

## What is Style?

"Style is the writer. Style is what is distinguished and distinguishing in writing."  
—T. H. White

### Elements of Style

#### Syntax

- sentence structure, sentence variety, sentence arrangement, word order, parallelism, spelling, grammar conventions (or lack thereof), phrasing, punctuation, repetition

#### Diction

- word choice; denotation and connotation; concrete and abstract details

#### Tone

- the writer's or speaker's attitude toward the subject, the audience, himself, or herself
- the emotional coloring of meaning of a work

#### Figurative Language

- metaphorical language: metaphor, simile, synecdoche, metonymy, personification, hyperbole, understatement, paradox, allusion
- not to be described as *flowery*

#### Imagery

- auditory, gustatory, kinetic, olfactory, organic, tactile, visual
- often contrasted or categorized: light vs. dark, apathy vs. energy, sweet vs. sour

#### Point of View

- first person, third person, omniscient, stream-of-consciousness, narrative, childhood, adulthood, personal, impersonal

#### Organization

- structure, form, contrast or similarity, formal, informal, logical, chaotic

#### Musicality

- euphony, cacophony, monotony (not to be described as *flowing*)

#### Rhyme

- formal, informal, traditional, unconventional, absence of

#### Meter

- formal, informal, traditional, unconventional, absence of

#### Use of Time

- flashback, flash-forward, narration, framed story, chronological, realistic, synchronous, magical, circular

#### Repetition

- words, phrases, clauses, sentences, images, structure, grammar

## Improving Your Style

Diction and syntax are two elements of style that can immediately and powerfully affect your writing. Your writing should be clear, economical, and graceful: a little out of the ordinary, a little unique, a little beautiful, with words and phrases not heard every day but seeming right and natural as you use them. Distinguished diction and distinguishing syntax require effort, so practice with the following suggestions for enhancing these crucial elements of your style.

### Diction Suggestions

1. Use vivid verbs.
  - *Example:* The pitcher hurled the fastball over the plate for a strike.
2. Use descriptive adjectives.
  - *Example:* The stagnant, murky appearance and foul stench suggested that the pond was contaminated with bacteria.
3. Use active voice.
  - *Example:* The students labored feverishly to complete the project.
4. Use passive voice sparingly and for purpose.
  - *Example:* The politician scanned the faces of the voters in the crowd and announced, "Despite exhaustive effort, the budget has not been balanced."
5. Experiment with **figurative language**.
  - *Example of **simile**:* Her hands were like popsicles as she waited for her blind date.
  - *Example of **metaphor**:* The teenage years are a rollercoaster ride of emotions.
  - *Example of **hyperbole**:* My parents and I have discussed my responsibility or lack thereof at least a million times in the last week.
  - *Example of **personification**:* The couples entered the marriage seminar, a virtual Noah's Ark of wedded pairs.
  - *Example of **allusion**:* As I stared into the eyes of my former best friend, all I could think was "Et tu, Brute?"

### Syntax Suggestions

1. Use different kinds of sentences.
  - **declarative**, ones that make statements
  - **interrogative**, ones that ask questions
  - **imperative**, ones that make commands
  - **exclamatory**, ones that communicate strong emotion or surprise
  - **conditional**, ones that express wishes

## 2. Vary sentence structures.

- **simple** (one independent clause)  
*Example:* I am bored with this conversation.  
*Example:* I am bored and upset with this conversation.
- **compound** (two independent clauses joined with comma and conjunction or semicolon)  
*Example:* I am bored with this conversation, so I am moving to a table with more intellectual students.  
*Example:* I am bored with this conversation; I am bored with most conversations.
- **complex** (one independent clause with one or more dependent clause)  
*Example:* I am seeking a more intellectual environment because I am bored with this conversation.
- **compound-complex** (two independent clauses with at least one dependent clause)  
*Example:* When I am uninterested in a conversation, I become bored, and I seek a new environment.

## 3. Use a variety of sentence orders.

- A **loose (or cumulative) sentence** expresses the main thought near the beginning and adds explanatory material as needed.  
*Example:* "She pointed out interesting details of the scenery: Stone Mountain; the blue granite that in some places came up to both sides of the highway; the brilliant red clay banks slightly streaked with purple; and the various crops that made rows of green lace-work on the ground." (O'Connor, "A Good Man is Hard to Find")
- A **periodic sentence** is one that postpones the crucial or most surprising idea until the end.  
*Example:* "As Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from uneasy dreams he found himself transformed in his bed into a gigantic insect." (Kafka, "The Metamorphosis")
- A **balanced sentence** is constructed so that it emphasizes a similarity or a contrast between two or more of its parts (words, phrases, clauses).  
*Example:* "It was the best of time, it was the worst of times; it was the age of wisdom; it was the age of foolishness." (Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities*)
- An **inverted sentence** is a created through the reversal of subject-predicate-complement order.  
*Example:* "About suffering they were never wrong, / The Old Masters." (Auden, "Musée des Beaux Arts")

## 4. Add explanatory **phrases** to add detail and interest.

- *Example of **prepositional**:* After the refreshing rain, the warm scent of salt air filled my nostrils.
- *Example of **participial**:* Standing back to back in a straight line, the ROTC cadets did not flinch at attention.
- *Example of **absolute**:* Its wings badly damaged by the storm, the airplane spiraled out of control.
- *Example of **appositive**:* Our algebra teacher, a man we all love to tease, gave us five thousand problems to do for homework.

## 6. Employ **parallel** constructions to add interest, making sure to maintain the same part of speech.

- *Example:* The line of words is a miner's pick, a woodcarver's knife, a surgeon's scalpel.
- *Example:* When I was younger, when I was convinced there was a Tooth Fairy and an Easter Bunny, when I wished upon a star and on the candles of my birthday cake, I had no inkling of the disillusioning truth of human nature.