

3.C Prose: Function of Structure

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Eiffel Tower viewed from the ground

The beloved symbol of Paris, the Eiffel Tower, was not so beloved when it was completed in 1889. At first, many people were shocked that the structure left 18,000 iron pieces and 2,500,000 rivets exposed. The Eiffel Tower's visible structure is now viewed as part of the Parisian tower's beauty. Examining the structure of literary works—the overall relationship of the parts, like the Eiffel Tower's connected iron pieces, and even the text's punctuation, capitalization, and italicization, like the Tower's rivets—can reveal significant meaning.

Key Concepts

The relationship of ideas within a text—where they are placed and how they affect each other—creates expectations and reactions in the reader.

AP exam questions may ask about the effect of the placement of an idea or event within a text, or the relation of one section of the work to another section. As you read a poem or prose passage, view the text as a unified work in which the author has purposefully ordered the events. Pay special attention to how the beginnings and endings affect you, and how any interruptions to the progression of events creates emphasis.

- William Faulkner's novel *The Sound and the Fury* is structured around Easter weekend in 1928. However, rather than relating the events in sequential order—Friday/Saturday/Sunday—the novel begins with Saturday, then shifts to Friday, and finally ends on Sunday. This structure highlights the consequences of the events of the prior day before actually relating them, thus emphasizing the novel's themes rather than the events.
- "Who's there?", the very first words spoken in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, **resonate** throughout the action of the entire play, as concealment and deceit are major elements in the tragedy. Beginning the play with these words sets the tone of mystery and questioning throughout the play.

Structural elements like punctuation, capitalization, and italics can guide the reader's understanding of a text's meaning.

Authors often use italics to differentiate a character's thoughts from spoken dialogue. Capitalizing a word that is usually uncapitalized can emphasize a word's importance. Placing a word in quotation marks can draw attention to how a word is used. Using a dash can create a sudden break for emphasis in the poem or narration. As previously discussed, **stream of consciousness narration** often leaves out normal punctuation and capitalization in order to portray the inner workings of a character's mind. Joining thoughts with commas and semicolons rather than ending them with periods can connect ideas and accelerate the poem or passage's pace.

- In the first section of *The Sound and the Fury*, William Faulkner often **dispenses with** standard punctuation and italicizes some passages to create the impression that the reader is inside the mind of Benjy, whose severe mental disability makes it impossible for him to speak. The lack of punctuation attempts to imitate the flow of Benjy's thoughts, and the use of italics indicates shifts to important memories.
- In the excerpt below from the novel *Blonde*, author Joyce Carol Oates uses italics to differentiate the main character's thoughts from those of the narrator and to reinforce the main character's intense feelings of sadness when she discovers she has slept through the end of a movie.

[She] fell asleep in her seat and missed the ending and woke dazed as the lights came up and strangers around her rose to leave.

Over, it's over? But how can it be over?

What to Look for

As you read, look for the following structural elements:

- **Transitional phrases** that indicate the relationship between parts of the passage
- Punctuation such as italics, question marks, parentheses, quotation marks around individual words, and dashes indicating an abrupt break
- Capitalized words within a sentence

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Practice Activity

In the following passage from Amina Gautier's short story "Afternoon Tea," a middle-school girl and her mother attend an introductory meeting with a women's organization offers weekend self-esteem sessions for at-risk girls who are accepted into the program.

Directions: Read the passage, highlight the following structural techniques, and annotate, explaining how they function:

- Punctuation such as italics, question marks, parentheses, quotation marks, and dashes
- Questions
- The relationship between individual paragraphs
- The overall structure of the passage

From "Afternoon Tea"

My mother pushed her way to the front of the room while other parents were gathering their coats and bags to leave. "I think this will be a wonderful program for my daughter," she said. "She wants to be a doctor. She comes from a long line of doctors. Her grandfather and her uncle both practiced medicine in Jamaica."

I hated the sight of blood, and needles terrified me. I wanted to be a librarian, to live a quiet and orderly life. To walk among stacks of silent shelves, to know every book by its number and let no book go astray. I loved to read worn books, *dog-eared* by people who had loved them. I wondered why she was lying. I tried to stand apart from her, to disappear each time she gestured to me, saying, "This is my daughter, Dorothy. She's a good girl. Smart."

You could tell that my mother was from the Caribbean. Even though her accent was almost completely gone, eroded away through the years, her foreignness appeared in phrases and on the ends of certain words, like my name. In school I was Dorothy, at home *Dorotee*. I absorbed my mother's sounds and phrases, but didn't repeat them. Her way of talking sounded more natural to me than the everyday language I heard outside our home, but in her voice I heard an act of erasure, a code embedded in the words she couldn't rid of her special pronunciation. I heard in those words a warning not to repeat them. Her words told me *Don't*.

"Come," she said to me. I walked to her side, towering over her. I had to listen as she sang my praises. The women looked me over. I wondered if I looked crucial enough to them, if they saw themselves saving me from heated embraces with experienced boys, or if they could tell that I was always one of the last to be asked to a dance at a house party. I was almost thirteen, but I might as well have been ten for all of my experience. I had never been kissed. Never attended a sleepover. Never done anything that did not have my mother's hand in it. Like my mother said, I was a good girl. I didn't see myself as being in a crucial stage, although I liked the way it sounded. *Crucial stage*. It was as if I was on the brink of something, standing with one toe at the edge of a cliff. At any moment I could plummet off the edge or be sharply pulled back in. Crucial. It meant I was one step away from my complete destruction. The slightest false move and I was done for. It gave my life an added sense of desperation that I liked immensely and didn't want these women to take from me. And if I were truly on the brink of something terrible, it was arrogant of them to think they could save me.

"What was all that for?" I asked as we made our way out of the school and walked home.

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"Just making sure they know who you are," my mother said. "Who you know is important. These women here can take you far."

I didn't say anything else as we walked home. My mother had already made up her mind, and so there would be no getting out of the program. I watched her as she walked slightly ahead of me, swinging my gift bag in her right hand.

Amina Gautier. "Afternoon Tea" in *At-Risk: Stories*. The University of Georgia Press, 2011.

Sample Annotations

My mother pushed her way to the front of the room while other parents were gathering their coats and bags to leave. "I think this will be a wonderful program for my daughter," she said. "She wants to be a doctor. She comes from a long line of doctors. Her grandfather and her uncle both practiced medicine in Jamaica."

-paragraph relationship = P1 and P2 illustrate a contrast between mother's and daughter's expectations

I hated the sight of blood, and needles terrified me. I wanted to be a librarian, to live a quiet and orderly life. To walk among stacks of silent shelves, to know every book by its number and let no book go astray. I loved to read worn books, dog-eared by people who had loved them. I wondered why she was lying. I tried to stand apart from her, to disappear each time she gestured to me, saying, "This is my daughter, Dorothy. She's a good girl. Smart."

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-paragraph relationship = shift to family's background

-"*Dorotee*" = italics for mother's pronunciation

-"*Don't*" = italics for mother's unspoken warning to avoid Caribbean pronunciations

"Come," she said to me. I walked to her side, towering over her. I had to listen as she sang my praises. The women looked me over. I wondered if I looked crucial enough to them, if they saw themselves saving me from heated embraces with experienced boys, or if they could tell that I was always one of the last to be asked to a dance at a house party. I was almost thirteen, but I might as well have been ten for all of my experience. I had never been kissed. Never attended a sleepover. Never done anything that did not have my mother's hand in it. Like my mother said, I was a good girl. I didn't see myself as being in a crucial stage, although I liked the way it sounded. *Crucial stage*. It was as if I was on the brink of something, standing with one toe at the edge of a cliff. At any moment I could plummet off the edge or be sharply pulled back in. Crucial. It meant I was one step away from my complete destruction. The slightest false move and I was done for. It gave my life an added sense of desperation that I liked immensely and didn't want these women to take from me. And if I were truly on the brink of something terrible, it was arrogant of them to think they could save me.

-paragraph relationship = shifts to mother's desire for her daughter's success

-"*Crucial stage*" = italics for difference between group's perception and girl's perception

"What was all that for?" I asked as we made our way out of the school and walked home.

-question mark = daughter's annoyance

"Just making sure they know who you are," my mother said. "Who you know is important. These women here can take you far."

-irony = NOT really who she is

I didn't say anything else as we walked home. My mother had already

-relationship = daughter forced to comply with her mother

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made up her mind, and so there would be no getting out of the program. I watched her as she walked slightly ahead of me, swinging my gift bag in her right hand.

-overall structure = begins with mother trying to impress the group, followed by the daughter's thoughts on her mother's attitude, and ends with the daughter's recognition of the futility of trying to avoid the program