

# Asyndeton



## DEFINITION

What is asyndeton? Here's a quick and simple definition:

An asyndeton (sometimes called asyndetism) is a [figure of speech](#) in which *coordinating conjunctions*—words such as "and", "or", and "but" that join other words or clauses in a sentence into relationships of equal importance—are omitted. The use of asyndeton can speed up the rhythm of a phrase, make it more memorable or urgent, or offer other stylistic effects. For instance, take the sentence: "I expect my dog to chew my pillows, my cat to claw my furniture." Here, the writer omits the "and" from between "pillows" and "my". This omission transforms the sentence from one that merely states what the pets often do, to one that implies exasperation as well as a fatalistic sense that the pets' actions are inevitable and unchangeable.

Some additional key details about asyndeton:

- While asyndeton usually involves commas, it can also function as a series of sentences, such as: "We tried. We failed. We learned. We will try again."
- Asyndeton can also be used for just part of a sentence. For instance, the sentence "Deftly and lightly, he entered the dark house undetected" could be rewritten with an asyndeton at the beginning: "Deftly, lightly, he entered the dark house undetected."
- Asyndeton often appears in conversation as a natural way of speaking: "I rode a roller coaster, ate a pretzel, won a goldfish, watched a juggler...I did it all!" However, it can also be used to create an effect: build tension, show distress or excitement, emphasize particular words, and so on.

## Asyndeton Pronunciation

Here's how to pronounce asyndeton: uh-**sin**-di-**tahn**

## A Primer on Coordinating Conjunctions and Asyndeton

To more fully understand asyndeton, it's helpful to understand the basics of what coordinating conjunctions are. To put it simply, conjunctions in general are words that join parts of a sentence and, in joining them, define a relationship between those parts. Those relationships can be equal or unequal:

- **Coordinating conjunctions** create *equal* relationships between parts of a sentence, such that the parts of the sentence are related but not dependent on each other. The most common coordinating conjunctions are **for**, **and**, **nor**, **but**, **or**, **yet**, and **so** (which conveniently spells out the acronym "Fanboys" to help you

remember them). The sentence "I went home and I ate dinner," is one in which the clauses are equal.

- **Subordinating conjunctions** create a relationship in which one clause of the sentence depends on the other. For instance, in the sentence "I went home because I had to eat dinner" the meaning of the second, dependent clause ("because I had to eat dinner") only makes sense in the context of the first, independent clause.

There's obviously a lot more nuance and detail to coordinating and subordinating conjunctions. But in terms of asyndeton, you only need to know one main thing: asyndeton is the omission of *coordinating conjunctions*. It won't ever apply to subordinating conjunctions.

## Asyndeton vs. Syndeton and Polysyndeton

Asyndeton is related to two other concepts that have to do with how many conjunctions are used to coordinate the words or clauses of a sentence.

### Syndeton

Syndeton refers to sentences that have a *single* conjunction between the parts of the sentence being joined. The example included above—"Deftly **and** lightly, he entered the dark house undetected."—is an example of syndeton. Put another way, syndeton is how conjunctions are *normally* handled, and asyndeton and polysyndeton are departures from that normal construction.

### Polysyndeton

The prefix "poly" means "much" or "many," and [polysyndeton](#) means that *multiple* conjunctions are present in close succession. An excellent example appears in Herman Melville's [Moby-Dick](#):

There was a low rumbling of heavy sea-boots among the benches, **and** a still slighter shuffling of women's shoes, **and** all was quiet again, **and** every eye on the preacher.

Polysyndeton is essentially the opposite of asyndeton, as it involves the inclusion of more than the expected number of conjunctions while asyndeton involves the omission of conjunctions. Polysyndeton can achieve some of the same effects of emphasis as asyndeton can, but are also unique in their ability to make a reader feel overwhelmed. In this example Melville evokes many simultaneous sensations and the hubbub of people coming into a church, which are all contending for the attention of the narrator.

## Asyndeton vs. Parataxis

[Parataxis](#) is another figure of speech that is somewhat related to asyndeton. The word parataxis comes from the Greek, and means the "act of placing side by side." In parataxis, short, simple, independent

sentences or phrases are placed one after another. Here's an example from the opening lines of Samuel Becket's novel *Molloy*:

I am in my mother's room. It is I who live there now. I don't know how I got there.

So what, then, is the relationship between parataxis and asyndeton? The two can sometimes overlap. For example, take Julius Caesar's famous quote:

I came, I saw, I conquered.

This phrase is an example of asyndeton because you could read it as the result of omitting the word "and" from the sentence "I came, and I saw, and I conquered." But because the statement can also be seen as the placing of independent sentences or clauses ("I came." "I saw." "I conquered.") next to each other without coordinating conjunctions, it's also parataxis.

However, while asyndeton and parataxis *can* overlap, they don't *always* overlap. Not all asyndeton is parataxis, and not all parataxis is asyndeton. The example from *Molloy* just above is not asyndeton, while the sentence "I expect my dog to chew my pillows, my cat to claw my furniture" is asyndeton but not parataxis.



## EXAMPLES

Asyndeton appears frequently in everyday speech as an unconscious habit, but it is also often used purposefully by writers as well as by speech writers and orators for stylistic effect.

### Examples of Asyndeton in Literature

Because asyndeton is a common habit of everyday speech, writers often use it to create realistic dialects for their characters. It can also be used to exhaust an idea or feeling with a long, extensive list. Sometimes the omission of a conjunction can make such a list appear to never end, so the reader might imagine what comes next. Because asyndeton, through the omission of an expected conjunction can disrupt the normal pattern of syntax in a text, writers sometimes use asyndeton to grab the reader's attention and to put focus on particular words or ideas.

#### Asyndeton in William Faulkner's *The Hamlet*

In this example from William Faulkner's novel *The Hamlet*, **asyndeton** and **polysyndeton** appear in the same sentence:

He did not still feel weak, he was merely luxuriating in that supremely gutful lassitude of convalescence in which **time, hurry, doing**, did not exist, the accumulating **seconds and minutes and hours** to which in its well state the body's slave both waking and sleeping, now reversed and time now the lip-server and mendicant to the body's pleasure instead of the body thrall to time's headlong course.

Faulkner was known for his literary experimentation and attention to the **diction** of his characters. He spent a great deal of time developing unique cadences for the dialogue of his characters and each work's narrative voice. So it comes as no surprise that one would find asyndetons throughout his work. This example, in his novel *The Hamlet*, slows down the reading of the text. The quick succession of descriptions of a slow healing process gives the reader little room to take a breath or break, which furthers the sensation of this character's immersive sluggishness.

#### Asyndeton in Thomas Wolfe's *Look Homeward, Angel*

In this example from Thomas Wolfe's novel *Look Homeward, Angel*, the use of asyndeton makes the text dramatic:

O waste of lost, in the hot mazes, lost, among bright stars on this weary, unbright cinder, lost! Remembering speechlessly we seek the great forgotten language, the lost land—end into heaven, a stone, a leaf, **an** unfound door. Where? When?

Wolfe wrote hyper-analytic novels that contained long, complex sentences. Similar to Faulkner, those sentences could sometimes comprise an entire page, or more. The use of asyndeton in this excerpt gives the language a musical quality, so it can be read almost like poetry. This effect wouldn't be achieved as successfully if an "and" were inserted before "an unfound door." Additionally, all elements in this series are referring to things humanity has forgotten but unconsciously seeks to find. By omitting the "and", Wolfe puts all of these elements on the same level of importance. He isn't saying we seek these things individually and at separate moments. He is saying we seek all of them at once and with equal effort, so a "great forgotten language" is just as important as "a stone." By using asyndeton Wolfe is telling his readers something about the human condition: the big mysteries of life are just as important as small, everyday objects.

#### Asyndeton in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

In the concise sentence below, from Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, the asyndeton involves omitting a "but" rather than the more typical omission of an "and."

Definitions belong to the definers, **not** the defined.

Morrison often punctuates longer descriptions with leaner lines like this example, which add clarity and emphasis on a particular point. By here inserting a simple sentence that also uses asyndeton, Morrison makes the line seem extra important. Moreover, omitting the word "but" after the comma mirrors the way people talk, so readers can imagine this line actually being spoken—firmly and with conviction.

### Examples of Asyndeton in Speeches

The omission of a conjunction focuses attention on certain words and phrases, but it also mirrors the way people sometimes speak using everyday language. So a speechwriter might employ asyndeton to

make an orator appear simultaneously natural and powerful, thus making his or her delivery both accessible and emphatic.

### Asyndeton is Eugene V. Debs's "Canton, Ohio" Speech

The example below comes early in Eugene V. Debs's 1918 famous "Canton, Ohio" speech.

To speak for labor; to plead the cause of the men and women and children who toil; to serve the working class, has always been to me a high privilege; a duty of love.

For one thing, the sentence contains more drama without the "and" conjunctions you might normally expect between the clauses. By leaving out the conjunction, Debs, a famous labor leader, also eliminates any hierarchy among these actions. Instead, he makes them equal, makes clear that they are one and the same to him. In doing so, he avoids creating a tired old list, and instead urgently communicates his ideals.

### Asyndeton in Barack Obama's Eulogy for Reverend Clementa Pickney

Barack Obama's presidency was defined by his meticulously crafted speeches, and many of these are filled with examples of asyndetism. The following appears toward the end of his eulogy for nine slain parishioners in Charleston, South Carolina:

It would be a refutation of the forgiveness expressed by those families if we merely slipped into old habits whereby those who disagree with us are not merely wrong, but bad; where we shout instead of listen; where we barricade ourselves behind preconceived notions or well-practiced cynicism.

Obama's repetition of "where we," without a conjunction, puts direct emphasis on the "we," as he aims to unify people after a national tragedy.

### Asyndeton in Abraham Lincoln's "Gettysburg Address"

Abraham Lincoln wrote some of the greatest speeches ever given by an American President, and he was no slouch when it came to asyndeton either. The most famous line from his most famous speech, the Gettysburg Address, depends on asyndeton:

And that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.

### Asyndeton in George Saunders's Commencement Speech for the Class of 2013 at Syracuse University

In this example the writer, George Saunders, uses asyndeton as he speaks to a crowd of graduating college students:

Do those things that incline you toward the big questions, and avoid the things that would reduce you and make you trivial. That luminous part of you that exists beyond

personality—your soul, if you will—is as bright and shining as any that has ever been. Bright as Shakespeare's, bright as Gandhi's, bright as Mother Teresa's. Clear away everything that keeps you separate from this secret luminous place. Believe it exists, come to know it better, nurture it, share its fruits tirelessly.

In the line "Bright as Shakespeare's, bright as Gandhi's, bright as Mother Teresa's" Saunders accelerates the rhythm in his speech by omitting the "and" as he compares the students' potential to that of important, well-known cultural figures. This passage occurs toward the end of the speech, when an orator in this context might want to close on an uplifting note, and shows how asyndeton can establish such a tone. In the final line, Saunders issues a riveting call for action that also relies on asyndeton. There is great energy and excitement here because Saunders chooses to not interrupt the series of commands with a conjunction.



## WHY WRITERS USE IT

Writer's use asyndeton for a variety of different effects and purposes, depending upon the context for publication or oration. The more common reasons include:

- Lists that do not include conjunctions leave open the possibility that there could be more elements within a series. This activates a reader's imagination and can make the series feel exhausting or infinite.
- Including a conjunction can sometimes create a subtle hierarchy within a listed series. When the conjunction is omitted, all elements exist on the same level, which can create interesting comparisons among objects or ideas that might not initially appear similar or comparable.
- It's important for writers and orators to consider rhythm in their work. This is how a writer gains and maintains a reader or listener's attention. Asyndeton can maintain or disrupt established speech patterns and, in doing so, both capture the audience's attention and place emphasis where the writer or speaker wants to focus it.
- Establishing rhythm through asyndeton can also give a text or speech a musical quality, which can make it memorable.
- Depending on the context in which it appears, there are a variety of tones that can be established by asyndeton. The infinite list might produce excitement. A succinct and direct statement, which omits all unnecessary words, might evoke solemnity. An orator listing goals might find power by omitting the conjunctions.
- An asyndeton can also build tension by not disrupting the tone that is being established in a series.
- Eliminating a conjunction can also add ambiguity to the text and its message, and writers might use asyndeton to establish purposeful mystery.



## OTHER RESOURCES

Check out these resources on other sites for even more information about asyndeton.

- [The Wikipedia Page on Asyndeton](#): Somewhat abstract in its description, but it does offer a few good examples.
- [The Dictionary Definition of Asyndeton](#): A basic definition that includes a bit on the etymology of asyndeton and a couple of historical examples.
- [A technical explanation of asyndeton](#), focusing on grammar and conjunctions more specifically.
- **Asyndetons on YouTube**
  - Winston Churchill's [speech](#), commonly titled "We shall fight on the beaches," was delivered on June 4th, 1940 to the Parliament of the United Kingdom during World War II. Churchill used the speech to rally Britain in its fight for survival against Germany, and used asyndeton to emphasize his

words and to give his words a sense of power and relentless determination.

- Jack Nicholson gives a memorable [performance](#) as Col. Nathan R. Jessup in the film *A Few Good Men*. He uses asyndeton in the speech, as when he says, "We use words like honor, code, loyalty," to emphasize his commitment to his ideals.

## HOW TO CITE

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