

Elements of Writing Style

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(Adapted with permission from the Athabasca University English 255 Student Guide.)

According to distinguished literary scholar M.H. Abrams, *style* is traditionally defined as “the manner of linguistic expression in prose or verse—it is *how* speakers or writers say whatever it is that they say.”¹ Features of style include the following:

- diction (word choice)
- sentence structure and syntax
- nature of figurative language
- rhythm and component sounds
- rhetorical patterns (e.g. narration, description, comparison-contrast, etc.)

These categories overlap to a considerable extent, but it is helpful to look at basic characteristics of each in relative isolation. This discussion provides supplementary comments and illustrations for the above stylistic categories (except for figurative language, which carries more weight in the analysis and writing of fiction, poetry, and drama than of non-fiction). We now add some supplementary information to enrich your appreciation of the main components of style in essays and your own use of style as a writer.

First Impression

Your words on the printed page create a first impression just like your clothes and general appearance when you arrive for a job interview. If your instructor looks at page one of your assignment and sees misspellings, typos, and wrong words, you will convey a *sloppy style* that is bound to lower your credibility as a writer and thinker. Here are some common word errors to avoid (especially on page 1!):

Incorrect

He interviewed a women.

Correct

He interviewed a woman.

Incorrect

She told the dog to lay down.

Correct

She told the dog to lie down. [See “to lie” and “to lay” in your dictionary]

¹ M.H. Abrams. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, 6th Edition. New York: Harcourt, 1993, 203.

Incorrect

Their is no excuse for this error.

Correct

There is no excuse for this error.

Incorrect

He returned the sword to it's scabbard.

Correct

He returned the sword to its scabbard.

Incorrect

She referred to alot of sources.

Correct

She referred to a lot of sources.

Better

She referred to many sources. ["A lot" is informal, a level of language less suited to academic writing.]

Incorrect

In his essay "Je me Soviens," Francis Herbert recalls his childhood in Montreal.

Correct

In his essay, "Je Me Souviens," François Hébert recalls his childhood in Montreal.

Misspelling the titles of works and the names of authors shows a lack of proofreading, not to mention an initial lack of attention to detail. Note that titles of essays are placed in quotation marks. According to MLA style, a comma—if required—is placed *inside* the second quotation mark.

Do Not Rely on Spell-check and Grammar-check Programs

Some students have come to assume that the computer automatically solves grammar and spelling, that such skills are as archaic as handwriting or an ability to navigate by the stars. This is a serious oversimplification for a number of reasons. Understanding the principles of grammar and spelling cannot be separated from a sound understanding of the language itself. Your writing style will gain depth and integrity the more you understand the principles of grammar, so be sure to check other relevant reference sources on this site as needed to solidify your command of usage.

Many instructors suggest that you not include grammar-checks as part of the resources you use to improve your writing style from the point of view of grammar. Grammar-checks are not always linguistically sound; they may even give you bad or incorrect advice in a number of cases. Spell-checks may be similarly unreliable. In addition, the

spell-check on your computer is likely American and will object to acceptable Canadian forms. Acquiring and using a good Canadian dictionary, such as the ITP Nelson Canadian Dictionary of the English Language, will serve you far better than relying on questionable computer spell-checks. Browsing through your dictionary should have the added advantage of allowing you to learn about the histories and different grammatical roles of various words. Take the time to use and enjoy a good old-fashioned dictionary (preferably Canadian).

Effects of Diction

Different effects are created by short, concrete words in contrast to longer, abstract ones. Origin is another important feature of words: what are the linguistic roots of the word and what associations do these create? Words of Germanic, Latin, Greek, Norse, and French origin have different tones and connotations, in part because of the differing roles played by the various root languages in British history. The Old-English-based word “sweat” has coarser associations than the Latin-based word “perspiration,” though both name the same thing. Latin and French were used by higher orders of the societies, Old English by the lower. Writing that favours words from Old English over words from Latin and French will have different stylistic effects along the lines of the above example.

Your dictionary, if you have chosen it carefully for college and university purposes, will tell you the etymology (history) of most words. Some reference books, like the 1998 *ITP Nelson Canadian Dictionary*, provide valuable expanded histories for many entries. Many good dictionaries (the *Cobuild English Dictionary* is another) provide lists indicating the linguistic origins of words. In short, English has incorporated words from hundreds of other languages, adding the textures and tones of these cultures. In today’s age of information, globalization, and specialist languages, this multilingual nature of English continues to increase—yet its mixed heritage traces back to its earliest years. Gaining a sense of this history will help you to recognize various associations that contribute to the stylistic effects of diction.

Voice

Your personal oral vocabulary is bound to inform your writing; indeed, your natural voice *should* inform your writing. However, our natural speaking style tends to include a “dog’s breakfast” of vocabulary ranging from colloquial slang to commonly used professional jargon. As a writer of scholarly and professional work, you need to review and revise your vocabulary to achieve a consistent level of language suited to your purpose and audience. Highly informal language, in the right contexts, can be colorful and effective, but even in the right contexts, conversational style can also include numerous clichés, which dilute ideas to the point of banality. Expressions like “no-win situation,” “play hardball,” “bottom line,” and “moment in time” [a redundancy], and slang of the day introduced through movies and pop culture (“chill-out,” “shoot the breeze,” etc.) contribute to this dilution. Overused “elevated” terms from professional fields, like “negative impact” and “phenomenon,” should be replaced with more precise,

original choices. While your writing style for university papers should remain honestly in touch with your own personality, overly informal expressions will date your writing if not contribute to banality, and large, pretentious words will similarly weaken your effect. Find a middle course between informal and puffed up, one that allows your own voice to make its appropriate contribution to a careful, academic style stressing **accuracy, concision, and reflection.**

Sentence Structure and Syntax

Sentence structure and syntax (word order) influence style through the lengths of thought units and the patterns of grammatical order (e.g. whether subjects lead to verbs, objects lead to subjects, etc. Shorter sentences, like shorter words, are generally considered easier to read. Longer sentences tend to occur in more academic literature or that intended for readers with high levels of formal education. It is also worth noting that average sentence lengths in general have diminished over the centuries. In their language workshops, Dr. Eric McLuhan (who worked for many years with his father Marshall) and Roger Davies (three-time winner of the American business Press Jesse H. Neal Editorial Achievement Award) provide interesting examples on this topic. For instance, a typical 300-word passage from Geoffrey Chaucer's translation of *Boethius* (1377 – 1381) averages 68.4 words a sentence. A 300-word passage from Ken Dryden's *The Game* (1999) averages 21.5 words a sentence. A typical Harelquin Romance, circa 1990, averages 9 words per sentence. (1989 McLuhan & Davies Communications Inc. workshop manual).

Sentence Power Points—Beware the “Bermuda Triangle”

What is meant by the “power points” of a sentence? This term simply refers to two prime sentence locations where, by cultural tradition, words have greatest impact for speakers of English: the opening and the closing. In the following example, we have underlined the power points.

The Bermuda Triangle² of a sentence refers to the middle part, where meanings—like airplanes flying over the ocean around Bermuda (or so the legend goes)—vanish, so use this middle place for words that are less important.

The reader of this sentence, unconsciously relying on power locations, forms an immediate equation: Bermuda Triangle = less important words. The writer has successfully used these two prime locations to convey and emphasize the essential idea—that the term Bermuda Triangle may be linked to that part of a sentence, the middle, where less important words should go. In this way, patterns and structure replicate and intensify meaning. Knowing and using these two power locations will enhance the effectiveness of your sentences.

² The metaphor of the Bermuda Triangle as applied to sentence analysis is discussed by Eric McLuhan and Roger Davies in their 1989 McLuhan and Davies Communications, Inc. workshop manual.

Rhythm

English provides an abundance of sentence lengths and patterns. By combining these in different ways, you can create various different rhythmical effects to complement the meaning and purpose of your writing.

Types of Sentences

1. She saved my brother's life.

This is a **simple declarative** structure moving from the subject *she* to the verb *saved* to the direct object *life*. Illustrated here is basic English structure: from subject to verb to object [or indirect object].

2. It happened during cucumber-picking season when I was four years old.

This sentence is **complex**; that is, it includes a main or **independent clause**.

3. It was the dry season, six months or so since the last rain, and the dirt road was blanketed with four or five inches of chalky dust.

This sentence is **compound**; that is, it contains two main or independent clauses linked by a coordinating conjunction. Note that a comma is used before the conjunction *and* to indicate transition to a second main clause.

4. Go to the store.

This style of sentence is **imperative**: it commands the listener to do something. In this case, the subject *you* is understood or elliptical: [You] go to the store.

5. Are you going to the store?

Questions, **interrogative** sentences, often place the subject between the auxiliary and the main part of the verb. *You* is the subject; *are going* is the predicate consisting of the main verb *going* and the auxiliary *are*.

6. The traditional idea of seeking and teaching truth the university today has half-forgotten.

In this **inverted** word order, the writer proceeds from object [*idea*] to subject [*university*] to predicate [*has half-forgotten*].

7. The traditional idea of seeking and teaching truth is half-forgotten today by the university.

This **passive voice** structure follows the normal subject-to-verb pattern while converting the actual doer of the action [*university*] into a prepositional phrase modifying the predicate *is half-forgotten* [thus an adverbial phrase].

8. Half-forgotten today by the university is the traditional idea of seeking and teaching truth.

This **passive voice** structure resembles the preceding example, but in this case the usual subject-to-verb pattern has been **inverted**. The main verb [*half-forgotten*] comes first followed by the adverbial prepositional phrase [*by the university*], then the auxiliary [*is*], then the grammatical subject [*idea*].

You can have fun manipulating sentence patterns in order to achieve rhythmical effects that further your meaning.

Sentence Variation Patterns

Following are four common patterns of sentence variation within paragraphs. Of course, many other patterns are possible.

Similarity

Within a paragraph, a writer can use similar declarative sentences throughout a paragraph in a way that evoke ideas of conformity, for example. Unless used with care, however, too many similar sentences, and especially simple sentences, can create monotony and the effect of thoughtlessness.

Alternating

An alternating sentence style shows the power gained by a simple sentence [e.g., *She saved my brother's life*] when it is framed on either side by complex sentences. As the term suggests, this pattern *alternates* from one sentence type to another and then back to the first.

Progressive

In a progressive pattern, the sentences become increasingly longer as they build to a climax (prurient pun intended), reflecting an intensification of a feeling or idea. Progressive patterns can build from short and simple to long and complex or vice versa.

Symmetrical

In a symmetrical sentence style, we find close similarities between the lengths and styles of the opening and closing elements of the paragraph. It attains a symmetry by opening and closing with the same pattern. In perfectly symmetrical paragraphs, the second half

of the paragraph represents an exact mirror image in sentence styles of the first half. For example, a symmetrical paragraph of seven sentences might use the following pattern:

1. simple
2. complex
3. passive voice
4. interrogative
5. passive voice
6. complex
7. simple

This may strike you as a rather artificial, overly crafted structure. However, many writers find that when they really know what they want to say, and when they allow an intuitive part of their being to take over, their finished work will present a remarkably symmetrical or otherwise highly crafted pattern in close service to intended meaning. Your paragraphs should use sentence variation in purposeful ways, to highlight keywords and to contribute meaningful rhythmic effects.

Rhetorical Patterns

Rhetorical patterns have a major influence on the overall style of a piece of writing. While personal style is important, and personal writing may provide an excellent departure point for you in this course—particularly if you have been away from formal schooling for some time—most university courses require mastery of third-person expository, argumentative, and analytical styles. In addition, as you practice these three main styles, your work in university will require increased integration of research sources. Here, then, are brief illustrations of these main academic styles, using suitable sources. .

Academic Expository Style-- Illustration

The speed of speech in various parts of Canada reveals a significant range of difference. Parts of Newfoundland and Montreal present two examples of rapid speech. In her essay “Newfoundlandese, if You Please,” Diane Mooney observes that “[all] Newfoundlanders talk fast; this is just a given” (111). Mooney suggests that certain Irish roots are partly the reason for this. Visitors to Montreal hear a similar quickness of spoken English. This may be due partly to the influence of French, dominant in the city;¹ as well, Yiddish and Mediterranean communities, described by linguist Charles Boberg, have had an

influence on the English spoken in the city (Haldane). No doubt the fast city pace of Montreal also influences the speed of speech and vice versa.

In contrast to Newfoundland and Montreal speech, much slower patterns occur in other parts of the country, for example, in much of Prince Edward Island (PEI), as well as on the prairies. Robert Deal, owner of a small bed and breakfast on the south shore of PEI, says, “On the Island, things are more relaxed: we don’t drive so fast as people from away, and we don’t rush our conversation.” A similar observation is offered by Brenda Mitchell of Carstairs, Alberta, after a holiday in Montreal. “I couldn’t get over how much faster people talk in this city,” she says. Are ethnic roots as well as lifestyles responsible for the slower pace of speech in these parts of the country? The answer is probably yes.² As Boberg states to Maeve Haldane of the *McGill Reporter*, language variation across Canada is a last bastion of cultural separation from the United States.

Notes

1. See the following online article by University of Montreal linguist Professor Blake T. Hanna, published in *Circuit*, March 1990: “Is French Corrupting Montreal English?” (<http://www.iquebec.ifrance.com/names850/anglais.html>). Hanna’s question makes one think of “Politics and the English Language,” in which George Orwell deplores the influence upon English of foreign words. However, Hanna argues an opposing view: that French (in Montreal) has reinvigorated English to a degree that has not occurred since the eleventh century.
2. A linguistics course, Ling 790, at the University of New Hampshire, states the following in its online description: “Canada is a rich environment for socio-linguistic investigation, because there is every possible type of language contact situation imaginable.” See <http://www.unh.edu/cie/canada/students.html>

Works Cited

Deal, Robert. Personal interview. 10 Aug. 2003.

Haldane, Maeve. “Speaking of Montreal.” *McGill Reporter*. 21 Nov. 2002. <http://www.mcgill.ca/reporter/06/boberg/>

Mitchell, Brenda. Personal interview. 13 June 2003.

Mooney, Diane. "Newfoundlandese, If You Please." *Acting on Words: An Integrated Reader, Rhetoric, and Handbook*. David Brundage and Michael Lahey. Pearson: Toronto, 2003. 110 - 111.

Commentary on this Example

This example uses subject-by-subject organization [Newfoundland and Montreal on one hand representing the subject of fast speech, PEI and the Prairies on the other representing the subject of slow speech] as well as a consistent pattern within each paragraph of two main citations and reference to possible causes. See the *Rhetoric* 457 – 458 for explanation of the notes used in this example. See the *Rhetoric* Chapter 12 for an illustration of how this example uses MLA parenthetical citations matched to the Works Cited list.

Note that the above example uses a detached tone mediated by third person. See the *Rhetoric* 277 and 337 on the effect of third person and expository style.

Academic Argumentative Style-- Illustration

In 1990, historian Page Smith published an indictment of higher education in America, condemning, among other things, the publish-or-perish culture. Now fourteen years later, publish or perish at Canadian universities is, if anything, worse than ever. No longer is the aspiring academic rightly encouraged to research and publish; he or she must publish as many *separate titles a year* as possible. A recent faculty posting in *University Affairs* reflects this disturbing reality: "Relative to research funding ...only Harvard's faculty publish more than UBC's" (35). Nothing is said about the quality or value of these publications, or of the compromises made to attain this "distinction." While the UBC ad writer would no doubt reply that quality is assumed, nevertheless, the ad strongly implies that quantity is priority one. Examples abound of how this emphasis on quantity discourages devotion to farsighted works in favour of feeding the KPI mill.¹ Perhaps more disturbingly, this demand for endless short publications undermines teaching. It is generally acknowledged on university campuses that teaching excellence does not play a sufficient part in advancement; introductory and basic skills-related

courses—the sorts of courses that often require the utmost teaching diligence—generally repay their instructors with low status. Surely the university's ideal of seeking and teaching truth suffers when the seeking consists of rapid-fire publications and the teaching garners diminishing respect.

Note

¹ “KPI” stands for “Key Performance Indicators,” a type of accountability criteria used in business but, according to various critics, unsuitable to the university. See Bruneau, William and Donald C. Savage. *Counting Out the Scholars: the Case Against Performance Indicators in Higher Education*. Lorimer: Toronto, 2002.

Works Cited

“Let’s Talk Excellence,” *University Affairs*. University Affairs. June/July 2003.

Smith, Page. *Higher Education in America: Killing the Spirit*. Viking: New York, 1990.

Commentary on this Example

The writer decided that part of the sentence from *University Affairs* was irrelevant to the point being made; the ellipsis indicates words omitted by the paragraph writer when integrating the quotation. Do not use this technique to remove words that challenge the interpretation you wish to give, and use this technique with restraint, since it could seem to suggest that you are cutting the original to suit your argument rather than to serve style and brevity, as was the case here.

Academic Analytical Style-- Illustration

The Sopranos—now entering its fifth season on HBO—has all the features of a Shakespearian history play, as defined by Norrie Epstein: battlefield heroics, familial relationships, feisty characters, power politics and covert scheming (151). Like Prince Harry overcoming Hotspur in Henry IV, Part 2, Tony prevails over an attempted assassination (episode 12) as does Chris (episode 21). Shakespeare’s use of domestic scenes is paralleled in *The Sopranos* by similar scenes of family relationships involving Tony, Carmela, Meadow, Anthony Junior, and various other members of the extended crime “family.” Feisty Shakespearean characters such as Hotspur, Falstaff, and Mistress Quickly find their modern counterparts in *Sopranos* regulars like Chris, Uncle Junior, and

Janice. In particular, Tony resembles Henry IV in their concealing of private anguish beneath a mask of political action. On the matter of power politics, Shakespeare's histories begin with the question of who will succeed to power, who will prevail in the bitter feud between the houses of Lancaster and York. Similarly, *The Sopranos* begins with the death of the local crime boss, Jackie Aprile, Sr., a consequential power vacuum, and problems of how to gain control according to the old code of honour, which means less to certain characters than it does to Tony. Uniting all of these similarities is the strong appeal that both the histories and *The Sopranos* have for their audiences: we envy the rich and the powerful, we experience the vicarious thrill of sin and danger, and we recognize in the ruthless main characters the same moral compromises that govern our own lives.

Work Cited

Epstein, Norrie. *Friendly Shakespeare: A Thoroughly Painless Guide to the Best of the Bard*. Penguin: New York, 1993.

Commentary on this Example

The above example uses point-by-point structure according to a scheme suggested by Norrie Epstein in her definition of the features of Shakespeare's history plays. The paragraph writer has considered what Epstein says about the histories and realized that each of her points of definition (i.e. battlefield heroics, familial relationships, feisty characters, power politics and covert scheming) applies as well to *The Sopranos*. This represents a thoughtful use of a secondary source, since Epstein herself does not offer a connection to the writer's primary source (*The Sopranos*). The writer makes that connection. See the *Rhetoric* 431-432 for further discussion of primary and secondary sources.