

Writing style

Writing style reveals the personality, thoughts, and voice of a writer in his or her prose. Effective writing style depends upon a combination of the following: audience, type of writing, punctuation, word choice, sentence construction, and overall presentation.

Active voice

Writing style is usually improved by using the active voice over the passive voice in sentence construction. Using the active voice leads to more concise, direct sentences.

Passive: The truck was overloaded by the workmen

Active: The workmen overloaded the truck.

The passive is used when the intention is to call attention to the patient, not the agent. He was murdered is stronger than somebody murdered him; the pancakes were delicious is more natural than you made delicious pancakes.

Balanced sentences

A balanced sentence contains similar structures in all its parts. It also expresses balanced ideas.

Marriage has many pains, but celibacy has no pleasures.
(Samuel Johnson)

Thus the Puritan was made up of two different men, the one all self-abasement, penitence, gratitude, passion; the other proud, calm, inflexible, sagacious.
(Thomas Babington Macaulay)

Conciseness

Concise writing comes quickly to the point. It avoids wordiness—unnecessary and repetitious words that add nothing to the meaning.

Wordy: Because of the fact that the watch was inexpensive in price, he bought it.

Concise: Because the watch was inexpensive, he bought it.

More concise: He bought the watch because it was cheap.

Conciseness is relative and must always be subordinate to other considerations. Organization should show intention. Where conciseness becomes the organizing principle, the result is merely laconic.

Connotation

The connotation of a word refers to the special associations, apart from its dictionary definition, that it may convey. The word dog may recall friendship to one reader, but terror to another. Using connotation in a strategic manner, a writer can achieve subtle and exact effects. A lap dog may suggest sophistication; a hound dog may suggest amusement; a cur may suggest social distinctions.

Even words that are synonyms may have different connotations: slender, thin, skinny may each convey different images to the reader's mind. The writer should choose the connotation, positive, negative, or neutral, that supports the mood.

Connotation varies with audience; writing for the learned, connotation may be a matter of etymology (the silent infantry) or allusion (she raised the glass of red wine with rosy fingers); writing for schoolbooks, wariness of caviling (Napoleon was a bigger influence than Frederick the Great on world history provoking But how could Napoleon be bigger when he was so short?); writing for encyclopedias, of using authoritative and dispassionate words (controversial, significant, &c.)

Conversational quality

A conversational tone in writing may help the reader more easily grasp what the writer is trying to say. Flowery language sounds more elegant but occasionally has less clarity.

Flowery: These United States

Conversational: the United States

Flowery: in the year of 1976

Conversational: in 1976

Flowery: at this point in time

Conversational: now

Figurative language

Using figures of speech, like simile, metaphor, metonymy, or synecdoche, can help a writer say something in an interesting way when ordinary language may seem dry. However, figures of speech should be used sparingly; too many similes in one paragraph may confuse the reader. Likewise, metaphors should be thought out. A mixed metaphor may detract from writing style.

Mixed metaphor: When put to the acid test, his principles were found to be as ignorant as a donkey.

Better: When put to the acid test, his principles dissolved.

Fresh language

Good writing style uses original and fresh words. It avoids clichés, which are overused, trite expressions that have lost their impact in meaning.

cliché: Some people can relate to the hustle and bustle of city life.

fresh: Some people thrive on the energy and motion of city life.

cliché: She is pretty as a picture.

fresh: Her amber eyes and radiant red hair overwhelmed me.

Imitation

The Elements of Style endorses imitation as a way for a writer to achieve his own style:

The use of language begins with imitation . . . The imitative life continues long after the writer is on his own in the language, for it is almost impossible to avoid imitating what one admires. Never imitate consciously, but do not worry about being an imitator; take pains instead to admire what is good. Then when you write in a way that comes naturally, you will echo the halloos that bear repeating.

Loose and periodic sentences

The writer can alternate between loose sentences and periodic sentences to achieve variety. Loose sentences, the most frequently used, begin with the main point:

Uncle Tom's Cabin is a very bad novel, having its self-righteous, virtuous sentimentality, much in common with Little Women.

(James Baldwin)

Periodic sentences place the main thought at the end of the sentence:

Under a government which imprisons any unjustly, **the true place for a just man is also a prison.**
(Henry David Thoreau)

There is one thing above all others that the scientist has a duty to teach to the public and to governments: **it is the duty of heresy.**
(Jacob Bronowski)

Nouns and verbs

Writing with nouns and verbs, as opposed to adjectives and adverbs can strengthen writing style. Specific nouns and powerful verbs can make writing more concise and vivid.

Weak: In 1850, 21-year-old Levi Strauss went from New York to San Francisco.

Vivid: In 1850, 21-year-old Levi Strauss traveled from New York to San Francisco.

Weak: The shrieking Arctic gales sent needles of ice into their faces.

Vivid: The shrieking Arctic gales shot needles of ice into their faces.

Practice

A writer needs to develop his skills through practice. Writing style cannot be forced; it emerges over time through practice. William Zinsser says writing style is not a commodity. "You will reach for gaudy similes and tinsel adjectives, as if style were something you could buy at the style store and drape onto your words in bright decorator colors . . . there is no style store; style is organic to the person doing the writing, as much a part of him as his hair, or if he is bald, his lack of it. Trying to add style is like adding a toupee. At first glance the formerly bald man looks young and even handsome. But at second glance . . . he doesn't look quite right."

Punctuation

Writing style is influenced by punctuation. A writer should use punctuation in a wise manner to achieve the intended effect. Punctuation used poorly could confuse the reader. Keep the following punctuation caveats in mind.

1. A period shows a full separation of between ideas.

Mary woke up early. She showered, ate breakfast, and took a walk.

2. A comma and coordinating conjunction show the following relationships: addition, choice, consequence, contrast, or cause.

Mary woke up early, but she only laid in bed until noon.

3. A semicolon reveals that the second sentence completes what idea was started in the first

sentence. It suggests a link between the two sentences, but leaves the reader to interpret the connection.

Mary woke up early; her depression kept her from actually getting out of bed.

4. A semicolon and a conjunctive adverb, such as however or moreover, show the relationship between ideas: addition, consequence, contrast, cause and effect, time, emphasis, or addition.

Mary woke up depressed; nevertheless, she got out of bed, showered, ate breakfast, and took a walk.

5. A conjunctive adverb is stressed when it is preceded by an independent clause ending with a period rather than a semicolon.

Mary woke up depressed. Nevertheless, she got out of bed, showered, ate breakfast, and took a walk.

Punctuation developed to represent prosody and must bow to the way a sentence reads aloud. Omit marks where you would not say them, add them where you would, and keep to the rules where you are not sure.

Sentence length

Sentence length may influence writing style. A parade of short sentences may be considered monotonous and fail to show the relationship of ideas:

Overpopulation is becoming a problem. Alaska is not thickly populated. Many people may move there. It has vast open lands.

By using a variety of sentence structures and lengths, the writer may make his meaning more clear:

Alaska, a relatively unpopulous state, has vast open lands which may attract many people in this time of overpopulation.

Sentence opening

Using a variety of ways to open a sentence may keep the writer's work from being monotonous. Different ways to begin a sentence may include:

prepositional phrase: Without a word, Charles left the room.

adverb: Laboriously, he dragged the large crate up the stairs.

dependent clause: When Flora arrives, we will light the candles.

participial phrase: Peering through the microscope, he discovered a squiggly creature.

Sentence purpose

Good writing style can be achieved by using a variety of sentence purposes. Instead of using all declarative sentences, which state facts, the writer could use:

interrogative sentences-asks a question. (Have you ever considered doing volunteer work?)

imperative sentences-gives a command (Do not assume the administration does not know what is happening.)

exclamatory sentences-expresses strong feeling. (How dare he try to use his political power to force his beliefs upon us!)

Sentence structure

Improved writing style can be achieved through using the different types of sentence structures:

simple sentences

compound sentences

complex sentences

complex-compound sentences

Simplicity

In writing style, using the simpler, more common word over the lesser-known word is preferable. "Avoid the elaborate, the pretentious, the coy, and the cute. Do not be tempted by a twenty-dollar word when there is a ten-center handy, ready and able."

Specific and concrete words

A writer who uses vague, fuzzy language may leave the reader confused or even bored. Using concrete words over abstract concepts may help the reader interpret the writer's intentions more accurately.

Weak: A car went around the corner.

Vivid: A battered blue Mustang careened around the corner.

Types of writing

The type of writing, or rhetorical mode, dictates the writing style. Most writing can be broken down into four types:

Exposition—a genre of writing in which the purpose of the author is to inform, explain, describe or define his or her subject to the reader.

Narration—storytelling, as found in short stories, novels, drama, and personal accounts.

Argumentation—the writer tries to persuade the reader to agree to a new belief or to take a course of action. Also called persuasive writing.

Description—the writer uses sensory details to show the reader what is being written about.