

# Introduction to Style

by Sophia Tutorial



## WHAT'S COVERED

This tutorial will cover the topic of style. We will discuss what style is, and the way it impacts genre and vice versa. We will also cover the intersections between style and audience.

Our discussion breaks down as follows:

1. What Is Style?
2. Style and Genre
3. Style and Audience

## 1. What Is Style?

Style is a word that you likely recognize, but when it comes to writing, what exactly does it mean? For the purposes of today's lesson, we'll define **style** as the way someone writes, as opposed to what he or she has written, including word choice, tone, sentence structure and variation, and more.



### TERM TO KNOW

#### Style

The way a person writes, as opposed to what a person has written, including word choice, tone, and sentence structure.

Even though we often try to separate style from content -- that is, to separate the *how* from the *what* -- the two are still very much connected. After all, different genres use different conventions of style, and different audiences will respond better or worse to certain writing styles. Therefore, it's not completely up to the writer. Style is, like other aspects of writing, a slave to the writer's purpose and the rhetorical situation surrounding it.

Before we go any further, it's important to define convention, to avoid any confusion. In the context of writing, think of **convention** as a standard or tradition -- something that's expected by readers, and something that a writer should do, unless he or she has a reason for defying expectation. Even in that case, be cautious.

➦ **EXAMPLE** For example, if you choose to defy the convention of beginning a business letter with a formal greeting, you'd better be sure about why you're doing so, and what effect you hope it will have. Or, for a completely different kind of convention, if you choose *not* to start your scary campfire story with

something to the effect of "years ago, right here on a night just like this..." chances are you won't scare as many little kids.

The point is to bring it back to composition. Writers should decide which approach is appropriate for the occasion for writing.



#### TERM TO KNOW

### Convention

A standard or tradition.

Formal writing is writing that is appropriate for professional or academic environments, but that doesn't mean it has to be stuffy, convoluted, or full of overly heavy vocabulary. Informal writing, meanwhile, is writing that's more appropriate for personal writing, narratives, or interpersonal communication. Informal writing includes slang, dialect, colloquialisms, and euphemisms. However, that doesn't mean it can't express the same kind of high-minded ideas and points as more formal writing. It would likely need to do it in a different way, though. Like everything else, it all depends on the writer's purpose and audience.

## 2. Style and Genre

One of the biggest factors impacting a writer's style is the genre of writing he or she is setting out to produce. In general, writers should understand and match the genre's expectations. A **genre**, which is defined as a broad or specific category of writing, can be as broad as fiction or poetry, or as specific as Gothic fiction, scientific reports, or academic essays. Regardless of the genre, the only reason a writer should deviate from its convention should be to create an intentional effect or change. If you're going to break the rules, you'd better know why!



#### TERM TO KNOW

### Genre

Broad or specific categories of writing.

Many genres have specific vocabulary, and it's important to be aware of the differences in meaning based on the genre, and to know the context for words that have multiple meanings. If, for example, a writer trying to start an online food blog used the following as the bio for his opening post, he might run into trouble with that community:

My name is Gordon Randall, and I'm a self-trained chef who loves cooking for my friends and family. I do it so much, it started to impact my career as an accountant, but I don't care. I just love cooking that much!

Now, this might not seem like a problem, except that Gordon doesn't know that in the culinary world, the word "chef" means more than just someone who cooks. Technically, a chef is a professionally-trained cook who does, or at least already has, run his or her own kitchen. By making the enthusiastic but naive claim that he is a chef -- and then immediately disproving his own claim in his biography -- all Gordon is likely to do is alienate readers within the genre.

However, what if he changed the term a little? If he called himself a *foodie*, for example -- a term people who are interested in eating and cooking fancy food use to refer to themselves -- Gordon would be much more in line with the conventions of the genre in which he's attempting to write, and his readers would be more likely to welcome him.

Here's another example. Suppose a student decided to start an essay she'd been assigned to write for a history class like this?

So I was thinking about the Greeks, like you said we should do on Friday, and I decided that I don't really understand them. I mean, they weren't a country, were they? Those cities, what do you call them, city-states? They would work together sometimes, but sometimes they fought each other. What's up with that?

As you may guess, her history professor would probably not respond favorably to this writing style. This is not because it's ineffective communication -- the student's ideas and questions are all included -- but because she didn't observe the conventions of the genre of academic writing, which expects a more formal tone. Her essay is written more in the style of personal address and first person structures, as in utilizing questions and the pronoun "I." These aren't hard rules, of course, but in this case, her breaking of the rules doesn't serve her purpose in writing very well.

On the other hand, if she'd written something like this, things might have gone differently:

One of the biggest sources of confusion about Ancient Greek politics is that modern people tend to think of "The Greeks" as having belonged to something similar to a modern nation, when in fact they were a loose alliance of independent city-states that spent as much time fighting each other as they did working together.

As you can see, even though the same ideas and points are being raised, our hypothetical student is now observing the genre conventions and will be much more likely to be well-received because of it.

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## 3. Style and Audience

One of the primary reasons writers seek to conform to genre standards is that their audience will expect it. An **audience**, in this sense, is defined as the reader of a text, which can be intended or unintended.



BIG IDEA

Writers should match the writing style to suit their intended audience.



HINT

Since different audiences are likely to be persuaded, entertained, convinced, or informed by different styles of writing, it pays for the beginning writer to be flexible and to always consider the intended audience when making any stylistic choices.



## Audience

The reader of a text, which can be intended (targeted by the author) or unintended (not specifically targeted by the author).

Deliberately going against the expected or desired style of an audience should only be done to create an intentional effect. That is, it should be done knowingly and for a specific purpose. Otherwise, the results are likely to be unpleasant. If, for example, a writer wanted to produce a short article to publish in an online forum for atheists with the intention of persuading the audience to consider embracing his or her religion, there are many ways to go about doing that. What follows is probably *not* the best option:

As a devout Christian, I feel sorry for everyone who has not accepted Jesus into his or her heart. I'd like to welcome you to consider this passage from Genesis 4:7: "If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must rule over it."

Any communication given toward an audience that, like this hypothetical example, uses the Bible as its primary source of not only evidence but words, is unlikely to succeed, no matter how well intentioned it might be. Consider the audience. These people are probably unlikely to be convinced in the first place, but doing so by assuming that their interest in biblical verses will bring them to the other side of the argument is simply not going to work. It's a daunting task for any writer. However, here's a post that might come closer to achieving this writer's purpose:

I feel badly that the love I feel for Jesus isn't a part of everyone's life. I understand that there's no way to prove anything about faith, but that's not the point. I'd welcome anyone's invitation to share a discussion about what faith means to me, and how I might be able to help others share in it.

Here, our hypothetical online missionary is doing more to conform to not only the rhetorical expectations of the audience, but the stylistic ones as well. Rather than taking a superior stance, in this version, the writer opens with an explanation as to why he or she feels badly, and ends with an invitation to share and discuss, rather than preaching -- which, let's be honest, is what the first version did. These three sentences are trying to engage with the audience on a more personal level, which is what the audience is more likely to respond to. This in turn makes the text's purpose more likely to be successful, though it still has a rhetorically-challenging situation at hand.

In this last example, let's consider a different sort of audience. Suppose a student in an introductory creative writing class was assigned to write a piece of constructive criticism on one of his classmate's short stories. There are many ways to engage with that audience. Here's one way *not* to:

What the heck was that? Mr. Cabrillo said we weren't supposed to be writing genre fiction, but you put vampires, werewolves, mermaids, and robots? Heck, if I thought I would've gotten away with that, I could've written such a better version of this story, but no, I had to write about a boy and a girl on a boat in a lake. Anyway, I didn't like your story.

Even if you've never been in a creative writing workshop, you can probably tell that the intended audience -- in this case, the writer's classmate and the professor -- isn't likely to respond well to this tone and stance. It's generally uncommon for responders to creative work to be so aggressive or to offer no constructive criticism as feedback. However, what if the response was something like this?

I thought your story was an interesting take on the vampire-werewolf-mermaid-robot genre, though I was under the impression that we weren't supposed to be writing genre fiction. Anyway, I thought there was some potential in this draft, though next time you might want to limit the number, or scope, of your characters.

This would be much more likely to be well-received by both parts of the audience. The writer whose work is being responded to is more likely to take the criticism, rather than rejecting it out of hand as some kind of personal attack. Also, the teacher would probably be more welcoming to the tone and the stance, not to mention the word choice that's used here. As you can see, writers who accurately predict the needs and expectations of their audiences are more likely to achieve whatever their goals are in writing, or at least to get closer to achieving them. For writers, this is a victory all of its own.



## SUMMARY

Today we learned about style, which is the way a person writes, including word choice, tone, and sentence structure. We learned about how considering both genre and intended audience is important when making decisions about style.

Source: Adapted from Sophia Instructor Gavin McCall



## TERMS TO KNOW

### **Audience**

The reader of a text, which can be intended (targeted by the author) or unintended (not specifically targeted by the author).

### **Convention**

A standard or tradition.

### **Genre**

Broad or specific categories of writing.

### **Style**

The way a person writes, as opposed to what a person has written, including word choice, tone, and sentence structure.