic devices used in many languages and cultures around the world in poetry, epics, songs, written prose, and speech.

Repetition is the reuse of words, phrases, ideas or themes in your speech. Parallelism—a related device—is the proximity of two or more phrases with identical or similar constructions, especially those expressing the same sentiment, but with slight modifications.

#### *The Purpose of Repetition and Parallelism*

Repetition and parallelism provide emphasis, structure, order, and balance in your speech, in addition to clarifying your argument.

Your audience is more likely to remember something that has been repeated. Parallelism functions similarly, but without rote repetition of words or ideas. Instead, parallelism draws on a sense of repetition.

#### **How to Use Repetition**

Repetition is effective in small doses, but you don't want to sound like a broken record. Consider using repetition of the same phrase or words only for those ideas that you would like to emphasize most throughout your speech. You can also use them in close proximity for an especially dramatic effect.

For example, consider the following quotation from Sojourner Truth's famous speech, "Ain't I a Woman?"

That man over there says that women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mud-puddles, or gives me any best place! And ain't I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! I have ploughed and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And ain't I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man - when I could get it - and bear the lash as well! And ain't I a woman? I have borne thirteen children, and seen most all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with my mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me! And ain't I a woman?

Truth repeats the question “And ain't I a woman?” to drive home her point.

### ***How to Use Parallelism***

Like repetition, parallelism is a hallmark of effective writing and public speaking. The two are often used together. Examples of parallelism abound. For example, consider the following quotation from John F. Kennedy's 1961 Inaugural Address: "Let every nation know, whether it wishes us well or ill, that we shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe, to assure the survival and the success of liberty."



In this case, Kennedy repeats the word “any,” but—perhaps more importantly—includes a number of parallel phrases. The phrases “pay any price,” “bear any burden,” “meet any hardship,” “support any friend,” and “oppose any foe” are all similar lengths. In addition, they all begin with a simple present tense active verb and end with a simple noun.

By constructing phrases and sentences in a similar way (with slight modifications), you can emphasize ideas, draw attention to similarities, and highlight differences.

### **From Concept to Action**

Focusing on where you might use stylistic devices to strengthen your delivery, conduct a review of a speech outline you're currently developing. Identify a part of your speech that you think might be good match for repetition or parallelism—or both. Then, write a few sentences that include repetition and/or parallelism. Once you're done, read the sentences aloud. Notice how the repetition or parallelism feels when you say it and how sounds to your ear. Because we don't tend use these types of stylistic devices in everyday speech, you might find this type of language feels unnatural at first. Give it a chance.

**OER IMAGE SOURCES:**

"President John F. Kennedy American President." Pixabay. <https://pixabay.com/photos/president-john-f-kennedy-american-396982/>. Accessed 23 May 2019. [CC0]

**OER TEXT SOURCES:**

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