

Name _____

Period _____

The Things They Carried
“Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong”

Literature Focus: The Power of Syntax and Writer’s Purpose

Part I: Defining and Understanding Syntax

Syntax is the arrangement of words and phrases to create meaningful sentences, using language to convey deeper significance. Effective writers use certain types of syntax for many different purposes. Let’s look at a few examples of types of syntax.

How would you describe the syntax (the arrangements of words and phrases) that this elementary student uses in her science report on walrus?

The walrus is a large mammal. The walrus has flippers, tusks and small eyes. The walrus uses its tusks to cut through ice. The walrus migrates north in the summer and south in the winter.

Answer: _____

How would you describe the syntax that Martin Luther King Jr. uses in his speech “I Have a Dream”?

I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia, the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood.

I have a dream that one day even the state of Mississippi, a state sweltering with the heat of injustice, sweltering with the heat of oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice.

I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.

*I have a **dream** today!*

Answer: _____

While both of these authors begin each of their four sentences in the same way (the student uses “the walrus,” while King uses “I have a dream”), why is Dr. King’s syntax more effective and memorable? Which of King’s four statements do you think is the most meaningful? Why? Discuss as a class.

What revisions in syntax would you recommend to the student writing the report? How do those recommendations reveal the importance of the syntax one chooses? Discuss as a class.

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Part II: Recognizing O'Brien's Unique Syntax in the Novel

Directions: Now that you have had some practice recognizing what syntax is and how writers can use it to their advantage, take a closer look at the following passage from "Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong." As you read, highlight and annotate O'Brien's use of syntax in the passage. Next, answer the questions that follow the passage. Write your answers on a separate piece of paper.

Mary Anne Bell and Mark Fossie had been sweethearts since grammar school. From the sixth grade on they had known for a fact that someday they would be married, and live in a fine gingerbread house near Lake Erie, and have three healthy yellow-haired children, and grow old together, and no doubt die in each other's arms and be buried in the same walnut casket. That was the plan. They were very much in love, full of dreams, and in the ordinary flow of their lives the whole scenario might well have come true.

On that first night they set up house in one of the bunkers along the perimeter, near the Special Forces hootch, and over the next two weeks they stuck together like a pair of high school steadies. Almost disgusting. Rat said, they way they mooned over each other. Always holding hands, always laughing over some private joke. All they needed, he said, were a couple of matching sweaters. But among the medics there was some envy. This was Vietnam, after all, and Mary Anne Bell was an attractive girl. Too wide in the shoulders, maybe, but she had terrific legs, a bubbly personality, a happy smile. The men genuinely liked her. Out on the volleyball court she wore cut-off blue jeans and a black swimsuit top, which the guys appreciated, and in the evenings she liked to dance to music from Rat's portable tape deck. There was a novelty to it; she was good for morale. At times she gave off a kind of come-and-get-me energy, coy and flirtatious, but apparently it never bothered Mark Fossie. In fact, he seemed to enjoy it, just grinning at her, because he was so much in love, and because it was the sort of show that a girl will sometimes put on for her boyfriend's entertainment and education. (90-91)

1. Identify any unique words or phrases.
2. How does O'Brien vary his sentence lengths and structures? Why does he do this?
3. What is the effect of the syntax O'Brien uses? Identify three examples from the passage to support your claim.
4. Knowing all you know about the content of the chapter as a whole, how does the syntax of this passage reveal more to the reader?