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Children's Environmental Identity: Awareness to Action
Writing in Style
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Writing in Style
Writing in Style: An Exercise in Defining and Understanding Stylistic Choices

Abstract

The Writing in Style exercise aims to help students understand the importance of writing style, define their writing style in a course-related application, and explore their compositional choices. The modular activities make style approachable with individual and group work that builds on familiar writing skills, encourages revision, utilizes relevant course and cultural materials, and models an application of AI technology to the writing process.

Keywords: Style, Summary, Synthesis, Group Work, Individual Work, Revision, AI

Exercise Instructions

The following activities are parceled into sections for before, during, and after a class period, but may be adapted to fit different course schedules. Some suggested alternatives are provided in the Exercise Principles section of this document. Tasks for instructors are presented in normal text and directions for students are highlighted in gray.

Before Class

a. Assign 3-4 readings. Students may choose two to read.

b. Students will compose a discussion post with the following components:
   i. Summary: Provide a 2-3 sentence summary of the authors’ main argument for each of your two chosen readings.
   ii. Synthesis: Put the two readings in conversation with each other. You may draw on previous readings to enhance your synthesis as well.
   iii. Call to Action: Use your synthesis to build towards a call to action related to core course issues. For example, in light of the readings and what they had learned so far, students in HE 1151 were asked to compose a call to action for academics, policymakers, or teachers related to “education in a changing climate” by answering the questions: What is a new way forward? What do you believe is most important and why?

During Class

c. Part One: Discussion
   i. Split the class into 3-4 groups so that there is one group per assigned reading. Put people in groups with a reading they completed.
   ii. In a shared presentation (e.g., a Google slides link in Canvas), have each group summarize the main argument of one of the readings on one slide.
   iii. Each group will then present their slide to the class. To prompt further discussion, consider asking if anyone else who read this paper has ideas to add or if anyone who did not read the paper has new insights.
   iv. Once the presentations are completed, students should individually revise their call to action from before class given the new information from the papers they did not read.

d. Part Two: The Elements of Style
   i. Read aloud from Chapter 5 of The Elements of Style (Strunk & White, 1979) (Appendix A). Of particular importance is the section explaining how the phrase ‘These are the times that try men’s souls’ could be written in different ways that say essentially the same thing but resonate less (p. 67). Several of the reminders starting on page 70 may
also be helpful depending on what the students need (e.g., do not overwrite, do not overstate, and avoid the use of qualifiers, p. 71-72).

ii. In their previous groups, have students select an appropriate meme phrase such as a soundbite from a well-known video like “Road work ahead? Uh, yeah, I sure hope it does!” Then, they will generate three different ways of saying the same thing. For example, “I sure hope the road works ahead!” or “I am hopeful the road works ahead.”

iii. Students will share these new iterations with the class and discuss what they think it is about the original meme that makes it stick in our culture: How does the original style compare to the new iterations? What parts of the composition make one more compelling than another?

e. Part Three: AI Style Descriptions

i. Now that students have a broader understanding of style, they will continue working with their call to action. In ChatGPT, have students enter the following:

“I am going to enter a piece of writing. Describe the style of the writing in three words, and which features of the writing or compositional choices influence the choice of those words.”

ii. Students then paste their revised call to action from Part One of this activity into ChatGPT so the AI can describe its style.

iii. In pairs, preferably working with someone they have done a peer review activity with before, have students share their writing and the AI assessment. They should discuss:

1. Does your partner agree with the AI assessment? Is there anything they would add or say differently?
2. What did you learn about your writing style?
3. Is this style the most effective for your call to action? Consider the audience and purpose.
4. Did your partner do anything in their call to action that you found effective?
5. Why is style important?

After Class

f. Students will post their writing, AI results, and thoughts on the Part Three discussion questions to Canvas before the next class.

g. Consider having a future homework/reading assignment that requires another call to action. Have students reflect on what they learned from this style exercise and how it influenced the composition of the new call to action in response to different readings.

h. In a future class meeting, consider scheduling a Rare Manuscripts visit to learn more about E.B. White. Since he was a Cornell alumnus, the library has a detailed collection of his work ranging from first editions of *The Elements of Style* to his high school biology notebook to multiple drafts of *Charlotte’s Web*. This visit exposes students to new library resources and offers insight into a beloved author’s drafting and revision process. You can request instruction support via the Cornell Library website.

Exercise Principles

The Writing in Style exercise aims to help Freshman Writing Seminar (FWS) students 1) understand the broad importance of writing style, 2) define their own writing style in a course-related application, and 3) explore the writing choices that contribute to the style. Writing style, “in the sense of what is distinguished and distinguishing” about writing, can be interpreted as what composition resonates with the audience and sticks with them over time (Strunk & White, 1979, p. 66). This style
exercise is designed to be implemented closer to the end of the semester after other writing skills (e.g., summarization, synthesis, revision, citation) have been scaffolded and students have built a larger library of sources relevant to the course subject.

This exercise accomplishes the specific aims by making style, stylistic choices, and their importance approachable. The various activities move between individual and group work to demonstrate how they complement one another and to provide different learning modalities. It starts by allowing students to practice familiar skills of summary and synthesis and then builds on those skills by introducing a ‘so what, now what?’ element with the application of evidence to actionable items. Once students have tried writing a call to action on their own, in Part One of the in-class activity, they collaborate to teach each other new information and are encouraged to revise their writing based on what they learn.

Although the meme phrases in Part Two are not a perfect analogy for written communication, the activity makes the idea that stylistic choices matter more accessible for students because they are likely more acquainted with the meme phrases. The memes also introduce an element of humor and help to break up the other activities.

Utilizing ChatGPT in Part Three helps students become more aware of the choices they make as writers. Embracing new AI technology in the classroom can make this type of learning more accessible to students and provide a use case for effectively applying AI to understand their writing rather than assisting in composition. By then prompting for reflection on the ChatGPT output with other students who are familiar with their writing, the activity also models how one can interrogate AI’s efficacy. Ultimately, students reflect on the match between their style and the purpose of a call to action, which leads them to draw their own conclusions about the importance of style.

Exercise Adaptations

The Writing in Style Exercise can be adapted and still achieve the specific aims. For this writing exercise, FWS instructors can select applicable readings to assign based on their course subject. If the activities are structured with the same before, during, and after class elements as listed above, it is feasible to complete the activity within a 75-minute class block. The various parts of this activity may also be spread across multiple class periods to fit different courses’ schedules and encourage slower, more focused learning. Designed for modularity and flexibility, the Writing in Style activity can help FWS instructors effectively scaffold learning about style and provide students with tools to further explore their own writing style.

In Part Two, the Strunk and White (1979) passage is listed as being read aloud during class. While this can help instructors emphasize certain aspects of the passage, it may also be effective to assign the passage as homework, particularly if the activity components are split across multiple class periods. This would allow students to reflect on the broad importance of style individually before describing their writing style and compositional choices in Part Three. Instead of a meme phrase, instructors may also choose to have students work with a particular quote or phrase that comes from course-specific materials where applicable.

If FWS instructors do not want to use ChatGPT, the students’ partners in Part Three of the in-class portion can come up with the three descriptive words and compositional choices. Instructors may need to provide a list of sample descriptive words to accommodate this adaptation. Another possible adaptation is to have students come up with descriptive words for both their partner’s and their own writing to prompt a comparative discussion.
Sample Response

A sample response is provided in the table below. The student tended to have a more informal writing style throughout the semester and appreciated the use of ChatGPT in this activity because it allowed for both individual reflection and group discussions related to their writing.

| Homework | Summary: Kwauk + Winthrop - I thought this article was very interesting because it focused on how we need to slow down climate change and our emissions by 2050 but we cannot accomplish this without education. By incorporating a new way to educate children about climate change they can start to make these changes in their lives and tell their families about these changes we need to make. Very few children receive climate change education but if all children in every country got this time for education the goal of 2050 would not seem too far-fetched, but the issue is just going through the process of changing school curriculums.

Winograd - This article focused on how humans are disconnecting from each other and nature and how we need to teach how to reconnect children to their environment so they learn their responsibility to others and themselves. Adults also need to recognize that children are worried about climate change and have anticipated anxiety and adults need to teach about safety and what we can do to help relieve their stress. It also is the teacher’s responsibility to teach children and warn them about climate change since they are at risk of the harms of climate change.

Synthesize: Both of the articles that I read pertained to the climate crisis and how education plays such an important part in slowing down the effect of climate change. The article by Kwauk and Winthrop focused more on why education about the climate crisis is important. The article by Winograd reflected on the same thing as Kwauk and Winthrop but just from a different viewpoint. The second article by Winograd discussed how we are now disconnected from nature and each other which is leading us to not care for the crisis we are getting ourselves into. I found this very interesting because this claim goes hand and hand with what Carie Green talks about in her book about environmental identity development. If these children are feeling disconnected from the world, then they will not go through their own EID which will cause them to look past nature and not care for the massive changes in our climate. One thing that both articles that I read today agreed on was that children do have anxiety about climate change. Kwauk and Winthrop focused on the need for education to help children understand climate change and for action to be taken and Winograd agreed and talked about how if we don’t teach children about climate change then they will have anxiety about the dooming future. One thing that Winograd talked about was how recycle, reuse, and reduce are commonly taught in schools but the three R’s are a lot deeper than the surface-level connections made in school. This went right along with what Echterling said in a past article we read a few weeks ago because they argue that too many children’s books focus on environmentally friendly lifestyle acts and not the relationship between the degradation of the environment and systemic social issues. That is exactly what Winogard was saying about the teaching of the three R’s. Overall, I liked these two
articles that I read today and the first article by Kwauk + Winthrop got me thinking about how badly education needs to be revamped.

**Call to Action:** The new way going forward to teach environmental education should be using the Children’s Environmental Literacy Foundation (CELF) approach. By incorporating environmental education in every subject students would “become agents of change for climate action in their school community and beyond” (Kwauk + Winthrop). The constant reminder of how climate change can affect us from history class to English class would help children feel a connection to the environment and in the end want to protect it. The goal of environmental education is to make students more environmentally conscious and Kwauk + Winthrop and Winograd agree that education is the key to stopping climate change. We need to educate children so that their four stages of the EID model are complete and then can help save the world. Departments of education need to work together so that environmental education can be implemented in every school all around the world so that people are better educated on what is happening and how to stop it.

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**Part One**

**Summary: Winograd**

- Children are disconnecting from nature and each other so we first need to connect them back to the natural world.
- Focus of education is to build citizenship and connection (build caring, participatory, and resilient citizens)
  - More collaborative and interactive learning plans to build connection with nature
  - Reflections on an individual’s relationship with nature
- Call to action: teachers responsible for teaching students to care
  - Suggests that teacher should create lesson plans to help facilitate students/childrens’ connection to nature
  - These lessons can focus on spending time in nature, civic action, and enacting peaceful relations with all life
- Children have anticipated anxiety about climate change
- Culture shift for environmental action
- Not technical solutions

^Group summary slide

**Part Two**

[Responses to Part Two and the meme rewrites were not formally collected]

**Part Three**

**Revised Call to Action:** The new way going forward to teach environmental education should be using the Children’s Environmental Literacy Foundation (CELF) approach and emphasizing the real effect environmental education (EE) has on children and the world. By incorporating environmental education in every subject students would “become agents of change for climate action in their school community and beyond” (Kwauk + Winthrop). The constant reminder of how climate change can affect us from history class to English class would help children feel a connection to the environment and in the end want to protect it. The goal of EE is to make students more environmentally conscious, and that education is the key to stopping climate change. EE is important to teach in schools because not every child has the same experiences and opportunities at home, but these teachers need expensive training and a passion for EE. Departments of different subjects need to
work together so that environmental education can be implemented in every school all around the world so that people are better educated on what is happening and how to stop it.

ChatGPT: “The three words I’d use to describe the style of this writing are informative, persuasive, and impassioned. The author employs a straightforward and informational tone to convey the importance of incorporating environmental education into every subject. The use of quotes, such as the one from Kwauk + Winthrop, adds an authoritative touch, emphasizing the persuasive aspect of the writing. Additionally, the repeated emphasis on the real-world impact on children and the world adds an impassioned layer, appealing to the reader’s emotions and sense of responsibility.” --ChatGPT

Reflection: This was my first time using ChatGPT and it was very surprising to see all of the things that you could do with it. When I was working with [student c] and [student d] I was shocked to see all that it told them about their writings [...] As for me, [...] There were no critiques that it gave me; it was only compliments on my incorporation of a quote and how I appealed to my readers' emotions. Overall, this style workshop was informative, and it taught me that I could use ChatGPT to see if they understand what I’m talking about and if my word choice sounds good. I also really liked the exercise we did about style in memes because it was easy to understand. It was a small-scale thing, but that idea will help me in my children's book [future assignment] and careful word choice.

References

Appendix A: The Elements of Style Passage

V. An Approach to Style (With a List of Reminders)

“Up to this point, the book has been concerned with what is correct, or acceptable, in the use of English. In this final chapter, we approach style in its broader meaning: style in the sense of what is distinguished and distinguishing. Here we leave solid ground. Who can confidently say what ignites a certain combination of words, causing them to explode in the mind? Who knows why certain notes in music are capable of stirring the listener deeply, though the same notes slightly rearranged are impotent? These are high mysteries, and this chapter is a mystery story, thinly disguised. There is no satisfactory explanation of style, no infallible guide to good writing, no assurance that a person who thinks clearly will be able to write clearly, no key that unlocks the door, no inflexible rule by which the young writer may shape [their] course. [They] will often find [themselves] steering by stars that are disturbingly in motion.

The preceding chapters contain instructions drawn from established English usage; this one contains advice drawn from a writer’s experience of writing. Since the book is a rule book, these cautionary remarks, these subtly dangerous hints, are presented in the form of rules, but they are, in essence, mere gentle reminders: they state what most of us know and at times forget.
Style is an increment in writing. When we speak of Fitzgerald’s style, we don’t mean his
command of the relative pronoun, we mean the sound his words make on paper. Every writer, by the way
This is inevitable as well as enjoyable. All writing is communication through revelation – it is the Self
escaping into the open. No writer long remains incognito.

If the student doubts that style is something of a mystery, let them try rewriting a familiar
sentence and see what happens. Any much-quoted sentence will do. Suppose we take ‘These are the
times that try men’s souls.’ Here we have eight short, easy words, forming a simple declarative
sentence. The sentence contains no flashy ingredient such as ‘Damn the torpedoes!’ and the words, as
you see, are ordinary. Yet in that arrangement they have shown great durability; the sentence is almost
into its third century. Now compare a few variations:

Times like these try men’s souls.
How trying it is to live in these times!
These are trying times for men’s souls.
Soulwise, these are trying times.

It seems unlikely that Thomas Paine could have made his sentiment stick if he had couched it in any of
these forms. But why not? No fault of grammar can be detected in them, and in every case the meaning
is clear. Each version is correct, and each, for some reason that we can’t regularly put our finger on, is
marked for oblivion. We could, of course, talk about ‘rhythm’ and ‘cadence,’ but the talk would be vague
and unconvincing. We could declare soulwise to be a silly word, inappropriate to the occasion; but even
that won’t do – it does not answer the main question. Are we even sure soulwise is silly? If otherwise is a
serviceable word, what’s the matter with soulwise? [...]

Young writers often suppose that style is a garnish for the meat of prose, a sauce by which a dull
dish is made palatable. Style has no such separate entity; it is nondetachable, unfilterable. The beginner
should approach style warily, realizing that it is [themselves they are] approaching, no other.” [...]

Here, following, are some suggestions and cautionary hints that may help the beginner find [their] way
to a satisfactory style.

1. Place yourself in the background: Write in a way that draws the reader’s attention to the sense
   and substance of the writing, rather than the mood and temper of the author.
2. Write in a way that comes naturally.
3. Work from a suitable design.
4. Write with nouns and verbs, not with adjectives and adverbs.
5. Revise and rewrite.
6. Do not overwrite.
7. Do not overstate.
8. Avoid the use of qualifiers.
9. — 21.”

(Strunk & White, 1979, pp. 66–81)