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

Leah A. Zuidema

"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 trip-pin' 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"), repetition ("man" is used three times), and dialectical spelling (e.g., "outta"). Students may not know the formal terms, but they can find and explain examples 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; memorable eyewitnesses have included cartoon characters, notable authors, politicians, and celebrities. Working in pairs, students write three eyewitness testimonies, focusing on details that the eyewitnesses of their choice would notice. In my observations, students almost always form true writing partnerships in this situation; I rarely see one student doing the work for the other. I can only speculate 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 vocabulary and a good memory for literature; Tyler has a vivid imagination, but he relies on special education staff to help him read and get his thoughts down on paper. It seemed to be an unlikely partnership, 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 overhear 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 captured enough of the style of "The Raven" that their classmates instantly recognized Poe as the eyewitness. The boys' faces were rightfully proud when the other students pointed out the clues: the references 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 writing 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 testimony sets it apart from the writings by high school students:

*Well, thewe I was at El Azteco Westaurant in
East Wansing, having a topopo salad, and some
wascally wabbit—I'm suwe it must have been a
wabbit or a hawe—dwove a big gween bwand
new pickup twuck—how that wabbit could
weach the pedals I do not know—wight into the
westaurant! Two wifers fwom the Wed Cedaw
Wighting Pwoject wewe injuwed, and the west
wewe weally angwy!*

Elmer Fudd's ever-present "w" is obvious, but there are other stylistic consistencies: the choice of familiar phrases (e.g., "wascally wabbit"), the conversational tone, and the punctuation that indicates 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 testimony:

*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.

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About the Author

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