

The Role and Function of Style

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WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, you will learn about what style is, and how it influences other aspects of writing.

Specifically, this lesson will cover:

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 they have written. Style includes aspects like 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 types of writing use different conventions of style, and different audiences will respond better or worse to certain writing styles. Therefore, the choice of style is not completely up to the writer. Style is, like all other aspects of writing, connected to the writer's purpose and the rhetorical situation surrounding it.

In the context of writing, think of a **convention** as a standard or tradition—something that's expected by readers, and something that writers should do, unless they have a reason for defying expectations. Even then, writers should be cautious.

⇒ **EXAMPLE** If you choose to defy the convention of beginning a business letter with a formal greeting, you need to be sure about why you're doing so, and what effect you hope it will have on the recipient. Following conventions doesn't mean that writers have no freedom when it comes to how they express themselves, however.

IN CONTEXT

To illustrate the power of style, consider two common categories of writing: formal and informal. 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, 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 just need to do so in a different way. It is up to writers to make good stylistic choices within the conventions of the type of writing they are performing.



TERMS TO KNOW

Style

The way a person writes, including word choice, tone, and sentence structure.

Convention

In writing, a standard or tradition that is expected by readers.

2. Style and Genre

One of the biggest factors impacting a writer's style is the **genre** of writing they are setting out to produce. A genre is a category of writing that can be as broad as fiction or poetry, or as specific as Gothic fiction, scientific reports, or academic essays.

In general, writers should understand and match the genre's expectations. The only reason a writer should deviate from its convention should be to create an intentional effect or change. Again, if you're going to break the rules, you'd better know why!

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.

IN CONTEXT

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 often, 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, chefs are professionally

trained cooks who run their own kitchens. 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”—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.



TERM TO KNOW

Genre

A broad or specific category of writing.

3. Style and Audience

One of the primary reasons writers seek to conform to genre standards is that their **audience** will expect it. Recall that the audience is the intentional or unintentional reader or readers of a text.

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.

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.

IN CONTEXT

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, but 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 in this story. 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 trip to the 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 science fiction genre, though I was under the impression that we weren't supposed to be writing genre fiction for this assignment. 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 on its own.



TERM TO KNOW

Audience

The intentional or unintentional reader(s) of a text.



SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned that **style** is the way a person writes, including word choice, tone, and sentence structure. Stylistic conventions, or expectations, change depending on the type of writing you are doing; therefore, there is a strong connection between **style and genre**. Likewise, **style and audience** must be considered together, as the style you choose will determine how your audience receives your message.

Best of luck in your learning!

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