

Title of Module: Style: The Secret to Becoming a Successful Writer

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Module Overview

1. What is Style?
 - Definition
 - Example
 - Analysis
 - When does Style change?
2. Components of an Effective Style in Academic Writing
 - Audience
 - Coherence in Form
 - Effective Language
3. Developing an Effective Style Through Language
 - Clarity
 - Brevity
 - Correctness
 - Elegance

Video 1: What is Style?

What is Style? Naturally crossing the genres of both academic and creative writing, style exists as part of the writer's craft. It represents voice and identity. Most readers, for instance, recognize the ironic voice in "It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife" as the narrator of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*. In the art of writing, style influences both the effectiveness of sentences and the beauty of composition. The former addresses communication; the latter, design. Style as choice reveals the writer's priorities, attitudes, and values.

Example

For example, Professor William Strunk, Jr. writes:

Vigorous writing is concise. A sentence should contain no unnecessary words, a paragraph no unnecessary sentences, for the same reason that a drawing should have no unnecessary lines and a machine no unnecessary parts. This requires not that the writer make all his sentences short, or that he avoid all detail and treat his subjects only in outline, but that every word tell.

The Elements of Style, p. 17. Also quoted in E. B. White's "Introduction" to *The Elements of Style*, pp. ix-x.

Analysis

Strunk's writing itself is a rhetorical tour de force with no unnecessary words. The short, direct, four-word first sentence models emphasis on brevity. The phrase, "no unnecessary," repeated four times in connection with "words," "sentences," "lines" and "parts," underscore Professor Strunk's values about the economy of language and design at both the sentence and paragraph levels. His sixty-three word treatise thus effectively communicates what he clearly argues: powerful writing makes "every word tell." Though not expressed, one can add that concise writing is also a virtue: by intentionally making "every word tell," a writer shows respect for the time a reader invests.

When does Style change?

Style changes with rhetorical context, especially in tone, language, and formality. Who is your audience and what are the expectations of that particular culture, community, discipline, or genre? What is your topic and your purpose? In terms of tone, an academic audience in the United States would expect your writing to sound confident instead of timid. In terms of language, the lab report on fruit flies for biology class differs from the literary analysis of a poem for English class. In terms of formality, the text you dash off to your best friend is far less formal than the business letter you craft for a potential employer.

Video 2: Components of an Effective Style in Academic Writing

In academic prose, a successful writer develops an engaging, effective style by showing consideration of audience, maintaining coherence in form, and emphasizing clarity, brevity, correctness, and elegance in language. The goal is to communicate effectively and in your own voice.

Audience

In an age of rapid global communication, successful writers study how those from other cultures and communities communicate, respect differences, and may adjust their use of sources, structure and style accordingly. Additionally, successful writers use language to build common ground and avoid alienating their audience.

For example, a writer addressing an ethnically diverse American audience shows sensitivity to and knowledge of preferred terms. "Negro," a preferred term in the 1950s in the United States to refer to Americans of African ancestry, can now only be used as an adjective, as in "Negro spiritual" (Tyler Perry reminds us). "African American," "black," and "Black" are best.

Multilingual writers studying in the United States should keep in mind that in terms of structure, the thesis, or main claim, usually appears at the beginning of an academic essay, and not at the end. In terms of style, clear, concise, and direct language is superior to vague, general, or flowery prose.

Regardless of audience or cultural context, accessible writing eschews an opaque, convoluted style and remains free from jargon, or specialized language. For example, in the social sciences a sociologist has complained:

A turgid and polysyllabic prose does seem to prevail in the social sciences.... Such a lack of ready intelligibility, I believe, usually has little or nothing to do with the complexity of thought. It has to do almost entirely with certain confusions of the academic writer about his own status.

C. Wright Mills, *The Sociological Imagination*, quoted in Williams, p. 5

In other words, plain English works best, regardless of academic discipline.

Coherence in Form

Coherence in form, or clarity in design, arises from a reader's experience of good writing. In structurally coherent work, readers can follow the framework of a writer's logic and see how all sections and paragraphs are relevant to the document's main point. Additionally, readers not only grasp how parts of the document are ordered, but also their organizing principle (Williams and Bizup, p. 118).

Video 3: Developing an Effective Style through Language

Clarity

1. "Suit the action to the word, the word to the action" (3.2. 18-19), as Hamlet advises in William Shakespeare's play. Using subjects to name the agents of a sentence, and using verbs to name their important actions are important principles of clarity.

For example,

"When Rosa Parks resisted giving up her seat on the bus, she became a civil rights hero" is more vigorous than "When Rosa Parks was resistant to giving up her seat on the bus, she became a civil rights hero" (Hacker 128).

While there are appropriate instances for using the passive voice, the active voice is generally more direct and vigorous.

For instance,

"I shall always remember my first writing seminar at Boston University" is bolder and more direct than "My first writing seminar at Boston University will always be remembered by me."

2. Using definite and specific language also lends force and power to a writer's prose. George Orwell once rewrote a passage from the Bible and rendered it lifeless. Compare this passage from Ecclesiastes:

“I returned, and saw under the sun, that the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, neither yet bread to the wise, nor yet riches to men of understanding, nor yet favor to men of skill; but time and chance happeneth to them all”

with

“Objective consideration of contemporary phenomena compels the conclusion that success or failure in competitive activities exhibits no tendency to be commensurate with innate capacity, but that a considerable element of the unpredictable must inevitably be taken into account.”

Quoted in *Elements of Style*, p. 17

Brevity

“Compression is the first grace of style,” says the American Modernist poet Marianne Moore in “To a Snail,” paraphrasing the Greek philosopher Demetrius. Eliminating redundant, meaningless, and empty words can help restore power to one’s prose. “Vigorous writing,” as Strunk has said, “is concise.”

For example, phrases like “in my opinion,” “it seems that,” “I think that” are empty because they are implied, and therefore should be cut. “Due to the fact that” is wordy, and can be replaced by one word: “because.”

Correctness

Attending to correct grammar, punctuation, syntax, and word choice helps a writer communicate with focused accuracy. Furthermore, every word has its denotation, or dictionary meaning, and connotation, or its associated meanings. Choosing words with appropriate connotations comes with knowledge of reader response, and skilled writers learn to master this art. Describing someone as *arrogant* implies a negative quality, whereas the adjective *confident* evokes a more positive feeling.

Elegance

The balance and coordination of ideas can lend grace to a writer’s prose, and one way to achieve elegance is to use parallel structure. Correlative conjunctions (“both, and”; “not, but”; “not only, but also”; “either, or”; “neither, nor”; “just as; so”; “whether; or”) also give weight and emphasis to ideas.

The Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who received his doctorate from Boston University’s School of Theology, articulates his vision for a harmonious America in his famous speech, “I Have a Dream.” Observe the rhythms, repetitions, and structure of his powerful prose:

“I have a dream today...I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, [and] every hill and mountain shall be made low. The rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight. And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together. This is our hope. This is the faith that I go back to the South with. With this faith we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope. With this faith we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood. With

this faith we will be able to work together, to pray together, to struggle together, to go to jail together, to stand up for freedom together, knowing that we will be free one day.”

The first two sentences demonstrate parallels not only in structure, but also in meaning: “every valley” contrasts with “every hill and mountain,” even as “every valley shall be exalted” and “every hill and mountain shall be made low.” In his fight for blacks and other minorities to acquire civil rights, King believes that justice will prevail: “the crooked places will be made straight.” King’s emphasis of collective action in the word “together” stays the same even as his direct, active verbs, in present tense, change (“to work together,” “to pray together,” “to struggle together,” “to go to jail together,” and “to stand up for freedom together”), the action finally culminating, he hopes and dreams, in all being “free one day.”

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