Style and Language Analysis Guide

***A Guide for***

***Analyzing Style and Language***

**AN EXPLANATION OF WRITING STYLE**

An author’s writing style is not incidental, superficial, or supplementary: style identifies how ideas are embodied in language. In other words, the effect of how an author uses words and literary elements is important for understanding the meaning of a text.

An author’s writing style includes all of the items on the list below, including specific word choice (diction), kind of tone, use of formal or informal language, etc.

The author adopts a variety of style elements depending on his or her purpose, audience, and genre. Analyzing an author's style involves understanding the particular way a text is written. Style in writing is not *what* is said but *how* it is said. Analyzing an author's style involves analyzing the writer's unique way of communicating ideas. Styles in writing are created deliberately by the author to convey a specific mood or effect.

Style is often aligned with pathos, since its figures of speech are often employed to persuade through emotional appeals. However, style has just as much to do with ethos, for an author’s style often establishes or mitigates one's authority and credibility. But it should not be assumed, either, that style simply adds on a pathetic or ethical appeal to the core, logical content. Style is very much part of the appeal through logos (appeal to logic and reason), especially considering the fact that schemes of repetition (e.g. outlines) serve to produce coherence and clarity, which are attributes of the appeal to reason. In other words, most pieces of writing have all three appeals (pathos, ethos, logos), but one or the other may be more dominate depending on the purpose of the piece of writing.

**WHAT DO I DO NOW?**

In order to analyze a piece of writing, go through this list to evaluate how an author is using these styles elements. Then, choose which ones are most dominate in a particular piece that will help you to interpret the meaning of the piece, which is ultimately the entire point of doing a close evaluation of a piece of writing.

1. **Vocabulary/word choice:** Are the words simple or fancy? Long/short, simple/complex, many modifiers/few modifiers? Are they technical, flowery, colloquial, formal, cerebral, lively, exciting, vivid, etc.? Use of dialect, standard, non-standard English? Does the text or this passage make use of shocking, taboo language? Does the author pile on the details? Does author use slang or jargon specific to the topic?  For example, does the writer utilize sports jargon to describe non-sports things, people, events, or places? Or military jargon to describe non-military things, people and/or places? How does the author’s word choice contribute to the message?
2. **Point of view:** Who is telling the story? Is the novel or this passage written in first person (I, we, us) or second person (you, your), or third person point of view? If it’s third person point of view, is it limited or omniscient? Is the narrator reliable? Does the point of view alternate to impact the way the text is read?
3. **Is there dialogue, monologue, or reported speech?** Dialogue is a conversation between two or more people. It is essential to fiction writing, and some types of nonfiction.
4. **Sentence Structure:** What is distinctive about the sentences in this passage of writing? Are the sentences long or short? Do they contain many subordinate clauses or are they often fragments? Are there any digressions or interruptions? Is the word-order straightforward or unusual? Are the sentences short and punchy?
5. **Figures of speech:** Are there any metaphors, similes, analogies, hyperbole, understatement, personification and/or symbols? Any other use of figurative language? Use of sensory details through imagery?
6. **Flashbacks:** Does the author use flashbacks? A flashback is an interruption to the narrative that presents an earlier episode. Flashbacks move a story back in time giving readers insights about characters they don’t know well. Used effectively, flashbacks enhance the emotional movement of a story, deepen the story’s imagery, and organize a story by weaving information into the narrative at critical times.
7. **Structure:**What’s interesting about how the author constructs the literary work? Are there flashbacks (see above), flash forwards, literary montage, vignettes, journals? Is the work chronological? What specific form is used in structuring the narrative? How does this form impact the way one reads the work? Does it contribute to the overall meaning or message of the work? Definition for **montage**: “a literary, musical, or artistic composite of juxtaposed more or less heterogeneous elements.”
8. **Characters:** A character is what he does. How does the author characterize the people in his novel? Characterization is the presentation of character, whether by direct description, by showing the character in action, or by the presentation of other characters that help define each other.
9. **Allusions:** How often and how does the author refer to other texts, myths, symbols, famous figures, historical events, quotations, and so on?
10. **Sound devices:** Use of alliteration, onomatopoeia, rhythm, rhyme, and/or repetition?
11. **Does the writer use any of the following:** Puns, euphemisms, archaic language, affixation, ambiguity, idiom, clichés, stream of consciousness, phonological features, foreign words, nonsense words, anecdotes, didactic, satire, vernacular, sarcasm, disclaimers, footnotes...?
12. **Paragraph structure:** Are the paragraphs very short, or are there enormous blocks running across many pages? Are the paragraphs indented or flush left?
13. **Irony:** Is there a use of irony? In **situational irony**, expectations aroused by a situation are reversed; in **cosmic irony** or **the irony of fate**, misfortune is the result of fate, chance, or God; in **dramatic irony**, the audience knows more than the characters in the play/film, so that words and action have additional meaning for the audience.
14. **Rhetorical strategies:**Has the rhetor appealed to pathos and/or logos? In what way has the rhetor established his or her ethos? Is there a rhetorical use of humor? An appeal to an authority? The use of a logical fallacy?
15. **Tone (the writer’s implied relationship to the reader and the subject matter):** What is the author’s attitude? Does the author seem sarcastic? Remorseful? Fearful? Condescending? Praising? Critical/satirical? Wistful? Pessimistic? Academic? Philosophically detached? Hopeful? Bitter? Sad? Intimate/distant? Angry/calm? Informative/entertaining? Humorous/serious? Ironic/literal? Passionately involved/aloof? Is the tone consistent or does it shift? What feeling is evoked in the reader by the language used by the author? What type of tone shifts exist that impact meaning?
16. **Most Importantly, how do all of these elements create meaning? What does the passage mean and how does it contribute to the meaning of the piece of writing?**

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What To Avoid In Style and Language Analysis

**THINGS TO AVOID/WHAT CAN GO WRONG:**

* Always clarify with adjectives—for example, do not write “the author uses diction,” write “the author uses understated diction,” or “industrial imagery,” or “chronological organization,” etc. If you write that the author uses diction, this is just stating the obvious. If diction is word choice, then everything ever written--ever!--uses diction. No piece of writing can exist without choosing words to use. You must clarify *WHAT KIND* of word choice the author has used, which is the whole point of analyzing the piece of writing. The word choice often determines a clue to the meaning of the piece.
* Always, always explain with specific examples from the text.
* Do not use specific examples until you have made a general assertion, usually in a topic sentence of a body paragraph. For example, write: The author establishes the unsettling tone of this passage with detailed description. Then, provide the examples.
* Do not praise the author or personally comment on the quality or validity of the content of the piece. In other words, never use these kinds of words: great, excellent, etc.
* Do not use first or second person. Stay in the formal third person point of view. (At least in academic writing for this course as you are learning to write in an objective, academic way at the college level).
* Try to avoid stale or inaccurate verbs. Do not use “this shows,” or “this tells the reader…” Use active verbs, such as “connotes,” “emphasizes,” and “relates.”
* Avoid using "the reader" as a crutch (unless specifically addressing audience as a style element).
* Do not be overly general in any part of the essay. The more specific, the better is a great rule of thumb for all writing.
* No overly general "funnel" introductions (always be as specific as possible in an introduction--get straight to the point or you are just using filler), or preachy conclusions (always use facts and appeal to logos in academic writing).
* Do not use truisms (Down through history, there have always been the poor), quotes as openers, or “hooks.” Simply state your point in a straightforward way. When in doubt, start with the thesis statement. Or, you can start with introducing the author and the context of the work, but do not waste more than a paragraph on summary or background--and do this only if needed. In most cases, you should assume that the person reading your analysis has actually read the piece you are analyzing. (At least for now as you are learning to write college-level, academic analysis.)
* Do not merely paraphrase or summarize passages; you must analyze the use of stylistic devices in a passage. You may need to include enough details so that what you are writing makes sense, but assume that the person reading your analysis did read the piece of writing that you are analyzing. (Again, at least in the context of this course as you are learning college-level, academic writing.)

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