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About Style in Writing

SOME PEOPLE think that style is like the geometer's "straight line", which is not anything anyone has ever seen. In fact it is not a line at all, but simply the straightness of a line.

Others believe that style can be seen and developed. They say it is a pattern in words expressing some idea of the writer's mind within a beautiful fabric.

We all know that some writers have the ability to beautify the commonplace and to illumine the dingy and the sordid. Cardinal Newman summed up this talent in his essay on style: "The Art of Letters is the method by which a writer brings out in words, worthy of his subject, and sufficient for his readers, the thoughts which impress him."

It is a counsel of despair to maintain that we are incapable of adding dignity, distinction and a certain allure to what we write. Writing is not a hallowed mystery, remote and secret. The ability to express ourselves is not a frill for the edges of life, but an indispensable tool of our self-understanding, our understanding of others, and our rational contact with the world around us.

It is a great tragedy that many men and women with valuable thoughts, yes, even with sublime ideas, have failed to develop skill in communicating them to others.

Someone brought "style" out of the clouds of uncertainty by listing its elements under five headings: economy, simplicity, sequence, climax and variety. A letter or a book checked by these points is fairly likely to be a good piece of communication, and these are virtues that can be developed.

An obvious striving after style, whether of the rough, tough sort or the polished, brittle kind, is ridiculous. Writing should be simple and natural, not insipid but sinewy, not brief for the sake of brevity, but compressed for the sake of intelligibility, not dainty but definite and brisk. The writer must sit firmly in the saddle, guiding his mount.

The need for style

It is not enough, if a writer wishes to stir people's minds, to put down facts as he would note on a blueprint the particulars about an engineering project. An executive may know his business inside out, but he needs also to be able to convey his ideas about it to his people in such a way as to win the response he desires.

A certain unaffected neatness and grace of diction are required of any writer merely as a matter of courtesy. But a genuine style is the living body of thought, not a costume put on for a special occasion. One doesn't need the verbal music of Shakespeare, but one must be able to make a pattern out of a muddle and build up a certain unity of matter and manner.

A genuine style is the expression of the writer's mind. Great writers do not aim at style for its own sake. They are inspired by their subject, and this inspiration shows itself in their words. They do not leave us in doubt about their topic: Macbeth is about ambition, Othello is about jealousy, Timon of Athens is about money, and King Lear is about renunciation. The style fits the subject, and it is only by being wilfully blind that one can fail to understand what Shakespeare is saying.

What is the nature of your subject? What impression do you wish to convey about it? Is your writing designed to entertain, inform, teach, sell or condole? Is it designed to be appreciated universally, by a certain class, by your superiors or subordinates, by your family?

The personality of the writer's style will reflect itself through the way in which he handles his subject with the purpose he has in mind. The resulting letter or article or book will show the writer's personal sense of the facts he sets down.

Perhaps you like Gertrude Stein's style: many people do. She wrote in "What is Poetry?": "One of the things that is a very interesting thing to know is how you are

feeling inside you to the words that are coming out to be outside of you.”

An individual style is impossible to the writer who takes his material from books straight to his fingertips without undergoing examination in his head. Such a product has no more individuality than a plaster cast of a cast, and not nearly the same perfection.

Brightening the subject

Style should be used to brighten the intelligibility of a subject which is obscure. It joins the instructive with the agreeable. It avoids monotony. It uses ornament where ornament will be effective, and is redundant if repetition will make a point.

If one is to say something significant he must rise above the sheer enumeration of first order facts. Writing is wearisome without contrast and without development of a thought. A white canvas cannot produce an effect of sunshine; the painter must darken it in some places before he can make it look luminous in others. Sir Joshua Reynolds, the great portrait painter of the eighteenth century, said, when someone asked him how he could bear to paint the ugly cocked hats, bonnets and wigs of his time: “They all have light and shadow.”

What is the application of this principle of art to writing a letter? It lies in this: we need to set off our facts by feelings and our feelings by facts; we need to introduce an occasional irrelevancy, perhaps, to lighten the letter, to add artistic piquancy.

When we follow this course we make our writing easy to read. The force of all verbal forms and arrangements is great in proportion as the mental effort they demand from the reader is small.

Some people confuse economy of language with abruptness, and simplicity of expression with the fatuous. We need to use the fewest number of words and the simplest form of composition to secure the full effect we desire, but this purpose also requires that we use enough words and give sufficiently detailed explanations to enable our readers to grasp our ideas. It is the needlessness of words and superfluous complexity that ruin style.

The audience must be considered. Some ideas cannot be conveyed in a way that would be intelligible to all persons who can read, but the writing should be simple enough for the rank of intelligence expected of the probable readers. Many authors believe that if they express themselves in such a way as to be simple enough for ordinary minds they are also appealing to a more astute or specialized reader because he will recognize the reason for simplicity and will admire the clarity of expression.

Simplicity, paradoxically, is the outward sign of depth of thought. The writer who presents his ideas in the form of parable and symbol, using commonplace words, is avoiding more showy qualities in an effort to make his meanings clear. He has made a disciplined selection and ordering of his material in advance of composition.

The nature of the subject-matter must be given more than a passing glance. We speak of various types of style, like narrative style, historical style, or an argumentative style. In all these, the style is the expression of a kind of thought, level with the subject and adequate to it. When a writer's power is fully developed in keeping with his expanded intellect, he may write in all styles, changing with the character of his subject, detecting the fitness of certain verbal arrangements for certain kinds of thought, achieving harmony between matter and expression.

No one expects to write rainbows into a business letter, but if the manager of a complaints department is writing to a distressed woman about her dissatisfaction with goods or services, he will not fob her off with the foggy-formal diction of a rubber-stamp letter, nor will he use the icy-sharp sentences of an inter-office memo.

Style is not artificial

Having a style of writing is not to write stylishly, to try to please by novelty. The use of unusual phrases and little known words displays only a childish liking for tinsel.

It is not worth while to reach the picturesque or the poignant at the cost of being unnatural. If the language used is discordant to the position of the writer or to his topic, readers will laugh or fall asleep.

Imitation of another writer's style is dangerous. It is like wearing a mask. It gives rise to a feeling of insincerity. It does not show a fine sense of style but the vulgar instinct to display.

Many essayists have written about style, and most of them agree in placing sincerity first in importance. “If you wish me to weep, you yourself must feel grief,” said Horace is his *Art of Poetry*.

There are certain elements of composition which need to be mastered as a dancer learns her steps, but the style of the writer, like the grace of the dancer, springs from a deeper source. Style must be genuine: the expression of the author's mind.

Out of sincerity, out of being brave enough to express himself in his own way, following the moods of his mind: out of these come simplicity, sequence, and variety, and style becomes the dress of the writer's thoughts.

Nothing is so forcible as truth plainly told. On the other hand, we might write a poem made up of lines

that sound prettily on the tongue, but so insipid as not to linger a moment in memory.

About developing style

Good prose is suitable to its environment of place, time and occasion; it is suited to the nature of its writer, the sort of topic, and the character of the person to whom it is addressed. The style in which it is written is not designed to make us see the writer, but his subject and thoughts.

Prose does not wish to compete with poetry. Prose will not turn away from rhythm if rhythm is necessary to its purpose, but it will seek rather a modulated utterance, a medium between prose and poetry. It will seek to be lucid and easy, but when opportunity offers it will also be graceful, witty, pathetic or imaginative. It may attain these qualities by being casual, colloquial and personal; by avoiding blaring trumpets and the mouthings of actors striving to make points.

The elements of prose style can be developed, as everyone can testify of his own experience. We can learn to use proper words in proper places. We can learn to use right phrases in the right way.

Let us repeat, in different words, a definition of style, so as to assure ourselves that style may be developed. Style is exactness, saying what one believes and means. Surely this can be learned. Style is related to fitting what is written to the apprehension and need of the reader. Undoubtedly, this can be developed. Style is the expression of the writer's personality. Who will deny that this can be improved?

A. J. Cronin, author of *Keys of the Kingdom*, *The Citadel*, and many other works, had no knowledge of style or form, no idea of technique, when he started his first novel. He found it difficult to express himself. He struggled for hours over a paragraph. "A sudden desolation struck me like an avalanche," he writes of this period. "I decided to abandon the whole thing." Cronin threw away his manuscript, and then, shamed by a Scottish crofter, he dug his papers out of the ash can, dried them in the oven, and went doggedly to work. In three months of what he calls "ferocious effort" he finished his novel *Hatter's Castle*, of which millions of copies were sold.

Some things, like the dates in history, can be learned by repeating them, but style is not like that. It has to be appraised with sensibility and then practised.

This is a painstaking quest. Our pens will sometimes be at fault for a while, no matter how accomplished we are. We will pause, rewrite, and amend before we are satisfied that our language has done justice to what we have in our minds to express. Genius takes pains, improves by practice, suffers failures, succeeds often

on a second or third try. Plato, it is said, wrote the introduction to his *Republic* seven times over in different ways.

Waiting upon inspiration is a snare. The crests of great composition rise only upon the back of constant work and effort.

This work consists not alone in pounding typewriter keys or scratching with a pen. It entails reading and re-reading what one has written—reading it aloud to get the ear-feeling of it. It means a continuing course of self-criticism: have I said what I am trying to say? have I used words that really express it? are my images, parables or metaphors the best possible? have I said anything that is unavoidably ugly or too long?

The writer will, in his re-reading, harden his heart to his felicitous phrases and his smoothly-flowing paragraphs. He will be alert to censure spiritless sentences, condemn what is rugged and misshapen, draw a line through what is incorrect factually, lop off redundant words and phrases while preserving the virtues of repetition, remove distracting ornament, rearrange what is expressed ambiguously, and throw light upon the parts that are difficult to understand. One needs the sort of hard-hearted determination voiced by Ovid when he said "When I re-read I blush, for even I perceive enough that ought to be erased, though it was I who wrote the stuff."

Words and sentences

The person seeking to develop style in writing doubtless knows enough about the elements of grammar so that he need not become wrapped up in the grammatical niceties of his manuscript. He will not become so immersed in words that he is like the laboratory worker who comes to love the guinea pigs for themselves, not for the knowledge they give.

If a writer pauses to wrestle with the choosing of a handful of words he dams up the flow of his ideas. When he lets himself go he will find his mind calling upon his total life experience, spindrift back into past ages for an illuminating incident, calling upon everyday events for a parallel, and rocketing into space where all art lines converge to provide an angle. No person more than a writer needs so much to see things as a little child, exciting because looked at as new, wonderful because of what imagination can do with them.

Diction is the choice of words, and its problems are not the exclusive preserve of inexperienced writers. These problems are quite normal, and their solution is part of the process of all careful writing. The expert writer, however confidently he may dash off sentences and paragraphs, is always acutely conscious of selecting and rejecting words a hundred times in the course of

writing a letter or a report. He will have at his hand for reference such a book as *A Dictionary of English Synonyms*, by Richard Soule (McClelland and Stewart, Limited, Toronto).

No hard and fast rule demands that we use short words exclusively. One good reason for short words is their greater impact. "Stop" is much more emphatic than "desist." But there are times when the short word does not convey the strength of a longer word: for example, "nasty" is not so effective as "disgusting."

The emphasis of a sentence lies not in its length but in its shortness. There is a narcotic effect in long-spun sentences. They demand an effort of memory, because we have to hold on to the statement in the first phrase until we reach the point in the final phrase.

However, we must not conclude that simple sentences are always best. The reader's pleasure must be catered to, and he will not be pleased by a style which always leaps and never flows. A judicious mixture is called for; so that the drowsy monotony of long sentences is broken by the occasional use of a short, sharp sentence which revives drooping attention.

True and false brevity

True brevity of expression consists in saying only what is worth saying, and in avoiding tedious detail about things. We are indulging in the meanest sort of style when we spin out thoughts to the greatest possible length. Brevity does not mean saying less than the occasion demands, but not saying more.

The limit to be placed on a piece of writing is not necessarily an arbitrary restriction of the number of words. The answers to these questions are the real determinants of length: is it all necessary to my purpose? does it sustain interest throughout? A style that takes note of these criteria has common sense as well as art on its side.

About writing letters

Business mail is often depressing, needlessly so. People do not write as they think, but as they think business expects them to write.

Because preceding *Monthly Letters* have gone into some detail about letter writing, it is not necessary to do more here than to point out the opportunity that correspondents have to develop more effectiveness in their work — and to make their work more pleasurable, too.

Good style in business letters follows in general the suggestions for effective style in other sorts of writing. A beneficial approach would be this: banish the fear of appearing too simple. It is merely a stodgy fear of being different that holds many men back from following their quite sensible impulse to write clearly, colourfully and even dramatically when the occasion warrants it.

The letter which gives us greatest pleasure in the reading is one that seems to be part of a talk between intimates. The writer is not trying to dazzle us, but is paying us such attention that we know the occasion of the letter is important to him and to us. He has thought through the subject before starting to dictate, so that he does not waste our time with non-essentials, but he is colloquial enough to be friendly. He has seasoned his message with the salt of his personality.

If the writer of a letter has knowledge, intelligence and discernment he can make the most commonplace things interesting. He does not use a pompous introduction, but hastens on to the event. He visualizes situations so that they interest the reader. He uses active verbs to attain a lively style: instead of "it is believed" he says "I believe"; instead of "it appears to be desirable" he says "we want". He closes vigorously, not with an artificial paragraph of friendly expression, as it were tagged on like an afterthought.

Summing up

What is style? A practical look at the problem gives us every reason to believe that if we have achieved individual expression, brevity, directness, lucidity, some adventurousness of idea and phrase, we need not pine timidly over some mystery called "style": we have it. But it is proper always to be striving to reach an ideal, little by little.

To write well is no gift of the angels, nor is it the outcome of striving audaciously to be different. The first thing demanded of the literary craftsman is that he be clear: then follow eloquence and harmony.

It is well, in these days, to recall the old civilities, and apply them to our writing. The traditional values still are worth clinging to in a society that has been made uneasy about the civilization it has created. Business men may find constructive assurance when their correspondence shows that there is still a part of society unstained by devilry, unravaged by destruction, and bearing gifts of real friendship.

But style is only for those who believe in what they write. It cannot enable shadows to become other than shapeless conceptions.

Madame de Sévigné, a master of style in her own world of the seventeenth century and still a model worthy of study, wrote to her daughter: "Never forsake what is natural. You have moulded yourself in that vein, and this produces a perfect style."

Shun artifices and tricks and fashions. Gain the tone of ease, plainness and self-respect. Speak frankly what you have thought out in your own brain and have felt within you. This, and this alone, creates a perfect style, as she says who wrote the most exquisite letters the world has known.