

Style is a writer's manner of expression. Style actually may refer to the style of a time period, the style of a writer, or the style of a particular work. Perhaps the best way to understand style is to think of differences in other creative forms: for instance, the difference between traditional realistic art (Rembrandt or Van Gogh) and modern abstract art (Picasso or Mondrian); or the difference between classical music (Beethoven) and jazz (Louis Armstrong) and country/western (Willie Nelson). All are forms of art or of music, but they each use the techniques of their "trade" differently and they evoke different responses from or have different effects on their audiences.

Style in writing is very similar: the language, sentence structures, and level of formality are quite different today from what they were 50 or 100 years ago, just as abstract art is nothing like 19th century art; and individual writers may approach their particular literary medium (say, poetry) in very different ways, just as a classical musician and a jazz musician do.

In ELA 30-1, we look at style principally in terms of the writer and sometimes a particular work more often than in terms of a time period. Writers generally exhibit a characteristic style throughout most of their works. Generally, three aspects make up an author's style - sentence structure, diction, and tone.

Sentence structure refers to the general pattern of sentence forms used by a writer. Some authors use a spare style composed mostly of short, simple sentences or compound sentences combined with conjunctions like "and" or "but." Descriptions and imagery are straightforward, fairly literal, and consist usually of denotative descriptors with few metaphors or similes, leaving the reader to form his or her own impressions of the scene. The best well-known example of this is Ernest Hemingway. "Hills Like White Elephants," for example, begins with these sentences:

The hills across the valley of the Ebro were long and white. On this side there was no shade and no trees and the station was between two lines of rails in the sun. Close against the side of the station there was the warm shadow of the building and a curtain, made of strings of bamboo beads, hung across the open door into the bar, to keep out flies. The American and the girl with him sat at a table in the shade, outside the building. It was very hot and the express from Barcelona would come in forty minutes. It stopped at this junction for two minutes and went on to Madrid.

Notice how unadorned this writing is, and that most of the sentences are brief or simple in structure.

Other writers use longer, more complicated sentence structures, like complex sentences connected with semicolons or subordinating conjunctions ("although," "because," "since," etc.), or sentences containing dependent and appositive clauses. Descriptions are rich in connotation, imagery is imaginative, full of figures of speech, and intended to deliberately shape impressions in the reader. A well-known writer using this style is William Faulkner, whose individual sentences sometime stretch into paragraphs! In your textbook, Dorothy Parker provides a good illustration of this style in her opening paragraph for "The Standard of Living":

Annabel and Midge came out of the tea room with the arrogant slow gait of the leisured, for their Saturday afternoon stretched ahead of them. They had lunched as was their wont, on sugar, starches, oils, and butter-fats. Usually they ate sandwiches of spongy new white bread greased with butter and mayonnaise; they ate thick wedges of cake lying wet beneath ice cream and whipped cream and melted chocolate gritty with nuts. As alternates, they ate patties, sweating beads of inferior oil, containing bits of bland meat bogged in pale, stiffening sauce; they ate pastries, limber under rigid icing, filled with an indeterminate yellow sweet stuff, not still solid, not yet liquid, like salve that has been left in the sun. They chose no other sort of food, nor did they consider it. And their skin was like the petals of wood anemones, and their bellies were as flat and their flanks as lean as those of young Indian braves.

A second aspect of style is **diction**. Diction refers to the writer's choice of words. Some choose to write much as if they were speaking to us, using slang and other loose speech forms, in what is termed a colloquial style ("Who's that dude a-draggin' by?"). Others choose an informal style which uses contractions and ordinary language but is not as loose as real speech ("Who's that man walking by so slow?). Still others choose a formal, rather elevated style with language not usually heard in speech - what some call highbrow ("Who is that male personage perambulating so slowly past?")

The third aspect of style is **tone**, which is the author's attitude toward the work, events, characters, or the reader/audience. For instance, he or she may be neutral, or amused, or saddened, or satirical in his/her attitude. Tone also refers to the emotional "feel" a work has for the reader/audience. Tone comes mainly from the language or vocabulary chosen and the combinations of words used, and from the narrative point of view - the writer's stance toward the work. The author may be detached from the work, giving it a serious or matter-of-fact tone. Alternatively, the author may be more involved, resulting in a humorous, ironic, satiric, playful, sad, resigned, supercilious or other tone.