

# FOR BEGINNERS IN "STYLE"

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THE very mention of style, in a group of writers, will precipitate a deluge of argument. What is style? the astute will ask, and then disagree with almost every definition that may be proposed. Perhaps the only sure statement is that style is something more than clearness, force and elegance; it is these, *plus* some vague and indefinite fourth quality which no one has as yet satisfactorily captured in a few brief sentences. Nor should I try to do that here, even if I could, because there is not the time available. But let me rapidly outline the problem, and note some of the ways in which good writing—another name for style—can contribute to successful authorship.

It is almost epigrammatic to say that immature writing, good-enough writing, slovenly writing, and downright bad writing have no style, chiefly because all such are unfinished writing. And yet style is not simply after-the-event polish. Real style, or at least the elements of it, will be found in writing done in the white-heat of creative composition... provided the writer knows what he is about. Let us consider the matter in a little more detail.

False ideas concerning that intangible, indefinable something called style usually spring from the vicious theory that style is an ornament, and best done without. Nothing could be further from the truth. Style is not an ornament; and style cannot be done without. All successful writing has style of some sort.

Buffon, the famous French critic, said that order and movement are the two most prominent attributes of style. And from that we may arrive at a very real notion of what style is and what it means. Would it not, in the light of Buffon's contention, be true to say that style is essentially the measure of control over what is being written? The control itself really comes from a clear conception and a firm handling of the idea, which results in a mastery of its expression; but when power over the order of thought and the order of words approaches completeness, the result is felt as a harmony of the whole. That measure of harmony is style.

We shall touch on that more thoroughly when we consider mood and style, a little further along. Just here it is perhaps

enough to note its connection with words. Most writing, according to current convention, must be vivid; and the writer knows that he must use vivid words, which means usually that he must use words that carry the full force of his ideas. This, of course, is both right and wise; but it is also dangerous. There is the temptation to explode into fireworks with adjectives and adverbs, concealing the desired effect behind a cloud of brilliant but useless sparks. And a parallel danger is a temptation, irrespective of the type, kind, color or mood of the writing under construction, to use a staccato structure, composed of commonplace moulds. Added to these, there are those who would experiment in diction, like Gertrude Stein, and work such tricks with the English language that they end in absurdity.

That, then, is something of the problem which confronts the would-be writer when he considers this business of style. Wherein lies that sweetness of reason which will ensure his way to success? Let us regard the matter under the following headings: style and mood, words, and sentence construction.

But first there is a piece of often-given advice to be criticized. It has long been contended that the way to get a good style is to study and imitate the writing of those who have good style. Robert Louis Stevenson loudly proclaimed the value of "playing the sedulous ape" to good writers. In every respect this advice is pernicious. It may be true that Stevenson did that and finally seemed to acquire, by it, a very rich and charming quality of writing: but do not let his exceptional success lead you into such devious devices. Beware of imitation. Through it, you climb the tree of affectation. Dr. Johnson's advice, to sit up nights with Addison, did not mean that to write like Addison was desirable for all men.

The thing to do is to read. That is the way to discover what can be done, and how it can be done. Read. Read. Read. If you are going to write, you cannot read too much good writing. It is the cure for anaemic thinking and for anaemic composition. And from it, unconsciously, you will retain those tricks that are most suited to your personality: for, in the final analysis, style is only saying—what you have to say—as well as it can be said—by you—in your own way! Read well and write hard!

And now let us look at the relation of style and mood, at the use of words, and at the mysteries of successful sentence construction.

In the first place, it seems axiomatic to say that the style of writing in a given story should conform with the mood of that story. But too few are able to understand so apparent a truism. And yet nothing is more contributory to real and lasting success in fiction or any kind of writing. Write in the mood of your story, and keep its stylistic atmosphere consistent.

The secret is surely obvious: choose the right words and choose the right kinds of sentences. If you are writing a grim story, be grim, but not lurid: choose a simple, taut, swift, secretive style. If you are writing a pathetic story, strike a note of sentiment but not of sentimentality: choose a discursive, flowing, ingenuous, open, mellow style. If you are writing a humorous story, be funny but not facetious: choose a leisurely or a racy style, depending on the type of humor. Make the mood and the style conform. This is the teaching of Edgar Allan Poe, and to be convinced of its effectiveness one needs only to read some of the works of this master.

It may be replied, of course, that some writers do not follow this good advice. O. Henry is a notable exception. He obtained some of his best effects by sharp contrast in style and mood. He often joked just before he was about to make his reader weep: and pretended to be intensely solemn in the midst of a huge joke. But, as a general rule, the advice of Poe stands, and should be followed by the beginner.

In short, the mood of the writing controls the particular effect the author wishes to obtain: and the style controls the mood.

Another word of caution, however, just at this point. Be suspicious of your writing at all times: but be especially suspicious when it is marked by fluency and warmth. When you think you are writing finely, you are likely producing nothing but "purple patches". Matthew Arnold called such suspect-writings by another name: he called them "darlings": and his advice was, "Murder your darlings!"

Don't let this eruptive kind of writing alarm you, though. It is merely an indication of adolescence in writing. And it can be cured. If you pile up the adjectives, fuss over the nouns, strive for rhythms, fill out sentences with harmonious but meaningless phrases, then you are in this stage of adolescence. And such pretty writing, fine writing, precious writing, swollen writing, demands the blue scoring pencil. Reduce the inflammation, condense and compress by taking out the adjectives and the adverbs. Think more of what you have to say than of the

way to say it. Remember, first and always, that writing is fundamentally an expression of a thought or an idea, and that a collection of decorative words is often fatal to such an expression.

Avoid the ecstatic style on the one hand, but be equally alert to avoid the commonplace on the other. Beware, most particularly, of *clichés*, because they have become almost meaningless through over-familiarity. Hackneyed expressions are smooth; they slip out easily; they save thought; and that is why they should be avoided like the tax collector. It is not easy to find equivalents, however, and one is always tempted to take a well-worn path rather than try to force a new way. To succumb to such a temptation is to fall by the wayside of failure.

How, then, is the ambitious literary traveller to press forward to the peaks glittering ever before him? The secret of good writing is twofold: proper choice of words and proper choice of sentences. On the one hand, it is necessary to know words and to make every word count. On the other hand, it is equally necessary to know how to combine words into the acknowledged grammatical forms called sentences. Possess a thorough knowledge of these two facets of the problem of style, and success is as certain as the multiplication table. Let us examine the problem in the light of such an admission and in that order: words, and then sentences.

Pick out the word that will give your reader a lift: whoever said that stated a most profound truth, and touched the hem of the garment of excellent writing. Good quality is not to be acquired without a thorough knowledge of the meanings of words that the writer proposes to use. His vocabulary may be large or small, but he will be well advised to know the precise meaning of every word in it, and use his words with precision.

Discussing the use of words, Mr. Albert Payson Trehune, famous American writer of dog stories, once said the same thing with his usual pungency: "Words are the tools of a writer's trade. Until he can use each of them in the right order, and in the right place, and with the right choice of them, and with no needless repetition or excess, he no more has learned that trade of his than has a carpenter who drives seventy nails into one shingle or who puts nine bristling steeples upon a single church."

In his choice of words, the beginner should prefer those that are sanctioned by good writers, and only such as exactly express his ideas. But he must seek for something more than mere purity and correctness of language: it often happens that,

although three or four different words might correctly express his meaning, only one particular word will convey it with full force. That word is the word he must seek out and use. And, to gain vividness, he should choose concrete picture-words and action-words, rather than vague and colorless ones. In this respect, it is well to remember that words and combinations of words may have two meanings: their literal meaning, and a secondary figurative meaning, acquired through custom from the literal. The most perfect example of the composition in which the figurative is rigidly excluded is the ordinary legal document, the dry and uninteresting character of which is proverbial. The hint is surely that the figurative sense is the sense in which most words are most vividly used.

But there is not the time available here to go more deeply into this aspect of words and style. Consult Richard C. Trench's excellent treatise on "Words", which may be had in many cheap editions. Mr. Henry Brett's "Wandering Among Words" will also handsomely repay study. And by hook or by crook you must possess yourself of a good dictionary and Roget's "Thesaurus." It is enough to say, here, that a sense of words can be cultivated at least as easily as the tones of the voice. Good reading, in itself, will cultivate it. If your style is dry and bloodless, read more *belles-lettres*; if it is flat and shrill, read more poetry, especially translation of the Greek classics.

But before we leave this matter of words, there is an important refinement to consider. Some authorities on style contend that style can best be achieved by an exclusive attention to the sound of words, to what is called their "tone color." It is true, to be sure, that the sound of words is important; for example, the sound will often determine which of two synonyms has the right emotional content. But words cannot be emptied of meaning, and used on their tone value alone.

The moment that sound means more than sense, the moment that words in themselves have more appeal than their meanings, that sentence rhythms dominate the idea, the damage to a genuine style begins. Adjectives and adverbs swell out like purple bumps, and fine words which have little vital relation to the idea under observation congest the paragraphs and interfere with the expression of that idea.

There is, however, much to be learned from a regard for the sounds of words: a good ear is an adjunct of a good style. In writing, watch out for harshnesses, for sibilants, for hard-to-tongue expressions, for words whose articulate noises are in-

compatible with the mood of the story—booming words in a quiet story, sweet words in a zestful story, and so on. And by all means read aloud to yourself what you have written: if it comes out of your mouth freely and easily, and sticks close to the proper expression of the idea under your attention, you may be sure that you have your face turned in the direction of the mountain peaks of quality writing.

So much—and a very inadequate much, for books could be written on the subject—so much for words. Now what about putting those words into sentences? There are two important features to consider here: sentence construction, and figurative language.

You will be wise to pursue to their bitter conclusions any grammars and compositions you can lay your hands upon—you will never know too much about sentence construction. And you will be wise to read both fiction and non-fiction analytically, and try to discover how various writers use sentences and what effects they get from their physical structures alone. For instance, hard, grim, blunt, realistic effects can be had from a proper use of short sentences: and pathetic, romantic, mellow, sentimental effects can be had from a proper use of long sentences. Moreover, short sentences speed action, and long ones slow it down.

But there is more in the use of sentences than that. To begin with, there is the superficial aspect of weaving any kind of sentences into model paragraphs, especially in descriptive passages. Paragraphs are not, or should not be, constructed haphazardly: there is definite pattern for a model paragraph, which should open with what is called a topic sentence. Here is an example which will reward study:

The Rockies have neither the individuality nor the beauty of the Alps. They stretch in sweeping ranges where the single mountain is lost in the chain, and their forms are more rugged, their slopes more bare, their peaks less graceful, than the snowy Alpine summits which carry green meadows on their breasts and tower into single pinnacles. The Rockies expand the imagination, the Alps refine and heighten it.

In the first place, the leading topic sentence is obvious. In the next place, one notes that it is divided into "individuality" and "beauty", and that these are expanded and illustrated by the use of detail in the second sentence. And finally, the third sentence shows the result of conditions. Model paragraphs are all constructed on this three-part skeleton: state, explain and

illustrate, and give the effect. You cannot miss lucid and clear descriptive writing if you follow this simple outline.

But even beyond this superficial aspect of weaving sentences into model paragraphs, there is the more subtle and elusive aspect of what can be done by the various kinds of sentences—and by that one does not mean merely simple, complex and compound sentences. One means the divisions that rhetoric makes of sentence construction; which can give the appeal of variety, which can adapt ideas to effects. It is important to know just what can be done, for example, by the use of inversion, by balanced sentences, by periodic sentences, by parallel construction, and so on.

Any good text on rhetoric and composition may be consulted here—indeed, should be consulted. There is not the time, now, alas, to go into the subject as thoroughly as is necessary for successful writing. But if you are skeptical of the utility of such study, an illustration may be given to convince you of your mistake. Let us take, for example, parallel construction.

It is often of value, within a single sentence, to write groups of phrases and of clauses expressing thoughts that are markedly similar or which stand in the same relation. In the whole paragraph it frequently happens that complete sentences can be similarly related. It is a decided advantage to write such phrases, clauses, or sentences, in the same grammatical form. By so doing it is possible to call attention to the similarity of the thoughts. This gives vividness and clarity, and makes it easier for the reader to understand the passage. Such construction is called parallel construction.

Let me be quite explicit. Supposing you write this sentence: "Seeing the auto approaching, he sprang from the sidewalk, dashed forward, and the prostrate child was saved." It appears to be perfectly logical, well-written and understandable. But wait a minute. Supposing you wrote it this way: "Seeing the auto, he sprang from the sidewalk, dashed forward, and saved the prostrate child." Here you have an example of parallel construction: note how it improves the idea conveyed in the first sentence—it is more simple, more direct, and more compelling.

You simply cannot afford to overlook sentence construction, if you want to achieve a distinctive style in keeping with the mood and idea of your writing.

Nor can you overlook figurative language and get away with it—from the metaphor to the metonymy, including the

simile, the personification, the apostrophe, and so forth: knowledge of these is of the utmost importance, in acquiring a keen vigorous arresting style of writing.

Of all the figures in common use, the metaphor is perhaps the most valuable. Its office is not merely to heighten the beauty of an expression; it also renders concrete that which, without it, might be abstract. Furthermore, it can lend force to propositions which would otherwise fall weakly; it can make vivid and impress upon the memory things which, if stated baldly, would soon be forgotten. In very truth, it conveys more to the mind than the mere statement of fact.

The point to be made clear here, however, is the choice of figures of speech, particularly the metaphor. As part of the attempt to keep style in relation to the mood of a story, the figure of speech should be kept in relation to the setting. That is, if you are writing a story about the North and wish to describe the strength of a character, it would not be in keeping to use the simile, "He was as strong as a lion" or the metaphor "He was a lion for strength." There are no lions in the North Country. It would be better to say "He was as strong as the frost that splits the mighty rocks on winter nights." That is vivid, and it is natural to the color of the story.

Concluding this aspect of style, it may be necessary to give a few cautioning suggestions about the use of the various figures of speech. The amateur should beware of over-indulgence. Writing in which the figure is superabundant can be likened to a dinner consisting of nothing but spices. The excessive use of figurative language savors of affectation, and weakens rather than strengthens style.

And not only should figures of speech be related to the employed setting. To be intelligible, they should not be drawn from objects about which the reader may know little. Such analogies tend to cloud rather than clear the idea. Overworked figures, like overworked quotations, should be avoided. And finally, to be in good taste, figures should not be drawn from unpleasant or repulsive objects, unless, perhaps, the story is definitely weird and horrific.

Before going on to the next topic I want to consider under style, it might not be a bad idea to drop a remark or two about punctuation, for the mechanics of punctuation are adjuncts to quality writing. And again I can do little better than direct you to any competent composition. Mr. Huntingdon's "Elements of English Composition" is perhaps as good as most. It is certainly lucid, and is packed with illustrative matter.



Punctuation, however, is an explosive topic. There are two modern tendencies, and as usual they are diametrically opposed: one group of writers wants more punctuation marks, another wants fewer! The situation is clearly appraised by Mr. Thornton Wilder in his Introduction to Miss Gertrude Stein's latest book "The Geographical History of America, or the Relation of Human Nature to the Human Mind."

Mr. Wilder says: "A great many authors have lately become impatient with the inadequacy of punctuation. Many think that new signs should be invented; signs to imitate the variation in human speech; signs for emphasis; signs for word-groupings. Miss Stein, however, feels that such indications harm rather than help the practice of reading. They impair the collaborative participation of the reader." And then Mr. Wilder quotes Miss Stein: "A comma by helping you along, holding your coat for you and putting on your shoes, keeps you from living your life as actively as you should live it. . . . A long complicated sentence should force itself upon you, make yourself know yourself knowing it."

Here you have the two extremes. The wise amateur, however, will choose a middle way. He will write simply, and he will use the traditional punctuation marks to make his meaning crystal clear. When he can do this without too much effort he will have formed his punctuation style, and will realize that frills are unnecessary—are, indeed, harmful.

And that brings us to the conclusion of the problem of style. The whole problem can be stated in two words: Be simple!

Simplicity is the keynote of all quality writing; and simplicity arises out of control, out of a refusal to pander to glamor.

The stark truth is that more pieces of writing are rejected because they are overwritten than because they are underwritten. In his striving for style, the tyro seems to forget that the finest writing is always the simplest. To put one's idea into the fewest and the most beautifully simple words is an art.

Voltaire said the same thing slightly differently when he spoke of clarity. And his injunction to avoid fuzziness is full of wisdom: don't see and describe things through the haze of sentimentalism. Be precise and therefore simple. De Maupassant is the very soul of precision, of conciseness. Take his story *Deux Amis*: it is simple, direct, brief: there is not a lurid adjective in it: but behind its restrained pathos there is a tremendous power.

In fact, De Maupassant is always simple and unaffected.

Conciseness and clarity are his strong points: he has no use for the frills of purple verbiage which delay the progress of a story and obscure the central idea; and from this adherence to simplicity arises his technique of stripping his writing down to its bare bones of plot, of characterization and of action.

It is not always wise to close a discussion on negative notes, but perhaps an illustration or two of how verbiage ruins writing will not come amiss. George Moore, noted as novelist and memoir-writer, was not altogether so successful in his translations from the Greek. Here is a comparison from his *Daphnis and Chloe*. The original reads: "Sweet the sound of grasshoppers and scent of fruits, pleasant the bleating of flocks." Mr. Moore rendered this beautiful passage: "When the voice of the cicada is heard in the branches, when the bleating of the yews tells of the richness of the fields, and the perfumed air is delightful to breathe..."

There you see what circumlocution, verbiage, and so-called "fine" writing does to simplicity and directness: "Sweet the sound of grasshoppers and scent of fruits, pleasant the bleating of flocks"! That is hard to beat.

Another amusing example, with the author poking his sly fun at circumlocution, comes from Charles Reade's novel, *Peg Woffington*. In the opening chapter, Reade explains how Triplet sat down to write a tale of "blood and bombast." It is really quite drole. The fellow took his seat at the deal table with some alacrity, for he had recently made a discovery—how to write. There was nothing in it:

First, think in as homely a way as you can; next shove your pen under the thought, and lift it by polysyllables to the true level of fiction. This insures common sense in your ideas, which does pretty well for a basis, and elegance to the dress they wear. Triplet then casting his eyes round, in search of such actual circumstances as could be incorporated on this plane with fiction, began to work thus:

*Triplet's Facts.*

A farthing dip is on the table.  
It wanted snuffing.  
He jumped up and snuffed it  
with his fingers. Burned his  
fingers, and swore a little.

*Triplet's Fiction.*

A solitary candle cast its pale  
gleams around.  
Its elongated wick betrayed  
an owner steeped in oblivion.  
He rose languidly and trimmed  
it with an instrument that  
he had by his side for that  
purpose, and muttered a  
silent ejaculation.

The objection to Triplet's fiction is obvious. He is quite at liberty to modify the facts a little, but his circumlocution—taking ten words to say what could be expressed in five—is fatal. In truth, the cataloguing of Triplet's facts is what is to be aimed at: the attempt of Triplet to improve upon them is what is to be avoided.

You can, in this respect, do little better than study the Bible as literature. As a text book of perfectly concise diction, as an example of literary simplicity, it has no equal. Even the glories of the Koran cannot compare with it.

Like the proverbial shrew, this seems to be going on for ever and ever. But this is about all we can consider. There is only one more point. The questioning amateur will no doubt be itching to ask, Can a story depend only upon the style in which it is written? The answer is, Yes. But, as you may expect, the style must be one of super-excellence. An illustration of such writing, which is nothing if not the work of genius, is to be found in Katherine Mansfield's short stories.

Most of her stories are apparently formless. They begin anywhere and end anywhere. *Prelude* tells us how a family move from one house to another. It starts: "There was not an inch of room for Lottie and Kizia in the buggy." (They are the children.) It ends with Kizia setting a very dirty calico cat upon the dressing-table, and sticking the top of a cream-jar over its ear. "Now look at yourself," said she sternly:

The calico cat was so overcome by the sight that it toppled over backwards and bumped and bumped on the floor. And the top of the cream jar flew through the air and rolled like a penny in a round on the linoleum—and did not break. But for Kizia it had broken the moment it flew through the air, and she picked it up, hot all over, and put it back on the dressing-table.

Then she tiptoed away, far too quickly and airily.

There is little plot in the story, apparently no purpose: but by what is left unsaid, by what is half-implicit, by stylistic indications subtle as a shadow, the reader obtains a richer conception of the characters than could have been achieved by the most elaborate description. And yet—this is important—the stories are anything but formless. They are not perfectly woven diagrams, like a spider's web; but they have structure, structure governed by the adjustments of life itself. And this structure is exploited by the indefinable but profoundly

gripping style in which they are written—a style, by the bye, that is simplicity in itself.

Another illustration may help to keep this kind of writing before your mind. In a few sentences of understatement, Miss Mansfield gives the whole tragedy of the "Life of Ma Parker", the charwoman:

It was cold in the street. There was a wind like ice. People went fitting by, very fast; the men walked like scissors; the women trod like cats. And nobody knew—nobody cared. Even if she broke down, if at last, after all these years, she were to cry, she'd find herself in the lock-up as like as not. . . . If she could only cry now, cry for a long time, over everything, beginning with her first place and the cruel cook, going to the doctor's, and then the seven little ones, death of her husband, the children's leaving her, and the years of misery that led up to Lennie. . . . Oh, wasn't there anywhere where she could hide and keep herself to herself and stay as long as she liked, not disturbing anybody, and nobody worrying her? Wasn't there anywhere in the world where she could have her cry out—at last?

Ma Parker stood, looking up and down. The icy wind blew out her apron into a balloon. And now it began to rain. There was nowhere.

One way of labelling this discerning style is to say that it gives a sign of reserve power. Miss Mansfield employs other terms. She says: "I hate the sort of license that English people give themselves to spread over and flop and roll about. I feel as fastidious as though I wrote with acid."

In this case, it is a style which springs from an attitude towards life: or as Mary Colum notes, "It is the translation into language of an inner rhythm of the mind, an inner rhythm which is the essence of the writer's personality, gifts, passions, emotions, psychic energy." And be assured that such is not acquired overnight.