Praxis: A Writing Center Journal • Vol 14, No 3 (2017)

STYLE MAKES THE WRITER: EXPANDING CONSIDERATIONS OF STYLE IN THE WRITING CENTER

Edward Santos Garza
St. Edward's University
edwardsantosgarza@gmail.com

Abstract

As a pedagogical tool, "style" in writing center lore has been cast as a lower-order concern. This marginalization stems not only from the difficulty of defining the word itself, but also from a persistent belief that "style" exists in a vacuum separate from "content," "development," and grammar, thus being of secondary importance to tutors and administrators. In this article, Edward Santos Garza challenges this clinical framework, arguing that style, a vital, permeating force, has much to offer those in writing center work. He positions style as a tool to help WC visitors more fully discuss, assess, and strengthen themselves as writers. Asserting that style is equally valuable for thinking about writing with regard to identity, Garza envisions how WC staff could productively foreground it in sessions and training.

> [Style] pervades the whole being. The administrator with a sense for style hates waste; the engineer with a sense for style economises his material; the artisan with a sense for style prefers good work. Style is the ultimate morality of mind. (12)
>
> — Alfred North Whitehead
> "The Aims of Education"

1. Style as Binding

The first writing center I worked at, on the campus of a 36,000-student public university, had a strong reputation for its Writing Across the Curriculum/Writing in the Disciplines (WAC/WID) partnerships. As a program coordinator, I got to work closely on the WC's partnership with the campus's Law Center, an experience that has become more instructive with time. The Law Center enlisted the WC to create, administer, and score a writing assessment taken by its incoming students. The assessment, a humanities-esque essay focused on a law-related issue—"Should lawyers be required to work *pro-bono* hours every year?"—was meant to help the Law Center gauge its students' skills in expository prose and their abilities to synthesize sources. Along the way, it was also meant to identify which of the 150-plus students needed additional assistance with their writing. Each of those who required additional assistance that year, about fifteen in all, was required to review their essay with a WC tutor, receive feedback for improvement, and write a second essay on how they would implement that feedback in their legal studies.

As the program's coordinator and one of its two scorers, I appreciated how it was already a well-oiled machine. The assessment had an established rubric, the prompt had been vetted, and the calendar of deadlines had been agreed upon. Today, though, I see how the program could have been modernized, especially in terms of its rubric. Whereas now, as a composition instructor, I prefer holistic assessment, I then bought into the rubric's neat dissection of the "parts" of a text: (see "Rubric Used to Evaluate the Writing Samples" in appendix).

Revisiting the rubric, I know there is just too much going on with it—and at the same time, not enough. It is a rubric like those Chris M. Anson et al. critique in "Big Rubrics and Weird Genres," ones cloaked in "the guise of local application, fooling us into believing that they will improve teaching, learning, and both classroom and larger-scale assessment." Moreover, it lacks a unifying force, something to describe not only how well the writer "answered" the prompt, but also what makes one successful writer different from other successful writers. This rubric suggests that, if I were to collate five excellent samples, they would all be characterized by a single formula of thought, as opposed to an array of voices working within the same conventions while displaying their own personalities. As the second-to-bottom row declares, "good" samples exhibited writing that was "powerful" and emphatic. As useful as these traits are for future lawyers, there could have been more consideration of other effective styles.

I reflect on this experience because it shows the value of reading holistically, of seeing writing as a creation unique to each person who practices it. If I still coordinated that partnership, I would focus on what unifying force could anchor my reading of the samples. At the time, my fellow scorer would tell me that, within a sample's first few paragraphs, he simply knew whether it would be "good" or not. As non-presumptuous as I tried to be, I agreed with him, though I was not sure why.

That effect on a reader, that unifying force, is the product of style, I argue today. An effective writing style heightens the quality of everything else in a text. For one, it can announce a writer's purpose especially clearly. A style with more elaborative qualities—e.g.,

well-used subordinate clauses, qualifying words, a variety of sentence lengths—covers what rubrics such as the one above might call "development." Moreover, whereas many rubrics treat grammar as something that is either "correct" or not, an effective style reflects how grammar can be rhetorical, how it can be manipulated to emphasize whatever the writer chooses. When properly attended to, style is both the result of and canvas for clear thought.

Though the rubric was for just one WAC/WID program, it illustrates a framework my fellow staff members and I were trained to use in all of our consultations. It was a framework not only for reading texts, but also for discussing them, and I suspect many WCs have constructed something similar for themselves. Here, then, I argue for why considerations of style should command a greater role in WC work. I suggest that a focus on style enhances how prose at the WC is read, evaluated, and discussed, and how it helps tutors respond to challenging texts, an example of which I tackle. Moreover, I assert that style serves as an effective touchstone for unpacking issues of privilege, power, and identity, issues forever in the purview of writing centers.

2. Getting into Style

First, what *is* style, really? The conversation has been going on for a while in English studies. In his 1967 article "Generative Grammars and the Concept of Literary Style," Richard Ohmann defines style as "a way of writing" (qtd. in Butler 2). Aged as it is, his definition is an accurate, if safe, take on the concept. It rightfully conveys that style reflects both a product and process, a notion that speaks to the work WC tutors already do. Interestingly, though, Ohmann does not take a stance on whether style is deliberate. Moreover, he quietly separates style—i.e., "writing"—from "content." Ohmann's concept of style does not account for a writer's thought process, their organization of ideas. Rather, the concept is just about the "way" someone writes.

On the other end of the spectrum lies a definition stretching back to antiquity. Usually attributed to Aristotle, it focuses on style's inseparability from content, an "organic" relationship (Butler 3). This take is echoed by English folks in, say, creative writing, folks who might draw a more direct line between the formation of style and the nature (i.e., personality) of that style's author. This definition is touched on elsewhere in English studies, too, starting as early as 1971 (Milic 77).

Considering various definitions and my purposes here, I subscribe to a scholar who has both successfully historicized style and developed his own synthetic definition of it. That scholar is Paul Butler, who, in his 2008 book *Out of Style: Reanimating Stylistic Study in Composition and Rhetoric*, defines style as "the deployment of rhetorical resources, in written discourse, to create and express meaning," a deployment that involves both "habitual patterns" and "conscious choices at the sentence and word level" (3). I favor his conception for a few reasons. First, it situates style as something to be deployed, capturing the fact that someone can, depending on the rhetorical moment, "use" one style or another; the Writer is not beholden to the one style that is most "organic" to them. (Whenever I write the word "deployed," I think of paratroopers leaping from a plane, probably an appropriate image here.) Second, Butler embraces how style is essential to both the expression *and* creation of meaning. As Joseph Williams writes in his essential *Style: The Basics of Clarity and Grace*, "It is easy to think that style is just the polish that makes a sentence more appealing, but more than appeal is at stake" (123). Put another way, style is not some sort of linguistic cosmetics; it is part of a text's own DNA.

(In the end, arguments of style and deliberateness mean only so much to me. The likely reality is that we sometimes communicate in our own "organic" styles, while at other times we contrive separate styles for other audiences. To a Latinx such as me, it is no surprise that a lack of thoughtfulness on this point has coincided with a lack of non-white, non-male scholars in stylistic studies, thinkers who have plenty of experience constructing styles for audiences different than themselves.)

3. Stylizing the Writing Center

By itself, Butler's definition has much to offer WC folks. For one, it suggests that while style can originate within the writer (*Write from your heart.*) or without the writer (*What are the conventions of this genre?*), it is always *of* the writer, fostering a symbiotic relationship between author and text. If, for example, a writer at the WC feels no personal connection to what they have been assigned, then their tutor could emphasize Butler's assertion that style is something to be deployed, that the writer need focus only on the conventions of their genre. In addition, if the tutor comes to see style beyond the binary of deliberateness and non-deliberateness, then they could more effectively help a writer harness their "habitual [i.e., personal] patterns," avoiding repetitiveness.

Indeed, if given the chance to unsettle how writing at the WC is read, evaluated, and discussed, style can have a liberating effect on tutors and writers

alike. It could help enact what many WCs only pay lip service to, that those who visit their spaces truly are Writers, not just students fulfilling the guidelines of their assignments. Style can enrich tutors' jobs by keying them in to their own habits when responding to texts, habits that can be prescriptive and mechanical. As Jesse Kavadlo puts it in "Tutoring Taboo: A Reconsideration of Style in the Writing Center,"

> Tutors should not be placed in the awkward position of telling students what they "should" do. Instead, they can remind them of rhetorical considerations, possibilities, and consequences concomitant with various and variable modes of expression. Further, style, unlike prescriptive grammar, involves a series of choices that demonstrate many layers of meaning simultaneously: the writer's style demonstrates what he or she thinks, but also the relationships between those ideas, the relative importance of weighted ideas, the writer's attitude toward those ideas, and the writer's ability to present those ideas effectively and persuasively. The tutor, then, must use questions to make the writer aware that what he or she says is a series of rational and discrete options, not blind adherence to a set of rules. (220–1)

Kavadlo's vision probably means more "work" for the tutor, but that work is less mechanized, less prescribed; the whole job sounds more fun, honestly. In addition, the tutor-writer discourse he maps echoes a productive instructor-student discourse, a helpful concept for tutors planning to teach and/or enter grad school.

And while, generally speaking, writing centers today are not *dismissive* of foregrounding style, they can do more to fully integrate it into the pantheon of Higher-Order Concerns™ (HOCs) that still holds sway over the field (McKinney 64). In his dated yet insightful article "Assessing Attitudes toward the Writing Center," Malcolm Hayward surveys WC tutors about their conceptual priorities during consultations, and "style" finishes unceremoniously behind "organization," "paraphrasing," and "grammar" (qtd. in North 47). Worse yet, as has been true from Hayward's time to ours, students are too often sent to writing centers purely for grammar and punctuation. So, style has been marginalized from two directions, one of which—the tribe of faculty members who still view WCs as fix-it shops—has budged only so much in the past few decades.

This is not to mention the subtle ways in which WC-ers themselves have subtly forgotten about or glossed over style. In his influential, oft-read article "Minimalist Tutoring: Making the Student Do All the Work," Jeff Brooks summarizes the tutor's task as follows: "We can discuss [with students] strategies for effective writing and principles of structure, we can draw students' attention to features in their writing, and we can give them support and encouragement" (129). To "draw students' attention to features in their writing" sounds noble—it is—but how about to draw their attention to a single pervading, distinct feature in the prose itself? Accurate as Brooks' rundown is, it feels simply like a more prosaic version of that Law Center rubric. It is a menu lacking a core, one that, while not essential, would help. Stylistic matters can do more than simply draw students' attention to a few characteristics of their work; they can effect change within and without it.

What are the stakes if WCs continue to let style fall by the wayside, if only partially? Well, they risk reproducing an antiquated idea of writing. If WCs continue to separate things such as "organization," "purpose," and "clarity" from style, then they will foster texts that lack personality, buildings that lack architecture. With even greater frequency, young writers would fall back on a bland, inefficient, and above all safe style of writing, a style a former professor of mine likens to that of Wikipedia (Mikics). Though this bland style lacks a codified name in writing center studies, every experienced tutor is familiar with it, as well as anyone who has taught first-year composition. One of Butler's forebears, style scholar Richard A. Lanham, calls it The School Style. In his essential *Revising Prose*, he lays out its characteristics:

> [The School Style] is compounded, in equal parts, of deference to a teacher of supposedly traditional tastes, at despair of filling up the required number of pages before tomorrow morning, and of the mindlessness born of knowing that what you write may not be read with real attention. Above all, The School Style avoids unqualified assertion. It always leaves the back door open. If the teacher doesn't agree, you can sneak out through an "it seems" for "is," "may indeed have something in common with" for "results from," "it could possibly be argued that" for "I think," and so on. (80–1)

Those who write in The School Style are usually the same people who compose their essays according to what their instructors "want to read," as opposed to their own convictions. Yes, there will forever be

instructors who do *not* want to read their students' convictions, but I think their influence is exaggerated.

As a tutor and compositionist, I now further understand that instructors ultimately want work that is compelling or at least interesting to read, not twenty versions of the same essay on the same topic. Far beyond improving the quality of teachers' grading sessions, though, considerations of style would help writers synthesize academic conventions with their own ways of writing, a rich takeaway for any college graduate.

As always, though, style in the WC must still take into account who—the writer or tutor—gets to set a consultation's agenda. "What good is a style-centric pedagogy," someone might say, "if writers rarely visit to talk about style?" To this I argue that writers *do* in fact come to the WC to talk about their writing styles, their deployment of rhetorical resources; they just express this interest via other terms. Tutors are accustomed to writers coming in to discuss how well their essays "flow," whether they "sound good." These writers are really talking about style.

Because what in a text creates "flow"? What makes it sound "good"? It is not just one well-crafted sentence, nor is it several. For a composition of a few hundred words or more, "flow" results from countless, effective choices at the sentence- and word-level, the "habitual patterns" Butler mentions (2). (I am fondly reminded of how, when I was a boy, my paternal abuelito would tell me, "If you take care of the pennies, then the dollars take care of themselves.") Yes, "flow" is about choices at the paragraph- and section-level, too, but not at the expense of what WC folks have traditionally labeled lower-order concerns. At the end of the day, "flow" and style are bound up with the same rhetorical resources: grammar, syntax, punctuation, usage, spelling. To those outside Rhet./Comp., these elements are simply "rules," things to be obeyed rather than deployed, but that assumption is precisely where a tutor can open up a conversation about style, one that still honors what the writer came in for.

Still, if style is a vehicle for approaching challenges WCs are already approaching, what is the need for it in particular? Put concisely, just because other concepts get tutors and writers to the same discussion-points does not mean those concepts are necessarily better at addressing those discussion-points. As I have sought to illustrate, style is a "better" vehicle because it positions the writer as an architect of their work, not just someone fulfilling instructions. Such a position is humanizing, if not just sobering, to someone writing an academic paper, an activity that for most students is "dull and unrewarding" (Brooks 129). Style, especially when assessed by an authority such as a tutor, is an effective way of encouraging ownership of one's ideas.

4. Style and Resistant Writers

Likewise, style can serve as an entry-point for tutors confronted with a text that clashes with the otherwise progressive values of WCs. In 2014, for instance, I came across a popular essay by a freshman at Princeton, Tal Fortgang. Entitled "Check Your Privilege: Character as the Basis of Privilege," it dismisses the notion that skin color and gender strongly impact one's opportunities, instead arguing, as conservative texts are wont to do, that hard work is the only determinant of "success" in America. Fortgang, whose essay first appeared in his campus's conservative newspaper and was later republished under a different title in *TIME*, became a galvanizing figure. Unsurprisingly, he was embraced by right-wing outlets, earning himself an interview with Fox News. Also unsurprisingly, his worldview was quickly challenged by those on the left. *TIME* soon published a response piece by another Princeton freshman, Briana Payton, titled "Dear Privileged-at-Princeton: You. Are. Privileged. And Meritocracy Is a Myth."

My disagreement with Fortgang was immediate, of course. I still wondered, though, about what in his text was so effective for his audience. Fortgang's beliefs are shared by countless others in blogs, social media pages, and cable programs, so why did his version of the same argument gain so much traction? Besides the fact that he was an Ivy-League teenager who was nonetheless conservative, it was likely his writing style that made his work so memorable. Warped as its conclusions are, his essay exhibits a command of pace and a sense of organization, both bound by a brash, memorable style. "I have checked my privilege," he writes in his conclusion. "And I apologize for nothing." The avoidance of "unqualified assertion" that Lanham associates with The School Style (80)? None of that here.

As I brainstormed my argument for this article, I thought, *What if someone like Fortgang brought a text like "Check Your Privilege" to a writing center? Where would the tutor start? How could the tutor challenge Fortgang to think more critically while still centering the conversation on his "writing"?* Once again, I concluded, style would be an avenue. For while Fortgang's prose is a strength of his text (Tutors must always pay a compliment, right?) it also betrays his gaps in thought, his lack of nuance. Consider his second paragraph:

> I do not accuse those who "check" me and my perspective of overt racism, although the phrase, which assumes that simply because I

> belong to a certain ethnic group I should be judged collectively with it, toes that line. But I do condemn them for diminishing **everything** I have personally accomplished, **all** the hard work I have done in my life, and for ascribing **all** the fruit I reap not to the seeds I sow but to some invisible patron saint of white maleness who places it out for me before I even arrive. Furthermore, I condemn them for casting the equal protection clause, indeed the very idea of a meritocracy, as a myth, and for declaring that we are **all** governed by invisible forces (some would call them "stigmas" or "societal norms"), that our nation runs on racist and sexist conspiracies. Forget "you didn't build that;" check your privilege and realize that **nothing** you have accomplished is real. (emphases mine)

As the bolded text shows, Fortgang's style possesses more confidence than subtlety. It suffers from his insistence on using extreme language to summarize the claims of others, quickly resulting in a straw-man argument. No one is disregarding *all* the work of men of his background. Rather, Fortgang's opponents—including yet more of his peers via the Tumblr page *I, Too, Am Princeton*—are claiming that because of his gender and race, he has been given an upper hand, a higher starting point. A tutor could spend a good portion of a thirty-minute session facilitating dialogue on this point alone, encouraging Fortgang to use more nuanced syntax, a style of prose that considers opposing viewpoints.

That would be style's primary use in contentious sessions: a catalyst for discussion. Some folks might read the paragraph above and say, "Why even give Fortgang constructive feedback? He wouldn't listen." Well, as always, whether one writer internalizes a tutor's feedback is beyond an entire WC's control. Our job as WC people is to give the most forward-thinking feedback we can, to give our visitors the benefit of the doubt that they actually want to push themselves as writers, as thinkers. And style, as personal as we know it is, can actually serve as a kind of neutral space for challenging a writer's convictions; it has the veneer of being more about the text than the person who produced it. Talking about style might be the only way to get writers such as Fortgang to open up, to revise their minds.

5. Stylizing the Writing Center, Part 2

What would a more style-centric writing center look like, then? For one, stylistic study could be integrated into training. I think of a lesson plan I enacted with my composition students. I took a text most of them were familiar with, *The Great Gatsby*, and showed them two differently styled video summaries of its plot. The first was produced by *SparkNotes*, whereas the second was produced by a series entitled *Thug Notes*. As one would imagine, the *SparkNotes* video relied more on a "traditional" mode of communication, sporting an English somewhere between The School Style and a *New York Times* book review. It lasted eight minutes.

By contrast, the *Thug Notes* summary conveyed the same plot while using African-American English (AAE). Impressively, the speaker, Sparky Sweets, covers the whole plot within four minutes, even including some details that *SparkNotes* did not. By deploying AAE, Sweets draws a funny contrast between the world of *Gatsby* and that of gangsta culture. At the same time, his style invites the viewer to observe similarities between the two spheres, how they both expose flaws in the American Dream. "America may have started as the land where homies got each other's backs," Sweets says in his analysis, "but Fitzgerald's America is full of back-stabbin' crackas that make Gatsby's romantic dream ridiculous" (2:19–29).

Comparing the styles of videos such as these, tutors might start resisting the myth that there is some standard, uber-style out there, capital-W Writing. They might see that a style is effective only insofar as it is crafted for its audience, whether that audience is composed of English instructors or undergrads who love gangsta rap. Moreover, an exercise such as this one would demonstrate how style is almost always racialized, how even the *SparkNotes* video, benign as it is, was casually crafted for a "mainstream" (i.e., white) audience. In short, the exercise would demonstrate how "good" style, like "good" rhetors, should be versatile and shape-shifting, qualities that new tutors would do well to develop.

Another exercise would have tutors examine their styles themselves. Bringing in essays of their own, tutors would be tasked with reading them via different eyes. What are their styles' dominant characteristics, and where do those characteristics come from? How much do they stem from their field of study, their place of birth, their gender, their race? Examining such contexts, tutors would be encouraged to adopt a more postmodern, less hierarchical view of language, making them more open-minded pedagogues.

6. Style's Exigency

In October of 2015, I had the pleasure of seeing Andrea Lunsford deliver the keynote address at a

conference in north Texas, Trends in Teaching College Composition. As scholars of her caliber sometimes do, she focused on a book she recently became taken with. That book was Lanham's *The Economics of Attention: Style and Substance in the Age of Communication*, published in 2007. Excitedly, thoroughly, she shared with us one of the text's major arguments, which she endorsed: In our age of booming, new media for reading and writing, style is more essential than ever. Like Lanham, Lunsford held that, shallow as the practice is, audiences today and tomorrow will ignore or dismiss you if your style is not effective (much like my students came to ignore the *SparkNotes* summary of *Gatsby*). Audiences have always been this way, of course, but now style and content, which were inseparable in the first place, need each other more than ever; erudition is not enough. If anything, as Lunsford suggested, "content" needs style more than vice-versa.

I do not want writing centers to lag in this regard. By expanding their considerations of style, WCs can revivify their conception of students as Writers, chefs as opposed to short-order cooks. Such an expansion would provide a rich avenue for addressing challenges WCs have always faced: helping writers navigate genre, helping writers take ownership of their work, and helping writers find themselves amid the ocean of academic discourse. After all, as Brooks reminds us, the chief value of the writing center tutor "is as a living human body who is willing to sit patiently and help the student spend time with her paper" (129). In short, by embracing the individuality of writing, expanding style would breathe life into the work of tutors, administrators, and the writers they serve, making the WC an even more human place to be.

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Appendix: "Rubric Used to Evaluate the Writing Samples"

PROJECT 1 Rating Scale ⇨	**1 2**	**3 4**	**5 6**
HOLISTIC	**F At-Risk/Poor D**	**C Average B**	**A- Outstanding A**
The general experience of the composition.	Hard to read and understand.	Doesn't fully state and support a clear claim.	A strong, clear, supported opinion that's easy to read and understand.
FORMING, FRAMING, PRESENTING THOUGHTS AND IDEAS	**Score based upon how many of these MAJOR PROBLEMS are evident, and how seriously.**	**Score based upon how many of these MINOR PROBLEMS are evident, and how seriously.**	**Score based upon how WELL these STANDARDS are achieved. [Likely to be indicated by these features]**
Purpose: ("Provide your informed opinion") Answer both parts of the question; state and support a thesis (informed opinion).	Highly unbalanced (or separate) responses to the two parts of the question. Fails to address one of the two parts. Lacking opinion. Claim very unclear or difficult to locate, and/or thesis fails to synthesize two parts of question.	Touches upon but doesn't fully address both parts of the question. Stance/opinion not made fully clear, or difficult to locate. Stance clear but not fully developed. Thesis doesn't clearly or fully predict the support.	Clear and well-developed stance. [Thesis statement in a predictable location, clearly stated, touching on both subtopics] [Two parts of the answer easy to distinguish]
Elaboration: ("explain how you reached that conclusion") Explain the reasoning behind the conclusion (make clear connections): Body paragraphs support topic sentences with details from sources and personal experience.	Little or no supporting details from sources; Seemingly-random selection of details from sources. Lacking topic sentences that predict paragraphs; Lacking a sense of how details connect to opinion(s).	Seeks to explain connections but results not always fully clear. Lacking reasons or support in a few places; reader left wondering "how" or "why" in places. Not all paragraphs introduced by clear predictive topic sentences.	Reason/support connections clear and convincing. [Topic sentences easy to locate, clearly written, predict support] [Points and particulars both present in most or all paragraphs]
	CRAFTING, EDITING, PROOFING WRITTEN PROSE		
Shape, Power, and Emphasis: Use position in sentences and paragraphs to help readers understand what's important. Signal relationships and transitions. Get to main verbs quickly. Place old before new information.	Sentences overly simple or needlessly complicated. Sentences poorly constructed/edited (long introductions, interrupted subject-verb connections, etc.). Organizational logic not clear or signaled.	Sentences generally easy to understand, but not always high impact. Sentences occasionally hard to understand. Organization only partially signaled.	Sentences achieve their effects with little effort from the reader. [Parallelism, active voice, simple tense] [Coordination, subordination] [Transitions—easy to follow organization]
	□ ***Frequent Editing Errors***	□ ***Occasional Editing Errors***	□ ***Few Editing Errors***
Economy and Clarity: Use fewer words in more-effective sentences. Cut repeated words and obvious implications; prefer the affirmative. Choose well-suited and precise words.	Too many wasted words and empty phrases; wordy or mechanical. Abstract, general words chosen for important passages. Inappropriate or wrong words chosen. Confusing arrangements of subjects/topics.	Some words and phrases could have worked harder; some waste. Mixture of abstract/concrete, specific/general word choices. Inconsistent order of subjects/topics.	Virtually every word and phrase counts. Easy to follow and tangibly imagine. [Concrete, specific nouns; strong, active verbs; consistent order of subjects/topics]