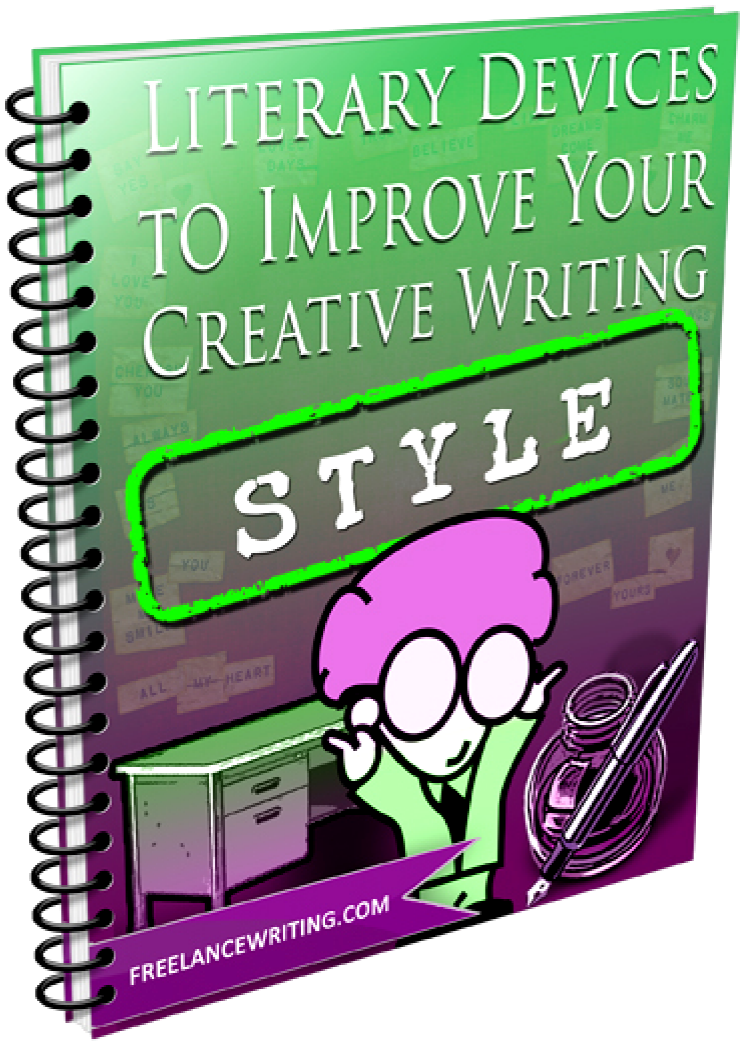

Literary Devices to Improve Your Creative Writing Style

Part 2: How to Use Rational, Discriminating, Judicious Judgment in Your Writing Style

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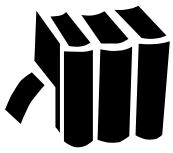


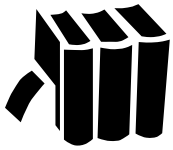
INTRODUCTION

The word "style," like the words "religion," "goodness," and "patriotism," implies a vague, hazy sort of excellence which most of us would have a hard time defining. But we are certain that no writing can be really good, or interesting, or worthwhile *without style*. The old cigarette magazine advertisements have style (after its fashion); the black-and-white newspaper classified advertisement has none. The news blog account of the latest natural disaster has style; the schedule of TV programs has none. Gibbon's *History of Rome* has style; a mathematics textbook has none. **Style** is that virtue in *writing* which makes it more than merely comprehensible.

I wanted to see a movie. It was an Academy Award picture. It was being shown at Cinema Village in New York's Greenwich Village. So I went downtown this morning and saw the show.

We can understand such writing easily enough. But it has no style. Between writing like that, and the writing of people like *Stephen King*, *Faulkner*, and *Hemingway,* are a thousand intermediate stages. The very uppermost of these stages are probably reserved for writers (such as Stephen King) who have a special talent and sensitivity beyond what mere training and writing advice can do for them. But training and advice can help any intelligent writer clamber from the lower stages of writing to the upper stages of writing. This eBook is intended to

give advice and foster training that will hasten the ascent to become a better creative writer.



1. CONTROL

The first requirement is that the writer understands what he wants to say. That is, he cannot afford to write a single sentence without first asking himself, "*What is the most important idea, emotion, or image I wish to convey in this sentence?*" He must pick the one word he wishes to emphasize; the one phrase he wishes to plant in the mind of his reader; the one clause which he wishes to make linger and ferment. The basic faults of writing style are due to writers failing to weigh and evaluate their own ideas than to any other weakness. If the writer himself has not decided which idea is most valuable, how can the reader decide? Rational, discriminating, judicious thinking is the first habit a writer should acquire. Without it, he only babbles.

A student writes:

Many students go through college on the reputations which they received at the first of the year because they did extra-hard work then, though they do very little later on.

The writer has not evaluated his own thoughts here. One thought is that students go through college on reputations received early in the year; another thought is that these students worked hard for their reputations; and a third thought is that these same students do little work later on. ***Which of these ideas is most important?*** The writer had not decided, and the reader does not know. Accordingly, the sentence, though comprehensible, is flabby and styleless. Other examples follow:

Example 1:
Mrs. Rhymes had on an old pair of garden gloves, and had evidently been puttering among the ferns and azalea bushes.

Example 2:
Surely you are not in sympathy with those people who raise one of their own kind to prominence and then hurl muck at their own creations, as we know some of our city politicians have been doing in the present campaign.

Example 3:
We had expected him to live, but he died.

Example 4:
I had been vaccinated and was immune to the smallpox which was sweeping through the city; so I had felt safe, and had come there on a business trip.

These sentences are all grammatically correct; they are not necessarily un-unified; they are not incoherent. But in no sentence has the writer made a plain and definite choice of the most important idea in the sentence. In any one of them he might choose one of several ideas as the most important, and construct a new and better

sentence in any one of several ways. The choice never forces itself on the writer; but rather, the writer must always force his own choice on the sentence. This means that he should have enough intellect to make a decision, render judgment, and execute every idea that comes to him. If he fails to discriminate, he has failed in the first step toward acquiring a rational writing style.

Having decided what is the most important idea in the sentence, he must let that idea control the sentence by appearing in a dominant structure. He must show the reader that this idea is dominant, and that he intended it to be dominant.

Let us look at the last of the faulty sentences quoted above. As it now stands, no dominating idea controls it. He can decide which of the four ideas is really the most important, and can frame four different sentences accordingly :

Though smallpox was sweeping through the city to which I had come on a business trip, I, having been vaccinated, felt immune.

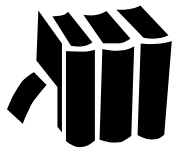
I felt immune to the smallpox sweeping through the city to which I had come on a business trip, for I had been vaccinated.

Since I had been vaccinated and felt immune to the smallpox which was sweeping through the city, I had come there on a business trip.

Though I had been vaccinated and felt immune, an epidemic of smallpox was sweeping through the city to which I had come on a business trip.

Each of these sentences has a different meaning, a different implication from the others; each puts forward a different idea as the controlling and dominant element in the sentence. Which of the four sentences the writer uses depends on his own judgment as to which of the four ideas he desires to impress most strongly on his readers.

Whenever a writer is confronted by such a multiplicity of choices, he should cast his vote for one of them, make his decision for better or for worse, and then stick to his decision. If he cannot decide which idea is most important, he should do one of three things: not write the sentence, or write two or three sentences instead of one, or use a balanced or parallel structure.



2. STRUCTURE

A balanced or parallel structure is one in which the writer has considered two or more ideas of equal importance, has believed they supplement one another, and has expressed their equality by placing them in similar structures within one sentence. The sentence just written was molded into three parallel structures because each of the three ideas expressed is equally important with the other two, and each forms only one portion of a complete idea. If they had not been of equal value, they would not have had the same structure; and if they had not been portions of the same idea, they would not have been put in the same sentence.

We may call it a rule that ideas of equal thought-value deserve structures of equal value, and ideas of unequal thought-value deserve structures of unequal value. The ascending order of structure-value is this: word, phrase, clause, sentence, and paragraph. The following sentences illustrate all these stages but the last:

- Word: *I saw armless men and legless men.*
- Phrase: *I saw men without arms and men without legs.*
- Clause: *I saw men who had no arms, and men who had no legs.*
- Sentence: *I saw armless men. And I saw legless men.*

Since the ideas of "armlessness" and "leglessness" are equal in thought-value, the following sentences with unequal structure-values would be absurd:

1) *I saw armless men, and men who had no legs.*
2) *I saw men who had no arms, arid men without legs.*

In these last two sentences, equal ideas are given unequal structures. But a more common offense is that the writer gives unequal ideas to equal structures. Many inexperienced writers have the habit of stringing together a hodgepodge of ideas by means of "ands" and "buts." One of the sentences quoted in the preceding section illustrates this fault:

Mrs. Rhymes had on an old pair of cotton gloves, and had evidently been puttering among the ferns and azalea bushes.

The two clauses are not of equal thought-value; and yet in this sentence they have the same structure. Such incongruity is irrational.

The following sentences have the same weakness:

Okay: *He stepped off the curb without looking, and was struck and killed by a passing car.*
(Here stepping off a curb, and being killed, are made to seem of equal importance.)

Better: *Stepping off the curb without looking, he was struck and killed by a passing car.*

Okay: *The sun may shine tomorrow, and then we can go horseback riding.*
Better: *If the sun shines tomorrow, we can go horseback riding.*

Okay: *Many people have no aim in life, and move in a circle which gets nowhere.*
Better: *Many people, having no aim in life, move in a circle which gets nowhere.*

Okay: *His mind was in a turmoil, so he decided to get drunk.*
Better: *Since his mind was in a turmoil, he decided to get drunk.*

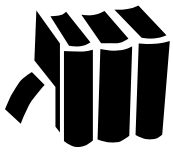
In each of these corrected sentences, the subordinate idea expressed in an independent clause has been re-expressed in a prepositional phrase, a participial phrase, or a dependent clause. That is, the structure-value has been reduced to correspond with the minor thought-values.

Sometimes a writer finds it necessary to do the opposite; that is, to make an important idea *really* seem important. The writer accomplishes this feat by raising words to the rank of phrases, phrases to dependent clauses, dependent clauses to independent clauses, and independent clauses to sentences.

An example follows:

Thompson was a much-traveled man.
Thompson was a man of many travels.
Thompson was a man who had traveled much.
Thompson, who was the man for us, had traveled much.
Thompson was the man. He had traveled much.

This deliberate heightening of an idea's importance requires more self-conscious artistry than does the proper subordination spoken of above. This heightening is a positive search for excellence; the other is merely a negative avoidance of error.



3. POSITION

The most important positions in any element of composition are the beginning and the end. Reason requires that we place our most important words, phrases, clauses, or ideas in one of these positions. The negative of this requirement is that we

should avoid placing unimportant words, phrases, clauses, or ideas in the two important positions in the sentence.

A. The Beginning. Sentences should seldom or never begin with words like "however," "also," "then too," and the like. But some laws supersede other laws. The law of clarity always comes first; other laws are secondary.

B. The End. Even more important than the beginning is the end of a sentence. If the reader will turn back a few pages to the sentence concerning smallpox, vaccination, and immunity, he will see that each of the corrected versions, except the last, ends with the principal clause and the principal idea in the sentence. In Section 2, each of the improved sentences ends with the principal clause and the principal idea. The practice illustrated in these sentences is, in general, safe. The important clause and the important idea should come at the end of the sentence. But like all other practices, it may be carried too far. It may become an obsession with the writer, and it may lead to monotony of style. Furthermore, it is not adapted to writing of a leisurely gait and a familiar tone. It is best adapted to exposition aiming at absolute clarity, and to argumentation aiming at conviction.

Yet no sentence should ever end with a tailing off into insignificant words and ideas:

Most of us would refuse to read more than a few sentences of it.

The gift of prophecy was also assigned to him.

The last two words in these sentences are flat and insipid.

Most untrained writers have the habit of placing a participial phrase or a dependent clause at the end of a sentence. Here are some more examples:

Her voice failed, being broken by sobs.

He died yesterday, having been sick only a week.

He took to begging, being on the verge of starvation.

She raised her hands in prayer to Neptune as she stood by the sea.

He would not answer, though I rang the bell several times.

(This last sentence is almost a model of what a sentence should not be.)

All these sentences are irrational because they indicate that certain ideas are subordinate, and yet they place these subordinate ideas and structures in the prominent position in the sentences. A writer of such sentences is like a strawberry packer who would go to the trouble of culling out inferior stock, and would then pile this inferior stock at the top of the basket for prospective customers to see. The writer should be like a real berry-packer; he should carefully choose the best of his stock, and then pile it in the most conspicuous place at the end of the sentence. If he has a word to emphasize, or a phrase, or a clause, or an idea, he should juggle the grammatical elements, manipulate the sentence-parts, rearrange the word-group, so as to make the important word, phrase, clause, or idea drop neatly into the prominent place. In a ballet dance, the chorus marches, wheels, converges,

retreats, interlaces in a hundred gyrations; but always the star dancer appears in the prominent place. Good writing is like that — it coils, turns, pauses, retreats, converges and the important element appears magically at the supreme position.

Note how each member of the following pairs conveys a different feeling:

They found him drunk in the street. // They found him in the street, drunk.

Queen Victoria walked ahead of us. // Ahead of us walked Queen Victoria.

The tiger now had him by the throat. // The tiger had him by the throat now.

I went from the hotel to the subway. // I went to the subway from my hotel.

In these sentences, different end-words produce different effects.

C. Transposition. Words or phrases transposed from their normal place in a sentence usually gain in emphasis. This rule holds good except in sentences where transposition takes a word away from the end-position.

Before continuing with this discussion, perhaps we had better see just what the normal sentence order is. The following sentence illustrates the elemental order:

The good man kindly gave the book to me.

(a) Subject, preceded by adjective.

(b) Verb, preceded by adverb.

(c) Object.

(d) Indirect object.

This elemental order has a few additional complexities:

The man in gray talked in a high voice.

(a) Subject, followed by adjective phrase.

(b) Verb, followed by adverbial phrase.

This order holds for adjective and adverbial clauses as well as phrases :

The man who lived down the street talked when he had the chance.

These examples show the fundamental orders. As for the order in more complicated sentences, the reader can more safely rely on his instinct for the language than on his memory of half-a-dozen special rules.

All this has been a digression. The main point is that we can focus our attention on a word in a sentence if that word is placed out of its natural order. The italics in the following sentences indicate words out of their natural order:

Everywhere in the darkness, I saw men lying about, *dead*.

Patiently, he listened.

The sunshine, *cold and bright*, offered no sympathy.

Last of all these marching thousands *rode Napoleon*.

All day were the birds loud in my garden.

Among these visions wandered *my spirit*.

The last sentence is almost bad. So much distortion looks artful and insincere. Indeed, a writer must use the device of transposition with discreet caution. He should reserve it for those occasions when he "would be very fine." There it is effective. But if he uses it every time he has the opportunity to do so, it soon tarnishes and looks cheap.

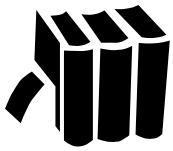
For in much wisdom is much grief.

In the day of prosperity, be joyful.

He by his wisdom delivered the city.

All things have I seen in the days of my vanity.

The reader should notice in passing that the transpositions in the first two examples are designed to place important words in the important end-position, rather than to attract attention to themselves. In the last two examples the transpositions are designed to emphasize the words transposed. Unless transposition can serve one of these two purposes, it is not worthwhile for its own sake. One other purpose, however, it may serve; and that is to make transitions from sentence to sentence more smooth.



4. CONTINUITY

A piece of writing has continuity if the connections between its elements are tight and snug, and if each part is locked hard and fast to its neighboring parts.

Continuity is not always a virtue.

It implies a strictly logical procedure, and it hints of an intellect controlled by rationality. Obviously, too strict continuity is out of place in writing which seems spontaneously emotional and sincere. It precludes a quick, nervous, energetic style. Often it gives writing clarity at the sacrifice of strength. Furthermore, the tendency of modern writing is analytic rather than synthetic; that is, modern writing consists more of an accumulation of units rather than a nexus of parts. Finally, an unbroken continuity is likely to weary the reader.

The last three sentences contain transposed elements. The reader may care to analyze their function and criticize their effectiveness. In our generation of hasty readers and impatient thinkers, some people demand logical writing instead of nervous writing; and some subjects require rational consideration instead of emotional contemplation.

A. Continuity of Ideas. Continuity depends on the larger structure of the composition. In narration, it depends on a simple following of the time sequence. In description, it depends on the arrangement of details. In exposition, it depends on the arrangement of ideas. Let's discuss the last of these three forms.

The easiest way to give smooth continuity to style is to have a clear and rational structure in the composition as a whole. When parts of the composition are thought out and arranged so that each part leads logically and inevitably to the succeeding part, then the writer will have little trouble in giving continuity to his style.

A few literary devices can help the writer achieve this continuity. Some of these concern the continuity of *ideas*; some the continuity of *paragraphs*; and some the continuity of *sentences*.

As for the first of these, the adoption of a certain order of procedure and adherence to it is the simplest and most effective. For example, the writer may decide on an order of procedure altogether chronological; or the order may be from a general idea that leads to illustrations of the idea; or those illustrations may lead to the general idea governing them; or it may be from simple toward more complex ideas; or it may be from known or admitted facts toward unknown or disputed facts; or it may be from an enumeration of points that are to be considered to an

elaboration of each of those points in turn. Which method the writer adopts will depend upon his subject. But once he has chosen his method, he ought to stick to it throughout his work. If he does so, he will find the minor problems of continuity much easier to solve, and the reader will find the composition much pleasanter to follow.

B. Continuity Between Paragraphs. This literary device is used to effect the transitional sentence, that is, a sentence which points both forward and back forward, toward the new paragraph, and back toward the preceding paragraph. This paragraph begins with a transitional sentence. The words "a more" indicate that something has preceded; the rest of the sentence suggests the nature of the new paragraph. The second paragraph in this section also begins with a transitional sentence.

A second device is the insertion of a short transitional paragraph between two important paragraphs. Like the transitional sentence, the transitional paragraph hints at something that has gone before, and indicates the general outline of what will follow. The fifth paragraph in this section is a transitional paragraph; so is the paragraph beginning on the next line.

C. Continuity Within the Paragraph. More varied than the devices which make for continuity between paragraphs are those which make for continuity within the paragraph that is, for continuity between sentences.

The first of these is the use of transitional words. In looking over the present section, one would find that the transitional words already used are "therefore,'

"furthermore," "that is," "finally,' and "other other hand," "moreover," "too," "accordingly," and "however." This makes a sizable list.

Somewhat akin to transitional words is the use of pronoun references in one sentence to nouns in a preceding sentence. The pronouns form a rational link between the two sentences. By way of illustration, the paragraph above begins, "*The first of these*" with "*these"* referring to a noun in the preceding sentence. And the first paragraph in this section contains several "it's" referring to nouns in the preceding sentence. A better example follows:

The Pleiads were daughters of Atlas, and nymphs of Diana's train. One day Orion saw them and became enamored and pursued them. In their distress they prayed to the gods to change their form, and Jupiter turned them into pigeons, and then made them a constellation in the sky. Though their number was seven, only six stars are visible, for Electra, one of them, it is said, left her place.

The reader conceives these four sentences as a large unit, quite unconscious of the subtle device which cements them.

A little different is the trick of repeating in one sentence important words of the preceding sentence. An example follows:

The story of the Iliad ends with the death of Hector, and it is from the Odyssey and other poems that we learn the fate of the other heroes. After the death of Hector, Troy did not immediately fall, but receiving aid from new allies still continued its resistance. One of these allies was Memnon, the Ethiopian prince, whose story we have already told. Another was Penthesilea, queen of the Amazons. . . . Penthesilea

slew many of the bravest warriors, but was at last slain by Achilles. But when the hero bent over his fallen foe, and contemplated her beauty, youth, and valor, he bitterly regretted his victory. Thomas, an insolent brawler and demagogue, ridiculed his grief, and was in consequence slain by the hero.

Such a weaving together of sentences becomes a stronger union when the repeated words are brought close to each other by transposition. In the passage just quoted, for example, there would be a closer weave if the author had transposed his link-words in some such fashion as the following:

It is from the Odyssey and later poems that we learn the fate of the other heroes, for the story of the Iliad ends with the death of Hector. After the death of Hector, Troy did not immediately fall, but continued its resistance with aid received from new allies. One of these attics was Memnon . . . etc.

This revised version carries the thought swiftly from sentence to sentence with hardly a break. The repetition of a word from sentence to sentence may couple together pairs of sentences. But it does not link together all the sentences in a paragraph. This latter feat is accomplished when one word is repeated from sentence to sentence throughout the paragraph. This repeated word (or phrase) becomes a distinctive brand burned on each sentence, and identifies that sentence as belonging to the particular herd of sentences which go together to make up a paragraph.

One final device of continuity is parallel structure – the expression of diverse ideas in so similar a form that they have a seeming relation. The parallel structure may be complex like a telescope with a tube within a tube within a tube. Thus, parallel

words may occur in parallel phrases, which may occur in parallel clauses, which may occur in parallel sentences. In the nineteenth century the device often took the form of antithesis; it was revived in the late twentieth century as a means of unifying a sometimes impressionistic, highly individualistic prose. Here is a passage with multiple parallelisms:

Essayists, like poets, are born and not made, and for one worth remembering the world is confronted with a hundred not worth reading. Your true essayist is in a literary sense the friend of everybody. . . . He must be personal, or his hearers can feel no manner of interest in him. He must be candid and sincere, or his readers presently see through him. He must have learned to think for himself and to consider his surroundings with an eye that is both kindly and observant, or they straightway find his company unprofitable. He should have fancy, or his starveling propositions will perish for lack of metaphor and the tropes and figures needed to vitalize a truism. He does well to have humor, for humor makes men brothers, and is perhaps more influential in an essay than in most places else. He will find a little wit both serviceable to himself and comfortable to his readers. For wisdom, it is not absolutely necessary that he have it.

With this we may leave the discussion of rationality in style. The whole subject demands only a clear understanding of just what one wishes to say, a clear knowledge of a few mechanical principles, and a little care in applying the principles.

- THE END -

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