

25.

## REVISING FOR STYLE

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### Learning Objectives

- Identify and improve lackluster sentences
- Replace weak diction with more powerful diction
- Revise for style

“The difference between the *almost right* word and the *right* word is really a large matter. ’tis the difference between the lightning bug and the lightning.” —**Mark Twain**

## Style

As mentioned in the “Revision Strategies” chapter, style is one “lower order concern” or LOC to look for when revising your work.

A writer’s style is what sets his or her writing apart. Style is the way writing is dressed up (or down) to fit the specific context, purpose, or audience. Word choice, sentence fluency, and the writer’s voice — all contribute to the style of a piece of writing. How a writer chooses words and structures sentences to achieve a certain effect is also an element of style. When Thomas Paine wrote “These are the times that try men’s souls,” he arranged his words to convey a sense of urgency and desperation. Had he written “These are bad times,” it’s likely he wouldn’t have made such an impact!

Style is usually considered to be the province of literary writers. Novelists such as Ernest Hemingway and William Faulkner and poets such as Emily Dickinson and Walt Whitman are well known for their distinctive literary styles. But journalists, scientists, historians, and mathematicians also have distinctive styles, and they need to know how to vary their styles to fit different audiences. For example, the first-person narrative style of a

popular magazine like *National Geographic* is quite different from the objective, third-person expository style of a research journal like *Scientific American*, even though both are written for informational purposes.

## Not Just Right and Wrong

Style is not a matter of right and wrong but of what is appropriate for a particular setting and audience. Consider the following two passages, which were written by the same author on the same topic with the same main idea, yet have very different styles:

### Examples

“Experiments show that *Heliconius* butterflies are less likely to oviposit on host plants that possess eggs or egg-like structures. These egg mimics are an unambiguous example of a plant trait evolved in response to a host-restricted group of insect herbivores.”

“*Heliconius* butterflies lay their eggs on *Passiflora* vines. In defense the vines seem to have evolved fake eggs that make it look to the butterflies as if eggs have already been laid on them.” (Example from Myers, G. (1992). *Writing biology: Texts in the social construction of scientific knowledge*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press. p. 150.)

What changed was the audience. The first passage was written for a professional journal read by other biologists, so the style is authoritative and impersonal, using technical terminology suited to a professional audience. The second passage, written for a popular science magazine, uses a more dramatic style, setting up a conflict between the butterflies and the vines, and using familiar words to help readers from non-scientific backgrounds visualize the scientific concept being described. Each style is appropriate for the particular audience.

## Elements of Style

Many elements of writing contribute to an author’s style, but three of the most important are word choice, sentence fluency, and voice.

### **Word Choice**

Good writers are concise and precise, weeding out unnecessary words and selecting the exact word to

convey meaning. Precise words—active verbs, concrete nouns, specific adjectives—help the reader visualize the sentence. Good writers use adjectives sparingly and adverbs rarely, letting their nouns and verbs do the work.

Good writers also choose words that contribute to the flow of a sentence. Polysyllabic words, alliteration, and consonance can be used to create sentences that roll off the tongue. Onomatopoeia and short, staccato words can be used to break up the rhythm of a sentence.

### **Sentence Fluency**

Sentence fluency is the flow and rhythm of phrases and sentences. Good writers use a variety of sentences with different lengths and rhythms to achieve different effects. They use parallel structures within sentences and paragraphs to reflect parallel ideas, but also know how to avoid monotony by varying their sentence structures.

Good writers also arrange their ideas within a sentence for greatest effect. They avoid loose sentences, deleting extraneous words and rearranging their ideas for effect. Many students initially write with a looser oral style, adding words on to the end of a sentence in the order they come to mind. This rambling style is often described as a “word dump” where everything in a student’s mind is dumped onto the paper in no particular order. There is nothing wrong with a word dump as a starting point: the advantage of writing over speaking is that writers can return to their words, rethink them, and revise them for effect. Tighter, more readable style results when writers choose their words carefully, delete redundancies, make vague words more specific, and use subordinate clauses and phrases to rearrange their ideas for the greatest effect.

### **Voice**

Because voice is difficult to measure reliably, it is often left out of scoring formulas for writing tests. Yet voice is an essential element of style that reveals the writer’s personality. A writer’s voice can be impersonal or chatty, authoritative or reflective, objective or passionate, serious or funny.

## Strategies to Revise for Style

**Adopt a persona that’s related to your topic.** Write from the perspective of this person you create: what language would a young woman who’d just spent two years in the peace corps use, for instance, if the essay were about the value of volunteer work? How would the words on the page of a project about gun control look coming from the perspective of a very conservative gun owner?

**Combine (some) short sentences, or break apart (some) long sentences.** Sentence length variety is an asset to your readers, as noted above. If you find a stretch of your essay that uses many sentences of approximately the same length close together, focus on combining or breaking apart there.

**Punch up the word choice.** Not every word in an essay can be a “special” word, nor should they be. But if your writing in an area feels a little flat, the injection of a livelier word can have strong rhetorical and emotional impact on your reader. Think of these words as jewels in the right setting. Often swapping out “to be” verbs (is, was, were, etc.) with more action-packed verbs has immediate, positive impact. Adjectives are also good

candidates for updating—look for “things” and “stuff,” or “very” and “many,” to replace with more precise terminology.

**Be creative.** People tend to think of academic writing as dry and boring, and some of it is! But most of the time, writing in an academic setting doesn’t mean you need to suppress your creativity and write like a robot. The rhetorical situation should help you determine how creative you can be with your writing style. If you’re writing a lab report, you don’t want to use a lot of flowery language, but if you’re describing the effects of climate change on coral reefs, you probably need to describe them in a style that evokes emotions in the readers.

Good writers will tinker with sentences for a long time before they’re satisfied. Consider this quote by the author Neil Gaiman:

I’ll agonize over sentences. Mostly because you’re trying to create specific effects with sentences, and because there are a number of different voices in the book.

Gaiman writes novels, so he agonizes over sentences that reflect the different characters in his fiction, but all good writers know that sentences “create specific effects,” so they devote the appropriate amount of time to revising their sentences to achieve those effects.

### Key Takeaways

- Your writing style should be appropriate for the rhetorical situation, and in most cases, you will need to make major changes to style as part of your revision process
- Revising for style means looking carefully at your sentences and word choices, which takes time
- A systematic approach to revising for style can help you make smart improvements