Here is a sentence from Martin Luther King Jr.’s “Letter from Birmingham Jail.” It is a masterpiece of rhetoric deriving structure and energy both from the deep roots of theological sermons specific to the African-American experience and the parallel sentence structures perfected in Enlightenment writings (Addison, Steele, Swift and others). King was jailed after a demonstration for parading without a license; in jail King read an article in a local newspaper signed by local religious leaders. The letter criticized King and his followers for not waiting for the legal system in the US to grant African Americans civil rights. King’s letter and the following sentence answer this criticism:

“But when you have seen vicious mobs lynch your mothers and fathers at will and drown your sisters and brothers at whim; when you have seen hate filled policemen curse, kick and even kill your black brothers and sisters; when you see the vast majority of your twenty million Negro brothers smothering in an airtight cage of poverty in the midst of an affluent society; when you suddenly find your tongue twisted and your speech stammering as you seek to explain to your six year old daughter why she can't go to the public amusement park that has just been advertised on television, and see tears welling up in her eyes when she is told that Funtown is closed to colored children, and see ominous clouds of inferiority beginning to form in her little mental sky, and see her beginning to distort her personality by developing an unconscious bitterness toward white people; when you have to concoct an answer for a five year old son who is asking: ‘Daddy, why do white people treat colored people so mean?’; when you take a cross county drive and find it necessary to sleep night after night in the uncomfortable corners of your automobile because no motel will accept you; when you are humiliated day in and day out by nagging signs reading ‘white’ and ‘colored’; when your first name becomes ‘nigger,’ your middle name becomes ‘boy’ (however old you are) and your last name becomes ‘John,’ and your wife and mother are never given the respected title ‘Mrs.’; when you are harried by day and haunted by night by the fact that you are a Negro, living constantly at tiptoe stance, never quite knowing what to expect next, and are plagued with inner fears and outer resentments; when you are forever fighting a degenerating sense of ‘nobodiness’--then you will understand why we find it difficult to wait.”

This sentence is composed of a main sentence “you will understand why we find it difficult to wait” qualified by a series of adverbial clauses, all articulated by the word “when.” One source of the sentence’s rhetorical power lies in King’s choice of having the main sentence at the end. Think how differently the sentence would have read to have “you will understand why we find it difficult to wait” at the beginning. Here is the main sentence “you will understand why we find it difficult to wait” at its place at the end of a series of adverbial clauses which offer an image of the African-American experience in a nutshell:

“But

when you have seen vicious mobs lynch your mothers and fathers at will and drown your sisters and brothers at whim;

when you have seen hate filled policemen curse, kick and even kill your black brothers and sisters;

when you see the vast majority of your twenty million Negro brothers smothering in an airtight cage of poverty in the midst of an affluent society;

when you suddenly find your tongue twisted and your speech stammering as you seek to explain to your six year old daughter why she can't go to the public amusement park that has just been advertised on television, and see tears welling up in her eyes when she is told that Funtown is closed to colored children, and see ominous clouds of inferiority beginning to form in her little mental sky, and see her beginning to distort her personality by developing an unconscious bitterness toward white people;

when you have to concoct an answer for a five year old son who is asking: ‘Daddy, why do white people treat colored people so mean?’;

when you take a cross county drive and find it necessary to sleep night after night in the uncomfortable corners of your automobile because no motel will accept you;

when you are humiliated day in and day out by nagging signs reading ‘white’ and ‘colored’;

when your first name becomes ‘nigger,’ your middle name becomes ‘boy’ (however old you are) and your last name becomes ‘John,’ and your wife and mother are never given the respected title ‘Mrs.’;

when you are harried by day and haunted by night by the fact that you are a Negro, living constantly at tiptoe stance, never quite knowing what to expect next, and are plagued with inner fears and outer resentments;

when you are forever fighting a degenerating sense of ‘nobodiness’—

then you will understand why we find it difficult to wait.”

Notice also that within the adverbial clauses themselves, there is a gradual intensification of affect, shown in bold:

“when you **have seen** vicious mobs lynch your mothers and fathers at will and drown your sisters and brothers at whim;

when you **have seen** hate filled policemen curse, kick and even kill your black brothers and sisters;

when **you see** the vast majority of your twenty million Negro brothers smothering in an airtight cage of poverty in the midst of an affluent society;

when **you suddenly find** your tongue twisted and your speech stammering as you seek to explain to your six year old daughter why she can't go to the public amusement park that has just been advertised on television, and see tears welling up in her eyes when she is told that Funtown is closed to colored children, and see ominous clouds of inferiority beginning to form in her little mental sky, and see her beginning to distort her personality by developing an unconscious bitterness toward white people;

when **you have to concoct** an answer for a five year old son who is asking: ’Daddy, why do white people treat colored people so mean?’;

when **you take** a cross county drive and find it necessary to sleep night after night in the uncomfortable corners of your automobile because no motel will accept you;

when **you are humiliated** day in and day out by nagging signs reading ‘white’ and ‘colored’;

when **your first name becomes** ‘nigger,’ your middle name becomes ‘boy’ (however old you are) and your last name becomes ‘John,’ and your wife and mother are never given the respected title ‘Mrs.’;

when **you are harried** by day and haunted by night by the fact that you are a Negro, living constantly at tiptoe stance, never quite knowing what to expect next, and are plagued with inner fears and outer resentments;

when **you are forever fighting** a degenerating sense of ‘nobodiness’”

Finally, King achieves great rhetorical power through the understated nature of his main sentence “you will understand why we find it difficult to wait.” King describes an intolerable environment of racism in response to which its subjects (African Americans) “find it difficult” to wait. Even more powerfully, King writes a sentence implying that its readers (the religious leaders of Birmingham) will, inevitably understand why King and others demonstrate when they have experienced what African Americans have experienced. Since those who are white certainly will never experience the racism of which King speaks, it is poignant that King asserts the impossible inevitability of such understanding.

What makes this sentence a quintessential product of Enlightenment prose is its mastery of parallel structure in addition to power derived from expressing passionate ideas in a controlled and even understated manner.