

# Style

Style is an intrinsic part of writing; it's the culmination of a person's being in prose: their voice. However, while style may be a natural part of the writing process, issues can become apparent when receiving feedback from instructors suggesting you address "awkward," "choppy," or "wordy" sentences. The purpose of this guide is to explain the common elements of style and provide ways to address potential issues with those elements.

## Be Direct

While having a unique style may increase the individuality of your writing, it often comes at the cost of your audience understanding and connecting with your argument. The difficulty in style comes with crafting an interesting prose approach while remaining accurate and precise to your message. The chief point of academic writing is clear communication between author and reader and your style should not hamper that dynamic. Here are some ways to remain direct when writing:

Avoid obfuscation via flagrant verbosity through thesaurus abuse. Clarity is often lost when you try to use fancy words that seem out of place.

Say what you mean in accurate and precise language. Deal in concrete examples and abstractions when appropriate. The specific is often more useful than general claims.

Maintain a cohesive and coherent logical chain. To read more about this topic, see our handout on **cohesion**.

Of course, being direct still means you need to choose your language carefully.

## Denotation and Connotation

Words, broadly, have two main metrics of associations being denotation and connotation. Denotation refers to the literal definition of a word (think dictionary definition). Connotation refers to the associative links of a word (think emotional content, tone, level of formality, and intensity). Both metrics should be considered when writing as matching the appropriate denotation and connotation influences the reception of your writing. Think about these two examples:

The students were pleased at the opportunity to pet the therapy dogs.

The students were overwhelmed at the opportunity to pet the therapy dogs.

While denotatively, these examples communicate the same information, that the students were happy to pet the therapy dogs, the emotional content of the second sentence is much greater. Depending on the context of your paper (academic, resume, or scientific writing), creating the right emotional tone and context is imperative, or, just something to consider. Often, genre expectations and conventions will inform you about how to pick your words according to denotation and connotation.

## Genre Expectations and You

Genre conventions are not an internal expression of style but are elements which are expected to be incorporated in your writing. In this way, conventions limit stylistic expression, but come from already established papers and essays telling you **what your audience expects** in a certain type of writing. For example, a lab report on yeast reproduction under different conditions will have a much different tone, level of formality, and structure than a quick reaction response to female representation in 2017's *Wonder Woman*. Conventions help you narrow down stylistic choices and assist in deciding if a formal writing style is necessary or if a more intense and obscene style works. Here are some things to consider when writing in genre:

What citation style is required (MLA, APA, Chicago, IEEE)?

How formal is the environment? Is perfect grammar and a reserved tone expected?

Who is this piece directed towards? An individual or the broader academic community?

Genre is about setting the boundaries of style; you can still be just, if not more, as creative within genre conventions than without them. They are important as they maintain a relatively cohesive style within a writing space. So, read up on how others write within your genre to see how you should craft your own style!

## Strong and Active vs Weak and Passive

Another important characteristic of style worth talking about is verb usage. Verbs, broadly, fit into two categories when referencing style, composing strong verbs and weak verbs. Strong verbs are more evocative or connotatively dense. They impart more specific and precise meanings when compared to weaker verbs. For example:

Hannibal Lecter ate his victims

Hannibal Lecter cannibalized his victims

They also contribute the action of a sentence to the subject better than weaker verbs, helping you to avoid the traps of passive voice which you can read more about here. Generally, the stronger stylistic choice is to aim for strong verbs that communicate specific feelings and information. This will help you be clearer and more direct when writing, leading to more engagement and understanding from your reader.

## Conclusion

Style encompasses many different interrelated concepts, each operating at different levels within your paper from word choice, the sentence level, and citation style. Each level contains its own wants and needs, but they all work together to create a cohesive unit that when unified, makes clear and engaging material. The best way to develop a unique and interesting writing style is to be aware of the factors which guide style and experiment with it. Use new and different verbs. Figure out ways to be direct and improve your communication skills. Become more aware of what the audience expects when writing in a particular genre. Play with these elements of style because the more you know, the better writer you will become.