

Experiments With Rhythm

Rhythm is supposed to be something that poets think about—while fiction writers are expected to use language in a more “naturalistic” manner, mimicking, if anything, the more common usage of everyday speech. In reality, of course, nothing will kill a paragraph of fiction off more quickly than rhythmic blandness. We say that such prose is “dead on the page,” and it is only by carefully dissecting it that we are able to discover what precisely is wrong with it. And much of the value we place on the sound of everyday speech comes from the fact that it actually IS rhythmic, and that its rhythm determines, to some extent, what we think of the speaker.

Sometimes prose can take on the rhythms of poetry. William Gass's “In The Heart Of The Heart Of The Country” has more iambs in it than an Elizabethan drama:

These wires offend me. Three trees were maimed on their account, and
now these wires deface the sky...I can't reach in, but like a stick, I throw
my feelings over. What is it that offends me? I am on my stump, I've
built a platform there...

Other narratives take on, with delightful aggressiveness, the rhythms of their narrator's speech. Lynne Tillman's *American Genius* is presented entirely in its narrator's breathless loops of thought, and comma splices abound. David Mamet's plays and other writing are known for the short, sharp, Germanic-root nouns and verbs his blunt characters habitually spit out. Stephen Dixon's stories stutter and skip with their narrators' mental interruptions and jittery self-regard.

Try one of these rhythmic experiments:

- 1) Take some extra-literary document—the lease on your apartment, or the Declaration of Independence—and write a story using its rhythm.
- 2) Write a story containing ten sentences that follow the exact rhythm of one of these three sentences:
 - a) In gabardine I shucked an ear of Indian corn.
 - b) Rapsallions pinched the lamppost's isinglass cover.
 - c) I'm a pedophile, you're a pedophile, everyone's a freaking pedophile.
- 3) Write a story that follows the sonata form. (see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sonata_form)
- 4) Write the same scene three times, first as a narrator who can't seem to start a sentence, second as a narrator who can't finish one, and third as a narrator who simply talks without ceasing.
- 5) Write in the rhythm of a person who is jogging, and must stop every now and then to dodge obstacles or wait for traffic to pass, or has to slow going up a hill, or speed up going down.
- 6) Write like a person with a respiratory disorder.
- 7) Borrow the verbal rhythms of an evening news report, political press conference, or concession speech.
- 8) Take a story you have already written, remove all the punctuation and line breaks until it's just one long solid paragraph, and then break it up again using new paragraphing and punctuation, without changing the word order.