

College Prep English: Writing with Style

Activity #1 — What is your style?

Over the last few years, you have had discussions in your English classes about the styles of particular writers: Mark Twain's ironical style; Shakespeare's figurative language; Hemingway's simple and direct reportorial style. You may have gathered from these discussions that only professional writers were capable of creating a distinctive, personal style. But you write, just as you walk, talk, or eat, in a way that is uniquely yours. Style is linked to personality. The following activities will help you get a sense of what style is.

Step 1: Select a partner. Take turns discussing each other's clothes in detail. Try to determine how your clothing contributes to your overall image. Be honest and specific. What words would you use to describe the particular style of each article you are examining? Consider these words in your description:

aggressive	up-to-date	stylish	professional	beautiful	unassuming
elegant	functional	ornamental	cautious	fashionable	different
loud	inappropriate	gaudy	tawdry	flashy	silly
sensible	conservative	eccentric	sloppy	clashing	cool
odd	old-fashioned	workable	solemn	sporty	punk
skater	preppy	Others????			

Step 2: When you have finished discussing each article of clothing, decide on one word that sums up the overall image of your clothes. For example: My clothes are functional.

Step 3: Next choose the word that best describes the opposite effect of your image, (for example, flashy).

Step 4: Does anything that you are wearing not seem to fit in with the rest of your clothes? What is inappropriate about the article of clothing? For example, dress shoes are inappropriate if you are wearing soccer shorts and a T-shirt.

Step 5: Continue by choosing words to describe your hair, your makeup or perfumes/scents, your voice, your stride (walk), etc.

Step 6: What other factors contribute to a person's style: Use specific details to support each descriptive word. Examples: favorite music, appearance of your bedroom, your car, etc. Are these consistent with your dress style? Why or why not?

Step 7: In a short paragraph describe your style based upon what you discovered in steps 1-6. Turn in this paragraph.

And the point is...?

Knowing your own style and observing the styles of others can be of value to you in developing your own writing style. The personality you express in your writing is your voice. How you create that voice comes through the application of various writing strategies that develop your writing style. Just as you have crafted your "look," so too should you spend time selecting writing strategies that will develop your writing style.

Just as you need to know your own style, you need to recognize that your audience will have a style or perspective of their own. Therefore, the more you understand and know about your reader, the most skillful you can be in making your writing style appropriate for your reader. If you write with no particular audience in mind, or if you write for "anybody who wants to read it," you will find it difficult to develop a distinctive style. Think for a moment about how what you say is determined by who your audience is. The following activity shows you to what extent communication is affected by audience.

Step 1: Select a partner. Each of you will fabricate a story to tell to the other. Use the two scenarios described below. Begin by explaining your long (sad or happy) story to your partner. You will probably have to make up a number of details, names, places, and so forth to make your story appear truthful. This should last for about 5-10 minutes each.

As you are talking, whenever your partner feels like it, he or she should interrupt you with one of the numbers on the list of different audiences. When you hear the number, you must immediately assume that you are speaking with that person, and therefore, change your entire style as you continue your story. You must sound totally honest with this person. Then after a little while, your partner should say another number.

Try not to miss a bit; simply continue your story, without going back to the beginning, for your new audience. If there is a lull in the story, your partner can ask you a question as though he or she were the person you are talking to.

Step 2: When your story is finished, discuss with your partner the stylistic changes that you made. Were they correct? Appropriate? Effective? In what ways were they appropriate? Your partner should point out specific examples where your style was inconsistent with your audience, purpose, and situation.

Scenario #1:

Assume that you have just broken up with someone you have gone out with for the past two years and you want to write to someone to explain your feelings. Even a quick glance at the following list will let you realize that you would not say the same things, in the same way, to each of them:

Audiences:

1. a close friend of the same sex
2. a close friend of the opposite sex
3. a friend of the person you have broken up with
4. one of your parents
5. one of the parents of the person you broke up with
6. a minister
7. your English teacher
8. your counselor
9. a child under six who knows you well
10. an agent for a computer dating service who has asked you why you broke up

Scenario #2:

Assume you are living in an apartment and you need to persuade your next door neighbors not to be so noisy. Explain your situation and your need for peace and quiet.

Audiences:

1. your next door neighbor
2. another neighbor
3. a member of your family who lives with you
4. a member of your family who does not live with you
5. a friend of yours
6. a police officer whom you have telephoned

Few of us would ever think of eating popcorn or french fries without salt, or spaghetti sauce without salt, pepper, garlic, basil, and oregano to spice up the taste. Yet, we often do little to spice up our writing with vivid words, relying instead on tired, boring words that give no flavor to our style.

- #1. The following is a paragraph from a student's literary essay on one of Henrik Ibsen's dramas. As you read:
- a) circle all parts of the verb "to be"—am, is, are, was, were, being, been, be
 - b) bracket every which, who, whom, that, there, and it.

These words, especially if you have used them excessively, result in ineffective constructions that dull your style.

Ibsen uses the symbol of the wild duck to give force to his theme. The duck, which is a living, wild creature, and its relationship with other characters and its environment are unique. The relationship is so intertwined that certain events may not be occurring within the duck's presence. The symbolism of the duck is present throughout the play, and there is a parallel between the duck's existence and human existence. The duck is a wild creature; it is wild and untouched by humankind. It is happy in its wild state until it is shot by a hunter. Its natural instinct, when it was would is to hide, so it dives into the ocean. But it is retrieved by the hunter's dog. The duck, which was still alive, is adopted by a family and placed in an artificial environment where it exists, but it is not happy.

Note the excessive use of these dull words.

- #2. With a partner, write a paragraph on any topic of approximately 100 words (+ or -10). In this exercise, however, you are not permitted to use any of these words:

it be is am was were being there been are which that who whom
do does did done have has had having feel felt seem seemed become
becoming became

You will have 15 minutes to accomplish this. Each pair successfully avoiding the above words will receive blue slips good toward grade bonus points. Use the back of this paper as necessary.

Activity #3 — Deadwood belongs in South Dakota, not in your writing

The verb “to be” and its various forms are essential to many sentences. You do not need to banish these verbs from your writing completely. However, you need to avoid their overuse.

Examples of effective use of “to be”:

- William Bennett is an essayist and social critic as well as a prominent figure on political talk shows.
- Cultural literacy is critical to America’s survival, according to Bennett, who has been one of the most outspoken critics of the status of education in our country.

The following sentences improve with revision:

From: Ralph Nader and William Bennett are two Americans who are critics of American society.

To: Ralph Nader and William Bennett are two American social critics.

From: Both are writing about how America’s status will wither if changes fail to occur.

To: Both write about how America’s status will wither is changes fail to occur.

Avoid linking verbs as well: feels, seems, appears, looks, smells, sounds, becomes

From: In Saul Bellow’s *Humboldt’s Gift*, the poet Fleisher is troubled during his wild swings between manic and depressive moods.

From: In Saul Bellow’s *Humboldt’s Gift*, the poet Fleisher feels troubled during his wild swings between manic and depressive moods.

To: In Saul Bellow’s *Humboldt’s Gift*, the poet Fleisher suffers during his wild swings between manic and depressive moods. (effective action verb)

The verbs do and have often appear equally weak.

From: Many readers do prefer the sardonic wit of Bennett’s work to Nader’s pedantic style.

To: Many readers prefer the sardonic wit of Bennett’s work to Nader’s pedantic style.

From: Bennett’s writing has a great deal of criticism of the educational system in the United States.

To: Bennett’s writing criticizes the educational system in the United States.

“Bewhichment” should also be avoided:

Excessive use of which and other relative pronouns (who, whom, that) along with the verb to be can bog down writing as well. Though easy to use, the writing becomes riddled with be and which. Such writing is not only tedious, it is “bewhiched.” “Bewhichment” includes the following constructions as well: “It was. . . which is . . . That is. . . who will be. . .” The cure is easy—change the clause to a verbal phrase or absolute.

From: One of Mailer’s early novels is *The Deer Park*, which was considered obscene by some readers at the time of its publication and which was banned from some public bookshelves.

To: One of Mailer’s early novels is *The Deer Park*, considered obscene by some readers at the time of its publication and banned from some public bookshelves.

From: Bellow, who had already established his reputation as a serious writer in the 1940s, finally won national popularity with his novel *The Adventures of Augie March*.

To: Bellow, his reputation already established as a serious writer in the 1940s, finally won national popularity with his novel *The Adventures of Augie March*.

There are [YUCK] too many it’s and there’s as well:

Are you a fan of sentences constructions such as, “There is...which...” or “It is...that...” ?These patterns produce verbs in the passive voice rather than the active voice and create wordier dependent clauses rather than more mature phrases and appositives.

From: There is one of Mailer’s novels, *The Naked and the Dead*, that has been made into a successful movie by famed director Raoul Walsh.

To: One of Mailer’s novels, *The Naked and the Dead*, has been made into a successful movie by famed director Raoul Walsh.

From: It is one of Bellow’s middle novels, *Henderson the Rain King*, that is regarded most highly by many critics.

To: Many critics highly regard *Henderson the Rain King*, one of Bellow’s middle novels.

Exercise: Remove the deadwood from the following sentences to make them more effective. [The fewer words the better.]

1. Norman Mailer himself is the central figure in *The Armies of the Night*, which tells of people who were demonstrating against the war in Vietnam.
2. Bellow has lived in Chicago for much of his life, and there are novels like *Dangling Man* and *Herzog* that use that city for background.
3. *Of a Fire on the Moon* is a book that has been written by Mailer and that describes the Apollo 11 moon shot.
4. It is notable that both Mailer and Bellow have had their work acclaimed internationally, and it is also notable that they have both received the Pulitzer Prize.
5. Mailer has been fascinated by the life of Marilyn Monroe, who was one of Hollywood’s true stars, and he published a book about her, which was called *Marilyn*.
6. Critic Diana Trilling says that Bellow’s novel *The Victim* is successful on many levels.
7. *King of the Hill* is Mailer’s account of one of the championship fights between heavyweights Muhammad Ali and Joe Frazier.
8. The Nobel Prize in literature, which was awarded to him, has done much to make Saul Bellow better known to more people.
9. Something we can all debate is whether Norman Mailer or Saul Bellow has done more to promote most effectively the fact that a genuine writer is a deliberate and hardworking artist.

Readers don't like to read long-winded passages of description, according to Lucille Vaughn Payne in *The Lively Art of Writing*. They don't want pictures slapped all over the pages, but they do want to "see" what a writer means. In other words, they want pictures, ones that flash on almost as fast as action on film. They don't want these pictures to be overly obvious but simply and suddenly there, whammo, straight on, and preferably in motion. In other words: action verbs. You show what you mean with "motion-picture" and "soundtrack verbs."

Not: A spectacular catch was made by Nate during the ball game.

But: Nate raced to the backfield, turned, leaped; the ball smacked solidly into his glove. OR Nate hurled himself forward, raised his gloved hand as he hit the dirt, and scooped the ball out of the air.

Not: A cat was seen crossing the yard. (passive)

But: A cat streaked across the yard. (active)

Not: The sound of footsteps was heard in the hall. (passive)

But: Footsteps thudded along the hall. (active)

Exercise: Rewrite the sentences below using one of more verbs that increase the visibility and/or the sound of the motion suggested. DO NOT ADD adjectives or adverbs.

1. He sat down.
2. The puppy had a fine time playing in the park.
3. The wind made a loud noise.
4. He left the room in a tremendous hurry.
5. She put the papers in her purse.
6. The garden tiller worked quite efficiently on the hard, rocky soil.
7. She seemed to be feeling very happy when she came into the room.
8. The old man went slowly across the street.
9. The dog lay down on the rug.
10. The boy drank the lemonade very fast.

ANIMATE the INANIMATE:

The subjects in the sentences above are capable of movement. The challenge comes to animate the inanimate.

Dull: The I-25 exit to northbound Broadway is on Lincoln Street.

Improved: The I-25 exit to northbound Broadway swoops down to Lincoln Street.

From: The house was brightly lighted.

To: The house bloomed with light.

From: The fog was so thick that the city was invisible.

To: The city swam in fog.

Exercise: Animate the following sentences.

1. The room was suddenly filled with loud laughter.
2. He finally let the extent of his anger be seen.
3. A startling report was given to the students by the principal.
4. The crowd made disrespectful noises.
5. He made a loud sound indicating disbelief.
6. It was a nice fall day.
7. Pictures hung on the walls.
8. She was so super sweet it made you sick.
9. His spirits were low.
10. Fish were being fried in the skillet.

“Direct your reader” — Movie directors know how to reveal a large amount of information with single details in close focus. A typical shot: a young man standing on a street corner. The camera gives you a general idea of what he looks like, but the director wants you to know as quickly as possible a great many other details about his young man. So, the camera moves in to show you certain details in close-up: first, the young man’s broken-down shoes; then a button dangling from the coat by a thread; then a tattered paperback thrust into a frayed pocket, with the title of the book visible, *Wild Birds of America*. Not one details appears by accident. The director chose each one to tell you something. The audience can now begin to speculate about this character from these specific details. While verbs give you the “action shots,” specific details supply the “stills”—the camera briefly at rest on a particular object. Look at the difference in these pictures.

Not: He liked to read the Bible.

But: A worn Bible lay in his gnarled hand.

Not: She looked like a rich woman.

But: A four point diamond glistened on her left hand, while a ruby glowed warmly on her right. Her clothes had the cut that pronounced, “Money, money, money.”

Lights...camera...Add action (strong verbs) and descriptive detail to the following sentences.

1. He looked nervous.
2. He was a very interesting looking young man.
3. The yard looked terrible.
4. She was crazy about candy.
5. The crowd was angry.

