Style: Definition, Separation, and the Teachable

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> *We should confirm for our students that style has something to do with better communication, adding as it does a certain technicolor to otherwise black-and-white language. But going beyond this "better communication" approach, we should also say that style is the proof of a human being's individuality; that style is a writer's revelation of himself; that through style, attitudes and values are communicated; that indeed our manner is a part of our message. We can remind students of Aristotle's observation, "character is the making of choices," and point out that since style, by its very nature, is the art of selection, how we choose says something about who we are.* (Weathers 144)

In the excerpt above, Winston Weathers points out the personal nature of style and the idea of choice, as well as the educator's responsibility to illustrate to the student the importance of developing something more colorful than a plainly stated form of writing. Emails, electronic postings, memos, proposals business letters, software instructions, and web pages too seldom benefit from a well-crafted tri-colon, an elegant metaphor, or the rhythm of alliteration. Students, in a sense, are a reflection of America's business technology. Although many may not voice their concerns, they want concrete definitions to what and verifiable answers to why. They want to know—What are the deliverables? Why is a semi-colon better than a period here? Why is this not a good word choice? Why should this sentence/phrase/paragraph/section be moved? Why can't you understand what I mean? Why are you "messin' with my style"?

Before effectively teaching style, we must first be able to define it, and defining it involves limiting its scope. Moreover, to teach style fairly and to help students maintain their writing identities, we must distinguish it from personal voice—that writing personality which is an intimate and individual part of each writer. Finally, in the composition classroom, matters of style must be clearly explainable, which means defining "good" style is important for our students.

Classical and Contemporary Definitions

Aristotle devotes eleven chapters (2-4 and 5-12) of Book 3 *On Rhetoric* to a discussion of style or *lexis*. He includes diction, word choice, and sentence composition in this discussion. Near the beginning of Book 3, he defines style as the "virtue" of clarity, as an element of rhetoric which is "neither flat nor above the dignity of the subject" (221). It is a strategy of choices that strongly considers the rhetorical situation. Thus, for Aristotle, good style in rhetoric models the qualities of conciseness and appropriate choice. His use of the word "flat" also suggests attention to the life and liveliness of writing.

Cicero describes good style as a virtue, one that distinguishes good writers from bad with harmony, grace, artistry, and polish. His primary focus rests on elegance in oratory; however, he emphasizes the importance of knowledge over stylistic choices, warning students of rhetoric that "if the subject matter be not comprehended and mastered by the speaker," this elegance is valueless (207). Although he doesn't directly address clarity, as does Aristotle in the aforementioned passage, he does suggest that a polished style is ineffectual if the rhetor does not clearly convey the essence of the subject.

Correctness, lucidity, and elegance constitute Quintilian's perspective on style. Although he does not give a direct definition of style, Book 1 of *Institutio Oratoria* devotes much discussion to diction, maxims, aphorisms, amplification, and correctness (which, he says, belongs to the grammarians). In Chapter 5 of this book, he hints at a definition, saying that "all grammar has three kinds of excellence, to be correct, perspicuous, and elegant" (35), echoing Cicero's ideas about style.

These classical rhetoricians all agree that style must include clarity, propriety, and elegance. All three define clear style in terms of appropriateness according to subject matter, occasion, and audience. Elegance, for the classical rhetoricians, results from an appropriate level of language and a wise use of ornament as rhetorical strategy. Additionally, correctness is considered a province of style, but arrangement is a separate matter, as is content and form. One could argue that arrangement or organization is a stylistic concern because it can imbue writing with elegance through focus and cohesion. Arrangement can also reflect personal choice.

Aristotle, Cicero, and Quintilian defined style in terms of its functions. They generated taxonomies of stylistic devices and classifications of language levels that support a perspective of style as a number of rhetorical enhancements and a level of gracefulness.

Of the contemporary definitions of style, Richard Ohmann's is one of the broadest—"A style is a way of writing" (135). Style, for Ohmann simply means that another writer would have written it in a different way. For him, the boundaries are not so discernible; rather, style is born out of "intuition." He includes matters of correctness and arrangement in the realm of style, but says "though syntax seems to be the central determinant of style, it is admittedly not the whole" (160). This is a departure from Aristotle, Cicero, and Quintilian who placed arrangement into its own canon.

Louis T. Milic directly contradicts Ohmann, arguing that "style must be defined in a way that its boundary with content can be clearly distinguished" (166). Although he agrees with Ohmann's concept of individual choice as central to stylistics, he finds Ohmann's metaphysical approach worthless for what he believes is the necessary quantification of stylistic criticism. He advises reading Aristotle's *Poetics* to see a clear separation of content and stylistics (174-175).

In a Rhetoric for Writing Teachers, Erica Lindemann acknowledges broad definitions of style such as that of Richard Ohmann, but for the purposes of those who teach writing, she more narrowly defines style in the classroom as a choice of words which reflects clarity, emphasis, specificity, and variety and which also considers audience, subject, and purpose (124). In planning a pedagogical approach, theory must convert readily into practice or it is useless, except as an analytic or descriptive aid.

Nevin Laib applies theory to the development and improvement of personal writing style in his textbook, *Rhetoric and Style: Strategies for Advanced Writers.* He defines style as the "external expression of your values and beliefs, your personal or social rhetoric" (21). He maintains that those values and beliefs are expressed in elements of grammar, clarity, self-expression and content and also that writers must manipulate those elements to convey a style that establishes him or her as an "admirable" person (21). His textbook offers advice and exercises for creating this persona in the student's writing, while admitting that no one approach will reach every member of an audience.

Most contemporary rhetoricians define style in terms of its boundaries. The disagreement seems to be where those boundaries lie. As Laib suggests above, choice and individual style also become part of the definition. Moreover, most contemporary rhetoricians

concern themselves with style as it applies to pedagogy, which explains the contemporary impulse to limit, verify, and evaluate (and I include myself here). Style for contemporaries can be more concerned with concision than with ornament, which was Cicero's primary stylistic focus. Teaching style today has become less about the manipulation of tropes and schemes than it is about editing for clarity and concision. The anthology, *Rhetoric: Concepts, Definitions, Boundaries,* describes historical perspectives on style from Aristotle to George Campbell and distills the current changes in stylistic focus in this way:

> Today, Enlightenment doctrines of plain style have so influenced our essayist prose that teaching style is often reduced to teaching editing skills. Yet the concerns of the postmodern age have also rekindled interest in metaphor as a way to generate multiple perspectives on the subject matter at hand. (Covino and Jolliffe 88)

A synthesis of both the classical and contemporary definitions as described above might result in the following description: Style is using language clearly and elegantly to convey meaning in a manner appropriate to audience, situation, and subject matter. However, this definition also needs to convey individual choice, both in respect to the myriad of stylistic options and personal voice. I have included the word *elegance* in the definition, even though it is an abstract idea, because elegance was an important component for classical rhetoricians, such as Cicero and Quintilian. Also, because of its subjective nature, the concept of elegance allows for flexibility in definitional boundaries.

The difficulty in an absolute definition is embedded in the individual's freedom of choice. Style manifests who the individual is—the attitude and values a writer has concerning a certain topic and an individual's expressions conveying hierarchies of emphasis. Nevin Laib, in his textbook, *Rhetoric and Style: Strategies for Advanced Writers,* claims that an individual's attitude and values can be maintained, while personal expression of those attitudes and values can be improved in a way that demonstrates the writer's admirable persona to the target audience (1-3). Pedagogical approaches must avoid over-prescription to avoid limiting the personal style and to avoid producing assembly-line writers who write correctly, but whose writing is devoid of values and attitudes. So, the question is how do we separate the teachable from the personal style for the purpose of helping students improve their reception by the audience, while maintaining the integrity of personal style?

Separating the Teachable from the Un-teachable Personal Style

Personal voice is an abstract and difficult notion to define, just as the whole notion of style is. Nevertheless, at its core personal voice is the style that emerges in a writer's work—intended or not—appearing through the selection of topic and the attitude toward that topic and its constituent parts. It is a certain choice of vocabulary and sentence structure. It is the selection, the emphasis, and the arrangement of certain information. All—except writer's attitude and values concerning a topic—in theory, cross into the domain of the teachable. Cleanly separating un-teachable personal voice from teachable style is impossible. Areas that define personal style, but that also have a potential for development, persist. Another problem with the teachable is that developmental criticism must be clearly justified to the student to effect real change. "Because it is convention" works sometimes, but explaining why a change is sound

rhetorical strategy or what meaning is conveyed more clearly justifies stylistic suggestions and criticism.

A student writes, "Today's music is more creative than music of 30 years ago." Stylistic criticism might address the faulty parallelism with a suggestion like the following: "Music of today is more creative than music of 30 years ago." However, the following parallelism suggestion—"Today's music is more creative that yesterday's music"—might be interfering with personal attitude. Although more concise, the second suggestion might interfere with the student's perspective concerning time. Maybe yesterday is ten years ago to the 18 to 20 year-old student. Maybe he or she especially despises the music from thirty years ago—music the student may not appreciate because it represents parental music in particular. The danger here is that while giving stylistic advice, an instructor may actually cross that fuzzy boundary from the teachable to the personal.

Perhaps we might suggest spelling the number 30 in the sentence above, rather than using figures, but can we definitively answer why—beyond a rule in a particular composition handbook? Students want a sound reason. They are beyond the "Because I said so" phase. A reasonable explanation would have to include why it is a sound rhetorical strategy—its effect on audience. The student may have chosen the number because it has fewer keystrokes, it looks better, or that's the way another teacher or handbook taught them. This stylistic advice is clearly not supportable as are many rules of convention.

While most errors in punctuation, syntax, and grammar are explicit and criticism is easily justifiable, other style choices are not. For effectively critiquing choices which are not specifically incorrect and justifiable, we should ask students what meaning they are trying to convey implicitly and explicitly and what reaction they expect from their audience. Only then can we understand their rhetorical goals and fairly give suggestions for improvement without tampering with their personal choice.

The original sentence—"Today's music is more creative than music of 30 years ago"— uses the word "creative" as its argumentative pivot point. Here we might suggest "different" or "unique" and explain to the student that arguing whether one era's music is more creative than another's may be a difficult point to support, but this comment may be perceived as a reflection of the instructor's bias and again, the student may resent the intrusion into the personal. In this case, the student should be urged to develop his or her own definition of creativity. Perhaps, what the student means is that today's popular artists are more willing to experiment with discordancy, dissonance, electronic sounds, and non-standard phrasing. If the word "creative" is a simplistic description of something more complex, encouraging the student to develop a more textured description of "today's music" versus "music of 30 years ago" might lead to a critical analysis, a student activity that most educators hope for.

So just how do we fairly address areas whose meanings could be enhanced, are unclear, or are in real danger of being misinterpreted? While many errors in punctuation, syntax, and grammar are explicit and criticism is easily justifiable, other style choices are not. For effectively critiquing choices, which are not specifically incorrect and justifiable, we must show students *exactly* how our suggestions clarify or improve their original intended meaning. That involves asking them what precisely they meant.

Students in high school advanced composition and college composition classes require a variety of stylistic choices, not stylistic prescriptions. We can turn to the classical rhetoricians for material. Consider the taxonomies of Aristotle, Cicero, and Quintilian for help in illustrating this variety. Exercises in identifying stylistic strategies in professional and student writing using

the lists as references would be a manageable task. Quintilian advised that students read successful and accomplished writers and observe not only "any expression that is peculiarly appropriate, elegant, or sublime," but also those expressions which are "inappropriate, obscure, tumid, low, mean, affected, or effeminate [sic]"[1] ("Institute of Oratory" 307). Using a short classical piece, one that self-consciously uses stylistic maneuvers, like Gorgias' *Encomium of Helen*, would be an interesting and instructive connection to the early rhetoricians and would show how purposely style selections can and have been made, even millennia ago. This piece is short enough, but challenging enough to be appropriate to high school advanced composition and college first-year composition students. Although today's students would be bored with Erasmus prescribed exercises of *imitatio* and the endless lists of style suggestions found in *Copia: Foundations of the Abundant Style*—his illustration on the many ways to write, "Your letter pleased me greatly," would add humor while illustrating variety in syntax, word choice, and subtle shifts in meaning (514-523).

The point is that the instructor's task is to provide students with a wide selection of sentence structures, metaphors, examples, adjectives, creative punctuation, word choices, and arrangements. Classical works provide a rich menu. If students are shown a broad assortment of both classical and contemporary examples, ways of seeing their writing will become fresher and more individual, not suppressed by cliché, formulaic thinking, or rigid writing patterns.

Is There Such a Thing as "Good" Style?

If style in student papers can be improved, then there should be a model of perfection or, at the very least, acceptability on which to base an evaluation. Is there a "good" style and a "bad" style? What criteria can be used to judge so slippery a concept that both classical and contemporary rhetoricians cannot agree about its boundaries?

Let's use the previous synthesis of classical and contemporary definitions of style: "Good" style is using language clearly and elegantly to convey meaning in a manner appropriate to audience, situation, and subject matter. Now let's add choice and intention: "Good" style is *choosing* that language which clearly and elegantly conveys *intended* meaning in a manner appropriate to audience, situation, and subject matter. This definition allows for individual intention, as well as choice, and that choice of language supports the voice of the student writer; therefore, the writer retains ownership of the work. Choice also allows for developmental criticism. Now that we have the definition for "good" style and the rationale for stylistic evaluation to present to students, we must consider a pedagogical approach.

Consideration of intention and choices makes verification and evaluation a complex task. An approach must include questioning about meaning, and feedback about what meaning we perceive in the individual student paper. Correctness errors and errors in explicit meaning are, in most cases, obvious; however, every sentence also carries with it implied meaning, as we can see from the previous example (i.e., "Today's music is more creative than music of 30 years ago.").

Consider this sentence: "My sister accomplished a "D" in Calculus." The explicit meaning is that the sister received a "D" in Calculus. An instructor may argue that "accomplished" is not the most appropriate verb choice. However, if asked what the student was implying by that choice, the response may very well be, "A 'D' is an accomplishment for her." If the student chooses to keep this verb, then the next question should involve how the student could give this sentence more contextual support. This type of exchange helps students see the effect on audience (the instructor), as well as allowing them to make their own stylistic choices.

Experience allows a composition teacher to make educated assumptions about much intended meaning based on familiarity with individual student style, context, and past encounters with similar instances. Other questionable meaning can be explored by simply asking students what was meant or why they chose that particular form of expression. In his essay, "Style and Good Style," Monroe Beardsley argues that implicit meaning can be made explicit:

> In order to show what style is, and what good style is, you have to work out the implicit meanings and state them baldly for examination. Then they are no longer implicit, of course, and the explication of them may seem forced and artificial. But implicit meanings *can* [italics mine] be understood and can be stated explicitly; and that is the only way to exhibit their connections or divergences. This is what I call style-analysis. (207)

If the plainly stated, implicit meaning indicates the intended meaning is unclear or worse, then the instructor must ask the student how the meaning can be made clear. The advantage to this approach is that the stylistic improvement may come in the student's answer to the instructor's question, "What do you mean by that?" This process is a dialectic process in that it involves definition, redefinition, clarification, and reclarification until the student's intended meaning is clear to the audience.

Final Thoughts

Defining, limiting, and separating the teachable from the personal style is not precise science, but we can get close. Students need to know that style is important, that there are many choices, that we can give concrete reasons for change, and that we trust their version of what their writing intends. After this, we need to teach them to recognize stylistic opportunities in terms of effect on audience. Classical works can help. The ancient rhetoricians began the discussion and named the strategies. Moreover, a classical overview will give credibility to stylistics by the weight of its historical importance. Students at college level have outgrown the simple arrangement of the five paragraph essay, as well as other formulas that do not foster and develop their natural voice. If we can show them that professional writers—both classical and contemporary—rarely follow a pedagogical encyclical, but rather, they vary wildly in their use of style, perhaps then they will try new methods of expression. Bringing samples of professional writing to class from a variety of fields would help make this point.

Finally we must be models for style ourselves. Bringing our own work into the class for analysis further enhances our credibility. It says to the student, "I really believe that style is important; I, too, have room for improvement and I make stylistic choices every time I write. I am not asking you to do anything that I would not do."

> *[S]hould not the student's most significant model, so far as style is concerned, be the teacher himself? Isocrates, that ancient member of the profession, did not "merely discuss the technique of language and composition—the final inspiration was derived from the art of the master himself." And surely this is so: what the teacher writes on the blackboard in front of the student, or even what the teacher writes outside of class and brings to read to his students, is the teacher's commitment to the style he is urging his students to learn. (Weathers 191)*

Note

    1. While I would, in fact, be hard pressed to define "effeminate" as a distinct style, this is Quintilian's word choice or, more likely, the translator's word choice. I assume what might be meant is a euphuistic or ornate style.

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