A complete list of classical rhetorical devices would be too long for our purposes, so we will content ourselves with just a few. We will use the following familiar text, Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, to get started.

Focus on the Reading: Recognizing Rhetorical Devices
Study how Lincoln uses rhetorical devices to express himself effectively and memorably.

Abraham Lincoln
Gettysburg Address

Four score and seven years ago, our fathers brought forth upon this continent a new nation: conceived in liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.

Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure. We are met on a great battlefield of that war.

We have come to dedicate a portion of that field, as a final resting place for those who here gave their lives that that nation might live. It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this.

But, in a larger sense, we cannot dedicate, we cannot consecrate, we cannot hallow this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, have consecrated it, far above our poor power to add or detract. The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here.

It is for us the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us, that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion, that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain, that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom, and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.

Commentary on the Reading

Tricolon

Study the first sentence of the fourth paragraph, "But in a larger sense, we cannot dedicate, we cannot consecrate, we cannot hallow this ground." This provides opportunity to observe several rhetorical devices. There are three successive clauses, each beginning with the same words, "we cannot." Any series of three coordinate items is called a **tricolon.** Ancient peoples had a lot of respect for the number three. In some cases it was magical, and in some cases it was feared. They believed the number three had a lot of power, and here we see one instance of it. There is an emotionally satisfying completeness about a series of three that a simple pair of items does not produce. You often encounter series of three items in your everyday reading.

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Anaphora

Lincoln emphasizes the tricolon by beginning each item with the same words, a technique known as **anaphora,** a Greek word that means literally "to bring forth again." An anaphora is a repetition at the beginning of successive phrases or clauses. Anaphora is to the phrase or clause what alliteration is to the word. Our ear hears the repetition, and our mind makes a connection because of the repeated sounds. Anaphora and tricolon are natural companions, because the effect of anaphora is not usually apparent until the third item in the series.

Asyntedon

Lincoln completes the effect by omitting the conjunction we expect at the end of the series. Usually when we have three items in a row, we expect the word "and" between the second and the third items. Deliberate omission of a conjunction is known as **asyntedon,** Greek for "no glue." The effect of asyndeton depends on the situation in which it is used. Often it gives a sense of haste, and in this case it seems that Lincoln is connecting three words with very similar connotations—consecrate, dedicate, hallow. It is as if he is speaking of one action three times, not as three different actions; thus the conjunction "and," which normally indicates addition or accumulation, would be out of place here.

One sentence with so much craft: was this intentional on Lincoln's part? In spite of the legends that claim he wrote the speech on the back of an envelope while on the train to the battlefield, it seems likely that he was aware of the emotional appeal this arrangement of words would have. This level of artistic effect does not happen by accident. If you want to achieve maximum results from your own reading and writing efforts, you will make more progress working toward the desired effects than by expecting them to happen spontaneously.

Epistrophe

Another reason to believe that Lincoln crafted that sentence deliberately is that we see the same techniques displayed in the closing words of the final sentence: "government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth." These famous words end a very long and complex sentence that is full of rhetorical devices, but this final segment alone contains a tricolon, asyndeton, and a repetition of words in each of the three phrases of the tricolon. This time, however, the words appear at the end, not at the beginning, so we call the device **epistrophe,** an after-stroke. Anaphora appears at the beginning of a phrase, and epistrophe appears at the end.

The entire final sentence is a masterpiece of careful arrangement.

> It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us, that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion, that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain, that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom, and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.

Tetracolon

Lincoln speaks near the beginning of the sentence of "the great task remaining before us." He defines that task in a series of clauses beginning with the word "that": that we take devotion, that we resolve, that this nation shall have a new birth, that government shall not perish. In this instance there are four, not three, items in the series, and the Greeks had a name for that, too: **tetracolon.** While three in a row produced a powerful effect, four in a row was also seen as very effective. Beyond that, we don't distinguish how many items there are in a series. If you can't make your point with four examples, you might need to rework the expression.

Lincoln's tetracolon here employs an anaphora beginning with the word "that." The repetition of that relative pronoun causes parallelism—each of the items in the series is a noun clause making the generality of "the great task remaining before us" specific:

> that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion,
>
> that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain,
>
> that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom, and
>
> that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.

In such a complex sentence, it is a good idea to pay attention to subjects and verbs: we take, we resolve, this nation shall have, and government shall not perish. These four components of the "great task" are treated coordinately through parallelism and the use of the conjunction "and" before the last item in the series. There is no asyndeton in this last tetracolon, because Lincoln is speaking of four different things, each one added to the list. That represents a change from the sentence at the beginning of the fourth paragraph, where asyndeton allowed him to express one idea in three different ways.

Thus far you have learned five rhetorical devices and their definitions:

anaphora—the repetition of a word or words at the beginning of successive phrases or sentences

asyndeton—the absence of expected conjunctions

epistrophe—the repetition of a word or words at the end of successive phrases or sentences

tetracolon—a succession of four coordinate items

tricolon—a succession of three coordinate items

We aren't quite finished with Mr. Lincoln and his use of rhetorical devices in his speech.

Tautology

In dedicating the battlefield to the soldiers who fell there, he says that "it is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this." You might ask what is the difference between "fitting" and "proper," and the answer is "not much." These two words mean roughly the same thing, and Lincoln is here employing a technique known as **tautology,** the deliberate repetition of an idea for emphasis. You will encounter the word when you study logic, but in logic, tautology is a pejorative term for an argument that is empty or self-evident. In rhetoric, however, it can provide very effective emphasis, and that's how Lincoln uses

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it here. The words "dedicate," "consecrate," and "hallow" might strike you as tautological, too.

Synchises

In the first paragraph, Lincoln describes the "new nation" with a pair of adjective phrases in parallel structure:

> "conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition..."

In each phrase we have an adjective followed by a prepositional phrase, connected with a coordinating conjunction. This device can be expressed with the pattern AB and AB, in which A is the adjective and B is the prepositional phrase. This balanced pairing of items in similar and coordinate fashion is called **synchises.** Its force comes from the combination of repetition and balance, and in addition to being very powerful, it is also very common.

Lincoln repeats the structure in the next sentence when he says,

> "... any nation so conceived and so dedicated," —AB and AB.

In the third paragraph he says,

> "The world will little note nor long remember ...." —AB nor AB.

That phrase actually extends into another synchises when Lincoln says,

> "The world will little note nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here."

Do you sense the repetition in "what we say" and "what they did"? Do you get the sense of balance? Do you see how coordination is achieved with the conjunction "but"?

Antithesis

The preceding example might serve to illustrate another rhetorical device that Lincoln does not use here. If you see "nor long remember" as the opposite of "never forget" and "what we say" as a contrast to "what they did," you might think of that expression as an **antithesis,** the balanced pairing of opposites, again usually on either side of a coordinating conjunction. If synchises is AB and AB, antithesis would be A and not A. The most famous example of antithesis is the one quoted in the opening paragraph of this chapter: "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times," or perhaps Hamlet's "To be, or not to be." You might think Lincoln has an antithesis in the expression "our poor power to add or detract," but it is better not to think that every contrast is an antithesis. Rhetoric suggests the deliberate arrangement of words and structures for some particular effect, and if we think that everything is a deliberately manipulative device on the author's part, we might mistrust the author's sincerity.

The Gettysburg Address, a little speech of 271 words, has already yielded more than its share of illustrations of rhetorical devices. However, we could analyze it even further. The third paragraph has an interesting progression in the phrases "who struggled here," "what we say here," "what they did here," and "who fought here." Throughout the speech, there is an interplay between death and life and between death and birth: "a final resting place" and "that nation might live," and later "these dead shall not have died in vain.... this nation... shall have a new birth." There is even an allusion to Thomas Jefferson's Declaration of Independence at the end of the first sentence. Lincoln packed a great deal of rhetorical artistry into this short speech.

More Rhetorical Devices

You should be introduced to a few more rhetorical devices that are not illustrated in Lincoln's Gettysburg Address.

Chiasmus

If you understand synchises to be the pattern AB and AB, you will not confuse it with **chiasmus,** which has the pattern AB and BA. A chiasmus takes a pair of elements on one side of the coordinator and reverses it on the other. The coordinator can be a conjunction, a semicolon, a conjunctive adverb ("therefore," "however," "nevertheless," etc.), or even a period. Alexandre Dumas rallied his three musketeers with the chiasmus "All for one and one for all!" The environmentalist motto "Not blind opposition to all progress but opposition to all blind progress" is a modern-day example.

Polysyndeton

Asyndeton, the absence of expected conjunctions, has its counterpart in **polysyndeton,** the presence of more conjunctions than normal. "Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow creeps in this petty pace from day to day" is a familiar line from Shakespeare's *Macbeth,* and most listeners to the speech sense the stretching out of time. The example on page 45 about how much homework you have shows that adding conjunctions can make a list of items seem longer or greater. Where asyndeton gives a sense of urgency and speed, polysyndeton suggests instead a slowing down. If asyndeton is A B C D E, polysyndeton is A and B and C and D and E.

Oxymoron

A writer who places two words that are normally contradictory side by side has used an **oxymoron,** a word that is itself an oxymoron, since "oxy" means "bright" and "moron" means "dull." The sophomore is a "wise fool," so that single word was coined with oxymoronic intent. The oxymoron is a special type of paradox. Phrases like "honest thief," "cruel kindness," and "light burden" are oxymorons. They are not absolute impossibilities, because at the heart of any paradox there is often truth.

Pun

A word that is used in more than one sense simultaneously, one of them literal and one of them figurative, is a **pun,** the rhetorical term for which is **paronomasia.** Puns can be funny, and occasionally someone makes an unintentional one and causes unexpected, and perhaps unwanted, laughter. Whoever said, "I was wondering why the baseball was getting bigger, and then it hit me," made a good pun.

Zeugma

The last rhetorical device we will address in this chapter is the most difficult to find and to construct, the **zeugma.** A zeugma, whose name comes from the Greek word for "yoke," occurs when one word in a sentence relates to at least two other words in the sentence, but in different ways. The classic example of zeugma comes from Alexander Pope's *Rape of the Lock:* "or stain her honour or her new brocade." The stain on the woman's brocade (an expensive fabric) would be a literal one, and to a lady of high society probably of minor consequence. The stain on her honor would be figurative, but much more serious. The irony results from the coordination of these two phrases, because coordination suggests equality of importance. A woman who considers a stain on her reputation to be equal to a stain on her dress might deserve Pope's ridicule.

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Here, then, are the eight terms that have been presented in the second part of our discussion:

antithesis—a balanced pairing of opposites

chiasmus—a balanced pair of phrases or clauses in which the order of the elements in the first pair is reversed in the second pair

oxymoron—the juxtaposition of two normally incompatible words; in essence, a two-word paradox

polysyndeton—the use of more conjunctions than is normal

pun—a word used in two senses simultaneously, usually one literal and one figurative

synchises—a balanced pair of phrases or clauses in which the order of the first pair is repeated in the second pair

tautology—the repetition of an idea in two words that are nearly synonymous

zeugma—the use of a single word to refer to or to describe two different words in a sentence resulting in two different meanings

No rhetorical device is an end in itself. The goal is not simply to notice them but to try to understand what role they play in the overall effect of a piece of writing. In Lincoln's case, it is fair to say that the amount of rhetoric was appropriate to the occasion. He was speaking at a solemn gathering of serious people, and he wanted to say something that would be heartfelt and memorable. The highly emotional impact of the tricolons and anaphoras he used helped him to achieve his goal. No good writer employs a rhetorical device just because he or she thought of it. The device appears in the final draft of the writing because it is right for the moment. Because he expressed himself so effectively, Lincoln's "moment" has lasted for nearly a century and a half.

AP Exam Advice

Before we leave our discussion of the Gettysburg Address, it is important to understand that what you have read in this commentary is not a good analysis of the role rhetorical devices play in the speech. What you have been reading is a catalogue of rhetorical devices and examples in order to introduce you to the patterns and devices that make the speech effective. A true analysis needs a thesis—for example, "Lincoln's careful arrangement of words and phrases into classical rhetorical structures helps to make his otherwise simple language emotional and memorable." The statement "Lincoln uses a lot of rhetorical devices in the Gettysburg Address" would be a poor thesis statement for an analytical essay on the AP exam.

Reading Selection by John F. Kennedy

As you read John F. Kennedy's inaugural address, note the carefully crafted expressions—repetitions (like anaphora, epistrophe, and tricolon), contrasts (like antithesis and chiasmus), and other arrangements (like synchises and polysyndeton). You should find many of the devices illustrated above. A few of them will be indicated in marginal comments.

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Study how the speaker uses rhetorical devices to express himself effectively and memorably.