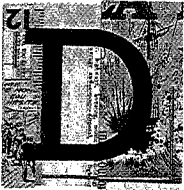


From *Everyone's an Author* by Lunsford, Brody, Ede, Moss, Papper, and Walters (1st Edition)

## T W E N T Y - S I X

# What's Your Style?



**D**OES THE TITLE OF THIS CHAPTER sound like a caption in a fashion ad? If so, it's no surprise: We often associate style with clothing, as we see fashions change from season to season or even week to week. What's hot right now will show up in outlet malls in a year or so—and in a decade or two, if you're lucky, those once-trendy clothes at the back of your closet may become retro-chic again. (Do you think there's any hope for these clothes from the 1990s on the left? How about those from the '70s on the right?)



Stars of the TV shows *Beverly Hills, 90210* (1990–2000) and the *Brady Bunch* (1969–1974) wear clothing typical of their times.

You might not be caught dead wearing these styles today. Style, after all, is about choices you do *not* make as well as those you do. Wearing a bikini to the beach might seem a perfectly good stylistic choice at twenty—but one you might well question at seventy or in a culture that puts a high value on personal modesty. Of course, there may be some things you would never choose to wear at any time because they just don't suit you at all—bright orange anything, for example, or cowboy boots. Most often, though, you choose your clothing to fit your own sense of yourself and to match the occasion: a business suit for an important interview; shorts and running shoes for the gym. Style, then, is both about creating your own “look” and making sure that look is appropriate to the particular situation.

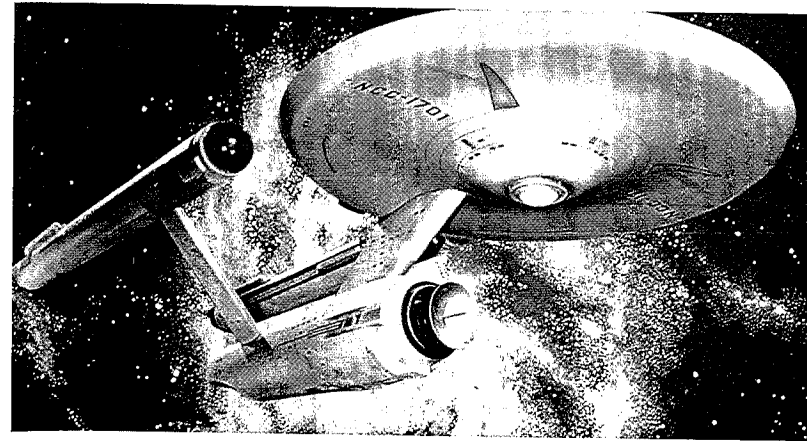
Style in writing works the same way. As you write, you look for words and ways of using them that match the message you're trying to convey—including the impression of yourself that you want to project. To achieve this goal, you do certain things while not doing others. In this chapter, we aim to give you tools you can use to think about and shape the style of your writing. Specifically, we'll consider the issues of appropriateness, formality, and stance; as you'll see, they're all related.

### Appropriateness and Correctness

To understand style in writing, you need to think in terms of a key rhetorical term: appropriateness. Put most simply, an appropriate writing style is one in which your language and the way you arrange it suits your topic, your purpose, your stance, and your audience. But making appropriate stylistic choices in writing can be tricky, especially because we don't have a set of hard-and-fast rules to follow. You may have learned that it's never appropriate to start a sentence with *and* or *but* or to end a sentence with a preposition. But even those “rules” are far from universal—and change over time. In fact, much fine writing today breaks these “rules” to good effect (as we do in the preceding sentence!).

So it won't work to think about style simply as a matter of following the rules. In fact, when it comes to being “correct” or being “appropriate,” being appropriate wins out in almost all cases. When *Star Trek* announced its mission “to boldly go where no man has gone before,” that split infinitive (“boldly” splits the two words of the infinitive “to go”) wasn't absolutely “correct,” but it created just the emphasis the writers were after (say it out loud and see

Would you expect to see the word “yup” in the *Boston Globe*? See how that one carefully chosen word affects the style of the article on p. 783.



The crew of the S.S. *Enterprise* split infinitives boldly, and with emphasis.

how different “to boldly go” and “to go boldly” sound!). Moreover, it was an appropriate choice for the time (the 1960s) and place (a TV show, not an academic paper). One mark of its stylistic appropriateness: It's still quoted, even in textbooks. Making appropriate stylistic choices, then, will almost always depend on your **RHETORICAL SITUATION**—what you're talking about, where you are, who the audience is, and how you're communicating with them.

**Standard edited English: The default choice.** In school and in many professional contexts, standard edited English is often seen as the most appropriate choice. Though there's plenty of debate over what standard edited English is, think of it as that variety of English most often used in education, government, and most professional contexts, especially in writing. Like the standard variety of any written language, standard edited English has changed across time—and will continue to change. If you read stories written by Flannery O'Connor, a twentieth-century fiction writer, you'll notice that she uses the words *man* and *he* to refer to people in general. Choices like this seemed appropriate at the time. But when many criticized the use of *he* to refer to both men and women, conventions changed, and writers looked for more appropriate choices. Were O'Connor, who died in 1964, writing today, it's likely that her use of language would reflect that change.

But the facts that standard languages emerge and change over time and that the appropriate use of a language most often depends on context

don't mean that there are no rules at all. There are some rules, and following them—or not—has consequences. After all, the logic behind standard languages is that if users of a language all follow the same rules, then we can focus on content—on *what* is said—rather than being distracted by *how* it is said. When you don't follow these fairly basic rules, readers may end up focusing more on the how than on the what.

**“You gotta know the rules to break the rules.”** This old saying still holds true in many situations. Take a look, for instance, at how linguist Geneva Smitherman breaks the rules of standard edited English brilliantly. In fact, had she stuck with those rules, the following paragraph would have been far less effective than it is.

Before about 1959 (when the first study was done to change black speech patterns), Black English had been primarily the interest of university academics, particularly the historical linguists and cultural anthropologists. In recent years, though, the issue has become a very hot controversy, and there have been articles on Black Dialect in the national press as well as in the educational research literature. We have had pronouncements on black speech from the NAACP and the Black Panthers, from highly publicized scholars of the Arthur Jensen–William Shockley bent, from executives of national corporations such as Greyhound, and from housewives and community folk. I mean, really, it seem like everybody and they momma done had something to say on the subject!

—GENEVA SMITHERMAN, *Talkin and Testifyin:  
The Language of Black America*



Geneva  
Smitherman

Smitherman obviously knows the rules of standard edited English but breaks them to support her point and also to create a clear rhetorical stance, as a scholar, a skilled writer, and a proud African American. Writing in the late 1970s, she could assume that her readers would know that the NAACP is the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, that the Black Panthers were a revolutionary social action group in the 1960s and 1970s, and that Arthur Jensen and William Shockley had made controversial claims about relationships between race and intelligence. She could also assume that readers of her book would expect her to write in standard edited English since the volume was published by a mainstream publisher and treated its subject from an academic perspective.

But Smitherman wasn't interested in writing a book about the vivid, energetic language of African Americans using only standard edited English. After all, one of her claims was that the language practices of African Americans were influencing American culture and language in many ways. Notice how her stylistic choices support that claim. She not only talks the talk of standard edited English but walks the walk of African American English as well. When she switches in her final sentence from standard edited English to African American English, she simultaneously drives home her point—that everyone at that time seemed to have an opinion about the language of African Americans—while demonstrating membership in that community by using the language variety associated with it. In short, she makes sound and appropriate stylistic choices.

### Level of Formality

Being appropriate also calls on writers to pay attention to the levels of formality they use. In ancient Rome, Cicero identified three levels of style: low, or plain, style, which was used to teach or explain something; middle style, which was used to please an audience; and high, or grand, style, which was used to move or persuade the audience. Note how these classifications link style with a specific purpose and a likely audience.

Following the January 2011 tragedy in Tucson, Arizona, in which nineteen people, including Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords, were shot and six died, President Obama delivered an address to the nation. The occasion was solemn and formal, and Obama, speaking as the nation's leader, offered a fine example of grand style, one that sought to move his audience by speaking from his heart to theirs as he sought to console the country.

Early in his speech, Obama quoted a passage from Psalm 46, part of the Hebrew Bible and the Christian Old Testament. He then offered short portraits of the victims of the shooting, those who had died and those who survived, as well as of people who had bravely intervened to limit the scope of the attack. Later in his remarks, he said:

If this tragedy prompts reflection and debate—as it should—let's make sure it's worthy of those we have lost. . . . The loss of these wonderful people should make every one of us strive to be better. To be better in our private lives, to be better friends and neighbors and coworkers and

You can find the speech by visiting [wnnorton.com/write/everyone-links](http://wnnorton.com/write/everyone-links).

parents. And if, as has been discussed in recent days, their death helps usher in more civility in our public discourse, let us remember it is not because a simple lack of civility caused this tragedy—it did not—but rather because only a more civil and honest public discourse can help us face up to the challenges of our nation in a way that would make them proud.

Here Obama used repetition and complex sentence structure appropriate to the gravity of the occasion. If you listen to the speech, you'll also hear how he used pauses to great effect. Note, too, that even in the grand style he used contractions because their use helped lessen the distance between him and his audience of ordinary Americans; it humanized him in a moment when his focus was the common humanity of all present. In this case, the level of formality was perfectly appropriate to the occasion. But the president (or anyone else for that matter) doesn't use this level of formality all the time. In a news conference after the Democrats lost the 2010 congressional elections badly, for example, Obama used the slang term "shellacking" to refer to his party's defeat—a good example, we think, of shifting levels of formality to one that was appropriate to that occasion (a press conference) and that audience (Americans who were following the aftermath of the elections).

### Stance

Stance refers to the attitude authors take toward their topic and audience. For example, you might write about immigration as an impassioned advocate or critic, someone with strong opinions about the inherent good or evil of immigration; or you might write as a dispassionate analyst, someone trying to weigh carefully the pros and cons of the arguments for and against a particular proposal. Either stance—and any possible stances in between—will affect what style you use, whether in speaking or in writing.

If your audience changes, your language will likely shift, too. Debating immigration issues with close friends whose opinions you're fairly sure of will differ in crucial ways from debating them with people you know less well or not at all because you'll be able to take less for granted. That you will likely shift all aspects of your message—from word choice and sentence structure to amount of background information and choice of examples—doesn't make you a hypocrite or a flip-flopper; instead, it demonstrates your skill at finding the most effective rhetorical resources to make your point.

In a posting titled "Same Food Planet, Different Food Worlds," blogger Rod Dreher calls attention to the drastically different stances taken by two restaurant reviewers. Here's an excerpt from one, a review of a new Olive Garden restaurant in Grand Forks, North Dakota, by eighty-five-year-old Marilyn Hagerty:

It had been a few years since I ate at the older Olive Garden in Fargo, so I studied the two manageable menus offering appetizers, soups and salads, grilled sandwiches, pizza, classic dishes, chicken and seafood and filled pastas.

At length, I asked my server what she would recommend. She suggested chicken Alfredo, and I went with that. Instead of the raspberry lemonade she suggested, I drank water.

She first brought me the familiar Olive Garden salad bowl with crisp greens, peppers, onion rings and yes—several black olives. Along with it came a plate with two long, warm breadsticks.

The chicken Alfredo (\$10.95) was warm and comforting on a cold day. The portion was generous. My server was ready with Parmesan cheese. . . .

All in all, it is the largest and most beautiful restaurant now operating in Grand Forks. It attracts visitors from out of town as well as people who live here.

—MARILYN HAGERTY, "Long-awaited Olive Garden  
Receives Warm Welcome"

Hagerty's polite, unpretentious stance is evident in this review—and as it happens, the style of her writing attracted much attention when it went viral, with readers both celebrating and bashing that style.

Dreher contrasts Hagerty's stance with that of the following one by Dive Bar Girl (DBG), who writes for a newsletter in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. In fact, Dive Bar Girl starts right out by announcing her stance—that she's going to be "mean," not "informative"—and so after saying "a few nice things" about her topic, a restaurant called Twin Peaks, she writes the review that she assumes her readers "want to read":

Admit it, you like it when DBG is mean. You only send her fan mail when she's mean. She never gets mail for being informative. . . . So she is going to write about the positive things first and then write the review you want to read. The smokehouse burger was above average. The patio



Marilyn Hagerty. Read the *LA Times'* take on the controversy—and Hagerty's son's response in the *Wall Street Journal*—via [www.norton.com/write/everyone/links](http://www.norton.com/write/everyone/links).

was a nice space. The staff, while scantily clad, was professional. The salads even looked good. The place was miles above Hooters.

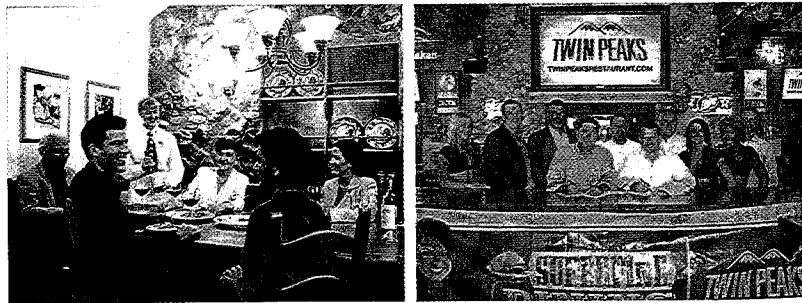
Here is the review you want: Twin Peaks has to be the brainchild of two 14-year-old boys who recently cracked the parental controls on the home computer. Waitresses are known as “Lumber Jills.” In case you are missing the imagery—each Lumber Jill has been endowed with an epic pair of Twin Peaks.

—CHERRYTHE DIVEBARGIRL

These two reviews could hardly be more different in stance: The first is low key and even-handed, well suited to Hagerty’s stance as a modest and sincere reviewer. The second is highly opinionated and sarcastic, true to the brash, in-your-face stance of Dive Bar Girl. So both are written in styles that suit (and reflect) their respective stances.

But what happens when that stance doesn’t fit very well with a particular audience? That’s what happened, in fact, when Hagerty’s review went viral. Some writers immediately began making fun of her as inept and hopelessly out of it; others jumped in just as quickly to defend Hagerty’s review, while still others read her review as an indirect parody of local restaurant reviews. Now imagine that Dive Bar Girl’s review appeared in Hagerty’s hometown newspaper. Chances are, it would attract some hefty criticism as well.

The takeaway lesson here: As a writer, you need to consider not only whether your stance is appropriate to your topic and audience but also to your mode of distribution. If what you write is going online, then you have to remember that your audience can be very broad indeed.



What do these photos say about an Olive Garden restaurant (left) and a Twin Peaks restaurant (right)?

## Thinking about Your Own Style

As you’ve seen, style is all about making appropriate choices, choices that inevitably depend on all the elements of your rhetorical situation, including your stance, your purpose, your topic, and your audience. Have you written a review of something—a restaurant for the campus newspaper? A book on Amazon? A review of your school on *Collegeprowler.com*? If so, take a look at the choices you made there and then compare them to an essay you’ve written for your first-year writing class—or to a poster you’ve made for a school project on some subject like alcohol awareness. You’ll see right away that you have instinctively used different styles for these different occasions. You may not, however, have paid much attention to the choices you were making to create these styles.

For an example of what we mean about making appropriate stylistic choices, take a look at a paragraph from this book, first as it appears on p. 511 and then as it is revised as a tweet, a report, and a flyer:

### Original text

Once upon a time—and for a long time, too—style in writing meant ornamentation, or “dressing up” your writing the way you might dress yourself up for a fancy dress ball. In fact, ancient images often show rhetoric as a woman in a flowing gown covered with figures of speech—metaphors, similes, alliteration, hyperbole, and so on—her stylish ornaments.

### Revised as a tweet

Writing style used to mean dressing up your words, like Cinderella getting ready for the ball. Not anymore. [#rhetorictoday](#)

### Revised as a report

For more than 500 years, the definition of “style” held relatively stable: Style was a form of ornamentation that was added to texts in order to make them more pleasing or accessible to an audience. In ancient depictions, Rhetoric is often shown as a woman dressed in elegant attire and “ornamented” with dozens of stylish figures of speech.

## Revised as a flyer

Once upon a time . . .

writing style was all about ornamentation.

Language

*in fancy dress*

What do you know about writing style?

Join us in the Writing Center to learn how style has changed over time

and how your style can be *in style*.

Sterling C. Evans Library

Room 214

Note how the style changes to match each genre and audience: The tweet is short, of course, and very informal; it uses a sentence fragment and then uses a hashtag to link readers with others talking about rhetoric today. The report is much more formal and is written in standard edited English. The flyer uses a much more conversational style—ellipses to signal a pause, a sentence fragment, a question, and the use of italics for emphasis—and announces an event (the purpose of a flyer).

We hope this chapter has convinced you of the importance of paying attention to the stylistic choices you make—and has shown you that style is the key to getting and holding an audience's attention. As an author, you get to call the shots—and you need to do so with careful attention to your rhetorical situation. And though there may not be any simple do's and don't's for writing in an appropriate style, here are some questions that can help you think through the stylistic choices you'll need to make in your own writing.

- **What's appropriate?** In short, what word choice, sentence structure, images, punctuation, typography, and other elements of writing will get your message across in a way that is most fitting to your **PURPOSE** and **AUDIENCE** as well as the **GENRE** you are working in?

- **What level of formality should you use?** Think particularly of your topic and audience, and of your audience's expectations, as you decide whether to adopt a colloquial, informal, semiformal, or very formal level of language.
- **What stance should you take?** Again, think about matching your **STANCE** to your purpose and topic and audience. For a formal college essay, you will probably aim for a serious scholarly stance; for a letter of application, a businesslike, straightforward stance; and for a letter to the campus newspaper editor poking fun at a recent concert, a satiric, playful stance.

*HAVE SOME FUN* with style by choosing a writer you admire—or one you love to hate!—and then trying your hand at imitating that person's style. Cast a wide net in making your choice: Consider songwriters, editorialists, cookbook authors (Paula Deen? Julia Child?), novelists, poets, TV commentators (Stephen Colbert, maybe?). Gather a sample of this person's work, enough to give you a good sense of his or her style and stylistic choices in terms of language, sentence structure, rhythm, imagery, and so on. Then choose a well known story or song or other text: a children's story like "Little Red Riding Hood," a song like "Call Me Maybe," or a genre like a tweet or an ad. Now rewrite this text in the style of the author you chose—or ham it up a little by exaggerating the style! Your goal is to exercise your own authorial muscles and have some fun doing so.