

Analyzing Style

Good style connects right word to right word to make the right sentence. Bad style uses either the wrong word or the wrong level of diction for its subject matter.

Diction refers to the writer's choice of an individual word, e.g., war, fights, hostilities.

Syntax is grammar or sentence structure.

The Functions Of Style

1. Style helps to **characterize** the speaker. A good writer, careful of style, uses **connotations** or associations to characterize.
2. Style creates **tone**, which is the value, that style or gesture gives to words.
3. Style can convey an **author's** judgement of a character.
4. Style is also a means of **persuasion**.
5. Style is **discovery**. In striving to say exactly what he wants to say, the writer discovers a more accurate expression of what he wants to say.
6. Style results from **linguistic choices**; the more frequently these choices are exercised and the more wide-ranging they are, the higher the probability they will effectively express the writer's unique thought and feeling.
7. Style sharpens **expressive meaning** as well as **referential meaning**.
8. Style is not mere ornament; rather it conveys important subtleties of meaning and evaluation, especially as they define the nature of the writer, his basic attitudes, his pre-suppositions, his moral stance, and his relation to his subject and his reader. In trying to analyze style, look for the **unusual** or **unique** features in the writing according to the following headings:
 - A. The Organization of the Whole Composition
 - B. Paragraph Development
 - C. Sentence Structure
 - D. Sentence Rhythm
 - E. Diction
 - F. Punctuation

A. The Organization of the Composition as a Whole

1. flexible – the author is not bound by the conventions of writing; he is free to explore all avenues.

2. varied – the author chooses more than one kind of style to make his point – these may be used for purposes of comparison/contrast or for purposes of emphasis.
3. rigid, mannered – one style is maintained throughout the composition perhaps to convey a sense of completeness, or to restrict thought to that convention.
4. conventional – a style, which adheres to the rules of general usage and conforms to established practices.
5. traditional – a style whose customs are based on time-honoured practices.
6. individual – style which has characteristics which relate to the personality of the author or one of his characters.
7. original – any unique writing form which has been created by the author.
8. fresh – a new outlook on an established idea. 9. tense – the overall tone of the passage is strained or suspenseful.
10. relaxed – the author seems able to convey an effortless atmosphere in a loose, less formal manner.
11. simple – the author chooses to portray his characters or ideas candidly with few chances for misunderstanding.
12. complex – the subject is many-faceted, so the author's style must try to capture these aspects, perhaps with figures of speech, longer sentences, use of analogies, etc.
13. literal – the author means to communicate on one level, i.e., he is referring to the primary meaning of the words he chooses; he is concerned with the facts; he exaggerates or embellishes very little.
14. figurative – style which makes use of figures of speech, metaphorical or rhetorical writing. 15. direct – a straightforward, candid, frank form of writing which does not deviate.
16. involved – style which tries to take an in-depth look at the subject, exploring feelings and behaviours.
17. abstract – the author intentionally stays away from specifics concentrating on the theoretical rather than the practical.

18. concrete – the author relies heavily on specific facts and instances to flesh out his ideas.

Other examples of words to use in analyzing style are:

- a. ponderous – heavy and dull
- b. epigrammatic – containing wise sayings smartly expressed
- c. didactic – instructive (teaching)
- d. dogmatic – positive, assertive
- e. colloquial – using the vernacular (common speech)
- f. pompous – pretentious, affecting a false dignity
- g. gushing – without reserve, usually without reflection
- h. coy – a pretense of bashfulness

Try also to detect the mood. It may be:

- a. ironical – the use of words to convey the opposite of their literal meaning
- b. humorous – funny, laughable, comical
- c. gay – merry, cheerful, jolly
- d. solemn – deeply earnest, serious, grave
- e. wistful – pensive, wishful
- f. romantic – extravagantly ideal
- g. religious – conscientious devotion to topic
- h. serious – sober, earnest, sincere
- i. melancholy – thoughtfully sad
- j. sad – sorrowful, unhappy, dispirited
- k. whimsical – oddly funny
- l. reminiscent – things remembered
- m. sentimental – cloying or sickening
- n. pensive – musing, thoughtful
- o. reverent – showing respect
- p. sportive – mischievous
- q. reflective – thoughtful
- r. somber – gloomy
- s. sinister – boding evil
- t. nostalgic – longing for home or country, or for something that is absent

B. Paragraph Development

The development of paragraphs within a composition is dependent on the author's depiction of his topic. Paragraphs may be developed:

- a. sequentially – organized by steps or through time
- b. spatially – organized through distance or space
- c. logically – reasoning from one supposition to another
- d. systematically – according to a method

- e. haphazardly – to convey a sense of confusion

C. Sentence Structure

Clues to an author's style may rest in the structure of his sentences.

- a. short – giving a staccato effect for excitement or speed.
- b. long – characterizes formal styles, especially discussions of ideas, also common in fiction (i.e., descriptive passages).
- c. varied in length – figures of speech may be used in order to embellish ideas.
- d. loose – makes sense if brought to a close at one or more points before the end.
- e. periodic – makes complete sense only when one reaches the end (or period). This may add to suspense or variety.
- f. parallel – two or more parts of a sentence follow the same grammatical construction. Use for emphasis.
- g. balance, antithesis, inversion, repetition and subordinate construction adds emphasis to ideas discussed in passage.
- h. simple and compound sentences lend simplistic tone and style, subject is not meant to be portrayed in a complex manner.
- i. complex sentences may help to convey a conflict of ideas.
- j. logical connectives between sentences solidify the argument.
- k. rhetorical questions – used to make the reader supply additional material for the passage, and to motivate reader to consider implications of passage.

D. Sentence Rhythm

An author's style may be enhanced by the rhythm of his sentences. This rhythm can convey a sense of regularity or process and may be achieved through repetition, balance, parallelism, alliteration or punctuation.

E. Diction

Examine the words in the composition. They may be:

- a. monosyllabic – one syllable – this style may be used to effect simplicity or it may be used for the purposes of austerity.
- b. polysyllabic – two or more syllables – a more formal, serious style which may make use of any of the constructions mentioned previously.
- c. archaic – belonging to ancient times – in this case, the style is obviously meant to transport the reader into a different era.
- d. connotative – suggesting more than the plain meaning – a figurative style meant to be emotive or reflective.

Other words to consider when analyzing the style based on a study of the words in a passage are:

- a. rare words – the intent may be lofty, lighthearted, informative or comparative.
- b. technical and scientific words – serious writing with a referential intent.
- c. slang and colloquialisms – may be used for humour or for realism.
- d. abstractions – intended to make reader reflect or accept alternate ideas.
- e. dialect words – used to portray a definite group of people, to convey realistic flavour.
- f. allusions – formal writing; the author supposes readers can make comparative judgements.
- g. onomatopoeic words – to convey realism, a sense of presence, a re-enactment of the original.
- h. vivid verbs – convey a sense of action.
- i. alliteration – helps bind phrases and thus thoughts together, lends completeness to passage.
- j. vivid imagery – takes reader away from commonplace, suggests alternatives.

F. Punctuation

Often punctuation, or the lack of it, will help to define the author's style.

- a. exclamation points – an abundance of these may help to establish an excited tone, a farcical situation, or a satirical attitude.
- b. question marks – frequent use may mean the author wishes reader to reflect on what has been written or to supply further information which would illuminate the subject.
- c. commas – slows the movement of the sentences, emphasis is on thought rather than action.
- d. semi-colons – these may signal balanced or parallel constructions.
- e. little or no internal punctuation – may suggest compactness or completeness of ideas.

In conclusion, it is impossible to list either all the kinds of style or the words to describe them, or all the ways of tackling this enigmatic element of writing. However, when trying to analyze style, look for the unusual or unique features in the writing. Perhaps some overall suggestions on style would be appropriate to end with:

1. Effective style has a **fresh, pointed** quality.
2. Effective style shows the **commitment** of the writer.
3. Effective style has **individuality**.

4. A formal style signals that the author wants the reader to pay serious attention.
5. An informal style signals that the reader may expect to be amused or entertained.

Sources:

1. Hans P. Guth, *Words and Ideas*, Wadsworth Publishing Co., 1980.
2. Robert G. Perrin, *Writer's Guide and Index to English*, Scott, Foresman & Co., 1959.
3. Kane, Peters, Jackel, Legris, *Writing Prose*, Oxford University Press, 1981.