

# English Notes on Style

## What is style?

Style is the sum total of qualities and characteristics that distinguish the writings of one writer from those of another. An author's characteristic way of writing is determined by the choice of words, the arrangement of words in sentences, and the relationship of the sentences to one another. Thus, one author may write long, complex sentences, while another writes short, terse ones. One author may use few adjectives, while another uses many. Style also refers to the particular way in which an author uses imagery, figurative language, and rhythm. These devices can be used to influence the mood of a passage (the way the reader feels), or set the tone (the way the author feels about the work).

## Elements of style

### 1. Categories of writing:

Writing falls into one of three categories or a mixture of the categories. Exposition is used to explain ideas, the style most often used in formal essays. Narration is another name for story-telling. Description is a verbal picture of an object, scene, person, or event. These three forms are often mixed and varied to produce interesting effects.

### 2. Concrete versus abstract language:

Language can be either concrete or abstract; that is language can refer either to things or to ideas. Concrete language is evident in the following quote: "The grey steel of the ship's bow cut through the white-crested ocean waves, leaving behind a turgid swell of swirling blue water." Note the difference using abstract language in the following quote: "As a ship makes its way through the water, it displaces its mass, provided that an equal volume of water would be less than the volume of the ship." Does the second description bring the same pictures to mind? Notice how concrete language relies on sensory details, while abstract language refers to generalizations. For example, the words "the navy" are abstract, while the words "a battleship" are concrete.

### 3. Connotation:

Words not only tell directly, but also imply. Choosing a word such as "creeping" changes the entire mood of a passage. For example, consider the differences between the following quotes: "It was almost dark." versus "Creeping night drew near."

### 4. Direct and Indirect presentation:

Direct presentation occurs when the author wishes to tell the reader something. Indirect presentation occurs when the author wishes to show the reader something. Note the difference between indirect and direct presentation in the following quotes: "Freddy was in a bad-mood, so he threw his dog into the garbage can" versus "Freddy, red-faced and roaring, picked up his pup, and with a swift, vigorous motion slam-dunked it into the garbage can."

### 5. Figurative language:

Often an author will use metaphors, similes, personification, hyperbole, alliteration, metonymy, synecdoche, foreshadowing, allusion, irony, etc. to enhance meaning. Note the device in the following quote: "Like a night-borne bat, the murderer descended upon his victim."

## **6. Imagery:**

Another aspect of style closely linked to concrete language is imagery. Imagery refers to the creation of mental pictures through the use of sensory language as opposed to the creation of concepts through the manipulation of ideas.

## **7. Irony:**

Irony, a form of figurative language, occurs when a discrepancy exists between two levels of meaning, the literal and the figurative. Three types of irony include verbal, dramatic, and situational. Verbal irony occurs when the discrepancy is between what is said and what is meant; for example if the writer says, "The blow dryer is another of those modern conveniences without which our lives would be empty, meaningless, and futile," then you know the writer is exaggerating and mocking. In this quote the writer is implying that the hair dryer is not important at all, and neither are other conveniences. Dramatic irony occurs when a discrepancy exists between what a character knows and what we as readers know. If we are aware of some information or event while a character is not aware, then dramatic irony is being used. Irony of situation occurs when what happens in a story is the opposite of what we expect will happen.

## **8. Patterns of organization:**

The way in which ideas are organized is important in the overall message that is conveyed in a story. Comparison and contrast, for example, are useful in an argumentative essay, while chronological order is important in history. Similarly, cause and effect are important in science.

## **9. Language register:**

The language being used can be formal or informal, "proper" English or colloquial street talk. Realism often is enhanced by employing the actual language that people use when talking.

## **10. Rhetorical questions:**

Questions can be used to control and direct the flow of an argument. A rhetorical question is one that is asked purely for effect, requiring no answer as the answer is expected to be clear from the context. Sometimes a writer may choose to answer rhetorical questions for more emphasis.

## **11. Sensory language:**

The author can give life to description by using words that appeal to the senses of sight, sound, smell, touch, and taste. The following quote contains sensory language: "The yellow fruit hung on the vines, its sweet smell sickening the air, and when it fell heavily to the ground, the ripe skin burst open, and the thick juice oozed upon the earth."

## **12. Sentence length and variety:**

By varying length and type of sentence, the author is able to control the flow of the prose and the pace of the situation being created. Long, complex sentences slow down the action, while short, abrupt ones increase the pace. Similarly in poetry, this control of cadence is reflected in aspects such as line length and meter.

## **13. Symbolism:**

Symbols can be used to create a meaning beyond the literal level. In The Grapes of Wrath, for example, the rot of the fruit stands for the rot of the entire economy and the moral decay of society.