

Means of Emphasis in English Writing

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Abstract

In the recent past, as the teaching quality of English course has steadily improved, students' basic knowledge of English is much stronger than before. The once popular mistakes in spelling, grammar and syntax are less witnessed in their compositions. Nevertheless, judging by the examples of students of different levels, we presume that their writing are not very emphatic, colorful, or even very prosaic. Upon elaborate analysis, we find that they the phenomenon mainly arises from students' lack of specific writing techniques, of which emphasize ranks very high on the list. This essay analyzes the significance of emphatic writing, and summarizes some approaches to help students attain emphasis in their writing.

Key words: English writing; Writing techniques; Means of emphasis

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INTRODUCTION

As a very important means of expressing one's thoughts, essays must be written with all techniques to help convey author's thinking in a highly efficient way, rather than to the contrary. An essay should make a distinction between the essential and the less important parts, in both contents and the language. As the most significant carrier of thoughts, language should be applied appropriately to satisfy author's purpose. Without certain techniques, it is

hard to tell the primary from the secondary, which may entwine each other, only to leave readers in confusion. With the aid of a variety of writing skills, the author can write in a more colorful way, strengthen his ideas, as well as make a deep impression on the readers.

However, there is a broad gap between the Chinese and English languages, which greatly hinder Chinese students' writing more emphatically. Different vocabulary, grammar, syntax and rhetorical knowledge jointly create a huge labyrinth, which infuses average Chinese students with confusion as well as horror. This essay aims to offer specific techniques in vocabulary, grammar, syntax and rhetoric to help them write more emphatically.

1. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF WRITING WITH EMPHASIS

Writing is quite different from speaking in that writing is often more thoughtful and systematic in expressing our ideas. Speeches may be just as thoughtful and systematic. However, most speeches which make an impression on us are just the oral form of the written masterpieces. Another difference between them is that a piece of writing can be revised over and over until it is worth reading. Each revision embodies author's consideration, which reflects his mind in a more accurate way. The more we write, the more mature our thinking is, and the more efficient the language sounds.

Writing conveys to readers writer's mind. The most important goal of writing is to pass information to readers and it depends on how he uses the language to achieve that. In order to formulate his thinking more effectively, the author must obey some recognized principles, such as unity, coherence, concision, variety, emphasis, etc.. Of all these principles, emphasis stresses how persuasive the writing can be. The messages are expressed in a very flat way can fail to catch the readers' eye, and therefore, weaken the persuasion of the essay.

2. MEANS OF EMPHASIS

2.1 Lexical Means

The lexical means to suggest the use of certain words and idioms to underline an idea. Depending on the different situations which often involve parts of speech of words, there are a variety of modifiers employed to make them sound even stronger. (Notice the preceding sentence is stressed with the adverb “even”.)

2.1.1 Stress a Noun

- A. We think she is a lady.
- B. We think she is *quite* a lady. (Stress a noun)
- A. That is the boy I’m looking for.
- B. That is the *very/exact* boy I’m looking for. (Stress a noun)
- A. He is a hero.
- B. He is a *real* hero. (Stress a noun)
- A. Wait a second, please.
- B. Wait *just* a second, please.

Between the two sentences in each pair, Sentence B is more emphatic than Sentence A for the use of emphatic words *quite*, *very/exact*, *real* and *just*, which are often used to stress a noun.

2.1.2 Stress an Adjective and Adverb

- A. This fast car can be expensive.
- B. This fast car can be *very* expensive.
- A. Tom can’t be rich.
- B. Tom can’t be *that* rich.
- A. Mary smiled happily to see her long lost sister.
- B. Mary smiled *so* happily to see her long lost sister.

In the above sentences, the italicized words *very*, *that* and *so* are used to emphasize the adjectives and adverbs. Such expressions include many other adverbs like *terribly*, *awfully*, etc..

2.1.3 Stress the Comparative and Superlative Degree of an Adjective and Adverb

- A. Todd jumps higher than John.
- B. Todd jumps *much* higher than John.
- A. Rose is taller than her twin sister.
- B. Rose is *even* taller than her twin sister.
- A. Jack Ma is richer than Robin Li.
- B. Jack Ma is *still* richer than Robin Li.
- A. The economic situation is worse than our imagination.
- B. The economic situation is *far* worse than our imagination.
- A. Do you think Miss Hough can do better this time?
- B. Do you think Miss Hough can do *any* better this time?
- A. The Nile is the longest river in the world.
- B. The Nile is by far the longest river in the world.
- A. Audrey Hepburn was the best actress.
- B. I have *never* seen a *better* actress than Audrey Hepburn.

Expressions like *much*, *even*, *still*, *far*, *a lot*, *any* (in a question or negative sentence) and the like are often employed to help make the comparative degree of adjectives and adverbs more emphatic. Similarly, expressions like *by far* are used to strengthen the superlative degree of adjectives and adverbs. The last pair shows that the comparative degree used in a negative form expresses the superlative degree, even in a more emphatic way.

2.1.4 Stress a Notional Verb

- A. Your brother came to see you last Tuesday.
- B. Your brother *did* come to see you last Tuesday.
- A. She believes the new president will solve the crisis.
- B. She *does* believe the new president will solve the crisis.

The above pair of sentences gives a clear distinction between the tones, as the words *did* and *does* in Sentences B explicitly adds power to the notional verbs that follow them, hence making them sound more powerful.

2.1.5 Stress a Noun and Pronoun (Often Referring to a Person)

- A. My friend Mike cannot play baseball, let alone teach you.
- B. My friend Mike cannot play baseball *himself*, let alone teach you.
- A. You need to do it.
- B. You need to do it *by yourself*.
- A. Art is life.
- B. Art *in itself* is life.
- A. Jerry looked at him in horror.
- B. Jerry looked at *himself* in horror.

From above instances, it is easy to find that a noun and a pronoun (both referring to a person) can be modified by reflexive pronouns or the relative phrases which include a reflexive pronoun or a phrase with a reflexive pronoun. However, in the fourth pair, the use of *him* and *himself* do not suggest emphasis, but a difference in meaning. In Sentence A of the third pair, Jerry looked at another man, but in Sentence B, Jerry did not look at another man, but himself. Students must have a correct understanding of the slight difference between them.

2.1.6 Stress a Possessive Pronoun

- A. I want to have an apartment.
- B. I want to have an apartment *of my own*.
- A. She can’t solve her problem.
- B. She can’t solve her *own* problem.

It can be noted from above examples that expressions *own* and *of one’s own* are often used to stress a possessive pronoun.

2.1.7 Stress a Negative Idea

- A. Pollution is not a problem in Tibet.
- B. Pollution is not a problem *at all* in Tibet.
- A. Hearing the news, she is not happy.
- B. Hearing the news, she is not happy *in the least*.

- A. Good luck has not favored her.
- B. Good luck has *never* favored her.

Negative expressions are already very strong in tone, yet they still can be made even stronger in different ways. *At all*, *in the least* and *never* or *not ever* are the usual means of emphasis on negative expressions.

2.1.8 Stress a Question

- A. What are you talking about?
- B. What *on earth* are you talking about?
- A. Where have you been hiding?
- B. Where *in the world* have you been hiding?
- A. Has he been abroad before?
- B. Has he *ever* been abroad before?
- A. What is he trying to explain?
- B. What *in hell/the blood* is he trying to explain?

A question can often sound more forceful if it includes such modifiers as *ever*, *on earth*, *in heaven*, *under the sun*, *in the world*, *in hell*, *the blood*, *the devil* and so forth. However, it should be noted that expressions like *in hell*, *the blood* and *the devil* are considered abuse, which should only be used when the context requires.

2.1.9 Other Expressions

- A. There are only sex and violence in this movie.
- B. There is *nothing but* sex and violence in this movie.
- A. Only his brother knows the way out.
- B. *Nobody but* his brother knows the way out.
- A. Everyone present will get a surprise.
- B. *Whoever* is present will get a surprise.
- A. I'll follow you where you go.
- B. *Wherever* you go, I'll follow you.
- Or: *No matter where* you go, I'll follow you.
- A. They don't like the new play.
- B. *None* of them likes the new play.
- A. He is only interested in music.
- B. He isn't interested in *anything but* music.

There are many other expressions that can help strengthen a sentence, and these expressions are chosen according to different contexts.

2.2 Syntactic Means

Syntactical means involve the application of certain sentence structures, which add power to the meaning. There are plenty of sentence structures in English. Nevertheless, some of them are plain and boring, and an excessive use of the same sentence pattern can result in readers being disinterested. On the contrary, a well-designed sentence pattern, which is often different from normal sentence structures, not only makes readers refreshed and interested, but adds color and emphasis to the writing as well.

2.2.1 Inversion

Inversion, which means the opposite order, is the most syntactical means of emphasis. Usually an English sentence follows the "subject + verb + other elements"

pattern. An inverted sentence changes the normal sequence of sentence elements. In English, inversion is employed mostly for two purposes: to ask a question and to emphasize an idea. The former is known as inversion for grammatical purpose, while the latter is for rhetorical use. Here only rhetorical inversion is discussed, since it catches readers' eye and draw their attention. Compare the following pairs of sentences:

- A. The teacher went out of the classroom.
- B. Out of the classroom went the teacher.
- A. The train comes here.
- B. Here comes the train.
- A. It is there.
- B. There it is!

In the above pairs, Sentences B involves inversion when an adverbial of place comes at the beginning of each sentence.

- A. We are surprised, and he is, too.
- B. We are surprised, and so is he.
- A. I promised to visit her, and I did so.
- B. I promised to visit her, and so I did.
- A. We can get it started only in this way.
- B. Only in this way can we get it started.

In these pairs, we can see that when the adverbs *so* and *only* are put at the beginning of a sentence, the sentence is often inverted.

In addition, when a negative adverb comes first, the sentence is mostly inverted, too. See the following sentences:

- A. George wasn't diligent, and his friend wasn't either.
- B. George wasn't diligent, and neither was his friend.
- A. I Hardly/Rarely/Scarcely saw her last week.
- B. Hardly/Rarely/Scarcely did I see her last week.
- A. Mike never/ seldom goes bowling.
- B. Never/Seldom does Mike go bowling.

A. The plane took off as soon as she arrived at the airport.

B. Hardly had she arrived at the airport when the plane took off.

2.2.2 Ellipsis

Ellipsis is a linguistic means to leave some words or idioms rather than repeat them unnecessarily. It often involves the use of sentence fragments instead of full sentences. Without this means, a sentence may sound very wordy and lose power. There is a general rule that the power of a sentence tends to decrease with its length and vice versa. Therefore, if we wish to stress an idea, a short sentence or even a sentence fragment is preferred.

- A. —Why does he like this game?
—Because it's fun. (Compare: He likes it because it's fun.)
- B. —How many times do you run every week?
—Three. (Compare: I run three times every week.)
- C. —Can I use your laptop for a while?
—No way. (Compare: You cannot use my laptop.)

2.2.3 Subordination

Subordination refers to the employment of complex sentences rather than compound sentences. Generally speaking, a compound sentence is flat in syntax, in which all ideas are equally important. It does not produce climax and it does not stress any idea either. Comparatively speaking, a complex sentence is more forceful and persuasive, especially when it is arranged in a periodic sequence, which puts the subordinate idea before the primary one. Compare the following:

A. It was raining, and we didn't go to school. (Compound sentence)

B. Because it was raining, we didn't go to school. (Complex sentence)

A. It was cold, but they got up very early. (Compound sentence)

B. Although it was cold, they got up very early. (Complex sentence)

A. Tom works hard, for he wants to succeed. (Compound sentence)

B. Because Tom wants to succeed, he works hard. (Complex sentence)

2.2.4 Negative-positive structure

A. The soldier did not escape, but he came back to save the girl.

B. It is not a curse. It is a blessing.

C. We will not take our destiny. We will fight for our future.

2.2.5 It Is...Who/That Structure

This sentence pattern is especially useful when one wants to highlight the subject, object, predicative, and adverbial of time and place. See:

A. Bill is going to read a poem to his girlfriend in the classroom after school.

B1. It is *Bill* who is going to read a poem to his girlfriend in the classroom after school. (Subject emphasized)

B2. It is *a poem* that Bill is going to read to his girlfriend in the classroom after school. (Object emphasized)

B3. It is *to his girlfriend* that Bill is going to read a poem in the classroom after school.

B4. It is *in the classroom* that Bill is going to read a poem to his girlfriend after school.

B5. It is *after school* that Bill is going to read a poem to his girlfriend in the classroom.

2.2.6 Imperative Sentence

When people give a suggestion, warning, request, or command, they tend to do so in a very polite way, as by using an interrogative sentence. However, such a question can be weak in tone. If one wants to put it in a stronger way, he can use imperative sentences (with or without a verb) to meet his need. Compare:

A. Would you please tell me your name?

B. Tell me your name, please. / Name, please.

A. I'd like to have your notebook.

B. Give your notebook to me.

A. Will you please take off your hat?

B. Hat off!

A. May I have your attention, please?

B. Attention, please./Please pay attention.

2.3 Rhetorical Means

Rhetoric is the art of discourse, which aims to improve the skill of writers. Rhetorical strategies refer to the involvement of figures of speech to intensify writers' efforts to make the writing more impressive. The usual rhetorical devices used to enhance an idea are overstatement (hyperbole), understatement, rhetorical question, repetition, parallelism, etc..

A. Thank you very much.

B. Thanks a million. (Overstatement/hyperbole)

A. She was very beautiful.

B. For she was beautiful—her beauty made the bright world dim, and everything beside seemed like the fleeting image of a shade. (Overstatement/hyperbole)

A. It's a serious matter.

B. It's no laughing matter. (Understatement)

A. He is a rich man.

B. He is a man of no mean wealth. (Understatement)

A. You can help yourself.

B. Can't you help yourself? (Rhetorical question)

A. She's an ambitious girl.

B. Isn't she an ambitious girl? (Rhetorical question)

Many great people frequently use parallelism and repetition in their famous speeches. See:

A. We shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and streets, we shall fight in the hills. (Winston Churchill)

B. A government of the people, by the people, for the people shall not perish from the earth. (Abraham Lincoln)

C. And so let freedom ring—from the prodigious hilltops of New Hampshire.

Let freedom ring—from the mighty mountains of New York.

Let freedom ring—from the heightening Alleghenies of Pennsylvania.

Let freedom ring—from the snow-capped Rockies of Colorado.

Let freedom ring—from the curvaceous slopes of California.

But not only that.

Let freedom ring—from Stone Mountain of Georgia.

Let freedom ring—from Lookout Mountain of Tennessee.

Let freedom ring—from every hill and molehill of Mississippi, from every mountainside.

Let freedom ring!

(Martin Luther King)

Rhetorical devices are so strong that they not only add emphasis and force to the writing and speeches, but they also intensify emotions in the readers and audience.

They are very advanced writing techniques, which can make essays and speeches not only colorful but also very persuasive.

CONCLUSION

As the most-widely use language, English plays an indispensable role in China's communication with other nations. In addition to face-to-face communication, written English is also essential in daily correspondence, especially in business. Hence, writing is an elementary skill that all Chinese students should spare no effort to master it. In order to achieve this goal, they are expected to be able to employ certain techniques, which include those that help them write emphatically.

Good writing is good thinking. It does not only help you to turn out a piece of colorful essay to write with emphasis, but it also helps one form the good habit of rigorous thinking, from which one will benefit to his surprise.

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