

# INTRODUCTION TO THE CENTRALITY OF STYLE

**Mike Duncan and Star Medzerian Vanguri**

University of Houston-Downtown and Nova Southeastern  
University

In the classical era, Aristotle's *Rhetoric* places style in Book III, almost as an addendum, despite the *Rhetoric's* recognition of the centrality and power of metaphor to the persuasive enterprise. Cicero realized the inexorable link between form and content, particularly in his *Orator* to Brutus, but in the later Roman empire, his idea of style was simplified into imperial ornamentation, having had already settled into one of the five rhetorical canons. Style remained an auxiliary to rhetoric and persuasion for over a millennium, save occasional questionable revivals, such as the Ciceronian movement in the Renaissance that stressed only using the Latin words present in Cicero's work to achieve an imitative mastery of his style, and the later Ramist reduction of style to tropes and figures only.

In the last hundred years, however, the nuances of *lexis* have enjoyed a different sort of theoretical attention. In particular, studies on sentence structure, paragraph structure, diction, rhythm, tone, genre, visual rhetoric, and document design have grown exponentially in the last fifty years, paralleling the increased specialization of the academy and theoretical study of instruction in rhetoric and composition. These studies, in total, have greatly expanded our understanding of how language works rhetorically and demonstrated the value of attention to stylistic matters.

Style now stands at an interesting crossroads. Considerable work has been done recently to establish style's significance within composition, with the recent authoritative 2010 Bedford St. Martin's collection *Style in Rhetoric in Composition*, edited by Paul Butler, placing it in a long theoretical tradition that offers a stylistic way of understanding compositional pedagogy, parallel and complimentary to other histories. It is only on this formidable bulwark that this collection can stand.

As such, the editors of this volume feel that it is no longer necessary to argue for style. That has been done, and done convincingly and well, by T. R. Johnson, Richard Lanham, Butler, Joseph Williams, and many others. The question, then, is what to do next, now that a growing number of composition scholars and teachers recognize style's relevance and usefulness to composition.

The answer to that question is presented in this collection: to imagine style as central to the act of composition and to the discipline of composition studies and consider what that might involve when enacted.

To explain that claim a bit further, we should reveal its origination. The germinal idea for this collection began shortly after a large workshop on style on the first day of the March 2010 Conference on College Composition and Communication in Louisville, KY. Many of the participants—some of which are represented in this volume—spoke of a need to keep building attention to style in composition studies, and further opined that style was so central to composition that the terms were almost synonymous. It seemed odd to us, the editors of this volume, to be content with style as a specialty subject within the conference if we truly held that style was central to composition studies. As such, we felt that it would be prudent to build a book-length collection that represented this viewpoint far better than one or two authors could.

This collection is the result of that observation and theoretical commitment. Its title reflects a belief by its editors and authors that style is what makes composition an art, that style is composition enacted, and that style is an ideal means by which teachers and theorists of composition can explain what occurs in writing. Furthermore, as Paul Butler has noted, style “offers a way for composition to embrace the cacophony of differences that defines our field” (2010, p. 2).

Style is epistemic, both creating and reflecting knowledge, and as such, style allows us to access the ideology and cultural values of a text. In “Prolegomena to the Analysis of Prose Style,” Richard Ohmann presents the notion of style as epistemic choice, wherein he asks us to increase our understanding of our students, whose worldviews are embedded in their prose, as a means of better understanding their written word. Furthermore, as Min-Zhan Lu has acknowledged, style helps us to appreciate difference. Because style is a reflection of a writer, and thus the writer’s life experiences and background, it moves us from the conception of non-standard English as error to an appreciation of stylistic difference.

Style also stretches across disciplinary boundaries. Because style has homes in literature, linguistics, rhetoric, technical communication, and other fields, teachers and scholars in composition have multiple traditions from which to draw, reinforcing composition’s existing propensity to reference other fields. Style also allows for more productive cross-disciplinary efforts, because style is a term that is already familiar, if not ubiquitous, in these other realms. As such, style can act as a language that guides our discipline by defining our mutual priorities and differences. Even if we do not subscribe to the same theoretical approach to composition, style allows us to talk about what we value and to

name those differences. Style also enables us to extend those conversations outside the discipline. We can more easily to share our work with the public when we employ its commonly stylistic definition of composition.

Most particularly, in the classroom, stylistic terminology allows us to discuss writing with our students in detail. We can move beyond impressionistic language that is rooted in value judgments and toward specific language that names those features of writing we value. Perhaps most importantly, the language of style allows students to talk to each other about their writing in meaningful and productive ways. In other words, style keeps composition classes focused on student writing and keeps learning reflexive. In classrooms where style is treated as central to composition, student writing can be the content students study to learn how to write effectively. When students work off an established and shared stylistic vocabulary and deliberately employ stylistic devices, the class can treat these features as intentional. Furthermore, once students understand the nuts and bolts of how writing “works,” they can analyze their own texts and choices. A stylistic approach to composition, then, builds reflection into the curriculum. Students must be able to identify what they are doing in their own writing before they can comment on its effectiveness.

Through an emphasis on style, writing is given a methodology. Disrupting the myth of the “artistic genius,” stylistic methods of analysis can remove the mystery from writing for students and make it something that can be learned and improved. The methods that Edward P. J. Corbett and Robert Connors offer in *Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student* ask students to calculate statistics such as word count, sentence types, and average sentence and paragraph lengths so as to recognize the effects these features have on an overall text and to help define an author’s style. Style also allows for genre-based approaches in composition; technical communication in particular has long established genre as a paramount concern, but this is not always reflected in rhetoric and composition. Fairly recently, the work of Anis Bawarshi, Amy Devitt, Carolyn Miller, and others has ignited interest in genre studies in rhetoric and composition, arguing that a goal of composition courses should be genre awareness. Style is a necessary consideration within genre-based approaches to composing, as all genre conventions are, at their core, stylistic.

Finally, the term “style” itself, particularly as represented in Part One of this text, is able to simultaneously hold a variety of definitions quite comfortably, with each of those definitions able to dialogue with each other and promote a multifaceted view of the importance of the canon and how it suffuses the act of composition. Further, stylistic principles (namely, rhetorical tropes and schemes) are uniquely able to describe phenomena ranging across mediums and modalities in recognition of composition’s many forms. We believe this

multifaceted aspect of the canon allows for a position that has not yet been reached in other attempts to align an ancient rhetorical concept with the practices of theorizing and teaching composition. We acknowledge the value of the extensive work arguing for the centrality of other rhetorical canons, namely—and perhaps most notably—invention (Crowley; Lauer & Atwill; Young & Becker); however, in this collection, we focus on style.

This collection is organized into two sections. Each section is prefaced by an introduction that discusses how each chapter builds upon the claim of style's centrality. As such, this collection has some of the qualities of a monograph: the connection between the essays is not merely topical or thematic, but rather is built upon a common claim.

Part One, "Conceptualizing Style," contains essays that offer different—sometimes complementary, and sometimes conflicting—ways of conceptualizing what style is. Style is presented as deception, as figures, as imitation, as Bakhtinian architecture, as style itself, as ethos, as cultural performance, and as invention. Many of these essays also explore pedagogy, but we have placed these nine essays together primarily for their unique theoretical viewpoints on style, which we believe advance the field's understanding of the concept by collectively demonstrating its presence in so many aspects of language.

Part Two, "Applying Style," as its name suggests, explores ways by which style can be incorporated into the teaching of composition. These proposed ways are diverse, including writing across the curriculum (WAC), linguistics, multimodal rhetoric, creative nonfiction, rhetorical/literary criticism, "stylistic sensitivity," the rhetoric of science, and the rhetoric of fiction. Teachers of composition will find much to mull over and consider in this second half of the collection, given that, like in Part One, style again appears in multiple locales as a critical concept, demanding attention due to style's centrality. These essays offer strategies for teachers that allow students to address and grasp style in the classroom.

We see this collection as a step forward for the study of style in composition studies. We hope, in particular, that it will lead to further work in the discipline on stylistic issues in a contemporary environment where the centrality of style to composition can be treated as a given.