Style: Word Choice

Style can help or hurt a good argument because the goal of writing is to communicate clearly with your audience. Style emerges from your decisions about every word and phrase you use. Style is not a collection of arbitrary rules; it is the habit of making conscious choices about what will communicate most effectively with your reader.

Here are some principles of word choice to help make your writing more effective:

1. **Formality.** We speak and write in many different styles. There are principles of writing appropriate to each style. In Humanities, we use a formal style, not because it is "true" or "proper" English, but because it is the style expected of us in most professional fields, and it takes work to perfect. There are many rules to formal English. Some are grammatically logical, and others are merely customary. Here are four of many possible examples:

    1. *Grammatical Rule.* Formal English prohibits the use of ***double negatives***. In many languages, double negatives serve to add emphasis; this is the case in informal spoken English as well: "I won't never go there again!" Formal English views the double negative as a logically self-contradictory statement.

    2. *Customary Usage.* It is important to be consistent when using **singulars or plurals**. In informal spoken English, we often mix the singular and plural without causing misunderstanding as in the following:

        Everyone wants their money back for the cancelled show.

        In formal English, this is seen as a careless mistake that mixes a singular subject with a plural pronoun. The sentence should read:

        Everyone wants his or her money back for the cancelled show.

    3. *Formal Style.* Many advocates of formal English believe it is incorrect to use ***split infinitives***, placing an adverb between the *to* and the *verb* of the infinitive. Split infinitives do not actually violate any logical rule of grammar, and they have a long history of use in "great" writing, most famously in *Star Trek*'s motto: "to boldly go where no man has gone before." However, because of the common perception that they are incorrect, it remains advisable to avoid splitting infinitives, unless it confuses the meaning of your sentence:

        Unnecessary Split. At work, they want us to frequently collaborate with the design team.

        The sentence works equally well if you write either "to collaborate frequently..." or "to collaborate with the design team frequently." Moving the adverb to the end of the sentence places emphasis on it.

Preferred Split. Creon orders Antigone <u>not to bury</u> her brother, Polynices.

The negation of *not* causes some clarity issues because it might belong either to *orders* or *to bury*. Logic might be able to figure this one out, but why cause the reader even momentary confusion? Write instead: "Creon orders Antigone <u>to not bury</u> her brother, Polynices."

4. *Formal Style.* Some elements of formality are not issues about perceptions of correct usage; they are strictly a matter of style. **Contractions** are a good example of this. They're associated with rapid, informal conversation. They don't violate any grammatical rules or customs, but you shouldn't use them in formal writing.

2. **Established meanings of words.** Rooted in Latin and the Germanic languages, English has a large and varied vocabulary. It is important to be careful about which words you choose to use. Commonly confused words and common "misuses" of words always rank high on people's lists of pet peeves. Be aware of these and avoid them because they frustrate readers and compromise the effectiveness of your writing. Keep a good dictionary on hand to help you avoid these mistakes. Here are three examples:

- *Word Confusion: Principal & Principle.* A "principal" is a person or thing of the highest rank or importance. A "principle" is a fixed rule.

- *Meaning Confusion: Literally.* "Literally" means "in actual fact." It is increasingly used in popular speech as an intensifier that means something like "figuratively" (as in *"It was amazing! I literally died when I saw them in concert!"*). Given the precise meaning of the word, the newer informal use is particularly frustrating to many readers. In formal writing, use *literally* only when you mean "in actual fact."

- *Usage Confusion: Like & As.* In common speech, *like* and *as* are often interchangeable; this is not the case in formal writing. There are two important distinctions between *like* and *as*:

  o *Like* is only a preposition. *As* functions as a coordinator (or conjunction) that connects two or more phrases with the same function. *Like* should not be used as a coordinator.

    Sometimes Odysseus acts *as if* (not *like*) he is not in a hurry to get back to Ithaca.

     ○ Use *like* when making a direct comparison and *such as* when introducing a representative list.

> Aeneas, *like* Odysseus, wanders the Mediterranean far from his home.

> Milton belongs among the great epic poets, such as Homer, Virgil, and Dante.

3.   **Clarity.** Clarity is the chief virtue of effective writing. It is hard to define what precisely makes prose clear, though it is easy to recognize when it has become unclear. Here are three principles to improve clarity:

- *Define key terms.* Many of the most important words in your essay are concepts that are commonly used and widely debated, such as *freedom* and *morality*. It is important that you use these words consistently and make clear the precise sense in which you are using them in the essay.

- *Avoid vague words and phrases.* We tend to use vague language because it includes the meaning we intend. The problem is that it includes many other meanings as well, and your reader does not know which one you mean. If I told you that Augustine's relationship with God is *interesting*, you would be right to immediately ask me what I mean by *interesting*. Is his relationship good or bad? Admirable, revolutionary, strange? Many vague words are about relationships and value judgments. When editing your essay, replace vague words with concrete, specific claims as in this example:

> *Vague.* When the plague hits Thebes, Oedipus finds himself in a <u>difficult situation</u>.

> *Specific.* When the plague hits Thebes, Oedipus finds that he is unable to do right by his people while also preserving his household.

- *Good and bad variation.* Many of us were taught that variation is a sign of good writing. And it is when used well. However, variation can just as easily cause confusion. Keep your key terms *consistent* throughout your essay. Do not, for example, arbitrarily switch between using *freedom* and *liberty*. Incorporate variation in two ways:

     ○ Vary words that do not affect the meaning of the argument. Use your vocabulary to make your prose more concrete. You do not need to introduce every quotation with so-and-so "says." Use words that better capture the quotation's tone. Is it a declaration? A statement? Use "declares" or "states." This is not a license for overwriting (see Brevity below).

- Vary your sentence structure and style. Variation on the sentence-level is another way to emphasize a point. Variety makes emphasis possible. If you write a series of exclamatory sentences, they all lose their power! The same is true if you only write short simple sentences (or only long complex ones).

4. **Brevity.** Brevity is cousin to clarity. One of the most effective ways to make your writing clearer is to edit it with brevity as your guiding principle. Brevity prefers the simpler, more concise, and more direct language over the wordy, long, and flashy. Here are several areas in which brevity is desirable:

- *Single words*. When there are two words with the same meaning, prefer the simpler one. Why write "utilize" rather than "use"?

- *Long phrases*. While writing, we often come up with overlong, roundabout phrases. Good editing simplifies them. Why write "the author of the *Aeneid*" rather than "Virgil"? Or why write "someone who practices law" rather than "lawyer"?

- *Omit needless words and phrases*.

  - Indirect phrases change the structure of your sentence and place distance between you and your argument. There is no need to ever write "the fact that." Just state the fact. In an argumentative essay, there is no need to write "I think that." Cut it. The whole essay is what you think.

  - Random intensifiers. We litter our prose with words that are meant to intensify our claims without actual argument. These words do not add to your argument, cut them.

    Augustine <u>really</u> wanted to dedicate his life to God, but he did not want to be <u>totally</u> chaste. [*Really* and *totally* are distracting and do not add to the meaning of the sentence.]

- *Do not overwrite.* Your argument is complex; your language should not be. Overwriting occurs when a writer consistently uses "big words" and "flowery language," when every sentence has multiple clauses, and when every paragraph has an analogy or poetic flourish. Overwriting cognitively exhausts a reader, causing him or her to lose the thread of the argument or the force of the point you are making. Brevity keeps the emphasis on your argument, where it belongs.

5. **Audience.** Be sensitive to your audience's knowledge and preferences and avoid using language that alienates or confuses them. Sometimes your audience is a specific group of people united by shared interests with its own specialized vocabulary. General audiences tend to resist the use of specialized vocabulary

because it is new and often technical. However, these specialized words are constantly being incorporated into the general lexicon. It is difficult to know exactly when a word makes the transition from specialized to general. For example, thirty years ago, words related to computers were part of a special vocabulary. Many of these words, such as "network" and "interface," are now part of everyday speech. In formal writing, it is good practice to refrain from using new words or new extensions of a word's meaning if you can avoid it. Here is an example:

> In Goethe's novel, Werther did not have the *bandwidth* to cope with all the changes happening in his life.

In 2017, it is popular to use *bandwidth* to refer to one's cognitive or emotional capacity. This is a metaphorical extension of the word's common, technical use as a measure of data passing through a communication channel. Time will tell if this new usage disappears or becomes established. For now, avoid it.

6. **Connotations.** Many words have both *denotations* and *connotations*. A denotation is the literal meaning of a word. Connotations are the ideas and tones associated with a word, which change the way a reader interprets your sentence. Some words share denotations, but have different connotations. A good writer is careful to pick words that have the appropriate denotation *and* connotation.

- *Implied Formality.* Take the words *consult* and *check* for example. They have the same denotation, but different connotations. *Consult* is associated with serious, formal investigation, and *check* is associated with informal examination. The words are not always interchangeable:

  > I *consulted* with the foremost authority on Anglo-Saxon archaeology, and she agreed that the helmet you found is not authentic.

  > I *checked* the list, but did not find your name on it. Are you sure that you're on the VIP list?

  In the first sentence, the "consultation" of an authority suggests that the matter is closed (your helmet is not authentic). In the second sentence, "checking" the list signals the beginning of a more thorough inquiry into the issue.

- *Connotation as value judgment.* The words you choose set the tone of your argument. Some words cannot be used neutrally because of their connotations. You shape your argument when you identify someone as a "terrorist" rather than as a "freedom-fighter" or "revolutionary." Similarly, if you say that Machiavelli counsels "princes," it has a neutral or positive connotation, but if you say he counsels "tyrants," then it has negative one.