Coordinating Conjunctions –
The Power of Polysyndeton and Asyndeton
Grade Ten

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Materials and Resources
• Excerpts from selected poems, plays, novels, and essays

Lesson Introduction
In this lesson students will learn how writers use extra conjunctions (polysyndeton) or eliminate expected conjunctions (asyndeton) to control reading pace and create meaning. Then they will compose their own sentences and stories applying these strategies to their own writing. On the next essay they write, the rubric should ask students to use these strategies effectively to earn a high score.

Explanations of Polysyndeton Examples

“For I have neither wit, nor words, nor worth,/Action, nor utterance, nor the power of speech/To stir men’s blood.” (William Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*)

*Shakespeare here has Antony manipulate the crowd after Caesar’s assassination. Antony denies his oratory skills ironically through this list of what he “cannot” do. Each extra *nor* forces attention on his oratory skills.*

“As a great buck it powerfully appeared,/Pushing the crumpled water up ahead,/And landed pouring like a waterfall,/And stumbled through the rocks with horny tread,/And forced the underbrush – and that was all.” (Robert Frost, “The Most of It”)

*Frost’s poem deals with nature’s indifference to man. Each *and* connects verbs that emphasize the buck’s behavior and add a note of resignation to the poem. The final *and* deflates any expectation that nature will interact with man.*

“The rest of the house was plain and uncomfortable and noisy with the complaints of twenty relatives.” (Amy Tan, *The Joy Luck Club*)
Tan’s extra and between the first two adjectives creates a note of irritation, capturing the situation in the household.

“When the shining city, too, fades, I will see only those forested mountains and hills, and the way the rivers lie flat and moving among them, and the way the low land lies wooded among them, and the blunt mountains rise in darkness from the rivers’ banks…” (Annie Dillard, *An American Childhood*)

Dillard fondly recalls her home town of Pittsburgh, and each and creates a focus on, and a nostalgia for, the details of its natural setting.

“And their king it is who tolls: – And he rolls, rolls, rolls/A paean from the bells!/And his merry bosom swells/With the paean of the bells!/And he dances, and he yells;” (Edgar Allan Poe, “The Bells”)

In this last section of the poem, Poe recreates the sound and tone of iron bells. Each and adds an ominous, serious note and forces attention on the actions of the king of the Ghouls.

“It was about the size of my clenched fist, with evil yellow stripes and tangerine coronets and a fiery green crown and menacing black dots on a pulsating body the color of that night’s harvest moon.” (Willie Morris, *My Dog Skip*)

Morris remembers a close encounter with a spider. Each extra and captures a child’s astonishment at finding such a creature in nature, drawing attention to the physical details of the spider.

“In subsequent years my parents would…not get involved with my detective work, nor hear about my reading, nor inquire about my homework or term papers or exams, nor visit the salamanders I caught, nor listen to me play the piano, nor attend my field hockey games, nor fuss over my insect collection with me, or my poetry collection or stamp collection or rock collection.” (Annie Dillard, *An American Childhood*)

Each extra nor and or adds a note of humor to the way Dillard’s parents interacted with her. Obviously an active, curious child, Dillard’s parents knew that she would learn best independently, and the list shows how they probably had to remove themselves from some of her activities so they could have lives of their own.

**Explanations of Asyndeton Examples**

“We are selfish men;/Oh! Raise us up, return to us again;/And give us manners, virtue, freedom, power.” (William Wordsworth, “London, 1802”)

Wordsworth’s joining of these qualities implies the four are inseparable and essential to improving society. The swift pace creates a sense of desperation.

“In the early morning peasants sold vegetables I had never seen or eaten before in my life – and my mother assured me I would find them so sweet, so tender, so fresh.” (Amy Tan, *The Joy Luck Club*)
Tan’s connecting the adjectives recreates the pleasure the mother found in the variety of produce available in markets in China.

“Friends, Romans, Countrymen, lend me your ears;” (William Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*)

Antony speaks in a tone of urgency to all the people as if they were one.

“You could draw me to fire, you could draw me to water, you could draw me to the gallows, you could draw me to any death, you could draw me to anything I have most avoided, you could draw me to any exposure and disgrace.” (Charles Dickens, *Our Mutual Friend*)

The power of the speaker’s marriage proposal comes from the fusion of the possible alternatives and the frantic pace at which they are delivered.

‘The drunks, the jobless, the junkies are shadow figures of his everyday world.” (Martin Luther King, Jr., *Why We Can’t Wait*)

King portrays the harsh world the average black person faces by grouping the three types of downtrodden people in one indivisible group.

“Wherever there was hard work, dirty work, dangerous work – in the mines, on the docks, in the blistering foundries – Negroes had done more than their share.” (Martin Luther King, Jr., *Why We Can’t Wait*)

King’s lists of types of work and places where it is performed build on each other and reflect the difficult conditions the workers endure.

“The men left in a rush: they flung on coats, they slid kisses at everybody’s cheeks, they slammed house doors, they slammed car doors; they ground their cars’ starters till the motors caught with a jump.” (Annie Dillard, *An American Childhood*)

Dillard’s cramming together five activities into one sentence captures the frenzy of the morning rush to get to work.

“Certainly nature seems to exult in abounding radicality, extremism, anarchy.” (Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*)

This block of three qualities builds a climax in its movement from lesser to greater and imparts a sense of wonder at nature’s power.

**Note:** Students would benefit from finding examples of polysyndeton and asyndeton in their readings, but not all authors use these syntactical structures. Therefore, the suggestion does not appear in the Student Activity handout. Please consider having students locate and analyze examples in the works you teach if the authors use polysyndeton and/or asyndeton.
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Activity One: Polysyndeton

A conjunction links and relates two parts of a sentence. Coordinating conjunctions (and, but, or, nor, for, yet, so) connect words or groups of words of equal grammatical rank.

Writers can choose to add coordinating conjunctions where they are not needed, or they can omit them where they are expected.

Using extra, unnecessary coordinating conjunctions is called polysyndeton. The prefix poly- means much, many, more than one, and the prefix syn- means with, together with, at the same time, by means of. Therefore, polysyndeton means “with many conjunctions.”

Through using polysyndeton, writers place emphasis on the items between the conjunctions. Polysyndeton slows the pace and usually creates a serious, ponderous tone. Memoir writers use it often to create nostalgia through focusing on the images appearing between the conjunctions. Other writers might use it excessively to create monotony or even humor.

Here are several examples of polysyndeton:

1. “For I have neither wit, nor words, nor worth./Action, nor utterance, nor the power of speech/To stir men’s blood.” (William Shakespeare, Julius Caesar)

2. “As a great buck it powerfully appeared,/Pushing the crumpled water up ahead,/And landed pouring like a waterfall,/And stumbled through the rocks with horny tread,/And forced the underbrush – and that was all.” (Robert Frost, “The Most of It”)

3. “The rest of the house was plain and uncomfortable and noisy with the complaints of twenty relatives.” (Amy Tan, The Joy Luck Club)

4. “When the shining city, too, fades, I will see only those forested mountains and hills, and the way the rivers lie flat and moving among them, and the way the low land lies wooded among them, and the blunt mountains rise in darkness from the rivers’ banks...” (Annie Dillard, An American Childhood)
5. “And their king it is who tolls: – And he rolls, rolls, rolls/A paean from the bells!/And his merry bosom swells/With the paean of the bells!/And he dances, and he yells;”
(Edgar Allan Poe, “The Bells”)

6. “It was about the size of my clenched fist, with evil yellow stripes and tangerine coronets and a fiery green crown and menacing black dots on a pulsating body the color of that night’s harvest moon.” (Willie Morris, My Dog Skip)

7. “In subsequent years my parents would...not get involved with my detective work, nor hear about my reading, nor inquire about my homework or term papers or exams, nor visit the salamanders I caught, nor listen to me play the piano, nor attend my field hockey games, nor fuss over my insect collection with me, or my poetry collection or stamp collection or rock collection.” (Annie Dillard, An American Childhood)

**Assignment**

a. Discuss the effect of the polysyndeton in each example. What parts of speech or grammatical units does the polysyndeton connect?

b. Read each of the examples omitting the conjunctions. Discuss the effect of eliminating them. Explain why the writers chose to use polysyndeton.

c. Write five sentences of your own using polysyndeton to connect different parts of speech or grammatical units. Try nouns, verbs, adjectives, prepositional phrases, and independent clauses.

d. Find a painting or a photograph that depicts a story. Write the story, using polysyndeton effectively at least once in your narrative.

**Activity Two: Asyndeton**

Asyndeton means not using coordinating conjunctions where they are expected. The prefix a- in the context of this word means not or without. Joined with the prefix syn- (with, together with, at the same time, by means of), the word asyndeton thus means “without or lacking conjunctions.”

When writers use asyndeton, they fuse the words (or sections) into one unit. Writers may not want to split the words (or sections) because their power or fragility might be lost if separated. Asyndeton causes the pace to speed up, builds tension or anticipation in the sentence or passage, and imparts a feeling of breathlessness or lightheartedness. Overuse of asyndeton might make the rhythm jerky or disconnected and might make the subject seem trivial or insignificant.

Read each of the examples of asyndeton and complete the activities that follow.
Here are several examples of asyndeton:

1. “We are selfish men;/Oh! Raise us up, return to us again:/And give us manners, virtue, freedom, power.” (William Wordsworth, “London, 1802”)

2. “In the early morning peasants sold vegetables I had never seen or eaten before in my life – and my mother assured me I would find them so sweet, so tender, so fresh.” (Amy Tan, *The Joy Luck Club*)

3. “Friends, Romans, Countrymen, lend me your ears;” (William Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*)

4. “You could draw me to fire, you could draw me to water, you could draw me to the gallows, you could draw me to any death, you could draw me to anything I have most avoided, you could draw me to any exposure and disgrace.” (Charles Dickens, *Our Mutual Friend*)

5. ‘The drunks, the jobless, the junkies are shadow figures of his everyday world.” (Martin Luther King, Jr., *Why We Can’t Wait*)

6. “Wherever there was hard work, dirty work, dangerous work – in the mines, on the docks, in the blistering foundries – Negroes had done more than their share.” (Martin Luther King, Jr., *Why We Can’t Wait*)

7. “The men left in a rush: they flung on coats, they slid kisses at everybody’s cheeks, they slammed house doors, they slammed car doors; they ground their cars’ starters till the motors caught with a jump.” (Annie Dillard, *An American Childhood*)

8. “Certainly nature seems to exult in abounding radicality, extremism, anarchy.” (Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*)

**Assignment**

a. Discuss the effect of the asyndeton in each example. What parts of speech or grammatical units do only commas connect?

b. Read each of the examples adding a coordinating conjunction where we would expect one to be. Then add coordinating conjunctions wherever you can. Discuss the effect of adding conjunctions to these sentences. Explain why the writers chose to use asyndeton.

c. Rewrite the sentences you wrote using polysyndeton and omit the conjunctions. Discuss the differences between the use of polysyndeton and asyndeton in your own sentences.

d. Return to the story you wrote based upon the painting or photograph, and add at least one appropriate example of asyndeton.

**Challenge**

When you write your next essay, the rubric will state that the successful papers illustrate, through their effective usage, a clear understanding of both polysyndeton and asyndeton.