

STYLE

What is style? For many people, a very complicated way of saying very simple things. According to us, a very simple way of saying very complicated things.

Jean Cocteau

What is style?

Some people use the term “style” to refer to the guidelines of a particular publication—rules for structure, punctuation, and citation one must follow when writing for, say, the Associated Press, American Anthropologist, or Quarks Today. For such purposes, “style” is primarily a matter of rules and mechanics.

The kind of style we’ll concern ourselves with here, however, is juicier and will give you room to experiment. It has two basic elements: *clarity* and *texture*.

- **Clarity:**

As Jean Cocteau’s quote above implies, your style should not obscure your ideas. Writing is a form of communication as well as an art, and your words should make your meaning crystal-clear to the reader.

- **Texture:**

Once your ideas shine through clearly and are readily understandable to your reader, they can be presented through an individualized texture that conveys your voice, personality, and audience. You can create this texture by manipulating any number of linguistic features: word choice and literary devices (alliteration, assonance, simile, metaphor, allusion, etc.), as well as other features like sentence length and variety, sentence structure, paragraph length, voice, etc.

Keep in mind, however, that great style alone is never enough to clinch a piece of writing. You have to have something to say before you can present it in a sophisticated way. Importantly, you may find that your ideas propel you towards a particular style, since often style and content aren’t as separate as some definitions imply.

How can I work on my style?

Here are a few proven methods for helping you develop and polish your own unique style:

1. **Read the work of other writers** to introduce yourself to their techniques. Sometimes you learn from other writers unconsciously as you read, but if you attend closely to their stylistic

devices, you'll absorb their lessons much faster. Don't be ashamed to imitate another author's style! Stylists in all fields, whether in sports, fashion, politics, or writing, begin as apprentices.

2. **Write like crazy.** You can develop your style organically and instinctively simply by writing until writing feels familiar. You can also choose to experiment, practicing new writing styles by trying them out yourself. Students with great, vivid writing styles usually enjoy playing around with words, and they tend to feel that when they put words on paper, they're putting a part of themselves on the line.
3. **Be aware of a reader as you write**—a reader who wants to be engaged by your voice. Think about who they might be and what you can do to engage them and hold their interest.
4. **Show your writing to others** so you can see how they react to your voice on paper. Ask them if they can “hear you” through your sentences.
5. **Read your own work**—not only silently, but also aloud. You may feel self-conscious doing this, but reading your work aloud will give you the opportunity to listen to the flow and music of your prose. And when you find yourself stumbling over particular phrases, take note! You've likely identified a trouble spot that can be fixed with a little rewording.
6. **Clean up and clarify your prose.** Ask yourself: are all these words essential? If you were forced to cram that six-line paragraph into five, for example, what would you trim out? First to go should be overused phrases, passive sentences, clichés, wordy expressions, and repetitions. As with many beginning writers, a natural style will emerge as you pare away, simplify, and smooth out the writing techniques you have already learned.
7. **Write using only words you understand.** It may be tempting to use impressive-sounding words, but only use them if you are absolutely certain that they are right for the context. It's far better to write naturally and clearly, using the vocabulary you know and have learned from other writers, than to use dozens of fancy words that may not mean what you think they do.

Credit: University Writing Center, 2020.

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