

What is Style?

Style is one of those words that are often used to talk about writing, but what is style? You may think that writers have a particular style, and be familiar with the style of a particular writer—Stephen King or J.K. Rowling, for example. ReadWriteThink explains style in this way:

"One easy way to understand literary style is to think about fashion styles. Clothes can be formal and dressy, informal and casual, preppy, athletic, and so forth. Literary style is like the clothes that a text puts on. By analogy, the information underneath is like the person's body, and the specific words, structures, and arrangements that are used are like the clothes. Just as we can dress one person in several different fashions, we can dress a single message in several different literary styles."

When you get dressed in the morning, you likely think (even unconsciously) about how you want to present yourself. Do you want to appear more formally dressed for a presentation? Or would you like to show that you play a sport, or that you have a favorite video game? You might think about how gender intersects with dress—some women love to wear skirts, while others live in their jeans. But you remain the same even as your style changes. All that shifts is how others perceive and react to you.

For example, check out these two sentences—they're essentially the same in content, but have different prose styling.

Example One: "It has been demonstrated by some studies—some controversial, some not—that the presence of comfort animals facilitates student success during finals week by lowering stress levels on campus."

Example Two: "We need a *Community*-inspired puppy parade on campus. It'll help lower my insanely high stress during finals week."

The first sentence is much more formal and academic. It includes references to outside studies, uses a complicated sentence structure, chooses a verb like "facilitates," talks about things in a detached way (using passive voice, in one case—"it has been demonstrated"). The author's narrative presence is invisible; there's no "I" or reference to the author's personal investment.

The second sentence is much more casual. It uses first-person pronouns ("we" and "my"), references a sitcom, uses the term "puppy" vs. "comfort animal," and engages in hyperbole ("insanely high").

Neither of these sentences is inherently good or bad, but each is appropriate to a particular context. The first sentence wouldn't be out of place in an academic argument, but it would be bizarre to see it in the editorial section of the *Chronicle*. The second sentence could be a letter to the editor or even a Facebook post. And the style of each is the product of the writer being aware of the audience, purpose, and context they are working within.

What we can learn from this is that style is the result of deliberate choices that writers make in language. Style is used to convey meaning, nuance, perspective, and engagement with an audience.

Some elements of style include . . .

- Language and jargon (what vocabulary level is being used? how specialized is the terminology?)
- Narrative point of view (how present in the author? Does the author use first person, or is the author more invisible?)
- References (to high culture? to pop culture? to other academic texts?)
- Rhythm and syntax (does the author use short, clipped sentences? long, complicated sentences?)
- Literary devices (metaphor, illustration, hyperbole are all examples of this)
- Punctuation (semi-colons; commas, and exclamation points!)

Exercise #1:

Guidelines: For this assignment, I'd like you to be attentive to your own style as you write two paragraphs about your favorite snack.

- The first paragraph should be as formal and academic as you can make it. Don't rely on "fluff" language, but use formal diction, complex sentence structure, references to studies and statistics. If you do use first-person, do so in a way that indicates rhetorical strategy ("I plan to argue that brownies are the ideal snack for college students").
- The second paragraph should be casual and engaging, as if you were writing a letter to your best friend who hates the snack, and you'd like to persuade them how great it is. Use vivid descriptions, illustrations, reference popular culture, and shorter sentences.