35. Style

Jonathan Buehl
The Ohio State University

Technical communicators often focus on style—the word- and sentence-level choices directing how readers will receive and understand a text. For example, revising to remove distracting "wordiness," focusing on action verbs in instructions, conforming citations to a style guide, placing information at the ends of sentences to create cohesion, or writing in registers that either signal expertise (e.g., scientific writing) or communicate expertise to non-experts (e.g., "***plain language***"). However, style is more than close attention to grammar, syntax, and vocabulary, as Dan Jones (1998) noted in a technical communication textbook dedicated entirely to style:

> Style affects almost all other elements of writing. Style is your choices of words, phrases, clauses, and sentences and how you connect these sentences. Style is the unity and coherence of your paragraphs and larger segments. Style is your tone—your attitude toward your subject, your audience, and yourself—in what you write. (p. 3)

This chapter considers the complexities of style in technical and professional communication (TPC) by examining multiple ways scholars have defined style, by identifying stylistic traditions in TPC, and by considering how style connects with TPC issues related to ***knowledge***, ***ethics***, justice, and inclusion.

Categorical definitions have considered both the categories to which style belongs and how style itself can be categorized. Style is one of the so-called canons of ***rhetoric***—traditionally, the five activities constituting rhetorical performance. The others are invention (identifying arguments), arrangement (organizing arguments), memory (remembering a text and making it memorable), and delivery (the material performance of a text). Rhetorical theorists continue to discuss and question the boundaries between canonical categories, approaching them not as steps in a rigid process (first we invent, then we arrange, then we choose a style, etc.) but as interrelated, co-constitutive activities. For example, Jeanne Fahnestock (2002, 2004) has demonstrated how rhetorical figures in scientific communication serve as more than mere ornamental flourishes—they are structures used to develop, epitomize, and reinforce lines of reasoning (see also Graves, 2005). Similarly, Paul Butler's (2008) term "inventional style" acknowledges the fuzzy boundaries and connections between generating ideas (invention) and choosing the words to express them (style). The TPC takeaway is that style is not just a late-stage activity (e.g., part of copyediting or proofreading); rather, it is

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an integral aspect of communication requiring attention at different stages of a project.

Although canon-based approaches focus on the taxonomies to which style belongs, other definitions classify styles into operational types. For example, Nora Bacon (2015) identifies five ways people invoke "style" to describe particular aspects of language use:

- Style 1—Individual Style: "the sound of [an author's] voice on the page" (p. 292)
- Style 2—House Style: the conventions articulated and enforced by a community of editors to achieve consistency; e.g., MLA style, APA style, or a style codified in a company's style guide or a project's style sheet
- Style 3—Usage: a stylistic focus on linguistic etiquette; e.g., injunctions to be precise with such distinctions as "effect" vs. "affect" or to avoid passive voice
- Style 4—Plain Style: an approach privileging clarity and conciseness; e.g., the advice of William Strunk, Jr. and E.B. White's *The Elements of Style*
- Style 5—Elaborated Style: an approach focused on "sentence variety, syntactic dexterity, and artfulness," such as the creative use of rhetorical figures (p. 292)

To Bacon's list, I add a sixth variant of style invoked in TPC contexts: Style 6—Structural Style or Technologized Style: the digital features facilitating how computers present ***content***, such as Microsoft Word styles or the style sheets that transform XML ***structured*** content into deliverables. For example, an XML transformation might specify that top-level headings should appear in Times font for a PDF but Arial font for a web page presenting the same content. Style 6 also highlights a point relevant to Bacon's other types of style: Style includes choices about words themselves as well as formatting, ***design***, and other nonverbal elements that nonetheless shape how words are perceived.

Other means of categorizing styles focus on the occasions of their use. For example, classical rhetorical theorists identified three types or "levels" of style, each associated with a specific purpose:

- the low or plain style, to be used to instruct an ***audience***
- the middle style, to be used to move or persuade an audience
- the high or grand style, to be used to please an audience

These levels persist in such contemporary stylistic distinctions as "colloquial," "standard," and "formal" (Fahnestock, 2011, p. 81). As Russell Willerton (2015) explains, plain style has long been associated with technical communication, with calls to use "plain English" for expert and non-expert audiences dating back to

the 14th century (p. 3). It is important to note that the boundaries between these levels are not hard lines—even for Cicero, the Roman orator often credited with the leveling concept (von Albrecht, 2003, pp. 20-25). Moreover, these levels are not hierarchical—i.e., a grand style is not qualitatively better than a plain style. As Michael von Albrecht (2003) observes, the real innovation of the levels approach is its recognition of "a close interrelation between subject and style" (p. 22).

The idea of stylistic "levels" took a quantitative turn in the 20th century, when researchers developed so-called readability formulas to rate texts for reader comprehension. For example, the Gunning Fog Index and the Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level test calculate the "grade level" of a passage (e.g., a score of 9 indicates a ninth-grade reading level). The Flesch Reading Ease test assigns a score ranging from 0 to 100, with higher scores associated with greater readability. Although they all use the same metrics (sentences, words, and syllables), each varies in how those features factor into the readability calculation. Table 35.1 demonstrates how these formulas evaluate passages. The first example, an abstract from a scientific article, has grade-level scores of 18.2 and 17.4 (i.e., graduate school) and a low reading ease score of 13.4 ("very difficult"). The other examples are from websites written for the general ***public***. They present similar content on how COVID-19 spreads, but they demonstrate lower grade levels and higher reading ease scores.

Readability formulas can help less-experienced writers focus on word- and sentence-level revisions; however, relying on readability scores as indications of "good" writing is potentially problematic (Selzer, 1981, 1983; Redish, 2000; Redish & Selzer, 1985). Indeed, using shorter words and more-but-shorter sentences will not necessarily result in a better text. For example, if only the italicized parenthetical statements were deleted from the second example in Table 35.1, the Flesch-Kincaid grade level would drop from 15.2 to 13.2; however, important clarifying information would be lost. Janice (Ginny) Redish (2000) has proposed that usability testing (also known as ***user experience*** testing) is a better approach for assessing reader comprehension.

Another approach for defining style focuses on valued attributes of discourse. Classical Greek theorists identified five "virtues" of style: clarity, correctness, vividness (*enargeia*), appropriateness, and ornateness (Burton, 2007b). Other theorists valued other virtues; for example, the Byzantine theorist Hermogenes included grandeur, beauty, rapidity, character, sincerity, and force along with clarity in his list of stylistic virtues (Burton, 2007a). Similar values-based typologies of style have long been commonplace in professional communication textbooks (Carbone, 1994). For example, Sada A. Harbarger's (1923) *English for Engineers*—which Robert J. Connors (1982) identifies as the first modern technical communication textbook—promoted three virtues for engineering writing: clearness, conciseness, and emphasis (Harbarger, 1923, p. 23). Similar lists persist today and are often expressed through the common mnemonic device of "the [insert number] Cs" of effective writing: for example, clarity, coherence, conciseness (Wasko, 2011) or consideration, clarity, conciseness, coherence, correctness, confidence

(Howe Writing Initiative, n.d.). (See Carbone [1994] for the long history of "the Cs" mnemonic in business writing texts.) Stylistic "virtues" are often presented as universal traits; however, they are scalar and contingent values. For example, a passage offering an appropriate level of detail for one context might be too wordy for others. Similarly, a maximally concise passage might be considered curt or even rude by some readers.

Another traditional approach is to name styles based on sets of features. For example, the "plain language" style is a specific variation of plain style that emerged from the plain language movement (Mazur, 2000; Willerton, 2015, this volume). It is often contrasted with bureaucratic style (Shuy, 1998), which needlessly obfuscates ***information*** through unnecessarily complex phrasing, insider vocabulary, and unclear agency. Conversely, plain language principles regarding organization (e.g., "address separate audiences separately"), verbs (e.g., "use the active voice"), nouns (e.g., "don't turn verbs into nouns"), sentences (e.g., "keep subject, verb, and object close together"), and paragraphs (e.g., "cover only one point in each paragraph") are meant to increase the chances that readers can find, understand, and use the information in a document (Plain Language Action and Information Network, 2011). Like plain language, writing with "you attitude" attends to the needs of the reader through such strategies as preferring "you" as a sentence subject when addressing what readers can gain or must do; however, it also protects the reader's ego through careful attention to avoiding negative language (Hotchkiss and Drew, 1916; Locker, 1995).

Although scientific style's purposeful use of passive voice and nominalizations might seem like the antithesis of plain language, the two styles are otherwise compatible (see Gopen & Swan, 1990; Green, 2013). Moreover, the "grammatical problems" that make scientific language challenging for non-experts—such as lexical density, complex noun phrases (e.g., "severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus"), interlocking definitions, and implicit taxonomies—are actually discursive features that have evolved to facilitate communication between experts who share a common base of knowledge (Halliday, 1993a, 1993b). This "scientific writing" for expert readers is often contrasted with "science writing," which can refer to a range of styles used to accommodate ***science*** for non-experts (see Buehl, 2013; Fahnestock, 1998).

Although categorical and descriptive approaches can help technical communicators understand style, they do not address the range of epistemological and ethical entailments related to both definitions of style and stylistic choices. Approaches to style vary in their epistemological assumptions about the relationships between language, knowledge, and reality. Linguists Geoffrey Leech and Michael Short (2007) identify three main philosophies:

- "Dualism": style is merely the manner in which content is expressed
- "Monism": style and content are inseparable
- "Pluralism": language simultaneously performs different functions

Table 35.1. Comparing Popular Readability Formulas*

Passage 1 (Expert Audience): Severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) has spread rapidly throughout the world since the first cases of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) were observed in December 2019 in Wuhan, China. It has been suspected that infected persons who remain asymptomatic play a significant role in the ongoing pandemic, but their relative number and effect have been uncertain. The authors sought to review and synthesize the available evidence on asymptomatic SARS-CoV-2 infection. Asymptomatic persons seem to account for approximately 40% to 45% of SARS-CoV-2 infections, and they can transmit the virus to others for an extended period, perhaps longer than 14 days. Asymptomatic infection may be associated with subclinical lung abnormalities, as detected by computed tomography. Because of the high risk for silent spread by asymptomatic persons, it is imperative that testing programs include those without symptoms. To supplement conventional diagnostic testing, which is constrained by capacity, cost, and its one-off nature, innovative tactics for public health surveillance, such as crowdsourcing digital wearable data and monitoring sewage sludge, might be helpful. (**Source:** Oran & Topal, 2020. "Prevalence of Asymptomatic SARS-CoV-2 Infection: A Narrative Review.") **Gunning Fog Index (Grade Level): 18.4 | Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level: 17.4 | Flesch Reading Ease: 13.3**
Passage 2 (Public Audience - General): COVID-19 spreads mainly from person to person through respiratory droplets produced when an infected person coughs, sneezes, talks, or raises their voice *(e.g., while shouting, chanting, or singing)*. These droplets can land in the mouths or noses of people who are nearby or possibly be inhaled into the lungs. Recent studies show that a significant portion of individuals with COVID-19 lack symptoms *(are "asymptomatic")* and that even those who eventually develop symptoms *(are "pre-symptomatic")* can transmit the virus to others before showing symptoms. (**Source:** Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020. "About Cloth Face Coverings." Emphasis added.) **Gunning Fog Index (Grade Level): 10.5 | Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level: 15.2 | Flesch Reading Ease: 35**
Passage 3 (Public Audience - Parents): Most commonly, the virus that causes COVID-19 enters people's bodies when it's on their hands and they touch their mouths, noses or eyes. A virus is so tiny that you can't see it. This is why it's important to wash your hands often and try not to touch your mouth, nose or eyes. If someone who has the infection coughs or sneezes on you from a close distance — closer than six feet — then that also can spread the virus. (**Source:** Mayo Clinic, 2020. "How to Talk to Your Kids about COVID-19") **Gunning Fog Index (Grade Level): 10.1 | Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level: 7.6 | Flesch Reading Ease: 75.4**

** Each of the passages describes similar content on the spread of COVID-19 but for very different audiences—scientific experts, the general public, and parents of small children. Each passage has been scored according to three popular readability formulas:*

- *Gunning Fog Index = 0.4 [(total words / total sentences) + 100 (complex words / total words)]*
  - *"Complex words": Words with more than three syllables (excluding proper nouns, "familiar jargon," and compound words)*
- *Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level = 0.39 (total words / total sentences) + 11.8 (total syllables / total words – 15.59)*
- *Flesch Reading Ease Score = 206.835 – 1.015 (total words / total sentences) – 84.6 (total syllables / total words)*

Understanding these distinctions is important because technical communicators might encounter people with particularly rigid views of language; for example, an "objective" style represents objective thinking.

Style is often discussed in relation to ethics, the politics of language, and relationships between language, power, and identity. Although TPC discourses are often regarded as objective or neutral, a seemingly neutral style does not necessarily mean a text is ideologically neutral or ethical. As Steven B. Katz (1992) demonstrated, the Nazis wrote clear and precise ***documentation*** of their technologies of genocide. Similarly, Nigerian military officers wrote in precise, audience-appropriate vocabulary about murdering innocent civilians to benefit an oil company (Agboka, 2018). As Michael J. Zerbe (2007) has observed, scientific discourse is the dominant "power" discourse of our time, and thus, it is crucial for students to be able to read, write, and critique it. However, we also have an obligation to help students recognize and navigate stylistic diversity without marginalizing specific dialects (Conference on College Composition and Communication, 1974; Wilson & Crow, 2017). In TPC classes, we often task students with performing styles typical for contemporary workplaces; however, "standard" styles should not be held out as objectively standard or ideal. Rather, they are sets of discursive moves that have become conventionalized as appropriate and expected for particular contexts. And "standard" conventions evolve as contexts evolve.

Consider, for example, shifts in conventions regarding gender and language. It was once acceptable to use masculine pronouns and male terms generically (e.g., "Each applicant must sign his name."). Most style guides now promote the use of sex-inclusive language ("Each applicant should sign his or her name.") or gender-neutral language ("Applicants must sign their names."). However, specific guidance on removing gender bias varies widely. For example, *The IBM Style Guide* (2012) discourages using plural pronouns as gender-neutral replacements for singular nouns ("Each applicant must sign their name."). The *Microsoft Writing Style Guide* (2020) states, "it's OK to use a plural pronoun (*they, their,* or *them*) in generic references to a single person" if there's no other option, while the *Mailchimp Style Guide* (2020) explicitly permits the singular "they." As Allen Smith (2020) observes, more and more companies are updating employee handbooks with gender-neutral pronouns to make these documents more inclusive of nonbinary individuals. Although approving of the singular "they" is the more common stylistic change, some companies (including the financial firm Goldman Sachs [2019]) openly support other singular nonbinary pronouns (ze / zer / zirs or ze / zem / zes). Such changes in stylistic conventions have ***social justice*** implications for professional communication and can support commitments to inclusion.

Calls for language diversity are other sites where style intersects with inclusive communication practices. As the field expands its understanding of the sites of TPC activity, the range of styles that "count" as technical and professional communication are also expanding. For example, in describing the possibilities of hip-hop pedagogies for TPC, Marcos del Hierro (2018) observes how rap songs

can communicate technical information through hip-hop styles. Krystle Danuz (2014) noted how Spanglish—the often-disparaged dialectal blend of Spanish and English—can actually be more effective than writing in a "standard" professional style when communicating technical information to some multilingual readers. As Temptaous T. Mckoy (2019) has demonstrated, even TPC scholarship can be performed effectively and insightfully through a diverse range of styles, which for Mckoy include "traditional" academic prose as well as African American Vernacular English (AAVE) and ***multimodal*** trap-music videos. In short, recognizing linguistic and stylistic diversity is entirely compatible with the core goal of TPC (as a field and as a ***profession***)—to share expertise effectively with diverse audiences.

To conclude with a stylistic flourish, just as style affects all aspects of writing, all aspects of writing affect style. Categorical, descriptive, operational, epistemological, ethical, and inclusive perspectives on style can help TPC scholars, students, and practitioners make meaningful choices to craft effective and ethical texts.

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