

STYLE IN ACADEMIC WRITING

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There can be little doubt that a central goal of first-year composition is to teach academic writing; this commitment is visible in our professional literature and in the mission statements of countless first-year writing programs. We promise to help students make the transition to college writing and succeed in their other classes because that is the purpose for which first-year composition courses were created, and it's the reason our courses continue to be required in almost every American college and university.

But teachers who embrace this mission find that it sits awkwardly with our commitment to teaching style. First, we recognize that many academic genres allow limited room for stylistic play. Is style an important enough feature of academic writing to deserve a place in our overcrowded curriculum? Second, we know that style varies across the curriculum: the styles preferred by mathematicians may be quite different from those preferred by historians or social workers or chemists. If we integrate style instruction into a general education course designed for students who are headed toward dozens of different majors, which style do we teach? Even if we could know the whole range of academic styles, we could hardly teach all of them in fifteen weeks. Is there a generic, teachable “academic writing style”? Is it the plain style?

In the paragraphs that follow, I challenge two widespread assumptions about academic writing that have obscured our view of its style(s): the notion that academic writing is impersonal and formulaic (essentially style-free) and the notion that the only characteristics of academic style worth teaching are clarity and conciseness. I suggest that a central insight of *Writing Across the Curriculum*—that academic discourse practices vary—provides a guiding principle for style pedagogy: at the heart of the enterprise is analysis of stylistic variation, with attention to the rhetorical choice-making that accounts for it and with opportunities for imitation, experimentation, and play.

THE DICHOTOMY: WRITING WITH STYLE VS. WRITING FOR THE ACADEMY

Perhaps because it addresses an audience of students, Kate Ronald's 1995 essay, “Style: The Hidden Agenda in Composition Classes or One Reader's

Confession,” describes style’s uncertain place in composition instruction in particularly clear and accessible language with a focus on the practical consequences for students. Ronald explains that

different eras have emphasized different parts of composition. Plato and Aristotle were upset by what they saw as an enchantment with style; they worried that writers could dazzle audiences without caring much about telling them the truth. And so they focused on invention, on figuring out issues by thinking and writing. (Ronald, 1999, p. 170)

In the 1980s and 1990s, she says, composition teachers informed by the writing process movement similarly focused on content rather than form and thus on invention rather than arrangement or style.

But there’s a problem:

Your teacher, and I, and all the others who were part of this latest revolution in rhetoric, haven’t been exactly honest with you about the matter of style. We say we aren’t overly interested in style . . . but we are still influenced by your writing style more than we admit, or perhaps know. . . . I’m still rewarding and punishing my students for their writing styles. And here’s the worst part of my confession: I’m not sure that I’m teaching them style. (Ronald, 1999, pp. 170-71)

When teachers don’t address style in their classes, students are judged by a standard that’s hidden from view, and they are expected to demonstrate stylistic skills that they are never taught. One student will write vivid, lively sentences and another won’t; the first student’s success and the second’s relative failure will be reflected in their grades, but the matter of how one *achieves* an effective style will remain mysterious.

If Ronald is correct—and I believe she is—then composition teachers have, in our neglect of style, done our students a disservice. But for all her honesty and wisdom, Ronald takes her argument down an unfortunate path. She accepts the dichotomy that has plagued our thinking about style pedagogy for too long, suggesting that writing with an effective style is one thing, writing for the academy quite another.

Ronald defines style in terms of the presence of the author; the writing she admires is “writing where somebody’s home.” She speculates that students sometimes write as if “nobody’s home” because they’re playing it safe, writing

to avoid mistakes or distancing themselves from their prose in order to protect themselves from criticism, and sometimes they write dry, lifeless prose because they think they have to in order to sound “collegiate.” And, she implies, collegiate writing does indeed require that the writer leave home. While English teachers may like writing with style—“we have a real bent for the literary element, the metaphor, the clever turn of phrase, the rhythm of prose that comes close to the rhythm of poetry” (Ronald, 1999, p. 174)—teachers in other disciplines are likely to prefer author-evacuated prose:

Many professors believe that you should be learning to write one certain kind of style in college, one that’s objective, impersonal, formal, explicit, and organized around assertions, claims, and reasons that illustrate or defend those claims. You know this kind of writing. You produce it in response to questions like “Discuss the causes of the Civil War,” or “Do you think that ‘nature’ or ‘nurture’ plays the most important role in a child’s development?” (Ronald, 1999, p. 175)

The example that follows is stiff and verbose, easily recognizable to any composition teacher as the work of a young writer trying on an overly formal, alien “academic” voice. Observing that the passage has “no authentic voice,” Ronald observes, “I don’t like this kind of writing very much myself. . . . I prefer discourse that ‘renders experience,’ as Peter Elbow (1991) puts it, rather than discourse that tries to explain it” (Ronald, 1999, p. 175).

The assumptions behind this analysis warrant scrutiny because they are so very widespread in our profession. Like many others who have written about academic discourse, Ronald writes as if the qualities we see in the most unappealing academic writing—awkwardness, wordiness, excessive formality, impersonality, a naïve aspiration to objectivity—were what defines academic writing. If the writing performs an academic function, such as explaining experience, the writer must be away from home; the writing will be stale, and while reasonable people may write such stuff because they have to (on an exam, for example, or in a publication required for tenure) and other people may read it because they have to, they can hardly expect to like it. Only if the writing performs a different function, “rendering experience” as literary works do, can a text convey the writer’s voice and give pleasure. The academy harbors a few people who write, appreciate, and reward clever, well-crafted prose—Ronald suggests that all English teachers fall into this category while others limit the group to “creative” writers—but for the most part, the academy insists on thesis-driven essays written in plain, utilitarian prose by uncreative writers. You

can have academic writing or you can have style, but you can't have both. You can teach academic writing or you can teach style, but you can't teach both.

This dichotomy is easy to see in “Style: The Hidden Agenda in Composition Classes” because Ronald, writing for an audience unfamiliar with debates in composition pedagogy, necessarily simplifies the issues. Others who criticize academic writing acknowledge that academic styles vary widely (in “Reflections on Academic Discourse,” Peter Elbow is particularly specific and persuasive on this point; see pages 138-140). Nevertheless, the essential terms of the dichotomy inform most of our thinking about style in composition studies, so that teachers feel compelled to choose between teaching academic discourse and teaching the delights of style. The choice is imposed on us not only because we have so little time that we have to make difficult choices about where style might fit but because style has so little relevance to academic writing as it is usually conceived.

THE PLAIN STYLE

With her reference to Plato and Aristotle, Ronald points to ancient articulations of the tension between style and substance, between language that “dazzles” and language designed primarily to express truth. In seventeenth century England, Thomas Sprat addressed the same tension, writing a forceful condemnation of eloquence. In *The History of the Royal Society*, Sprat urges a spare, unadorned style as necessary to scientific inquiry. Volubility, *copia*, eloquence—these are the enemies of the plain style, and Sprat reports that in the interest of science, members of the Royal Society sought to avoid them:

They have therefore been most rigorous in putting in execution, the only Remedy, that can be found for this extravagance: and that has been, a constant Resolution, to reject all the amplifications, digressions, and swellings of style: to return back to the primitive purity, and shortness, when men deliver'd so many things, almost in an equal number of words. They have exacted from all their members, a close, naked, natural way of speaking; positive expressions; clear senses; a native easiness: bringing all things as near the Mathematical plainness, as they can: and preferring the language of Artizans, Countrymen, and Merchants, before that, of Wits, or Scholars. (Tillotson, Fussell, & Waingrow, 1969, p. 27)

The ideal of matching the number of *things* to the number of *words* is telling, for the theory of language underlying the plain style is a correspondence theory. The goal of writing is to reflect external reality. The best writing is transparent, permitting a clear view of the phenomenon being described or analyzed without excess, without distortion, without distraction.

The influence of the plain style on writing pedagogy can hardly be overstated. Among Sprat's descendents are the authors of the two most widely adopted books on style, Strunk and White's *The Elements of Style* and Joseph M. Williams's *Style: Ten Lessons in Clarity and Grace*.

As many readers have observed, *The Elements of Style* is as idiosyncratic and inconsistent as it is charming. In the final chapter, "An Approach to Style," White seems to be having a wonderful time fooling around with language, creating a string of aphorisms and extended metaphors even as he recommends "turning resolutely away from all devices that are popularly believed to indicate style—all mannerisms, tricks, adornments. The approach to style is by way of plainness, simplicity, orderliness, sincerity" (1959, p. 55).

His own indulgences notwithstanding, White cautions against calling attention to oneself or one's craft: *Place yourself in the background; write in a way that comes naturally; do not overwrite; do not overstate; avoid fancy words; avoid foreign languages; use figures of speech sparingly; prefer the standard to the offbeat*. Throughout the book, Strunk and White highlight the importance of clarity and conciseness. Among the "Elementary Principles of Composition" is the admonition to *omit needless words*:

A sentence should contain no unnecessary words, a paragraph no unnecessary sentences, for the same reason that a drawing should have no unnecessary lines and a machine no unnecessary parts. This requires not that the writer make all his sentences short, or that he avoid all detail and treat his subjects only in outline, but that every word tell. (1959, p. 17)

To illustrate Strunk's most famous injunction—*use definite, specific, concrete language*—White turns to that other well-known advocate of the plain style, George Orwell, quoting his translation of Ecclesiastes ("I returned, and saw under the sun, that the race is not to the swift . . .") into gobbledegook ("Objective consideration of contemporary phenomena compels the conclusion that success or failure in competitive activities exhibits no tendency to be commensurate with innate capacity . . .") (1959, p. 17).

In *Style: Ten Lessons in Clarity and Grace*, Joseph Williams offers dozens of similar translations, and his exercises invite students to transform wordy, awkward, or indirect sentences into lean, clear prose. The stylistic virtue that he stresses from beginning to end is clarity; his specific suggestions—to use the subject and verb positions to identify actors and actions, to avoid nominalization, to prune out redundancy—are offered to this end. And like Orwell, he weighs the ethical and political consequences of clarity on the one hand, obfuscation on the other. We have an ethical duty, Williams argues, to write prose as clear as the prose we wish to read. And we have a right to insist on clarity from people in positions of power: “We must simply insist that, in principle, those who manage our affairs have a duty to tell us the truth as clearly as they can. They probably won’t, but that just shifts the burden to us to call them on it” (2005, p. 186). To Orwell and to Williams, clarity matters because the workings of democracy depend upon clear thinking and honest communication.

The plain style seems perfectly congruent with the goals of scientific discourse. The knowledge-making mission of the academy would seem to be well served by the effort to describe, explain, analyze, and evaluate the world with as much clarity as we can muster. For this practical reason, as well as the ethical and political reasons suggested by Orwell and Williams, the plain style endures. To the extent that style has any presence in composition theory and pedagogy, it consists mostly of lessons encouraging clarity and conciseness.

This approach to style pedagogy is problematic, however, for at least two reasons. First, there’s the epistemological problem. While some scholars may proceed from a positivist view of language, seeking words that map onto a pre-existing, describable reality, others question such a project. In *Style: An Anti-Textbook*, Richard Lanham raises this point as an objection to privileging clarity above all. Characterizing style textbooks and handbooks together as “The Books,” he identifies a “fundamental error”:

In Western philosophy’s long-standing quarrel between idealism and realism, The Books remain realists. Reality is “out there” and words must remain loyal to it.

A complete theory of prose style need not settle this endless dispute [between idealism and realism]. But it should chart the whole dispute. It should account for a prose loyal to a preexistent reality and it should account for a prose loyal to words themselves as a final reference point. . . . The Books omit half the process. . . . They thus ground themselves on

both a false theory of knowledge and a false theory of perception. They assume both a neutral observer whom psychology has long ago disproved and a neutral language that even science has now discarded. (1974, p. 39)

In the forty years since Lanham wrote those words, the “realist” view has continued to lose ground in the academy.

The second problem with reducing style pedagogy to instruction in the plain style is an aesthetic one. It’s easy enough to grant that clarity and conciseness are generally desirable qualities in writing. When I read Orwell, Strunk and White, or Williams, I nod in agreement; when these writers offer “before” and “after” examples of revision, with a profusion of nominalizations or a string of prepositional phrases in the first sentence and taut, lean syntax in the second, I always prefer the sentence as revised. And yet. While clarity and conciseness may be necessary to an effective style, surely they are not sufficient.

Pedagogy that privileges the plain style cannot teach style as Kate Ronald has defined it for us. To Ronald, writing has an effective style if it is infused with the personality of the writer, making use of those literary devices English teachers love (“the metaphor, the clever turn of phrase, the rhythm of prose that comes close to the rhythm of poetry”) (1999, p. 174). To write with style is to arrange words artfully, striving for euphony, wit, eloquence. Twentieth-century advocates of the plain style may not reject artful language with the vehemence of Thomas Sprat, but they don’t encourage it, and they don’t offer much help to the young writer who hopes to achieve it.

What this discussion has, I hope, demonstrated is that conceptions of “academic writing” and “style” that prevail in composition studies make it difficult for us to see where style fits into a course in academic discourse. The academic/creative dichotomy creates one kind of difficulty: when we accept the view of academic writing as inevitably dry, stiff, and impersonal, academic writing and style must live in different homes, presumably the dutiful, dogged first-year writing program and the happily sybaritic creative writing program. Privileging the plain style creates another difficulty: while the plain style seems generally well suited to the purposes of academic writing, the goals of clarity and conciseness constitute a disappointingly anemic conception of style.

VARIATION IN ACADEMIC WRITING

Let us return to the rather obvious observation that academic writing is not all the same. It varies, in structure and in style, in many respects: the shape

taken by a text, or by particular paragraphs and sentences within a text, will depend upon factors associated with the writer—his or her personality, mood, knowledge, experience, professional status, ethnicity, gender, proficiency with language, and so on—and other factors associated with the context—the practices of the discipline, the conventions of the genre, with these in turn shaped by the culture in which the discipline is situated and the history in which generic conventions have evolved.

Given the breadth of this variation, and given the complex personal, social, and political dynamics that account for it, what sort of instruction in style might be useful to a writer at the point of entry into the academic discourse community?

This question is nested in two larger issues that composition theorists have wrestled with at least since the early 1980s. First is the issue of what it means to become part of a discourse community. Ever since Patricia Bizzell's 1982 article introducing the term, composition teachers have taken seriously the responsibility to initiate students into the academic discourse community. The issue that never really goes away, and that seems particularly pressing when we think about style, is that "initiation" slides so easily into "assimilation": we worry that as students learn to sound like members of academic discourse communities, they will sound less like members of other communities they care about, less like themselves.

Second is the issue of transfer. To a surprising degree, knowledge seems to be context-bound; people who learn a skill in one setting do not easily operationalize it in other settings, and the more pronounced the differences between the two settings, the less likely that transfer will occur (Ellis, 1965; Perkins & Salomon, 1992; Smagorinsky & Smith, 1992). Some years back, an "abolitionist" argument gained some traction among composition scholars with the claim that since discourse practices vary within the academy, since academic writing is not one thing, first-year composition courses cannot teach a universally applicable set of "general writing skills" and therefore have no function (Petraglia, 1995). If this argument is extended to style instruction, it leads to the conclusion that since style varies within the academy, it is fruitless to try to teach academic style.

The abolitionist argument has largely disappeared from view, to be replaced by a commonsense approach informed by Writing Across the Curriculum theory. We aim to teach not only those skills that seem broadly useful in the academy but also rhetorical awareness, alerting students to the fact of discourse variation and teaching them to analyze the rhetorical demands of new disciplines and other new contexts. Specifically, we aim to teach a critical rhetorical awareness, inviting students not only to try their hands at

academic writing but, at the same time, to stand at a distance from it, to see how it compares to other kinds of writing, to think about why it has the characteristics it has, what values it reflects and perpetuates, whose power it reflects and perpetuates, and where, in light of that analysis, they choose to stand in relation to academic discourse.

DIRECTIONS FOR STYLE PEDAGOGY

What, then, does a first-year writer need to know about style? What might he or she expect to gain from style pedagogy in a composition course focused on academic writing? Guided *analysis* of style in academic texts can help students recognize the stylistic preferences of successful writers; appreciate variation across writers, disciplines, and occasions; and understand the factors that account for variation. Guided *practice*—deploying specific syntactic/stylistic options to achieve desired rhetorical effects—can help novice writers take the step from appreciating to producing effective style in academic texts. The three passages below are examples of academic texts that could function as objects of analysis and resources for practice with style.

The passages represent different genres and disciplines—*Programming in Prolog* is a textbook in computer science, *The Freedom of the Streets* a monograph in history, “On Beauty and Being Just” a lecture in philosophy—but each is the product of an academic writer doing academic work.

It is a dark and stormy night. As you drive down a lonely country road, your car breaks down, and you stop in front of a splendid palace. You go to the door, find it open, and begin looking for a telephone. How do you search the palace without getting lost, and know that you have searched every room? Also, what is the shortest path to the telephone? It is just for such emergencies that maze-searching methods have been devised.

In many computer programs, such as those for searching mazes, it is useful to keep lists of information, and search the list if some information is needed at a later time. For example, if we decide to search the palace for a telephone, we might need to keep a list of the room numbers visited so far, so we don't go round in circles visiting the same rooms over and over again. What we do is to write down the room

numbers visited on a piece of paper. Before entering a room, we check to see if its number is on our piece of paper. If it is, we ignore the room, since we must have been to it previously. If the room number is not on the paper, we write down the number, and enter the room. And so on until we find the telephone. There are some refinements to be made to this method, and we will do so later when we discuss graph searching. But first, let's write down the steps in order, so we know what problems there are to solve. (Clocksin & Mellish, 1984, p. 142)

In 1888, twelve-year-old Ollie Kreps lived with her parents in a house on East Second Street in Davenport She was the oldest child in a crowded, poverty-stricken home. Her parents, married thirteen years, had nine children. Ollie and her father were the family's sole wage earners. Albert Kreps worked as a laborer at the Davenport Lumber Company. His work, though poorly paid, was probably steady in the warm months, when river men floated huge rafts of logs down the Mississippi from the timberlands of Wisconsin for processing at riverside lumber mills. But in the winter months, when the central events of this story took place, the river froze and traffic dwindled to a standstill. Lumber milling and virtually all other work depending on the river came to a halt, and Albert Kreps joined hundreds of other seasonally unemployed men in Davenport, waiting for the spring thaw, when the river opened, the mills turned, and plowing and planting began again. (Wood, 2005, p. 111)

Beauty brings copies of itself into being. It makes us draw it, take photographs of it, or describe it to other people. Sometimes it gives rise to exact replication and other times to resemblances and still other times to things whose connection to the original site of inspiration is unrecognizable. A beautiful face drawn by Verrocchio suddenly glides into the perceptual field of a young boy named Leonardo. The boy copies the face, then copies the face again. Then again and again and again. He does the same thing when a beautiful living plant—a violet, a wild rose—glides into his field of vision, or a living face: he makes a first copy, a second copy, a

third, a fourth, a fifth. He draws it over and over, just as Walter Pater (who tells us all this about Leonardo) replicates—now in sentences—Leonardo’s acts, so that the essay reenacts its subject, becoming a sequence of faces: an angel, a Medusa, a woman and child, a Madonna, John the Baptist, St. Anne, La Gioconda. Before long the means are found to replicate, thousands of times over, both the sentences and the faces, so that traces of Pater’s paragraphs and Leonardo’s drawings inhabit all the pockets of the world (as pieces of them float in the paragraph now before you). (Scarry, 1998, p. 3)

The three passages serve as counterexamples to the idea that academic writing is dry, dull, objective, passionless, or merely utilitarian. These writers have made stylistic choices in the interest of giving pleasure, and for me as a reader, they succeed. Each passage is quite different, stylistically, from the others. Of the three, Scarry’s lecture strikes me as being most self-consciously styled: the language itself commands our attention as images “glide” into an observer’s field of vision, as traces of an image “float” in a paragraph, as the writer shatters the fourth wall in the final clause. The paragraph is typical of Scarry’s long lecture; it is a virtuoso performance, both as an instance of philosophical reasoning and as cleverly crafted prose. In the other passages, the language does not call attention to itself. Nevertheless, all three texts demonstrate stylistic choices that would be fruitful to discuss in a course on academic writing.

SAMPLE STYLISTIC ANALYSIS: CHOOSING SUBJECTS

Consider, first, the human presence in each of the passages. None of these writers uses “I”; none seeks to render the writer’s own experience. Nevertheless, the passages are decidedly populated, a point students could discover by analyzing the focus, or choice of subjects, in the clauses.

The Clocksin and Mellish passage is the easiest to analyze. In the first paragraph, there are ten subject-verb pairs; in five of them, the subject is “you.” Student writers are sometimes advised to avoid the second person in academic writing, so it’s worth asking why Clocksin and Mellish use it. What does the use of “you” accomplish? What tone does it set? (Other questions naturally follow: What else do these writers do to set an informal tone? Why would they want such a tone in a textbook? Would they be likely to make similar choices in other academic contexts?) In the second paragraph, there are twenty subject-verb pairs; in twelve, the subject is “we.” To whom does “we” refer? Presumably to the reader and writer. In the first few sentences, the search for the

telephone continues, so Clocksin and Mellish could easily have continued to use the second person. But with “we,” they insert themselves into the paragraph, and so “we” search for the telephone together and, in the final sentences, “we” write down our steps in order so that “we” can see what problems there are to solve and what refinements might be made when “we” discuss graph searching. Having walked through the castle with me, Clocksin and Mellish are by my side as I learn to write code for maze-searching programs. When I return to my day job as a writing teacher, I might ask students to comment on the effect of the pronoun choice on the chapter’s tone or on the appropriateness of the stylistic choice to its rhetorical context.

Like the Clocksin and Mellish passage, Sharon Wood’s paragraph introducing Ollie Kreps’s family illustrates the general preference of published writers for human subjects. Writing students picking out the subject-verb pairs would find that seven clauses have human subjects: *Ollie Kreps, she, parents, Ollie and her father, Albert Kreps, river men, Albert Kreps*. The non-human subjects are concentrated in the last two sentences: *events, river, traffic, milling, work, river, mills, plowing and planting*. The list of subjects captures the movement of the paragraph, from Ollie to the social group that shaped her (her family), from her father to the social group of which he was a part (river men), from river men to the forces that governed their economic circumstances (the river traffic, milling, work, plowing and planting). Because Wood is a colleague of mine, I was able to ask her, in a discourse-based interview, about the reasons for her stylistic choices. She explained that, as a labor historian, it is important to her that Albert Kreps’s unemployment and Ollie Kreps’s prostitution be understood not only as the plight of individuals but as social phenomena. In crafting sentences, she responds quite intentionally to concerns about both content and style. In this passage, she chose concrete subjects and active verbs in the interest of keeping the prose clear and direct; human subjects in the interest of telling an engaging story; and subjects naming natural or economic forces in the interest of accurately representing the historical context in which her “characters” lived.

The stylistic principle of preferring concrete, preferably human, subjects is one that I like to teach: I want my students to know that using human subjects can help them achieve clarity in their sentences and cohesion within their paragraphs. But because academic writing often focuses on natural phenomena or abstract concepts, academic writers do not always have a cast of characters available to serve as subjects. The Scarry passage is an interesting example because not only is the writer discussing an abstract concept, but her purpose is to attribute agency to this abstraction. Not surprisingly, the passage has more non-human than human subjects, with beauty itself serving as a subject in the opening sentences: “*Beauty* brings copies of itself into being. *It* makes us draw

it, take photographs of it ... Sometimes *it* gives rise to exact replication ...” In the fourth sentence, people begin to appear on stage as a face “glides into the perceptual field of a young boy named Leonardo.” Words referring to Leonardo (*boy, he*) become subjects in the next clauses, though Scarry still manages to present the artist as being acted upon: as images come before him, he reproduces them, over and over, repeatedly, almost robotically. Finally, it is a description of Leonardo’s practice that assumes agency—clause subjects include Walter Pater’s *essay, traces* of his paragraph, *pieces* of his text—as beauty replicates itself in the work of Leonardo, then Pater, then Scarry. This passage cannot illustrate a simple lesson like “prefer human subjects.” But it surely demonstrates the importance of the subject position in establishing agency. The presence of Leonardo and Pater (and, perhaps, the entrance of an angel, a Medusa, a woman and child, etc.) may reflect an accomplished stylist’s impulse to populate her prose.

SAMPLE STYLISTIC ANALYSIS: SENTENCE VARIETY

When advised to keep their sentence subjects consistent, students often worry that the sentences will sound too much the same, that the style will be boring. The three passages above, or others like them, could be used in lessons on sentence variety. Taken together, the texts have 33 sentences containing 643 words. The average sentence length is 19.5 words, a bit shorter than the norm for academic writing. But the range of sentence lengths is strikingly wide, and the sentence structure varies in other ways as well.

Of the three texts, the Clocksin and Mellish passage has the least variety in sentence length: the average length is 17.6 words, and nine of the fifteen sentences fall close to the mean. This passage also has the most consistency in its sentence subjects, relying heavily on “you” in the first paragraph and “we” in the second. But I think it’s a rare reader who would find the passage choppy or dull. The sentences vary in type—in addition to declarative sentences, there are two questions and an imperative—and the writers have varied their sentence openers. In the second paragraph, for example, although “we” is used as a subject of eleven clauses, it never begins a sentence. Instead, the writers begin sentences with transitional expressions, free modifiers, and subordinate clauses: *For example, if we decide ... What we do is to write down ... Before entering a room, we check to see ... If it is, we ignore the room ... If the room number is not on the paper, we write down ... And so on until we find the telephone.*

In the Wood and Scarry texts, the sentences vary more dramatically in length. These sentences are, overall, longer than Clocksin and Mellish’s, with means of 19.8 words in the Wood passage and 22.0 words in the Scarry passage. But

the ranges are wide (Wood's sentences range from eight to 45 words, Scarry's from six to 52 words) and in each passage, only two sentences fall near the mean. In other words, both writers create a mix of short, medium-sized, and long sentences. While all the sentences are declarative (excepting one fragment in the Scarry piece), their structure is varied: some are developed by means of pairs or series, others with subordinate clauses, others with free modifiers. In a composition class, these passages would work well to introduce medial modifiers, phrases that interrupt the sentences to provide detail or, in some cases, drama. Novice writers don't often use medial modifiers, but when they give them a try, they find them easy and natural. So students would benefit from noting, and imitating, sentences like these:

Her parents, married thirteen years, had nine children.

His work, though poorly paid, was probably steady in the warm months ...

He does the same thing when a beautiful living plant—a violet, a wild rose—glides into his field of vision ...

Analysis of sentence variety in effective academic writing can give students motivation and specific strategies for developing their own sentences.

SAMPLE STYLISTIC ANALYSIS: FIGURES OF SPEECH

A time-honored approach to teaching style is to identify figures of speech. The Clocksin and Mellish passage is an extended metaphor, using the story of hunting through a castle in search of a telephone to explain the logic of maze-searching. The story is entertaining, but Thomas Sprat's worries can be laid to rest: the pleasure does not distract us from the point or short-circuit our ability to comprehend. On the contrary, the strategy of explaining a new concept by analogy to a familiar one is common in academic writing because it aids comprehension; in this case, the metaphor is so essential to the explanation that it is difficult to imagine how maze-searching could be explained without it.

The three passages offer a wealth of resources for teaching schemes of balance, particularly parallelism. Again, Clocksin and Mellish's use of parallelism contributes to the clarity of their explanation:

Before entering a room, we check to see if its number is on

our piece of paper. If it is, we ignore the room, since we must have been to it previously. If the room number is not on the paper, we write down the number, and enter the room.

The two sentences beginning with “if” describe alternative scenarios in grammatically similar constructions: If X, we ignore the room; if—X, we enter the room. It is important that the sentences be grammatically similar so that readers immediately recognize the two options as a pair, just as they would recognize two arrows on a flowchart.

Lessons in parallel structure, simply showing that items in a list should have the same grammatical structure, begin with series like these:

You go to the door, find it locked, and begin looking for a telephone.

It makes us draw it, take photographs of it, or describe it to other people.

More complex series illustrate how effectively a parallel list can draw a picture, establish a rhythm, create a mood:

Lumber milling and virtually all other work depending on the river came to a halt, and Albert Kreps joined hundreds of other seasonally unemployed men in Davenport, waiting for the spring thaw, when the river opened, the mills turned, and plowing and planting began again.

Student writers can hear the beauty of a sentence like that one. They appreciate the sense of motion, of water flowing and wheels turning in response to the thaw, and they understand how the alliterative phrase “plowing and planting” calls to mind ancient, earth-bound cycles in which the men of Davenport participate.

Elaine Scarry relies heavily on parallelism and repetition, as well she might in a paragraph about replication. Almost every sentence contains an echo, whether she is setting out an array of possibilities in matched phrases (“sometimes it gives rise to exact replication and other times to resemblances and still other times to things whose connection to the original site of inspiration is unrecognizable”) or repeating exactly the same words (“The boy copies the face, then copies the face again. Then again and again and again.”) In her final sentence, Scarry, like Wood,

plays with the sound of the words. Read the sentence aloud, listening for the echo of *faces* in *traces* and *pieces*, or for repeated use of words beginning with *p*:

Before long the means are found to replicate, thousands of times over, both the sentences and the faces, so that traces of Pater's paragraphs and Leonardo's drawings inhabit all the pockets of the world (as pieces of them float in the paragraph now before you).

If Elaine Scarry can have this much fun with her academic writing, then so can the rest of us. More to the point, so can our students.

FROM ANALYSIS TO PRACTICE

I come, in the end, to the recommendation that we teach style by relying on familiar methods: analyzing the work of excellent stylists; introducing principles like sentence focus, sentence variety, and balance; designing exercises that prompt students to imitate the stylistic moves they admire; encouraging students to experiment with style in their own writing. I believe this work can and should be done in the context of courses focused on academic writing. There is no shortage of exemplary academic writing; if you pause for a few minutes, you'll think of academic texts that you would like to bring into the classroom, and if you spend an afternoon browsing through your bookshelves, you'll find dozens more.

Such texts deserve analysis not only in our classrooms but in our scholarship. Are the stylistic features observed in the three sample passages above characteristic of their disciplines? My impression is that computer scientists are often playful in their writing and that historians are typically good storytellers, but I suspect Scarry's writing is unusually lyrical for a philosopher. I wish I could give you more than impressions and suspicions; I wish I had studies to cite or findings to report. Stylistic variation in academic writing is a research area begging for further exploration. Close attention to style would be a useful extension of current scholarship in writing in the disciplines; ideally, the work would be performed with sophisticated analytical tools such as those afforded by systemic functional linguistics (see Lancaster, this volume). Students who are invited into the investigation will find a window into the values and mores of the academy.

Reflecting on the place of style in composition classes, we do not have to conceive of style and academic writing as competing topics vying for our limited time. Academic writing is writing. Its style is sometimes ugly, sometimes lovely,

sometimes almost invisible—but if the writer is making choices about how to arrange words in sentences, the prose has style. It must be acknowledged that different kinds of discourse permit different degrees of stylistic experimentation and play. A dissertation has less room for eloquence than a poem or a memoir. But doesn't a dissertation have *some* room for stylistic play? Couldn't it have more? If we look for style in academic writing, we may find more pleasure and beauty than we expected, or we may find that we—or the next generation of writers, taught to appreciate and experiment with prose style—can create more room by pushing at the edges of academic genres. Whether they are “rendering” experience or “explaining” it, they should know that they can strive simultaneously for clarity and elegance, for truth and beauty.

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