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By Patrick Barry

A moment's insight is sometimes worth a life's experience.

— Oliver Wendell Holmes Sr., *The Professor at the Breakfast Table* (1859)

Don't make the mistake of thinking that content always comes before structure. You don't need to figure out all your ideas before you decide how to organize them. Much value can come from going in the opposite direction: first figure out how you are going to organize your ideas—their appropriate structure—and then determine the appropriate content.

I often offer law students the following suggestion: "Once you find the right structure, perhaps it will be easier to find the right content."

Even if they continue to start with content, even if they continue to insist that information always trumps organization, they might start to appreciate the strong relationship between that information's architecture and the information itself. It's like the relationship between (1) the blueprints for a building and (2) the people and furniture that will eventually go inside. Each affects the other. The influence is not one-way.

Patrick Henry and Malcolm X

When it comes to advocacy, one of the most useful organizational tools is parallel structure. Think of the Virginian Patrick Henry's famous appeal during the American Revolution. On March 23, 1775, Henry addressed some of the most powerful leaders in the colonies. They were all meeting as delegates of the Second Virginia Convention at St. John's Church in Richmond. George Washington was there. So was Thomas Jefferson.[1]

Henry's goal was clear: he wanted Virginia to take military action against the British. "We must fight!" he said at one point. "I repeat it sir, we must fight! An appeal to arms and to the God of hosts, is all that is left to us." What he added at the end, with a voice as booming as it was passionate, has helped make this speech one of the most celebrated in American history: "give me liberty or give me death!"[2]

Note how perfectly that statement uses parallel structure. On one side of the phrase, you get a verb ("give"); and on the other side of the phrase, you get a verb ("give").

give me liberty or give me death
(verb)   (verb)

On one side of the phrase, you get a pronoun ("me"), and on the other side of the phrase, you get a pronoun ("me"):

give me liberty or give me death
(verb) (pronoun)   (verb) (pronoun)

Finally, on one side of the phrase, you get a regular noun ("liberty"); and on the other side of the phrase, you get a regular noun ("death"):

give me liberty or give me death
(verb) (pronoun) (noun)   (verb) (pronoun) (noun)

The symmetry is exact, like a football stadium's 50-yard line, or a seesaw evenly balanced by two eight-year-olds, each precisely the same weight as the other.

A more technical way to describe this kind of arrangement comes from Carl Klaus, who taught for many years at the famed Iowa Writers' Workshop. In *A Self Made of Words: Crafting a Distinctive Persona in Nonfiction Writing*, Klaus includes a whole chapter on parallel structure. He defines it this way: "corresponding ideas expressed in corresponding forms."[3]

Advertising slogans can be a good source in which to see this correspondence at work:

Home Depot: More saving. More doing.[4]

Botox: Keep the wisdom. Lose the lines.[5]

Virgin America: Fly like a CEO. Pay like a temp.[6]

Take the period in each slogan as the dividing line. What you get on one side ("More saving") mirrors, at least structurally, what you get on the other ("More doing").

You can also see this correspondence in the title of a speech given by Malcolm X on April 3, 1964, at the Cory Methodist Church in Cleveland, Ohio. The country, divided over civil rights, was preparing for a big election later that year. So Malcolm encouraged the largely African-American crowd to think strategically about how to use their

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vote, especially given that the country's demographics meant that African Americans could play a major role. He communicates this point by closing with a cleverly evocative bit of parallel structure:

> [W]hat does this mean? It means that when white people are evenly divided, and black people have a block of votes of their own, it is left up to them to determine who's going to sit in the White House and who's going to be in the dog house.[7]

But it's the title of the speech that is the real gem: "The Ballot or the Bullet." Not only do the syllables line up—three syllables to the left side of "or" and three to the right—but Malcolm also adds in some connective alliteration. The "B" that begins "Ballot" and the "B" that begins "Bullet" help reinforce the parallelism, as do each word's double "ll" and ending "t."

He could have called the speech "The Ballot or the Gun" or "The Ballot or the Ammunition." Just as he could have called it "The Vote or the Bullet" or "The Election or the Bullet." But none of these would have been as effective as "The Ballot or the Bullet." None would have employed the kind of symmetry that aids comprehension; the kind that makes it easy to process information quickly, even instantaneously; the kind that the seventeenth-century philosopher and mathematician Blaise Pascal might have been talking about when he observed, "Symmetry is what we see at a glance."[8]

At a glance

The idea that symmetry is an aid to comprehension—that it can help your audience grasp an idea or argument "at a glance," with little mental effort—is good to remember when trying to clean up clunky sentences. We'll soon look at two from a Green Card application written by a student in the University of Michigan Human Trafficking Clinic.

The clinic represents trafficking victims from around the world in a wide range of legal matters. Sometimes this means preparing them to testify against their traffickers in criminal trials. Sometimes it means initiating lawsuits through which victims can sue their traffickers themselves. And often, as we'll see in the Green Card example, it means guiding victims through the not-always-easy-to-navigate world of immigration law.

The client in the example, a 36-year-old woman from Haiti whom we'll call "Elise," had already moved pretty far along in that world. She had been granted a special kind of visa reserved for trafficking victims under the Trafficking Victims Protection Act, as well as the accompanying right to pursue a Green Card—a document that is a kind of immigration golden ticket: it would allow her to permanently live and work in the U.S.

The application for a Green Card includes a section for background facts. Trying to explain that Elise had spent 18 years working in South America as a domestic servant before being trafficked in the United States by a family that (falsely) promised to help her become a citizen, the student wrote these sentences:

> Before coming to the United States, Elise worked as a domestic servant for 18 years. She worked in French Guiana for six of those years and the other twelve in Brazil.

These sentences aren't terrible. All the information is correct. All the necessary data is included. But you may have noticed a kind of grammatical glitch as you moved from the first part of the second sentence ("She worked in French Guiana for six of those years") to the second part ("and the other twelve in Brazil").

The glitch isn't major. You can still understand what is being communicated. But we can make things easier on the readers,

who in this case hold Elise's fate very much in their hands, by smoothing out the transition. We don't want the immigration officials to experience any kind of stumble. We don't want them to think, even if for only a moment, "Wait, something seems a little off."

Instead, we want the sentences to be as user-friendly as possible. Parallel structure can help.

The key is to get the order of the words to align. Start by focusing on the preposition "in." It appears both in the first part of the sentence ("She worked in French Guiana for six of those years") and in the second part of the sentence ("and the other twelve in Brazil"). Each time, it is placed next to the country's name, which is helpful for parallel structure.

The problem is that in the first part of the sentence, "in French Guiana" comes before the reader learns the number of years that Elise spent working there ("in French Guiana for six of those years")—while in the second part, "in Brazil" comes after the reader learns that information ("the other twelve in Brazil"). Notice what happens when we align the parts of the sentence more directly. Notice what happens when we use parallel structure:

> Before coming to the United States, Elise worked as a domestic servant for 18 years. She worked in French Guiana for six of those years and in Brazil for the other twelve.

Isn't that a little easier on your eyes and brain? Doesn't it allow you to grasp the information more quickly—maybe even "at a glance"?

A tale of two sentences

In 1984, researchers at Yale and the University of Massachusetts tested parallel structure's effect on reading time and comprehension. They found that "[r]eaders and listeners strongly prefer coordinated elements of sentences to be parallel in structure."[9]

The pervasiveness of this "parallel structure effect" is what struck the researchers the most.[10] They tried out several different sentence constructions. Some used active voice; some used passive voice. Some used animate nouns; some used inanimate nouns. In each, the parallel version was more easily absorbed

A compelling kind of clarity accompanies parallel structure….

than the nonparallel version.[11] "These observations suggest," the researchers concluded, "that the preference for parallel structure… is not simply an aesthetic judgment about the elegance of various sentence forms": the structure actually helps people understand what you are trying to communicate.[12]

Perhaps this is why Abraham Lincoln used parallel structure when writing to the future vice president of the Confederate States, Alex Stephens, two days after South Carolina became the first state to secede from the Union:

> You think slavery is right and ought to be extended, while we think it is wrong and ought to be restricted. That, I suppose, is the rub. It certainly is the only substantial difference between us.[13]

Perhaps it is also why Frederick Douglass used parallel structure throughout his written accounts of his life as a slave, as well as in many of his speeches—including one in Williamsport, Pennsylvania, on November 15, 1867, that seems like a rhetorical relative of Malcolm X's own "The Ballot or the Bullet" speech mentioned above. "A man's rights rest in three boxes," Douglass said. "The ballot box, jury box, and cartridge box. Let no man be kept from the ballot box because of his color. Let no woman be kept from the ballot box because of her sex."[14]

A compelling kind of clarity accompanies parallel structure when it is used in this way. There is a built-in sense of order and authority.

The literary theorist and former *New York Times* columnist Stanley Fish highlights these qualities when discussing parallel structure in his 2011 book *How to Write a Sentence*. Parallel structure, he suggests, is one of the key ingredients when you want to express "unshakable conviction."[15] Keep your sentences short, he advises, employ parallel structures, use the present tense, limit yourself to relatively small words.[16]

Sentences with those characteristics "are rhythmic in feel and easy to remember; they can be delivered in a click and a snap."[17] They are perfect for crafting a "pithy pronouncement of wisdom in a manner that does not invite disagreement."[18]

Supreme Court justices have learned this lesson well. In 1970, as tensions over the Vietnam War mounted, the justices had to decide whether to overturn the conviction of 19-year-old Robert Cohen, who had been arrested for wearing an intentionally provocative antiwar jacket into a Los Angeles courthouse. On the back of the jacket, stenciled in red ink, read the words: "Fuck the draft."

Deciding in favor of Cohen and making clear that the First Amendment protects speech that some may find offensive, Justice John Marshall Harlan used a form of parallel structure to craft exactly the kind of pithy pronouncement that Fish describes. "[O]ne man's vulgarity," Harlan wrote, "is another's lyric."[19]

Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes took a similar approach in *New York Trust Co v Eisner*, a decision in which the Court upheld the constitutionality of a federal estate tax. It wasn't a very memorable case, but it did produce an extremely memorable—and wonderfully parallel—maxim: "[A] page of history is worth a volume of logic."[20]

I obviously don't know whether Harlan and Holmes came up with the structure of these pithy pronouncements before settling on the content out of which they were made. My guess is that the structure and content arrived in quick succession, if not simultaneously—the way that a clever line might to a seasoned comedian. Both justices were avid readers. Both likely internalized, early on, the elegant effect of putting corresponding ideas in corresponding forms, even if neither would have necessarily described what they were doing in that way.

But if you are just starting out as a writer, or you are simply looking to improve the effectiveness with which you communicate, it can be helpful to make a more deliberate effort to add parallel structure to your writerly repertoire. Really try to keep in mind the core principle: "corresponding ideas in corresponding forms." It's a great option for delivering information. ∎

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ENDNOTES

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