Emulating Edgar, Elmer, and Ernest: Using Students' Writing to Define Style

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“What’s your style?” Pose this question to most teenagers, and you are likely to get descriptions of the latest trends in fashion. Ask the same question in the context of a writing lesson, and you’ll be lucky to get beyond puzzled looks and a few confused, hesitant guesses. Without guidance, students find it difficult to describe their own writing. One of my goals is to help students develop and recognize their own writing voices. I hope to make students conscious of the qualities that distinguish one writer’s work from the efforts of another, and I want them to become cognizant of their own writing style. Ultimately, I want students to put their knowledge of style to advantage in their own writing.

The problem I encounter in teaching about style is that the concept is both obscure and abstract. When I find a definition that my ninth grade students will understand, it is so vague that it is essentially useless, and when I find a more precise definition, the complex vocabulary makes it inaccessible to most students. The ninth graders in my classroom would gain little from the loose definitions put forth by Strunk and White in *The Elements of Style*: Style is “what is distinguished and distinguishing” (66), “the sound words make on paper” (66), and that which “not only reveals the spirit of the man but reveals his identity” (68). A complicated definition from the American Heritage dictionary would be equally problematic: Style is “a customary manner of presenting printed material, including usage, punctuation, spelling, typography, and arrangement.” I can imagine my students even now, dutifully copying out these definitions without ever puzzling out the meaning or purpose of the word style. Style is a frightening concept to teach, because it refuses to be captured in one explicit definition.

**A Working Definition**

A clear and precise definition of style is difficult to find, but it is a practical necessity for my students and me to come to an agreement about the meaning of the word. We need to have a common understanding of style before we begin to manipulate it in conversation, before I ask them to analyze writing styles of various authors (themselves included). My first objective, then, in teaching students about style, is to help them to arrive at a working definition of the word.

My method is to work backward. I have students use what they already know about style to try some experimental writing; then we analyze the writings to identify key elements of style, and finally, we write our precise working definition of style. To begin the exercise, I share some writing of my own, a newspaper account of a true story from my high school days. Of course, key details such as names and locations have been changed to protect the innocent—and to pique the interest of my audience.

*On Saturday, September 19 at 12:30 p.m., police were called to McDonald’s on 84th Street in Byron Center. Witnesses claimed that a woman had driven a truck through the front windows. The impact knocked a teenage couple from Byron Center High School out of a booth, injuring both students. The victims were rushed to a local hospital and treated for fractures, cuts, and bruises. They were released the following day. The driver left the scene before police arrived, and it remains unclear why she drove through the window. The incident is still under investigation by local law enforcement.*

When I have finished reading aloud the newspaper article from a transparency, I replace it with more of my writing: the dictated testimony of an
unidentified eyewitness. I ask students to try to
guess what kind of person this eyewitness might be
while I read the testimony aloud:

Well, man... There was this chick in this groovy
truck. She was somethin’ man. She came trippin’
through the window in her truck and just
about sent these punks out of this world. I tried
to stop her—“Peace, lady, peace!” But like I said
man, she was on her own trip, and she was
outta there.

Students easily determine that the eyewitness
is probably a hippie. They have no difficulty identifying
clues such as word choice (e.g. “groovy”), repeti-
tion (“man” is used three times), and dialectical
spelling (e.g. “outta”). Students may not know the
formal terms, but they can find and explain exam-
pies of the clues that identify the eyewitness. The
teacher can then provide the labels in context.

Working Toward the Definition

Now that I have modeled the assignment, it is
time for the students to do some writing. The class
brainstorms a list of other possible eyewitnesses
whose testimony would be easy to identify; memo-
rable eyewitnesses have included cartoon charac-
ters, notable authors, politicians, and celebrities.
Working in pairs, students write three eyewitness
testimonies, focusing on details that the eyewit-
tnesses, notable authors, politicians, and celebrities.
Working in pairs, students write three eyewitness
testimonies, focusing on details that the eyewit-
tnesses of their choice would notice. In my observa-
tions, students almost always form true writing
partnerships in this situation; I rarely see one stu-
dent doing the work for the other. I can only specu-
late as to why this occurs, but I think it has to do
with the built-in silliness of the assignment.
Students are concerned about “getting it right,” but
not in the typical way. They aren’t worried about
sounding proper; they simply want to sound like
somebody else. This frees both students to scaffold
off of each other’s ideas; instead of holding back for
fear of making mistakes, both writers are eager to
improve the final product.

One especially beneficial partnership was
formed last year when Michael and Tyler sat down
together to write. Michael has an advanced vocab-
ulary and a good memory for literature; Tyler has a
vivid imagination, but he relies on special educa-
tional staff to help him read and get his thoughts
don paper. It seemed to be an unlikely part-
nership, but during their writing time, I heard the
two of them collaborating to get both of their ideas
into the writing. There was a lot of exclaiming and
excitement as Michael copied their best testimony
onto a large sheet of paper for everyone else to see;
I had to remind them not to let anyone else over-
hear the identity of their eyewitness. Together, they
created this eyewitness account:

Once upon a midday dreary,

while I quietly pondered weak and weary
Over many a forgotten food du jour
there loudly came a crashing as if somebody
smashing
through the front door. Then I saw the lady with
raven hair
She perched and sat in her car as if waiting
She perched and sat and nothing more. Then
she drove away screaming
“Nevermore!”

The meter limps in places, and the rhyme isn’t
perfect, but this verse is a success. Even though it
had been a year since they studied this poem (they
parodied it from memory), Michael and Tyler cap-
tured enough of the style of “The Raven” that their
classmates instantly recognized Poe as the eyewit-
tness. The boys’ faces were rightfully proud when
the other students pointed out the clues: the refer-
ces to the raven, the rhyme scheme, the poetic
rhythm, the repetition of phrases, the choice of the
word “Nevermore,” and the mysteriously dark
mood.

For ninth graders, it is difficult to capture more
than a few of the identifying characteristics of one
eyewitness’s style. The essence is enough; finesse is
rare. For more advanced writers, the challenge is to
write in a way that consistently captures all of the
elements of the eyewitness’s style. I presented writ-
ing teachers at the Red Cedar Writing Project with
a similar hit-and-run scenario; this time the setting
was their favorite Mexican restaurant, El Azteco.
The cohesion of style in Mary’s eyewitness testimo-
ny sets it apart from the writings by high school
students:

Well, theve I was at El Azteco Westeurant in
East Wansing, having a topopo salad, and some
wawselfly wabbit—I’m suwe it must have been a
wabbit or a howe—duve a big qween buwand
new pickup twuck—how that wabbit could
weach the pedals I do not know—wight into the
westeurant! Two witer wuome the Wed Cedaw
Wight Pwoject wewe injuwed, and the west
wewe weally anwiy!

Elmer Fudd’s ever-present “w” is obvious, but
there are other stylistic consistencies: the choice of
familiar phrases (e.g. “wasawly wabbit”), the con-
versational tone, and the punctuation that indi-
cates second thoughts. (Is he imagining that wabbit
again?) All of these clues point consistently to
Elmer Fudd.

A consistent style is not always demonstrated
by unique spellings or punctuation. Sometimes the
clues are more subtle, as in Fred’s eyewitness testi-
mony:

We sat at a booth near the back. The martinis
were cold. They made us feel clean. The bar-
tender made them with chilled Tanqueray and
French Vermouth. She had just ordered another when the truck came through the wall. It was a Ford. A woman was driving. She had short hair, like a man.

Readers familiar with Hemingway's writing will recognize the abrupt, simple sentences, as well as the emphasis on alcohol and the description of the woman. It is the syntax, the diction, and the emphasis of ideas that give this eyewitness away. Like so many others, this eyewitness has revealed himself in only a few lines.

High school students are skilled at finding clues in their own writings, but sometimes they lack a writer's vocabulary to name what they have observed. After reading this excerpt from a testimony by Amanda and Jessica, students recognized the style, but didn't know how to put it into words: "To duck or not to duck, that was the question." All of the students detected the sound of Shakespeare, but their best effort at expressing the similarity was to say, "It's almost exactly the same as Hamlet. The words are in the same order." The students' own observations had created an opportunity for us to define and discuss syntax and parallel structure in a meaningful way.

As the eyewitnesses display and read their testimonies for the other writers, I help the class compile a list of the clues that help us to distinguish one writing style from another. We call the list "Elements of Style" (with the subtitle "Clues to Who's Writing"); eventually it includes characteristics such as syntax, diction, punctuation, tone, emphasis of ideas, grammar, dialect, rhyme, rhythm, repetition, allusions, and figurative language. When all of the testimonies have been analyzed, I ask the partners to review our activities and write their own definitions of style. Then two pairs combine their definition, after which two groups of four combine definitions, and so on, until the class has agreed on one working definition of style.

Working with the Definition

The definition that my students approve is not so different in sentiment from those offered by Strunk and White, and it often includes a list similar to the one in the American Heritage Dictionary definition. The difference is that this is a definition which has meaning for the students; it has not been copied lifelessly onto a flat page and left to lie there. When students have tried on the style of another writer, it becomes easier for them to analyze their own writing style. I follow the exercise I have described with a writing assignment in which I ask students to analyze their own style and reflect on it: "Look at some of your writing and describe your style. Explain what you like about it and what you would like to change." I also ask students to analyze the style of other authors—their peers, as well as published writers.

Sometimes students feel as though they are cheating or taking the easy way out when they try to emulate the style of an author they enjoy. I don't believe this to be the case; I think it takes hard work and a great deal of thought to bend one's own ideas into a specific, consistent style. Following a fine example is worthwhile. Devoting conscious, analytical attention to writing is the key to developing one's own sense of style.

Works Cited


About the Author

Leah Zuidema, a Red Cedar Writing Project participant who teaches English and theater at Byron Center High School, is the new secondary chair on the MCTE Executive Board.