Style

What Is Style?

Style is the sum total of elements that, when considered together, determine the readability of any document. A document is readable to the extent that it

- anticipates readers' expectations,
- organizes material so as to achieve the writer's purposes,
- groups information so that it is coherent and readily retrievable,
- uses a level of diction appropriate to the reader,
- achieves clarity in word choice, and
- conforms to commonly accepted standards of grammar, spelling, punctuation, and mechanics.

Looking at each element in itself, and in how it interrelates with the others, can be useful in determining what makes an efficient and effective writing style.

The Rhetoric of Style

Style is an interrelationship between a writer's concept or intent, the reader's prior understanding of the topic, and the linguistic, typographic, and graphic resources at the writer's disposal. Thus, concern for style encompasses the entire communication process between writer and reader. The aim of style is to convey the writer's purpose to the reader as lucidly as possible. The best style, then, is a transparent one that interposes as little as possible between the writer's concept and the reader's understanding. Hence, every aspect of style—organization, layout, coherence, sentence structure, word choice, and mechanics—is important in the total effectiveness of the piece.

Integrity and Coherence Within and Between Paragraphs

The paragraph is best considered as the basic unit of discourse, providing a signpost to the reader that within it lies an integral stage in the development of the material. The length of a paragraph determines the pace at which the reader processes the information and signals the relative complexity of the thought. Most paragraphs should have a clearly defined or implied topic sentence about which all the rest of the paragraph revolves in development. The nature of that development determines the function of the paragraph within the piece as a whole. Success in revealing this function to your reader depends on how clearly and consistently your paragraph reveals its structural integrity. Finally, paragraphs developing a continuous line of thought are best linked to one another through transitional language contained in either the first or last sentence, or both.

Constructing Clear and Readable Sentences

The readability of a sentence is usually a function of how well it accords with the reader's psychology. According to Joseph Williams, readers read passages fluently when the sentences begin with what readers are familiar with and work towards new material, which occupies the place of emphasis at the end of a sentence.[1] When subsequent sentences refer back to what has gone before, either through repetition of terms or substitution (such as pronouns for nouns), then readers are psychologically prepared for further new material to come. If, conversely, the new material consistently comes at the beginning of sentences, readers are constantly in shifting states of adjustment, making them re-read to get the full sense of the passage. The length, shape, and complexity of sentences also affect readers' ability to understand.

Choosing Words Appropriate to Your Audience

Diction has perhaps the most immediate effect upon your reader's understanding, since the word is the basic unit of meaning. Meaning is a set of shared understandings between reader and writer, and if the writer chooses words that either evade or distort this relationship, meaning is lost. Words that call attention to themselves because they are imprecise, vague, or inflated serve as noise in the signal and impede communication. Writing that uses concrete nouns, active verbs, and adjectives that appeal to the senses makes connections with readers, while overuse of abstract nouns, weak verbs, and prepositional phrases sucks the juice from one's prose.

Correctness in Grammar, Spelling, Punctuation, and Mechanics[2]

Equally important as all the rest is maintaining quality control in standard English usage. Researchers have identified the twenty most common errors in academic writing, listed below with appropriate examples. Elements added or revised for correctness are enclosed in brackets.

1. Missing comma after an introductory element

    Introductory word

        Frankly[,] we were baffled by the committee's decision.

    Introductory phrase

        In fact[,] the Philippines consist of more than eight thousand islands.

        Because of its isolation in a rural area surrounded by mountains[,] Crawford Notch doesn't get many visitors.

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[1] Joseph M Williams, *Style: Toward Clarity and Grace* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 45–65.

[2] Adapted from Andrea Lunsford and Robert Connors, *The New St. Martin's Handbook* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1999), I-15–27. Examples 10 and 11 are from the original source; the rest have been substituted by the author of this note.

Introductory clause

Though I gave detailed advice for revising[,] his draft became only worse.

2. Vague pronoun reference

Possible reference to more than one word

Transmitting radio signals by satellite is a way of overcoming the problem of scarce airwaves and limiting how they are used. [*radio signals or airwaves?*]

Reference implied but not stated

The City Council believes that we can address the housing crisis by requiring downtown developers to set aside a percentage of development costs to build affordable housing, but ~~it~~ [*the policy*] hasn't been effective.

3. Missing comma in a compound sentence

The South Boston Seaport Master Plan Interim Report was released last year[,] and it was immediately recognized as a slapdash production created to make up for lost time.

4. Wrong word

The community had a ~~deep-seeded~~ [*deep-seated*] resentment against planners and planning.

The developers mistrusted the community development corporation, and ~~vise versa~~ [*vice versa*].

They had no reason to doubt their judgment ~~visa vis~~ [*means "vis-à-vis", but should be "concerning"*] the design criteria for the project.

5. Missing comma(s) with a nonrestrictive element

The criteria for the development[,] which had been established by the Boston Redevelopment Agency[,] were called into question by a prominent architecture critic. [*If you excise "which had been established by the Boston Redevelopment Agency," the sentence still works, so the excised clause is incidental, not essential to convey meaning.*]

6. Wrong or missing verb ending

The fact that the Brahmin class ~~build~~ [*built*] mansions circling the Boston Common while shutting out housing for working-class people shows that 19th-century planning practices precluded the poor from decision-making processes.

7. Wrong or missing preposition

> The bus committee is trying to set a schedule that will meet the needs of most people who rely ~~in~~ [*on*] public transportation.

8. Comma splice

> Development of the garment industry in the Northeast of Brazil lagged far behind that in the Southeast,[*;*] the difference can be attributed to geographical separation between training centers and employment clusters in the Northeast.

9. Missing or misplaced possessive apostrophe

> The planning ~~committees~~ [*committee's*] startling report revealed many ~~objection's~~ [*objections*] to the guidance they had been given.

10. Unnecessary shift in tense

> The good thing about its location is that it is right off the main highway, very easy to spot. There are also plenty of road signs pointing you in the direction of the park. And if visitors ~~got~~ [*get*] extremely lost, pulling off and asking would be the easiest way to get on track.

11. Unnecessary shift in pronoun

> After deciding where to begin your career, many graduates are then faced with the predicament of where to live. This is not such a problem for students who know the area, but it is if ~~you~~ [*they*] haven't lived in the same city or area in which ~~you~~ [*they*] got a job.

12. Sentence fragment

> There were several obvious reasons for rejecting the Finance Ministry's application for the IMF loan.[;] ~~W~~whereas there were just as many good reasons for seeing the Ministry's point of view. [*The second group of words is a dependent clause, and should be linked to a main clause, rather than standing alone*.]

13. Wrong tense or verb form

> When I asked him about what courses he regrets not ~~taking~~ [*having taken*] when he was at MIT, he said that real estate finance, small business management, and geographical information systems were the ones he missed most.

14. Lack of agreement between subject and verb

> Each of the items in these designs coordinate[s] with the others. [*The subject of the sentence is "each," not "items" or "designs."*]

15. Missing comma in a series

    The major services his firm provides are design, engineering, financing [*,*] and research and development. [*Note the confusion if the last comma is missing.*]

16. Lack of agreement between pronoun and antecedent

    Neither Jim Rouse nor Edwin Logan brought ~~their~~ [*his*] prejudices to the bargaining table.

    None of the Selectmen ~~were~~ [*was*] willing to stick ~~their~~ [*his or her*] ~~necks~~ [*neck*] out. [*"None" is singular.*]

17. Unnecessary comma(s) with a restrictive element

    People, who want to preserve wilderness areas, oppose the plan to privatize national parks. [*The grayed-out commas interfere with the restrictive intent of "who want to preserve wilderness areas."*]

18. Fused sentence

    They doubted the value of mediation[*;*] nevertheless[*,*] they decided to try it once.

19. Dangling or misplaced modifier

    They could see the eagles swooping and diving with binoculars. [*Do eagles swoop and dive wearing binoculars?*]

    The architect ~~only~~ wanted to use [*only*] teak accents for decoration. [*The architect wanted only teak.*]

20. *Its/it's* confusion

    A project determines ~~it's~~ [*its*] own parameters. [*If "his" has no apostrophe, then "its" doesn't need one, either.*]