

A BATTLE WITHOUT SIDES: BALANCING THE STANDING CIRCLE OF STYLE

Jacob Rees
Brigham Young University

If people cannot write well, they cannot think well, and if they cannot think well, others will do their thinking for them.

—George Orwell

For you and me—right now—style is everywhere, thrust upon you in different mediums and modes. Style is about getting your point across in an effective way to your audience. It is about selling. Politicians sell their images, corporate executives sell their proposals, interviewees sell their résumés, advertising firms sell their products, and they do it all through a complicated combination of word choice, rhetoric, and sentence fluency taking into account audience, voice, and presentation. All of which are included in *style*.

According to Stendhal, “Style is this: to add to a given thought all the circumstances fitted to produce the whole effect which the thought is intended to produce.” Style is inextricably connected to effect, which is also intrinsically connected to meaning. When our writing lacks style it “falls flat”—losing effect and lessening meaning.

One View of the Circle

It’s no secret that style influences how an audience will react to a given text. How we say something, spoken or written, is inseparable from and just as important as *what* we say (Ronald 171). The importance of style is not on trial. The two-part question is: “How can you and I learn to write with style, and is it possible to *teach* our students to do the same?”

The second part of this question has taken on a special resonance with me, as in the months since I wrote my original draft of this article, I have entered the classroom as a student teacher, attempting to impart the lessons of style to my students. Being a prospective high school teacher, I am concerned not only with learning to “write with style,” but also with how other teachers like myself might help their students develop their own style.

A common approach to teaching style is to expose learners to the writing of others—Hemingway, Steinbeck, Faulkner, Dickinson, Dillard, Dostoevsky, Churchill. One thing is for certain, they each have their own style—individual, unique, unborrowed from any other source. However, if students undertake a serious study of style, their own personal voices could be muffled. After closely imitating the styles of other, well-established authors, students may lose whatever creative and individual style they would have come up with on their own. Who taught Emily Dickinson to use so many dashes? Who taught Faulkner to construct such ambiguously clear sentences? If we teach students to write in a style not their own, are we stifling them? Holding them back? This is part of the complexity of the question—not “Is style important?” but “Is it possible to teach individual style, and, if so, how?”

Consider the case of Carissa, a sixth grade student whose teacher is following the assignment and methodology developed by Larry Lewin, former elementary, middle, and high school teacher,

and current education consultant on writing strategies. The assignment advocated by Lewin was to “examine the author’s content and craft, to let that author know what they [the students] liked or didn’t like, and to offer suggestions for improvement” (Lewin 2). Here is Carissa’s response to a short story, “Sidd’s Excellent Adventure,” written as a letter to the story’s author:

Your story was all right. The main reason I didn’t like it was because I don’t like farces, the one thing I can visualize is the bright orange on the cat with a black light because I watch a show called “C.S.I.” and it does a lot of stuff like that. It was extremely easy to predict he was going to do something with the orange goo, but what he did with it was funny. The part I didn’t like with the orange goo was when he was going to kiss Inga because that doesn’t really appeal to this audience’s age. I didn’t really understand Why you put what Sidd’s tail looks like (paragraph 14, lines 6–7). Why did you worry about what your face looks like (paragraph 14, line 7) when you can’t see it when the black light is not on? How do cats have glasses? I thought the cat with the glasses was a bit too tacky.

On my first read, I thought this was a great essay for a sixth grader. But the more I read it, the more I heard Carissa’s teacher, instead of Carissa. Lewin covers sentence length in his curriculum, which is a good thing. Changing sentence length and sentence structure certainly adds style, effect, and meaning to whatever subject the writer is discussing. And Carissa heeds the teaching, starting her first sentence with a hard-hitting opinion of only five words, “Your story was all right.” Then, to vary her sentence length, she jumps from five words to forty-six. It doesn’t work, largely because the voice she adopts appears to be something other than her own. Her circle of style has “fallen flat,” losing effect and meaning. She uses words and phrases that don’t seem appropriate for her age: “farces,” “visualize,” “appeal to this audience’s age,” and “a bit too tacky.” When elementary students write, Bakhtin stated precisely, “The language in their written work, although somewhat clumsy, is lively, concrete, and emotional. Although this childish language may be awkward, it manages to reveal the writer’s individuality” (qtd. in Bazerman 337). Read Carissa’s letter again, and see if the individuality and personality of a sixth grader comes through. When I read it, I see bits and pieces of Carissa trying to come through, but mostly I see Carissa trying to do what Bakhtin ascribes to the older students as they “begin to write in a self-consciously literary and bookish style and begin to fear any original expression that does not resemble the clichés in their books [. . .] it is depersonalized, colorless, and lackluster.” One of the purposes of the assignment was to provide the students with a real purpose for their writing, and the communication with the author certainly fulfills this objective. However, in preparation, in teaching style, Lewin and, more directly, Carissa’s teacher, have stifled Carissa’s voice and told her to feel good about it by praising her depersonalized reply as an example for other students to follow. Though the purpose of the actual assignment, to provide a real context for writing, was a success, the side note stylistic instruction failed; because of the praise Carissa received, a stylistically regressive lesson was learned. It can be suffocating to try to teach kids style. It encourages them to follow, even guides them down, an increasingly constricting road they (teachers and students) never intended to travel when they picked up a pen or pencil. A road called conformity—leaving no room for invention, creativity, or the reason to write in the first place: to sound personal voice.

Prospective student teachers in a university methods class were handed a set of papers written by actual high school students.¹ The prospective student teachers were then asked to read the high school papers and write feedback for revision. The assignment was an activity in learning how to

handle the great paper load that English teachers face. One of the prospective student teachers *retyped* each of the high school students' entire papers, making the "necessary" changes to render them, as she said, "the way they ought to be written." When the professor tried to explain the obvious problems of this solution, with regard to handling the paper load as well as the assertion that writing can have only one correct answer, the prospective student teacher held her ground, stating, "But that is the only way they will learn to write correctly. It is the only way." The student was later cut from the teaching program, but her ideas in less extreme forms still breathe in education.

Julie, a high school senior taking AP literature, received all of her papers back with many of her sentences crossed out and replaced by her teacher. The only way for her to receive a good grade was to include the teacher's rewritten sentences in her papers. It didn't take long for Julie to adopt her teacher's style. By the end of the semester her A+ papers became the archetype of an identity theft for which Citibank offers no protection. The seventeen-year-old pen moves with vibrant creativity, but the forty-nine-year-old ink stains with worn experience.

Because style can be so elusive, so subtle, even a teacher with the best intentions can unknowingly stifle a young writer's emerging style. Both victim and perpetrator warmly, unknowingly participate in the identity theft malefaction.

Watching home videos and listening to my own voice mail message are both immediate reminders of what it was like the first time I heard my voice on tape. "Something's wrong with the tape player—that's not how I sound." Interestingly enough, on tape, *my* voice seems to be the only one that changes while everyone else's voice is accurately recorded and played back. Obviously the tape does not *change* our voices but reveals that how we naturally hear ourselves is not an accurate representation of how others hear us. Unfortunately, your own writing style can be similar. You might not be able to "hear" your own distinct voice in your writing—but it's there. Ben Yagoda interviewed over forty authors, trying to get them to explain away their style. Why did they use a semicolon instead of a period when both were equally correct? None of the authors interviewed was able to cogently explain every aspect of their own style (xxxii). These decisions can be made consciously for effect and purpose, but will also be made unconsciously because of who we are. To a certain extent, as with our voices, we are deaf to our own style (xxxi). This becomes problematic, as we've seen with Carissa, Julie, and other examples—teachers, "deaf" to their writing, innocently envelop their own style around young writers like a straitjacket, and when students finally stop struggling—they're praised.

Another View of the Same Circle

Despite the above examples, I argue that teaching the conventions of style does not have to be a straitjacket; it does not constrict or "stifle" our individual voice as the above apology insists. The problem with teaching style through imitation is that imitation leaves no room for originality. Instead, we should teach style by drawing our students' attention to the choices successful writers make. For example, when students are taught about punctuation, an integral part of balancing the circle of style, they can learn about distinct choices that writers make to reveal their own *personal* style (Paraskevas 46). It is in the "not knowing" that a writer's personality and creativity are restricted, causing the balanced circle to fall flat—restricting perspective and, subsequently, meaning. Knowing and understanding stylistic devices are tools writers can use to freely express themselves. Without the comprehension of how the stylistic tools work and their effects, students are limited in

expressing themselves. In revealing voice, good teachers understand that stylistic devices, as Johnson says, “are not merely fun, not just toys for writers” (37). Bakhtin further explains that grammatical form is a means of representing reality, especially when an author can choose between more than one grammatically correct form. In that case, the choice is determined not by grammar, but by the representative and expressive effectiveness of each form to convey the intended reality, or real meaning (Bazerman 334).

Consider for a moment the following: Two of your students walk into a restaurant and say, “We was in the neighborhood and thought to pick ourselves up a application.” Those students might pick up jobs in the back washing dishes, which could have been their intent. Some may question this example as a problem of grammar, not of style. Although the grammar may be considered incorrect in a number of milieus, it is not inherently wrong. Many authors, like Richard Wright, William Faulkner, and Cormac McCarthy, have found a successful place for different speech dialects as part of their writing styles. The point being that in an effort to balance the circle of style and view the subject from a particular perspective, stylistic choices are not right or wrong, rather *chosen* and used—appropriately—for a specific effect at a certain time and a certain place. Completely intentional. Grammar is a part of style, and stylistically there is a difference in speech between the high school hallway and the New York boardroom—neither correct, both effective.

You and I have an obligation to help students understand conventions, rhetoric, and every other aspect of style that will affect students’ social status (Noden 14). Grammar lessons on subject-verb agreement, direct objects, and article usage won’t help. It won’t mean anything to them. Grammar in isolation is water without a cup. As Patrick Hartwell said, “[O]ne learns to control the language of print by manipulating language in meaningful contexts, not by learning about language in isolation” (qtd. in Amare 165). Grammar taught in the context of writing as a stylistic, even rhetorical device has meaning and purpose that resonates with students. It is interesting because it has power in application. When we teach the effect of a stylistic device, students will understand how their writing and speech will be received.

As students see the effects that writing with style have on their own voice, they will start to notice the effect and intent behind voices other than their own—a necessity for being a good reader and for surviving life. If students understand what is happening stylistically, they can take note of what the author is doing contextually, using style to both reveal and conceal. But students won’t recognize either one if we don’t move beyond traditional grammar rules and into rhetorical stylistic meaning and effect.

Even so, students cannot fix what they cannot recognize. Last week, my high school seniors were quick to praise “the fierce atmosphere of a construction worker” that “seem[ed] unimaginable to the naked eye” as very “descriptive” and therefore “good” writing. With their minds whirling in praise of the above passage, asking them: “How can an eye, even a naked one, imagine?” was like jamming a crowbar in their spokes. The previously known world became a flash of undistinguishable images, the physical pain and visceral “What the ——!” reaction forced reflection: within seconds the new perspective brought clarity and understanding for both past and future encounters. Reading text for craft becomes a tool for writers to balance their circle of style and communicate with power, dropping the turgid mixture of weak reasoning, approximate diction, and loose phrasing in exchange for precise meaning and intentional effect.

Balancing the Circle

I don't profess to be a good writer. It's only thanks to my sophomore typing class and the mere fact that I'm literate that I am capable of what you have read so far. You might think that is a bit facetious. However, in learning to write, that is—at least in attitude—where many of my students will start. It is impossible to lead without being where they are and without going where they need to go. Therefore, sophomore typing is where I will start.

In answer to the question of whether or not style should be taught, there are no clear sides. No sharp edges distinguishing where one argument stops and another begins—like a circle. I will inexorably defend my view that Carissa's individuality was suffocated in a complicated yet restrictive five-paragraph form passed off as "style." I'm ready right now. I'll take the witness stand and vehemently testify that *not* teaching style is securing low expectations and even lower achievement for our children, inhibiting their potential and their voice. For me, there are no sides—only different angles. A better understanding comes through looking at something from as many different perspectives as possible. The same applies to our students. The more perspectives they can see, the clearer they will be able to create.

In the end, I come back to our definition of style, "to add to a given thought all the circumstances fitted to produce the whole effect which the thought is intended to produce." Anything else is just making things pretty. So what do we do? We teach punctuation, what it is capable of and what it generally signals to the reader. We teach many different types of genre and the conventions generally associated with them. We expose the students to writers who consciously break those conventions for effect. We dissect sentences and paragraphs, as if they were frogs, pointing out where everything is, what it does, and what would happen if we crossed that frog with a turtle or a spider. We do this in as many different ways as possible to broaden perspective and enhance learning. Then we do what the sagest of teachers do. No matter how long it takes. We let the students discover their style on *their own*. Writing style, like clothing style, comes from looking around at what options you have on the rack; some colors you can wear—some you can't. Some days it's a dress shirt, others—no shirt. It develops from everything we are exposed to, imitate, can afford to spend time on, whims, past experience, place, function, etc. Students need to understand genre, and the conventions that go with that genre, then grow up and change them how they want. Style can't be taught. Punctuation can be taught. In all its nuance and intricacy, it can be taught. Sentence structure, fluency, voice, genre conventions, audience; they can be taught. Style, S-T-Y-L-E, is discovered. Not created.

Notes

¹Names of students, teachers, and universities have been either withheld or changed to protect their identity.

Works Consulted

- Amare, Nicole. "Style: The New Grammar in Compositions Studies." *Refiguring Prose Style: Possibilities for Writing Pedagogy*. Ed. T. R. Johnson and Tom Pace. Logan: Utah State UP, 2005. 165.
- Bazerman, Charles. "An Essay on Pedagogy by Mikhail Bakhtin." *Written Communication* 22.3 (2005): 333–38.
- Corbett, Edward, and Robert Connors. *Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student*. 4th ed. New York: Oxford UP, 1965. 364.
- Farrin, Scott J. "When Their Voice Is Their Problem: Using Imitation to Teach the Classroom Dialect." *Refiguring Prose Style Possibilities for Writing Pedagogy*. Ed. T. R. Johnson and Tom Pace. Logan: Utah State UP, 2005. 149.

- Flannery, Kathryn. "Style Redux." *Refiguring Prose Style Possibilities for Writing Pedagogy*. Ed. T. R. Johnson and Tom Pace. Logan: Utah State UP, 2005. 67.
- Johnson, T. R. *A Rhetoric of Pleasure*. 1st ed. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 2003.
- Lewin, Larry. "Talking Back to Authors." *Educational Leadership* 62.2 (2004): 58–58. ERIC. 24 Oct. 2006 <<http://search.ebschost.com>>.
- Noden, Harry. "Image Grammar: Painting Images with Grammatical Structures." *Voices from the Middle* 8.3 (2001): 7–16.
- Paraskevas, Cornelia. "The Craft of Writing: Breaking Conventions." *English Journal* 93.4 (2004): 41–46.
- Ronald, Kate. "Style: The Hidden Agenda in Composition Classes; or, One Reader's Confession." *The Subject Is Writing: Essays by Teachers and Students*. 2nd. ed. Ed. Wendy Bishop. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 1999. 169–83.
- Weathers, Winston. "The Rhetoric of the Series." *College of Composition and Communication* 27(1966): 217–21.
- Yagoda, Ben. *The Sound of the Page: Style and Voice in Writing*. 1st ed. New York: HarperCollins, 2004.