

Searching for style in the freshman classroom

by

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## INTRODUCTION

Style, it is the man himself.

Buffon

Proper words in proper places make the true definition of style.

Jonathan Swift

A man's style is his mind's voice.

Ralph Waldo Emerson

Have something to say, and say it as clearly as you can. That is the only secret of style.

Matthew Arnold

What is this thing called style about which so many have so much to say? If we narrow the search to exclude the likes of writing implements, botanical terminology, and personal dress or behavior, we can focus on it as it relates to language. Although some would deny the existence of style in language (recognizing only content in any communication), many concern themselves with "style as an aspect of meaning" (Hough 8) and view it as a manipulable element in any discourse.

Of those who treat it as more, or less, separable from matter, some take a relatively dim view of style when it is left to stand on its own. W. K. Wimsatt has called it "an irreducible something that is superficial, a kind of scum . . ." (qtd. in Kinneavy 275). Others, such as Richard

Lanham, see style as perfectly capable of carrying its own weight. In fact, he would have us "aim at an acute self-consciousness about style" and build our writing courses around it (Anti-Textbook 13).

Between these two extremes lie a number of terse observations that may add to our conception of style. F. L. Lucas calls it "simply the effective use of language" (18). Walker Gibson says: "It is partly a matter of sheer individual will, a desire for a particular kind of self-definition. . ." (24). Kenneth Burke has observed that "Style is ingratiating" (Martin and Ohman 128). Nils Enkvist sees it as "one type of systematic linguistic variation" (47). But perhaps the simple definition that best sums up all of these comes from William Irmischer: "Style results from choices we make" (130), an easily stated but crucial concept.

Many students come to the freshman composition class possessing only marginal writing skills (Lanham, Anti-Textbook 3). Whatever level of mastery they may have achieved, they are almost all uncertain of their abilities yet dependent on those writing techniques that have gotten them this far in their education. The matter of choice in expression, while not necessarily unheard of, is a concept with which most students are unfamiliar and which many students resist. They've labored long just to say it, and

now someone is asking that they try to say it differently. . . .

Or at least some instructors are. Teaching style--helping students become aware of rhetorical options--is a problematic undertaking at best, one that some see as vital and that others virtually ignore. Richard Lanham is critical of many in the field of education today who de-emphasize style, teaching a "plain" or "never-noticed" version of it. "They do not teach style," he says, "they abolish it" (Anti-Textbook 17). And if these instructors succeed with their "lists of self-contradicting proverbs," then they end up with students who have not been so much taught style as "housebroken" (19).

But there are also those to whom helping students develop their ability to express themselves fluently is of the utmost importance. William Irmscher insists: "Every teacher of composition ought to have some kind of working definition of style" (129), and then continues by defining his and giving several concrete suggestions to his students. Louis Milic mirrors this sentiment in "Theories of Style and Their Implications for the Teaching of Composition." And Winston Weathers maintains that "making the teaching of style . . . relevant . . . viable . . . and believable" is the "sine qua non" of the profession" (187).

So, if the teaching of style is truly consequential, why aren't we paying more attention to it? Well, part of

the problem is that we lack a clear-cut idea of just what to teach. What is style? Can it be taught? Is there just one, or are there many? What constitutes good style; by what measure should we judge it? If we can determine at least some elements of a valuable style, then what methods might we use to teach them to our students? These are the questions we must wrestle with if we are to pull together a coherent, comprehensive approach to teaching style in the freshman classroom.

Since expository (in which I include both informational and analytical writing) and persuasive prose are the kinds of writing that composition instructors deal with most often, I would like to identify some fundamental elements of each style and then perhaps see what they have in common. I suspect that there is a bedrock underlying these styles (and perhaps all styles) that constitutes good writing principles--solid stylistic advice we can give to our students as they struggle through their fifteen or thirty-odd weeks of freshman composition. Also, I hope to discover a relatively painless, reasonably logical way of integrating basic stylistic suggestions into a thirty-week syllabus. At the least, I hope to be able to recommend the minimum elements of style with which we can expect our students to be competent as they pass from their first-semester course to the second and then beyond.

## CHAPTER ONE: THEORIES OF STYLE

If we can agree that there is such a thing as style and perhaps even that it is a critical component of any written discourse, we must next consider whether or not it is teachable. In order to do this, it will be helpful to review several of the most basic theories underlying the conception of style and then try to determine not only which theory seems most logically appealing but which seems to offer the most promise for practical classroom application. Beginning with Aristotle, who "stands at the [head] of the normative theory of style" and Plato, "at the [forefront] of the individual theory," a dichotomy was born that has had proponents on either side of the issue arguing down the centuries (Doherty 330). Today the debate between "the theory of ornate form, or rhetorical dualism" and "the individualist, or psychological monism" (Milic 257) is still alive and well, with critics and educators continuing to argue vehemently for their respective positions--although some are finding compromises.

## Organic Theory of Style

In "Theories of Style and Their Implications" Louis Milic discusses two versions of the organic approach to style: psychological monism and Crocean aesthetic monism.

The first of these two, Milic says, is embodied in Buffon's oft-quoted aphorism, "The style is the man," and may have descended from Plato's "conception of the 'vir bonus,' the good man whose goodness would express itself equally in graceful dancing and graceful expression" (257), a view that sees writing style as no more than a natural outgrowth of personality, needing no particular direction.

The second theory, one widely held today, was first articulated by Benedetto Croce in 1909. This philosophy, Crocean aesthetic monism, challenges the classical theory of ornate form, calling it an "illegitimate division of expressions" (68). What Croce maintains is that each individual expression exists solely unto itself; it is self-contained and thus cannot be replicated without changing its fundamental meaning:

expression is a species which cannot function in its turn as a genus. Impressions or contents vary; every content differs from every other content, because nothing repeats itself in life; and the irreducible variety of the forms of expression corresponds to the continual variation of the contents, the aesthetic synthesis of impressions. (68)

Since expression or form cannot be manipulated without altering content, one must rely on "intuition" to bear the

"aesthetic fact" (72). One of the results of this philosophy is that "rhetorical categories" (i.e., tropes and schemes) should be considered an unnecessary evil to be retained in a curriculum only as a reminder of "errors of the past" (72). Another important outcome is that the concept of synonymy is no longer valid: translations become independent works of art, rather than more or less accurate representations of a source (Croce 68); and the very act of summary and paraphrase is called into question (Sledd 188).

Milic, among others, is critical of this monistic theory. He feels that since "it explicitly disavows any segmentation between the subject and its form" that there is no longer any basis for the study of style and "that discussion of the student's writing must consist almost exclusively of its philosophy. . ." (259). And carried to its logical conclusion, it would seem that Croce's approach would lead to just this sort of problem: the teacher ends up responding impressionistically without being able to offer any specific stylistic direction. However, what appears to happen in many instances is that the instructor who believes in the organic theory reaches a compromise between the Crocean ideal and his own actual classroom practice.

Monroe Beardsley is a good example of an avowed organicist who yet finds himself able to make some practical suggestions on form to his students. Although he does

assert that the "sovereign remedy" to difficult writing situations "is to think out the logical connections clearly" (301), he creates a distinction between stylistic "facts" and stylistic "rules." The "facts" are rhetorically sensible practices (such as reserving the ends of sentences for information one wishes to emphasize) that an instructor should present to his students (296). The "rules," or recommendations, Beardsley is more reluctant to prescribe, citing several examples from Strunk and White that he feels are improperly framed as imperatives. "There may be," he says, "rules of appropriateness: such-and-such is the accepted style of a thank-you note. But what more can we say" (296)? It appears that to promote an organic sense of style is to expect (perhaps demand) that students assume responsibility for their own rhetorical decisions and that instructors intrude on the student's writing process as little as possible.

#### Ornate Theory of Style

The theory of rhetorical dualism or ornate form "implie[s] that ideas exist wordlessly and can be dressed in a variety of outfits, depending on the need for the occasion. . . ." (Milic, "Theories" 257). Underlying this is the belief that substance and shape are divisible, that they can, and of necessity do, exist independently of one

another. James Sledd in "Some Notes on English Prose Style" maintains that "[w]e make this assumption every day" (188). In his opinion we cannot make "a translation, a paraphrase, or a summary" without acknowledging this. Furthermore, we could neither say nor believe the simplest indirect quotation to or from a friend, and any bit of discourse would become incomprehensible as soon as we could no longer remember it word for word. In fact:

if we did not assume that matter and manner are separable, language and communication would be impossible; for a man could explain himself only by repeating the words he said before, and if we did not understand him after the repetition, nothing more could be done. (188)

There are a great many educators and critics who subscribe to this approach to style. The majority opinion seems to be that unless form is at least in some way isolable from content that the writer has nothing to manipulate but meaning--and the teacher has nothing more specific to direct his students toward than more revision. Richard Ohman sums up the frustration of many with the organic view by asking: "[I]f style does not have to do with ways of saying something, just as style in tennis has to do with ways of hitting a ball, is there anything at all which is worth naming 'style'?" ("Prolegomena" 2).

Louis Milic would answer emphatically, yes. As an enthusiastic supporter of rhetorical dualism, he sees it as the most effective approach to teaching in the freshman classroom, though not without its drawbacks. If the instructor chooses to concentrate on expression rather than meaning, she has a number of options available: She can work the students through imitation exercises, close and loose; she can have students practice various styles "from the low to the grand"; she can teach the tropes and schemes; or she might check compositions "for the suitable presence of the seven parts, from exordium to peroration" (258). In focusing on form, students work with and are influenced by elements of style--they learn within a structure.

While this kind of organized instruction is a strength and can lead to stylistic maturity, it also has its disadvantages. Milic points out that, if adhered to closely, the theory of ornate style discourages students from expressing their true personalities: practice with forms is more important than self-expression. Also, content is given short shrift, since "the theory explicitly denies any link between substance and form except for logic" (258). Another danger in this approach is that it may produce students who write like one another rather than as individuals, but this may be seen as a positive result and a "vindication of the theory" (258). It would seem that

rhetorical dualism, much like the monistic theory, when followed too closely creates problems for students, problems that are, perhaps, resolvable.

### Epistemic Choice and Other Compromises

Dualism maintains that matter and manner are irrevocably separated. Organicism insists that they are inextricably bound together. Both theories have much to offer, but neither is complete while it stands inflexible and alone. The writing instructor who believes that expression and meaning are one tends to approach his students inductively, allowing them a great deal of freedom to make their own choices. This cannot help but encourage self-responsibility and stimulate creativity. The instructor who sees form and content as completely divorced from one another seems to approach her students more deductively, supplying the patterns with which students will work until they become competent with them. This kind of guidance helps students to become stylistically versatile in the ways of tradition. If the two theories can be brought closer together, perhaps they may inform one another to the benefit of both. In "Prolegomena to Prose Style" Richard Ohman considers both organicism and dualism and finds some ground on which the two may meet.

Ohman is not quite satisfied with either traditional approach to style and suggests an alternative, which he calls "epistemic choice": "a writer's method of dissecting the universe, as expressed by the infinite number of choices he makes" (24). To reach this conclusion, Ohman works with the speculations of I. A. Richards (statements may differ from one another and be stylistically "congruent" without being equivalent) and feels that he must qualify one of Richards' fundamental conceptions: "experience has 'uniformity as organized from within'" (8). Instead, Ohman says, "we must act as if there were uniformity of experience" (8; emphasis added). This interpretation leads him to deny the existence of any "ready-made forms of thought" and to assert that what we all confront is a kind of existential "formlessness" from which we must make certain choices. Citing current psychological theory, Ohman contends that "the perceiver . . . shapes the world by choosing from it whatever perceptual forms are most useful to him--though most often the choice is unconscious and inevitable" (9). From unbounded chaos, experiences limit our range of choices, but we are still free to choose. In this choosing, "style has its beginnings" (9).

Ohman's reasoning is significant in that it challenges both organicist and dualist preconceptions. There are choices in expressing meaning that can and must be made by

people coming to grips with their world through their language, so "[f]orm and content are truly separate" (9). On the other hand, since most choices are "unconscious and inevitable" we have much less control over the sentences we form than we might imagine. We develop "habit[s] of meaning, and thus . . . persistent way[s] of sorting out the phenomena of experience" (14). We acquire a "habitual style [that] is the ground for all the special styles of stylistic maneuvers [we] may adopt" (Logic 153). If this is true then matter and manner, while separate, are still interdependent, and style cannot simply be viewed as "sugar-coating" ("Prolegomena" 24).

Ohman's conception of epistemic choice may be the kind of compromise that allows the writing instructor more flexibility when she wrestles with the sometimes ambiguous, and always difficult to teach, area of style. Rather than sniping at one another from our respective critical camps, perhaps we can find some value in each other's approaches. There is certainly precedent.

Aristotle, as Edward P. J. Corbett points out, "taught that there is an integral and reciprocal relationship between matter and form" (Classical 385). This attitude allows Aristotle to speak to his students about manner of expression, when it seems appropriate, and how it may advance their arguments. He can give more general advice as

the rhetorical situation warrants: A "writer must disguise his art and give the impression of speaking naturally and not artificially. Naturalness is persuasive. . . ." (70) or more specific suggestions: "Bad taste in language may take any of four forms: 1. misuse of compound words, 2. employment of strange words. . . ." (73). By maintaining an open-ended approach to teaching rhetoric, he can expect his students to become both creative and to develop a polished style.

So perhaps it is time to lay the debate to rest. We can see that there are both theoretical and practical considerations for working toward a synthesis of organicism and dualism. Style may be considered "nondetachable, unfilterable" from content, as E. B. White would have it (Strunk and White 69), or it may be considered "artificial," at least in the "sense that all good styles are achieved by artifice" (Murry 16). Whatever our theoretical foundation, we should try to offer stylistic alternatives for our students so they may leave the classroom expressing themselves with greater fluency than when they entered.

CHAPTER TWO: TRADITIONAL DIVISIONS OF STYLE:  
HIGH, MIDDLE, LOW

Since pointing out rhetorical options is so important in helping our students to develop a more mature style, we might ask next what kind of framework could contain those options? A traditional answer to this question would be one of the three categories that have come down to us from classical Greece: the High or Grand Style, the Middle Style, and the Low or Plain Style, with their attendant "virtues" (Lanham, Handlist 113). These divisions have been defined often over the centuries (and criticized by many as vague and inexact) but are still popularly used today. Therefore, it might be useful to explore the three styles, see of what they consist, and then try to decide which--if any--we might want to recommend to our students.

High Style

Richard Lanham tells us that rough distinctions among the styles can be made according to: "subject," "diction," "effect on the audience," and "syntax" (Handlist 113-14). The High Style deals with important events; uses elevated diction, including figurative language; tries to emotionally arouse the audience; and carefully shapes its sentences, favoring balanced and periodic constructions. While not an

enthusiastic supporter of the categories ("A good case could be made for junking the whole [system]. . . .") (Analyzing 171), Lanham sees them as inevitable and has spent some time trying to determine what more particularly characterizes the two extremes of High and Low, coming up with the following lists:

| High           | Low            |
|----------------|----------------|
| rhetorical     | logical        |
| emotional      | rational       |
| persuasive     | informational  |
| ornamented     | plain          |
| opaque         | transparent    |
| Latinate       | Anglo-Saxon    |
| front-stage    | back-stage     |
| aristocratic   | plebian        |
| serious        | comic          |
| affected       | sincere        |
| literary       | conversational |
| hypotactic     | paratactic     |
| periodic       | loose          |
| dramatic       | everyday       |
| self-conscious | natural (171)  |

Lanham says that the two styles have been traditionally defined by any and all of these attributes but notes that the categories overlap, that there is seldom "pure" High or

pure Low style. And somewhere in between, partaking of both, rests, uneasily, the Middle Style.

It might be helpful to look at several examples of the High Style to get a sense for it in operation. One of the most extreme comes from the Elizabethan period and was popularized by John Lyly:

This young gallant [Euphues], of more wit than wealth, and yet of more wealth than wisdom, seeing himself inferior to none in pleasant conceits, thought himself superior to all honest conditions, insomuch that he deemed himself so apt to all things, that he gave himself almost to nothing . . . disdainng counsel, leaving his country, loathing his old acquaintance, thought either by wit to obtain some conquest, or by shame to abide some conflict, and leaving the rule of reason, rashly ran onto destruction. (Warner 81)

This passage is typical of Lyly's work. It shows a highly self-conscious style, overburdened with alliteration, repetition, and antithesis, all elements of the High Style. The antiquated diction notwithstanding, most people would have little trouble deciding into which category to place it.

Moving forward several centuries, we might take a look at some of Winston Churchill's rhetoric:

Side by side, unaided accept by their kith and kin in the great Dominions, and by the wide empires that rest beneath their shield--side by side, the British and French people have advanced the rescue, not only of Europe, but of mankind from the foulest and most soul-destroying tyranny which has ever darked and stained the pages of history. (Lanham, Analysis 175)

Here we see an updated version of the High Style in the hands of a great orator. Like Lyly, Churchill uses alliteration and repetition; however, the prime minister uses them with more discretion. Other elements of the High Style in this short excerpt: the periodic sentence; the figurative language; the dramatic, emotional appeal; and the serious occasion--world war (178).

But just how accurately can we describe High Style, or Low for that matter? Keeping the previous lists of attributes in mind, we might find some contradictions in the following selection written by an automotive journalist describing a car that he is taking for a test drive:

What's this? The tunnel is big enough to hold a driveshaft carved out of a telephone pole, and that curving gear lever has all the heft of a Louisville Slugger. The Cobra is not a, uh  
 . . . dainty car. You know the minute you

clamber in. . . . Eeaaasee down on that throttle,  
 gently upon the clutch and throbthrobthrob  
 off we go in a faint squeal of tire smoke. . . .  
 [Y]our eyes are seeing little red dots swimming  
 around like baby amoebas on your corneas. . . .  
 Touch . . . the brakes. And whomph. Like running  
 into a gigantic pillow. (Lanham, Analysis 188-89)

Richard Lanham points out that we have a sort of hybrid on our hands. The work falls into the Low category as far as subject matter and colloquial language is concerned but is aimed directly at the emotions rather than the intellect. The author's style is conversational (Low) but studded with metaphors and similes (High). And he manipulates his pacing with "sudden stops and starts that imitate the flight of the car" (190). Lanham sees this as a self-conscious style verging on the "opaque," every bit "as mannered as Churchill['s]" (190), and therefore High Style.

#### Low Style

If we try to stay within Lanham's stylistic divisions, we may find ourselves having to reconcile "Low-Style" attributes such as "logical," "rational," and "informational," elements that mark the Low or Plain Style as conceived by classical rhetoricians like Cicero, with those of High Style from time to time. And clearly, there

is some work that resists categorization. However, the weight of tradition seems to favor an independent grouping, one that some see as slightly less reputable than High or Middle Style--one no longer, as was the case in classical rhetoric, specifically aimed at instruction. Educators like Northrop Frye, for instance, regard the Low Style "as simply a separate rhetorical style . . . [w]ith all its anti-grammatical forms . . . vocabulary . . . syntax . . . rhythm . . . imagery and humor" that, as in the instance of Huckleberry Finn, "can be as capable as any other style of literary expression" (41). While our students (or we, for that matter) are not likely to use the Low Style in quite as capable a fashion as Twain, perhaps we can still look at an example of that style to determine a few of its characteristics:

I'm fed up with the way gals get treated in the latest flicks. For one thing, there aren't many of them around anymore. The best flicks you see these days are mostly about guys: Patton, Godfather, Deliverance, Papillon, The Sting. And when women do get a piece of the action, they're either whores like the woman played by Linda Lovelace or bitches like Mrs. Robinson in The Graduate or stupid masochists like the woman who gets raped in Straw Dogs. Oh sure, once in a

while you see a woman you can dig, like Billie Holiday in Lady Sings the Blues, but that's a pretty unusual thing. (Miles and Bertonasco 12)

Looking back at several of the Low-Style attributes from Lanham's catalogue, "conversational, everyday, natural," we can see how these terms might be applied to Low Style and specifically how the casual tone is achieved. Robert Miles and Marc Bertonasco point out some of the Low-Style characteristics to be found in the above student letter. Diction is an obvious marker: the letter is shot through with colloquial expressions and slang (13). Although we do not find any cliches as such, we might expect to find them occasionally, adding to the informal air. And then the student author uses contractions freely and makes "liberal use of first- and second-person pronouns" (13).

Miles and Bertonasco note that these devices are perfectly legitimate elements of a Low Style and make no value judgments concerning them, but the authors do object to the "imprecision and lack of clarity" that they feel is "likely to appear in the Low Style" (14). They mention the unclear pronoun reference in the second sentence, the confusing list of movies following the colon in the third (seeming to refer to "guys"), and the most "puzzling bit of imprecision," in the first sentence, the phrase "the way the gals get treated." ("Does 'gals' mean actresses or female

characters? Does 'get treated' refer to professional treatment, artistic treatment, physical treatment, or what?")(14). So the authors tell us that "imprecision and lack of clarity" are not necessarily inherent in the Low Style but, perhaps because of its casual nature--one given to less rigorous self-scrutiny--are weaknesses that need to be guarded against.

### Middle Style

There are those in the classical tradition who maintain that there really is not a Middle Style at all, just a sort of nebulous midway point between the two poles of High and Low (Lanham, Analysis 170)--which is frustrating to more than just a few. Richard Lanham, in Analyzing Prose, remarks that "since it is generally agreed that the middle is the essential prose style . . . [t]here must be some way of defining what we mean by a middle style" (191). His search proves fruitless, though, and he finally decides the term is too slippery to pin down, at least using traditional designations of style. But there are others who have no difficulty with a definition: "In ordinary speech we can see clearly enough what the middle style is: it is . . . the ordinary speaking style of the articulate person, and its basis is a relaxed and informal prose. . . ." (Frye 40). While this is not the most precise summation of the Middle

Style, it is certainly accurate and may be as close as we can get to the definition of the Middle Style. And for our purposes this may be close enough.

Miles and Bertolaso say flat out that "there is no single Middle Style," that we should view it as a spectrum ranging from a notch below High to a cut above Low (15). They base their advice for finding the most appropriate level of style on the seriousness of the message and the education and sophistication of the audience: the more serious the message and educated the audience the higher the style (15). As an example of a Middle Style that is "not far removed from Low" (16), the authors rework the student letter to the editor on women in films:

I don't like the way women have been treated in recent films. For one thing, women don't get many important roles. Men are the important ones in the best films: Patton, The Godfather, Deliverance, Papillon, The Sting, and so on. And women who do get important roles are either sluttish like the woman played by Linda Lovelace, bitchy like Mrs. Robinson in The Graduate, or stupid and masochistic like the woman who gets raped in Straw Dogs. Occasionally you see a woman you can like, such as Billie Holiday in

Lady Sings the Blues, but that's a rare exception.

(16)

By eliminating some of the colloquial expressions, slang, one of the second-person pronouns, and using more explicit language the authors have moved the excerpt more into the Middle range.

To "elevate his style a few degrees" more, a writer might eliminate "a few more symptoms of Low" (16):

In recent films the depiction of women has been incomplete and inaccurate. First of all, women rarely appear in important roles. Men have dominated the best films: Patton, The Godfather, Deliverance, Papillon, The Sting, and so on. And the women who do get important roles are generally either sluttish like the woman played by Linda Lovelace, pampered and selfish like Mrs. Robinson in The Graduate, or stupid and subservient like the woman who gets raped in Straw Dogs. Rarely do you see as likeable a woman as Billie Holiday in Lady Sings the Blues.

(16)

In this version the authors have culled "bitchy" in favor of the more precise "pampered and selfish," replaced the wordier "are the important ones" with "have dominated," reduced first- and second-person pronouns, cut another of

the "gets," and added the nominalization "depiction," all changes which make the letter a bit more formal, thus closer to High than to Low Style.

So it appears that if we want to acknowledge a Middle Style--that "style in which most of the world's writing gets done" (Miles and Bertolaso 7)--we must be prepared to deal with a certain amount of ambiguity and to work with different levels within that style. Of course the danger for our students in representing style as not only consisting of choices but also residing on an incremental scale is that they will occasionally concoct some strange stylistic beasts, along the lines of the following:

Thus we observe that nineteenth-century parents were not likely to pamper their kids. The parents never flinched from the imposition of harsh discipline, and if the kids didn't like it, that was just too bad. The inflicting of corporal castigation was deemed a parental prerogative and obligation through a noncupative social agreement.

(17)

Although we smile as we read this kind of stylistic cacophony and shake our heads, perhaps it is a small enough price to pay in encouraging students to try new forms.

## A Few Closing Remarks

High, Middle, and Low Styles--these designations have been with us for several thousand years, a testimony to their utility at least (and perhaps to their vagueness). Without making value judgments, but purely looking at them descriptively, we can see that they all serve a particular rhetorical function and within those areas can be appropriately and effectively used. Freshman composition students, however, will seldom be called upon to speak with the eloquence of a Churchill (or, we hope, with the affectation of a Euphues). So an unremitting High Style, while probably beyond the grasp of most anyway, is also probably beyond their need. And an unadulterated Low Style seems to come all too readily to the hands of young writers: they already know how to speak casually and don't need much encouragement to continue doing so. Which leaves us with the Middle Style. Admittedly, a baggy and ungainly creature that sprawls across the spectrum from High to Low, but perhaps because of its reach, and its tractable nature, it is the most effective general choice for our young student writers.

### CHAPTER THREE: DESCRIPTIONS OF DISCOURSE STYLES AND RELATIVE READABILITY

We have examined the classical divisions of style and determined that the broad range of the Middle may best serve our interests in the freshman classroom. But there are other ways of looking at style than the traditional categories. A number of educators over the years have attempted to divide discourse in various ways and then to explore the different stylistic elements of each component. While many discrete expressive features have been found among the modes, so too have areas where they overlap. James Kinneavy is one who sees the classical virtues of "clarity, dignity, propriety, and correctness" as the "virtues of style in general" (278). Other educators have different terms for the qualities they feel should be common to all styles: "plain," "clean," "relaxed," "readable," "efficient"; all have been used to describe superior writing. It might be worthwhile for us, as we consider the kind of style we would most like to teach our freshmen, to take a look at some various discourse styles, focusing first on expository and persuasive modes, to see if we can find some generalizable qualities in a writing style that we all feel are worth working toward.

## Expository and Persuasive Prose

James Kinneavy in A Theory of Discourse divides the whole of oral and written communication into four aims: "expressive, literary, persuasive, and reference." He further breaks down reference into three divisions: "scientific, exploratory, and informative." Although under the heading "informative" many of Kinneavy's observations are directed toward journalistic writing, he also includes there the kind of expository writing found in freshman composition courses (95-96).

At the outset of his discussion on reference discourse, Kinneavy warns us that information on this particular style is relatively meager (166), that the greater emphasis by far has been placed on the study of persuasion. Both informative and scientific writing probably emerged from the Plain or Low Style, he says, rather than the High or Middle, and he sees "the struggle between the plain style and the other styles [as] partly . . . the attempt of informative and scientific discourse to separate themselves from persuasive discourse" (179). In spite of this association and the dearth of material on informative style, there are still some features that can be discussed.

All areas of reference discourse are "reality dominated, rather than person- or signal-dominated" (179),

which makes a relatively impersonal tone a natural outgrowth (180). Citing studies by Rudolph Flesch and Robert Gunning, Kinneavy sees some value in watching word and sentence length--that informative writing should consider both in relation to its audience (the younger the reader, the shorter the average word and sentence should be). However, he cannot reconcile Flesch and Gunning's recommendation that informative writing strive to increase its "human interest" level, because this seems contrary to the very nature of the medium (182).

Whereas scientific discourse will permit much jargon, informative writing suffers from it (183-84). Emotionally charged words should be kept to a minimum, abstractions used sparingly, and humor--while permissible--should be used with care. Finally, we see figurative language beginning to make an appearance in informative writing (184).

If the tropes and schemes are considered less important in informative discourse, they are a hallmark of persuasive writing, so much so that the essence of "rhetoric has often been reduced to them" (288). While Aristotle advocated their use (particularly the metaphor) as an aid to clarity, he promoted them primarily because they add "vividness and vivacity" to style (287).

Yet the concept of clarity should not be slighted. Kinneavy mentions that it is and always has been one of the

most important elements in rhetoric: "In fact, at some time in the tradition, clarity almost preempted all other considerations in style, not only for persuasion but for all kinds of discourse" (276).

One of the ways to achieve clarity is to work toward "readability," a concept that Kinneavy feels is much more important in persuasive than referential style (284). Because of this, as first espoused by Aristotle, it is important to speak to the people in their own language: we tend to be less suspicious of people who sound like us. And as we use that language, we should be conscious of the redundant nature of all communication, but especially in persuasive discourse (284). Without frequent repetition an audience is likely to wander.

Finally, we need to keep in mind the ultimate aim of persuasive rhetoric: to move the listener. This goal justifies a number of tactics. For instance humor might be a device that would dispose an audience favorably toward the speaker: personalizing the message is important. Abstractions such as "good, love, patriotism, God, happiness, freedom" and so forth can be particularly helpful in an argument (288). And sometimes it is best to conceal one's motives, for "persuasion is often most successful when it parades under the guise of information or exploration or even literature" (285).

Huntington Brown also deals with both expository and persuasive prose (which he calls "deliberative"). They are two of the five styles into which he divides all prose--the others termed "prophetic (Biblical prophecy, stoic philosophy, the essay); tumbling (the instinctive expression of the speaker); and indenture (legal documents, private formal messages)." He lists a number of the same characteristics that Kinneavy does in respect to deliberative style but offers some additional insights.

Persuasive rhetoric delivered orally is highly ordered, uses a common idiom, and follows the principle of "copiousness of expression" (19). As the orator manipulates the common idiom, Brown explains, he will find abstractions useful, but they should be well known, that "eloquence is . . . the art of shaping out of familiar cloth" (25). As to "copiousness," Brown qualifies this somewhat, noting that while persuasive communication of any sort encourages repetition, constraints of the printed page discourage an overabundance of reiteration and that one who forgets this is in danger of becoming an "intolerable bore" (19).

An important aspect of the deliberative style is that it capture and hold the interest of the audience: "A good deliberative argument" can be considered "a carefully timed performance" (21). Delivered orally, speeches should be accompanied by appropriate body language; but written, as

well, they should seek to engage the reader on every level. The writer will use devices such as the "rhetorical question, parenthesis, apostrophe, exclamation" and so forth (20-21). Rather than a coordinate structure, the deliberative writer will rely on subordination, "to convey as strongly as possible the feeling of a constant progress." He will "vary the getup of successive paragraphs, sentences, and parts of sentences as if to suggest [he] is constantly breaking new ground and making headway across it" (20). To generate and maintain a sense of suspense, a writer will depend on climactic arrangements and use the periodic sentence frequently. Brown suggests that, on the whole, persuasive prose has many of the same elements as a "good story" (30); because of this, much more so than in expository writing, audience awareness is crucial.

By its nature expository writing is less immediate and so has less hold on its reader. Since it is not so much engaged with persuasion as presenting ideas, expository style invites the reader to take his time, to examine the material closely, even to break from the text on occasion to meditate on a thought or principle being put forth. Brown sees expository style as "typically an equation ('A is B'; 'mice are mammals')." Not that most prose falls into these bare, linear statements but that "the aim or ideal of

exposition is everywhere to approximate such simple, categorical propositions" (39).

If this is the case, then grammatical structures such as balanced sentences and parallelism are a logical extension (46). And paragraphs built around topic sentences and developed through "restatements, illustrations, comparisons, and contrasts" will be common (40). Although the prose should be "coherent," Brown sees no special need for "carefully timed effects" (such as climactic arrangement) (41) and observes that much expository writing has a beginning and a middle but an end that is often only arbitrary (40).

Like Kinneavy, Brown feels that figurative language has a place in expository style and that repetitive devices can be particularly useful. He characterizes the language of exposition as "firm and forthright" (48).

Leo Kirschbaum supports this view of diction in expository writing. In his book Clear Writing he proposes five styles that have been used in English over the years-- "Mock-Heroic, Grand, Apocalyptic, Purple, and Plain"--that a student who is concerned with developing a personal style might want to review (216). After commenting on the first four styles, Kirschbaum admonishes the student: "When one is writing exposition, surely he should not indulge himself in poetic prose, highly colored and shimmering with emotion.

Surely he should be brief, exact and objective" (216). Kirschbaum favors a simple diction in "simple grammatical patterns" (217). And he goes even further than Kinneavy and Brown in assessing the importance of clarity in expository writing: "That exposition has the best style that has the most clarity" (220).

Alan Warner is another proponent of a "clear and simple" style (191), which he terms "clean English": a style that is "clear and vigorous, free from verbiage and affectation" (7). While acknowledging that English has become more colloquial since the turn of the century, and is likely to become even more so (158), Warner deplores what he sees as the antithesis to "clean" English, that is, the "gritty" style. A relaxed, informal approach to writing, he says, need not create the "gritty" compendium of technical jargon, pretentious verbiage, and overstuffed sentences that have proliferated in recent years (181-85). He would see students strive for writing that is "lucid and simple" (190); however, he admits that "cleanness is not the only virtue of prose," particularly for the writer of fiction (191). Expository prose, he feels, should exhibit clarity, but not at the expense of boredom. Even informative writing should bear the stamp of the author's individuality. And if it comes down to it, and the student is "forced to choose,

[she] must prefer vitality to cleanness." For it "is better to be dirty and alive than clean and dead" (192).

### The Style of Stuffy Talkers

After having spent some time with expository and persuasive styles as such, noting individual and common features, we may now turn to another kind of style--one that might appear in either exposition or persuasion--what Walker Gibson calls the "Stuffy Style." In his book Tough, Sweet and Stuffy Gibson talks about the personas a writer consciously or unconsciously chooses: the egocentric "Tough Talker," who uses "I-talk"; the advertizing-oriented "Sweet Talker," who uses "you-talk"; and the formal "Stuffy Talker," who relies on "it-talk" (x). He sees the way most of us write as a combination of these three and feels that good style results from achieving a balance among them. But we don't always manage to do this. Often, without realizing it, we find ourselves drifting too far into one style or another, becoming caricatures rather than real people, and thus alienating our audience (103). Of the three possibilities Gibson feels that "Stiffness" causes most of the problems, calling it the "major fault in modern prose" (107).

Stuffy talk is the voice of an institution rather than a person speaking (90). Gibson calls it "scarecrow prose,"

coming from a "stuffed shirt," a "speaker [who] has no insides" (91). It is characterized by pompous diction, "verbosity," and a marked tendency to avoid any responsibility (96). When Stuffy talk is at its worst, Gibson says, "we feel a disparity between the simplicity of the situation, as we feel it ought to be defined, and the pretentiousness of the lingo" (97). He goes on to list several examples of Stuffy prose like the following:

Cigarette smoking is causally related to lung cancer in men; the magnitude of the effect of cigarette smoking far outweighs all other factors. The data for women, though less extensive, point in the same direction.

The risk of developing lung cancer increases with duration of smoking and the number of cigarettes smoked per day, and is diminished by discontinuing smoking.

The risk of developing cancer of the lung for the combined group of pipe smokers, cigar smokers, and pipe and cigar smokers is greater than for nonsmokers, but much less than for cigarette smokers.

The data are insufficient to warrant a conclusion for each group individually. (93)

To show us how this "official" style can be deflated somewhat, brought closer to the rest of humanity, Gibson provides a possible rewrite:

Cigarette smoking is the major cause of lung cancer in men, and probably in women too.

The longer one smokes, and the more cigarettes one smokes per day, the greater the chance of developing lung cancer. This risk is reduced when one stops smoking.

People who smoke pipes or cigars, or both, also risk cancer, but to a lesser degree than cigarette smokers. We cannot say exactly what the risk is for each of these groups. (96)

The following list names and quantifies the rhetorical differences between the two versions:

|                               | Original | Revision |
|-------------------------------|----------|----------|
| Total number of words         | 106      | 76       |
| Average sentence length       | 21       | 15       |
| Proportion of monosyllables   | 57%      | 69%      |
| % of words over two syllables | 18%      | 5%       |
| Adjectives and noun adjuncts  | 18       | 6        |

(97)

While Gibson admits that the information he provides is not revelatory, it does give us some insight into the Stuffy Style. We can see that his revision has reduced the word

count, average sentence length, number of syllables per word, adjectives, and noun adjuncts. Other characteristics of this style are lengthy subordinate clauses (ten words or more), frequent neuter nouns as subjects rather than people, non-finite verbs, overuse of passive voice, and the separation of subject and verb with subordinate constructions and modifiers (108).

What Gibson is careful to point out, that style is a mixture of several possibilities, the linguist Martin Joos would agree with. He divides style into five different "registers"--"frozen, formal, consultative, casual, and intimate"--but sees none as inherently superior to another: they are simply the manner people assume when they interact (13). The point that Joos stresses is that "there is no law requiring a speaker to confine himself to a single style for one occasion. . . ." (17); in fact, it would be unusual for him to do so. By their nature, people mingle styles.

While this may still be true for people in conversation, in writing, Richard Lanham feels, the situation is getting grim. Describing the "Official Style" --"a scribal style, ritualized, formulaic"--he contends that "it is, increasingly, the only kind of prose style that America ever sees." We have lost our ability to adapt to different rhetorical situations, and a kind of stylistic rigidity has set in: "The low style has dissolved, the high

style has hardened and dehydrated, and the middle style has simply evaporated. The Official Style threatens to replace all three" (Revising 57).

The Official Style has much in common with Gibson's Stuffy Style, and Lanham calls it a "genuine," if distasteful, style, one that a writer should at least learn to recognize and perhaps even to manipulate, if he would find his "niche in The System" (57). Here is a student example:

Twelve-year-old boys like to fight. Consequently, on several occasions I explained to them the negative aspects of fighting. Other responsibilities included keeping them dry (when near the creek or at times of rain), seeing that they bathed, attending to any minor wounds they acquired, and controlling their mischievous behavior. Another responsibility was remaining patient with the children. (57-58)

After the first sentence the author begins to assume the Official pose; he is filling out a form and so tries to sound as important, as official, as possible (59). Lanham suggests a rewrite that would preserve the tone set in the first sentence:

Twelve-year-old boys like to fight. Often I had to stop them. And I had to keep them out of the

rain, and the creek, and mischief generally. I

had to give out Band-Aids and keep my temper. (58)

This second version (although missing the bathing) is clear and straightforward, eliminating the generalities and putting a human agent back in the subject position. After supplying a number of other examples, Lanham summarizes the characteristics of the Official Style:

a noun style; a concept style; a style whose sentences have no design, no shape, rhythm, or emphasis; an unreadable, voiceless, impersonal style; a style built on euphemism and various kinds of poetic diction; a style with a formulaic structure, "is" plus a string of prepositional phrases before and after. (103)

The Official Style, then, bears an uncommon resemblance to the Stuffy Style. Both suffer from symptoms of bloat, impersonality, and imprecision; neither favors clarity.

#### Relative Readability and Communicative Efficiency

Over the years there have been many attempts to establish criteria for the relative reading ease or difficulty of a text. Although the primary purpose of these studies was to classify textbooks for children according to age and grade, several researchers have used their findings to make suggestions to writers for improving their style.

Two of these researchers, Rudolf Flesch and Robert Gunning, have had a significant impact on the communications industry with relatively simple advice: shorten your words and sentences, use familiar words, and write personably. They both have devised readability formulas based on these suggestions.

Flesch thinks that our sentences should be shorter because that is the historical trend. Citing a study by L. A. Sherman around the turn of the century, he says that "the average Elizabethan written sentence ran to about 45 words; the Victorian sentence to 29; ours to 20 and less" (106-07). He goes on to explain that though sentences are shrinking they may still contain as much information because as words evolve they frequently carry more meaning. For instance: "memorandum (that which ought to be remembered) and legislator (a proposer of laws)" (119). But Flesch sees the more compact words as a potential problem: "Most of the long, complex words in modern prose are . . . condensed expressions of abstract ideas that can be expressed just as well in two or more shorter words" (122). This kind of diction, he feels, is not only pompous but often incomprehensible, as he shows with the following example:

The generally accepted view is that the additional units of effort required to earn additional income tend to have increasing

disutility. (123)

Along with recommending shorter words and sentences, Flesch would see writers personalize their work. They can do this by increasing the number of proper nouns, personal pronouns, and "words that have masculine or feminine natural gender, e.g. John Jones, Mary, father, sister. . ." (214). And writers can include more "personal sentences": dialogue, questions, commands, requests, exclamations, and fragments (215).

Robert Gunning offers much of the same advice: shorter words and shorter sentences. He says that this will help squeeze out most of the "Fog" in today's writing, that is, needlessly complex, "tangled" and wordy sentences (x). In support of familiar diction, one of his "Ten Principles of Clear Writing," Gunning makes several points: Although "the average high-school student knows in the neighborhood of 10,000-15,000 words," most people conduct daily business using less than 3,000 (82). And as for writing, "[t]he thousand most common words [in the English language] turn up 80 per cent of the time and the 10,000 words most often used account for 98 percent of all that's written" (82). If this is the case, perhaps students should spend less time ransacking a thesaurus while they write and more time rephrasing the vocabulary with which they are already equipped.

Gunning and Flesch are not the only ones concerned with readability. E. D. Hirsch, Jr. in The Philosophy of Composition uses the word "efficiency" in place of "clarity" and then goes on to define "communicative efficiency" or "relative readability": "Assuming that two texts convey the same meaning, the more readable text will take less time and effort to understand" (85). Hirsch continues, to qualify and expand this principle and to use it as the criterion of good style (9).

For a text to be readable, it must be consistently "linear," which simply means that a reader should seldom have to double back to pick up a meaning. The less often she has to do this, the more readable the prose. Hirsch cites three factors that contribute to linearity:

1. "closure," the point at which the meaning of a "phrase, clause, sentence, or . . . paragraph" becomes clear (130), "[it] must occur frequently enough to accommodate short-term memory";
2. "expectation," the reader's anticipation of meaning should be continually met;
3. "contextualization," the reader should be able to determine the "contours of implication" from the immediate context (137).

Hirsch's contention that "psychological economy is the governing principle which determines the most effective written expression of one's intended meaning" leads him to

formulate what he believes to be the four most important rules in writing:

1. Omit needless words.
2. Keep related words together.
3. Make the paragraph the unit of composition.
4. Use integrative devices between clauses and sentences. (154-55)

For Hirsch, then, clarity, concision, and coherence define good writing style.

#### A Few Closing Remarks

During the course of our exploration of style, we have looked at expository and persuasive prose, noting that a flexible Middle Style can contain both quite well. We have seen that there are qualitative differences between the two styles, primarily based on their respective functions: information and persuasion. But there are likenesses also. Well-written prose must hang together, or in E. D. Hirsch's words have sufficient "integrative devices." Arguments--particularly oral ones--may favor "copiousness" of expression, but the most effective ones still maintain the standard of concision, if for no other reason than to keep from boring their audience. And as for clarity in the modes of discourse, as James Kinneavy says--and many educators vigorously second, it has been a fundamental concern of

rhetoricians since classical Greece. So the minimum it seems we might ask from our student writers is that their work be clear, concise, and coherent.

But beyond this, what should they strive for? Walker Gibson says, a balanced persona: not too Tough, not too Sweet, and above all else, not too Stuffy. It's the Stuffy Talkers who seem to be the worst problem, those bound fast to a frozen style. Richard Lanham would agree. He calls this kind of writing "a pathological prose, sick with bureaucratic constipation, a special language suitable for schools but not for sensible human life" (Revising 94). And perhaps this is the persona Wayne Booth had in mind with the "pedant's stance," which "consists of ignoring or underplaying the personal relationship of speaker and audience and depending entirely on statements about a subject" (Rhetorical 184).

Establishing a personal relationship with the reader, then, is important, whether we are seeking to persuade or just to convey information. A reader who senses a person behind the author is more apt to respond to the message--positively or negatively--but in either case, actively. This kind of involvement is a virtue. The kind of flexible Middle Style that we might recommend to our students is by its nature relatively informal. It encourages students to show themselves.

CHAPTER FOUR: A FLEXIBLE MIDDLE STYLE:  
SOME ELEMENTS REFINED

The fact should be faced squarely that good writing is and has always been extremely rare. I do not mean fine writing, but the simple, clear kind that everyone always demands--from others.

Jacques Barzun

Less is more.

Robert Browning

When we encounter a natural style, we are astonished and delighted; for we expected to see an author, and we find a man.

Pascal

In trying to decide just what makes a style a good one, we have isolated several characteristics on which most seem to agree: clarity, concision, and (for want of a better word) personality. These are important, perhaps universal, elements of an effective style, but certainly not all. More comprehensive lists abound. For instance, Jacques Barzun and Henry Graff would add: "Order, Logic, Ease, Unity, Coherence, Rhythm, Force, Simplicity, Naturalness, Grace, Wit, and Movement" (173). But even within this more selective lineup, Barzun and Graff note, there will be, of necessity, a certain amount of overlap: qualities of a style "can reinforce or obscure one another." And they insist that we cannot work with the elements of style piecemeal: "Neither style nor any of its qualities can be aimed at separately." Still, if we are to teach our students to

express themselves well, we must try to simplify where we can and discover specific, practical advice to give them.

Our flexible Middle Style is serviceable as it stands but could use another designation, one that will help clear, simply stated prose become even more interesting. If we include the term "variety," and consider ways to achieve this, from the word level all the way up through the figures of speech, we will have come close to creating a serviceable prose for our freshman classroom, one that can actively engage an audience on any level and one that, as the occasion demands, may even rise to eloquence.

So let's spend a few moments taking a closer look at our four categories. We won't exhaust all the possibilities for improving any of them, but we may discover a few useful suggestions.

### Clarity

There are many reasons why people write obscurely. Michael Crichton suggests that much of the overly complex prose that appears in professional circles results from the fear of having ideas appear too simple (Williams 3). F. L. Lucas says much the same thing in his book Style and then goes on to add "egotism," expecting the audience to know the intended meaning; "pomp," where the writer is overwhelmed by the grandeur of her ideas and so must reach for a more

magnificent form of expression; "charlatanism," simply not knowing but trying to bluff; "incoherence," muddled thinking; and sheer "overcrowding" (66). Of these possibilities overcrowding may be the one which most afflicts students, trying to say too much in too short a space, not realizing they are creating a hopeless tangle.

John Gardner has a bit of advice for these packers: Don't try to "cram all three syntactic slots with details" (104). Choose subject, verb, verb modifier, or direct object position in the sentence and feel free to load it up, but be wary when inclined to fill the second slot, and just don't modify the third. For instance:

1.

The old man, stooped, bent almost double under his load of tin pans, yet smiling with sort of a maniacal good cheer and chattering to himself in

2.

3.

what seemed to be Slavonian, walked slowly down the road. (105)

Or the second position:

1.

2.

The old man walked slowly, lifting his feet carefully, sometimes kicking one shoe forward in what looked like a dance, then slamming down the foot before the sole could flop loose again,

grinning when it worked, muttering to himself,

3.

making no real progress down the road. (105-06)

Gardner then combines the first two examples but warns that this is creating a "precarious" sentence, dangerously close to overload (106).

To help reduce clutter, Joseph Williams suggests that students depend on the active rather than the passive voice (but is also careful to point out the appropriate uses of the passive). And he mentions nominalizations, drawing a distinction between those that are useful (i.e., ones "that sum up in a subject what went before or that refer to a well-established concept") and those that are just usurping the legitimate function of verbs (35-36).

Most educators agree that writing with nouns and verbs will increase clarity. John Trimble reminds us of this and the correlative: adjectives and adverbs tend to dissipate the power of their more concrete relatives. The truism is that both adjectives and adverbs "tell" while nouns and verbs "show" (79).

A writer's facility for showing, marks a vivid, mature style. Trimble emphasizes this: "The more abstract your argument, the more you should lace it with graphic illustrations, analogies, apt quotations, and concrete details" (79). John Gardner would heartily agree: "These

two faults, insufficient detail and abstraction where what is needed is concrete detail, are common--in fact all but universal--in amateur writing" (98).

As Barzun and Graff note, the different categories we assign to various features of style often overlap. Favoring active voice, for instance, certainly helps with concision; using the familiar, frequently Anglo-Saxon, word versus the more exotic, Latinate, one does double duty, helping to create clear as well as personable writing. Joseph Williams makes several suggestions for improving coherence in a work, but they can't help but also increase clarity. For instance, he says that the "new" information in a sentence is more effectively placed at the end, reserving the beginnings for information with which the reader is already familiar. Transitional words and "orienting words and phrases" ("for the most part, depending on," etc.) should be used to introduce sentences (61-62). To help orient the reader within a sentence, he suggests, among other possibilities, the use of what he terms "resumptive" and "summative" modifiers. A "[r]esumptive modification repeats a key noun, verb, or adjective close to the end of a clause and then resumes the line of thought, elaborating on what went before." An example using verbs:

Humans have been defined by some as the only animal that can laugh at grief, laugh at the

pain and tragedy that define their fate. (131)

"With a summative modifier, you end a segment of a sentence with a comma, then sum up in a noun or noun phrase what you have just said, and then continue with a relative clause."

Scientists have finally unraveled the mysteries of the human gene, a discovery that may lead to the control of such dread diseases as cancer and birth defects.

This brief recapitulation replaces a "which" clause and eliminates any potential confusion (132).

#### Concision

How do we sell our students on this idea of concision? We know that it's a worthwhile goal--particularly after having waded through stacks of compositions heavy with the panicky excesses of students struggling to reach "word counts." We can quote Polonius; talk about the value of the reader's time and the courtesy the author owes him; and mention how brevity often reflects maturity of style, the sophistication of knowing when to leave it in and when to take it out. We can marshal stylists to our sides like F. L. Lucas, who comes out strongly in favor of concision, enumerating the benefits to be gained from it: "grace, force, rapidity, suggestiveness, and clarity" (Style 102-03). He also points out the "challenge" to the reader and

how it both flatters and engages her to be able to make logical connections based on shared knowledge, assumed understanding, and perhaps tacit agreement (101). Or we can adopt the same sort of tone that he does toward certain prolix writers: Swinburne "suffered badly both from dearth of ideas, even of sense, and from this incurable dysentery of words" (83). But, in the end, until we clarify the confusion in many students' minds between concision and development, it will be rough going.

Less is good, but more is better. A seeming paradox but, of course, only on the surface. Nevin Laib, while acknowledging the virtue of concision, emphatically promotes "amplification." He feels that current composition practice gives far too much attention to trimming away excess at the expense of elaboration, which carried to extremes "results in bluntness, opacity, and underdevelopment." And he gives voice to the question in the minds of many students: "After all, if the point of an essay can be summed up in a few sentences or a thesis statement--and conciseness is the ideal--why say more" (443)? Robert Miles and Marc Bertolaso have an answer:

The principle of conciseness does not require the terseness of a telegram. It does not proscribe details or images or qualifications, or even words that do nothing but impart a friendly informality

or add some extra beats for the sake of a graceful and vigorous rhythm. Instead, conciseness requires the omission of useless words. It requires the deletion of words that contribute nothing, either logically or stylistically, to the prose in which they appear, and have no effect but to slow the pace and hide the meaning.

(70)

Amplification, elaboration, development--all describe a critical aspect of writing, without which we have little more than the bare bones of a message. But the conflict between amplification and concision is only seeming, for we are only incidentally in the summary business.

With that potential confusion laid to rest, we can try to discover a few practical suggestions on how to achieve concision. Joseph Williams admits, though, that finding comprehensive rules is difficult, partly because some kinds of wordiness are so pervasive: "Diffuse wordiness is like a chronic accumulation of specks and motes that individually seem trivial but together blur what might otherwise be a clear and concise style" (104). Even so, he does point to several common problem areas:

1. Different kinds of redundancy head the list: pairs, modifiers, and categories. An example of redundant categories:

In the area of educational activities, tight financial conditions are forcing school board members to cut back in nonessential areas in a drastic manner.

In education, tight finances are forcing school boards to cut back drastically on nonessentials.

2. Meaningless modifiers:

Most students generally find some kind of summer work.

Most students find summer work.

3. Obvious implications

4. Pompous diction

5. Excessive detail

6. A phrase for a word (or, for that matter, a clause for a phrase)

7. Excessive metadiscourse:

It is most certainly the case that, for the most part, totalitarian systems cannot allow a society to settle into what we would perceive to be stable modes of behavior or, even more crucially perhaps, stable relationships.

Totalitarian systems cannot allow a society to

settle into stable behavior or stable relationships.

8. Indirect negatives:

There is no reason not to believe that engineering malfunctions in nuclear energy systems will surprise us.

We can assume that malfunctions in nuclear energy systems will surprise us. (105-06)

Williams notes that, generally, concrete word choices decrease wordiness. H. Wendell Smith makes the same observation, adding that abstract or general terms tend to accumulate modifiers:

A little animal had come unwanted into our temporary quarters while we were going out for a walk in the wooded area.

A mongoose had stolen into our tent as we were hiking in the woods. (81)

Miles and Bertomasco add wordy connectives to the list ("in order to, to; with regard to, about; in the event that, if"; and so on) (69). And they don't miss that bane of all composition instructors, the adverbial intensifier ("very, extremely, definitely. . .") (66).

Finally, everyone seems to be in agreement on the value to concision of the active voice.

Richard Lanham, in Revising Prose, includes the active/passive along with other recommendations for trimming back wordy prose. His "Paramedic Method" is a quick way to cut through much of the "lard" in problem sentences and is simple enough for students to apply it readily:

1. Circle the prepositions.
2. Circle the "is" forms.
3. Ask "Who is kicking who?"
4. Put this "kicking" action in a simple (not compound) active verb.
5. Start fast--no mindless introductions. (6)

### Personality

This aspect of our flexible Middle Style is one that many stylists seem to talk around or through, and are in favor of, but have difficulty pinning down. "Personality" comes close to what I mean, but still isn't quite right. It includes Webster's definition: "the quality or fact of being a person" and beyond that of being an individual, but also has a sort of superficial, theatrical ring (as in: "Johnny Carson, now there's a personality for you!) that I'm not altogether happy with. However, it also implies to me a sense of congeniality, and further, an openness, a

willingness to discuss rather than to just expound: a personable nature not comfortable with dogma, perhaps even hesitant to push doctrine. At the least, we have a person willing to reveal herself, which implies a certain level of informality. Aristotle had something to say about this kind of persona in his Rhetoric:

the orator must not only try to make the argument of his speech demonstrative and worthy of belief; he must also make his own character look right and put his hearers, who are to decide, in the right frame of mind. . . . There are three things which inspire confidence in the orator's own character--the three, namely . . . good sense, good moral character, and goodwill. (161)

F. L. Lucas not only believes that a writer's character should emerge in her work but that she would do well to cultivate good humor. He finds little to recommend "peevishness" or "ill-humor" in most writing situations. Although he does acknowledge that there are times when anger "may be a useful source of power" (Style 134), "without control of that passion, its effects are largely ill or null" (132). For Lucas, a style that seems laced too tightly is not convincing--the author's perspective, to Lucas, seems askew--but worse it is "oppressive." Lucas calls the tone that characterizes this kind of work "dreary

and portentous solemnity" and finds that it haunts too many undergraduate essays (140).

But it needn't. When we discussed readability in chapter three, we noticed several possibilities for making prose more accessible and more engaging: average sentence length of about twenty words and average word length under two syllables, more familiar words, and more "personal" words (i.e., proper nouns, personal pronouns, and words with natural gender). "Personal" sentences will also help (that is: dialogue, rhetorical types and fragments). This isn't to suggest that multisyllable words (there's one) should not be used, but that they can be overused. However, as Joseph Ecclesine points out in defense of one-syllable words:

Small words move with ease where big words stand still--or, worse, bog down and get in the way of what you want to say. There is not much, in all truth, that small words will not say--and say quite well. (qtd. in Smith 197)

Besides choosing familiar words, we might also want to consider using the informal phrases those words often create: idiomatic expressions. Richard Ohman comes down strongly in their defense: "Good writing is always idiomatic writing, for idiom is the living tissue of a language" (Logic 236). Idioms help to signal our audience that we are not far removed from the mainstream, where most of them are.

The linguist Martin Joos notes that even a mature audience is most "at home in the completely central 'good standard teenage consultative style'. . ." (17). While many of our students already have a facility for misusing idiomatic expressions, perhaps we can help them to become conscious of selecting, and so controlling, their use in appropriate rhetorical situations.

The question of how to address readers comes up frequently enough that we might want to give it a little additional room. To enhance readability the advice is: use personal pronouns. Most of us are comfortable with the "we, our, us" forms; but people often still hesitate to use the first- and second-person singulars, "I" and "you." Jeanne Fahnestock and Marie Secor in A Rhetoric of Argument devote seventeen pages to the personal pronoun issue, discussing the relative merits of their use in argument, and find that they are invaluable in establishing a relationship with the audience. As for "I," they say that in some rhetorical situations "certain effects can be achieved only by writing in your own voice, by appearing in your own writing as "I" (333). John Trimble feels the same way about using personal pronouns in general and scoffs in particular at the notion that the reader should not be referred to as "you." He sees both of the other alternatives as "bad psychology": not referring to a reader at all is distancing, and calling him

"the reader" is "utterly depersonalizing and stuffy. . . . It's akin to saying, in conversation, 'I'm glad to hear the listener has recovered from his cold.'" Trimble, as do Fahnestock and Secor, warns that this rhetorical device can be overworked, pushing an audience away by the forced "chumminess" (88-89).

Trimble offers several dozen more "tips for increasing readability," many of which we've already touched on. He advocates writing to an implied reader who is "a companionable friend with a warm sense of humor and an appreciation of simple straightforwardness." Occasional contractions can prevent sentences from sounding too stiff: "Would you not think a stuffed shirt wrote this sentence?" Dialogue, direct and indirect, is useful, as is creating "imagined thoughts" for people in an essay. He prefers "that" over "which" in restrictive clauses, calling the latter a "bookish," and therefore more formal usage (77-81). And finally he remarks on different types of punctuation, how a mark like the dash can lend an informal air to a work while the colon and semicolon are a bit more elevated (101-16).

Although we haven't discussed grammar, there are a few conservative rules still lingering in English that show a writer to be either fastidious or more relaxed. Joseph Williams points out some of these rules, remarking that

"when you observe them, you will signal a level of formality that few careful readers will miss" (196):

1. "Never split an infinitive."
2. "Use 'shall' as the first person, 'will' for second and third person simple future; use 'will' to mean strong intention in the first person, 'shall' for the second and third person."
3. "Always use 'whom' as the object of a verb or preposition." (Linguists agree that the who/whom distinction is dying a natural death and in the near future will probably not exist.)
4. "Never end a sentence with a preposition." (To my mind, no one has ever equaled Churchill's comment on this particular "rule": "This is the type of arrant pedantry, up with which I shall not put" (qtd. in Trimble 91).
5. "Do not use 'whose' as the possessive pronoun for an inanimate referent."
6. "Use 'one' as a generalized pronoun instead of 'you.'"
7. "Do not refer to 'one' with 'he' or 'his'; repeat 'one.'"
8. "When expressing a contrary to fact statement, use the subjunctive form of the verb." (Few of my students have even heard of the subjunctive, so I'm not sure that it's even being taught in

English these days. Maxwell Nurnberg remarks: "Although the subjunctive is alive and well and living in France, Spain, Italy and Germany, it is virtually--with few exceptions--dead in England and America."

(60)

To elevate style further still, Williams suggests:

1. Negative inversion.

"Ask not" in place of "Do not ask"

2. Conditional inversion.

"Should anyone question" for "If anyone should"

3. Instead of "do not have to," use "need not."

4. Instead of "does not have" any, use "have no." (200)

### Variety

Clarity, concision, and personality are enough to create the kind of prose that people will begin to read, but without variety they probably won't finish it. F. L. Lucas says it succinctly: "variety is a law more important even than brevity" (Style 104). If we offer only limited diversion, we bore a reader, and to bore him is to fail him. But the concept of "variety" is a roomy one, admitting many possibilities. How might we begin to define it? Lucas tells us that it "means avoiding monotony of rhythm, of language, of mood." And he reminds us that "[o]ne needs to

vary one's sentence length . . . to amplify one's vocabulary; to diversify one's tone" ("Fascination" 170). More than this, we can seek for original expression, reach for fresh images, and try for at least occasional surprise. John Trimble quotes Ford Maddox Ford: "Carefully examined, a good--an interesting--style will be found to consist in a constant succession of tiny, unobservable surprises" (65). To achieve this, a writer must challenge herself, use her imagination, repeatedly ask of her work: "Now how can I express this more memorably" (65)? "How can I move my reader through this more effectively?" In answering these questions, a writer does more than just mildly interest her reader; she reaches out to him: she creates a compelling style in which her reader can become actively, eagerly involved.

We are all familiar with the typical--and sound--handbook advice for developing variety on the word, sentence, and paragraph level. Pronouns and synonyms are important; an awareness of connotation versus denotation in word choice helps to create the subtle shades of meaning that provide color and precision; paragraphs should be varied in length and may effectively use the patterns of development (i.e., definition, comparison/contrast, etc.); and sentences should certainly be diverse. The Little,

Brown Handbook offers the following fairly representative suggestions to help with sentence variety:

1. Vary the length and structure of sentences so that important ideas stand out.
2. Vary the beginnings of sentences with modifiers, transitional words and expressions, and occasional expletive constructions.
3. Occasionally invert the normal order of subject, predicate, and object or complement.
4. Use an occasional command, question, or exclamation.

(Fowler et al. 350)

But beyond this, what might we recommend to our students to invigorate their style, to add the kind of freshness and clarity that abolishes tedium for both the writer and reader? We might follow the lead of the classical rhetoricians in prescribing the figures of speech.

Aristotle, as Edward P. J. Corbett points out in Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student, praised the metaphor for its ability to impart "charm and distinction" to an argument and to imbue it with "clearness and liveliness" (425). Longinus was even more emphatic in assessing the value of figurative language:

Well, it is able in many ways to infuse vehemence and passion into spoken words, while more particularly when it is combined with the

argumentative passages it not only persuades  
the hearer but actually makes him its slave.

(qtd. in Corbett 425)

I'm not sure that any of us wants to enslave our audience (or that we should get the hopes of our students up as they dutifully hone their rhetorical skills--knowing full well who their audience generally is), but clearly any rhetorical device that has so much potential for enlivening and clarifying a written work has its place in the composition classroom.

Corbett mentions that there are over two hundred figures of speech. Of the many possibilities, he has selected several dozen and broken them into various categories of which, of course, the two primary divisions are the schemes and tropes. He further divides the schemes into four sections: "schemes of balance, unusual or inverted word order, omission, and repetition." The ones that seem most essential to me, occurring so frequently in all writing that students should learn to recognize and use them with ease, are the schemes of balance and repetition.

Parallelism, which Corbett notes, "is one of the basic principles of grammar and rhetoric," is a scheme of balance (429). Most students don't seem to have a problem with a simple series of words but begin to get into trouble when phrases and clauses multiply. But these slightly more

complex arrangements are exactly what they need, to create variety in emphasis and rhythm. When students have mastered simple parallel structures, they can be encouraged to experiment with isocolon (grammatical units "similar not only in structure but length") to further enhance rhythmical effects (429). The other scheme of balance that Corbett includes is antithesis. This "juxtaposition of contrasting ideas" is not an essential element in any writing but is a mark of polish. Corbett points out--which may be of some motivating value to students--that it "can win for the author a reputation for wit" (430).

Under the heading of repetition are nine possibilities. Alliteration and assonance are two of these that are important devices for building both rhythm and euphony. Corbett notes that they are integral components of poetry but downplays their significance in prose, mainly cautioning students against their abuse: the unconscious piling up of like sounds to create a ludicrous, and therefore distracting, effect. For instance: "He tries to revise the evidence supplied by his eyes" (435). John Gardner recognizes the same potential problem for young writers, but being one "who would sacrifice a character's ears for melodic effect" feels that the schemes are invaluable to prose as well (107). Certainly students should be aware of these devices for rhythm and sound--if for no other reason,

so they don't trip over them--but the more sophisticated writer, particularly in the latter half of a second-semester composition course, might be encouraged to refine her work this way.

Another scheme of repetition is climax. It is a fairly obvious concept that few students seem to have trouble with once they are aware of what to look for.

The next six schemes I've arranged in what seems to me to be a descending order of importance, in terms of how frequently they occur in professional writing and in terms of how useful they may be to students in their own work:

1. anaphora: "repetition of the same word or group of words at the beginnings of successive clauses":  
 "We shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields."
2. epistrophe: "repetition of the same word or group of words at the ends of successive clauses"  
 "After a war that everyone was proud of, we concluded a peace that nobody was proud of."
3. anadiplosis: "repetition of the last word of one clause at the beginning of the following clause"  
 "Labor and care are rewarded with success, success produces confidence, confidence relaxes industry . . . ."

4. antimetabole: "repetition of words, in successive clauses, in reverse grammatical order"  
"You like it, it likes you."
5. polyptoton: "repetition of words derived from the same root"  
"He is a man to know because he is known."
6. epanalepsis: "repetition at the end of a clause of the word that occurred at the beginning of the clause"  
"Blood hath bought blood, and blows have answer'd blows. . . ." (Classical 435-38)

In the area of "unusual or inverted word order," two schemes deserve mention: parenthesis and apposition, both of which should be staples in any writer's repertoire. The former of these, students seem to grasp fairly quickly and only need their instructor's encouragement to fully exploit. Corbett remarks on the effect of parenthesis: "For a brief moment, we hear the author's voice, commenting, editorializing, and, for that reason, the sentence gets an emotional charge that it would not otherwise have" (431). A valuable asset both in maintaining variety and establishing persona. Apposition is also common. Since it works to amplify and refine expression, it too creates variety.

Of the schemes of omission, ellipsis must be the most essential. Corbett notes that it "can be an artful and arresting means of securing economy . . ." (432), and

therefore concision, but it works in other ways as well. Ellipsis promotes sentence variety by altering habitual patterns; and by allowing the writer to selectively leave understood information out of a sentence, it, again, contributes to the rapport between author and audience. The linguist Bruce Liles observes that this type of "[d]eletion may be performed because the information is shared by speaker and listener. . . . The more informal the style, the more deletion of this nature" (311). And so, although ellipsis can be useful at any level of formality, it tends to indicate a more relaxed relationship between writer and reader. Asyndeton, a scheme of omission where "conjunctions between a series of related clauses" are left out, helps to increase the pace of a sentence; and, its opposite, polysyndeton, slows the movement down (433).

All of the schemes give writers greater freedom in manipulating syntax and thus more options for varying their style. While some schemes are found in all good writing, others may only appear by conscious design, often indicating stylistic maturity. Students may be encouraged to experiment with the entire range of schemes but should, at least, become well-versed with the fundamentals.

The tropes, on the other hand, are not as necessary an element of competent writing as are their counterparts. In fact, much solid, workmanlike prose gets along quite well in

their absence. The tropes are not a utility item, and many would consider them a superfluous luxury or a decoration or, at worst, an affectation they can do without. But these figures are not supposed to function as rough lumber or structural scaffolding. They are the "graces of language" which "can render our thoughts vividly concrete" (Corbett, Classical 425). They add elegance; at their heart is play, and their essence is surprise. Be it the outrageous bombast of hyperbole, the subtle insinuation of irony, or the laconic emphasis of litotes--they are the unexpected extra thrust of an imagination working harder than most, not only to communicate but to delight.

Because tropes involve "a deviation from the ordinary and principal signification of a word" (Classical 427), that is, inspire an image by looking at the familiar from a different slant, they constantly surprise us. They have an endless potential for creating variety. In his rhetoric, Corbett lists a number of tropes, many of which students are already likely to have come in contact with, if not used much themselves. Metaphor and simile are perhaps the most common.

These two figures seem either initially to embarrass students (who often feel that they are being asked to dress their writing in chiffon and lace) or to elicit a string of mixed metaphors, cliches, and heroic epithets that would

make Homer blush. It might be helpful to remind them that metaphors are in many ways the bones of the language. F. L. Lucas quotes a Professor Weekly: "Every expression that we employ, apart from those that are connected with the most rudimentary objects and actions, is a metaphor, though the original meaning is dulled by constant use" (187). Lucas mentions a few candidates: "an 'expression' is something squeezed out; to 'employ' something is to wind it in ('implicare'); to 'connect' is to tie together ('conectere'); 'rudimentary' comes from the root RAD, 'root, sprout'. . ." (187). Robert Miles and Marc Bertomasco suggest that students start with one-word metaphors, particularly verbs, so they won't be as likely to overwork them: "You can have someone 'elbow' his way through a crowd, 'yawn' his way through a book, 'hunger' for admiration, 'intoxicate' himself with his own words. . ." (195). If we keep our own examples simple, we may not frighten our students off. We can show them that metaphorical language doesn't just belong to poets, that it's neither beyond students' grasp nor beneath their dignity.

Synecdoche (wherein "a part stands for the whole") and metonymy ("substitution of some attributive or suggestive word for what is actually meant") are so similar that for our purposes we can treat them as one (Corbett, Analyzing 440-41). Students may have never consciously tried to use

these tropes, but chances are, in either speech or writing, they have. Stock examples are "bread" for "food" and "roof" (as in over your head) for "house." Miles and Bertomasco show students how they can add clarity and color to their writing by using metonymy to replace "abstractions and generalities":

It was a shoddy motel.

It was one of those motels where your room smells of mildew and you find two dead mice in the swimming pool. (198)

Since freshman compositions so often suffer from anemia of detail, this figure seems to hold some promise.

Another trope with which many students have had some experience is personification. They seem more inclined to experiment with this device than with some of the others, and the semester generally has not progressed too far before I'm seeing "tired barns," "steadfast stone walls," "angry skys," "mournful ponds," "weeping willows," and so forth.

The rhetorical question is a mainstay to most of my students. In fact, they have a tendency to lean a little too heavily on it. Jeanne Fahnestock and Marie Secor make the useful distinction between the rhetorical question, the assertion in disguise, and the question that a writer asks when anticipating a possible audience concern or objection and which he intends to answer (343).

It is a student reaching for subtlety of expression who uses irony in less obvious instances. Often it goes awry or seems heavy-handed (as in "Oh, sure, I really love English composition), but if she knows that her instructor expects this sort of manipulation of language from time to time, she won't be as fearful that we will misinterpret her efforts and so may be more inclined to try it.

Other tropes which we can make students aware of are: onomatopoeia (combined with alliteration and assonance can create elegant rhythm and euphony), litotes, hyperbole, periphrasis, puns (which they can have a lot of fun with if we help ease their self-consciousness), and oxymoron.

#### A Few Closing Remarks

I think we can agree that a flexible Middle Style, one that can dress itself up when the occasion warrants or relax in its casual clothes and unwind with an audience, is a worthwhile goal to work toward in the freshman classroom. Clarity, concision, personality, and variety--overlapping as they do--can be achieved in one degree or another by working diligently and systematically. While we may or may not agree with F. L. Lucas who, after forty years of teaching writing, one day exclaims in exasperation: "To write really well is a gift inborn; those who have it teach themselves . . .", we can probably all agree with him when he says that

we can help "hasten the process" ("Fascination" 166). None of our students may emerge from our classrooms writing prose as "limpid as a purling stream and as a lean as a greyhound on a diet" (as Richard Lanham tells us the world expects) (Anti-Textbook 4), but all of them can leave us as significantly better writers.

Clarity and concision are fundamental rhetorical principles and universal elements of a good writing style. An engaging persona is important--even in expository prose, where the primary emphasis is on presenting information: an audience listens more closely to someone than to something. Variety always helps. Word, phrase, clause, sentence, paragraph levels--structural variety is a must in any but the most elementary and brief communication, and many of the schemes are simply necessary to achieve this goal. The tropes are just an unexpected pleasure. We don't need them in any writing, but we appreciate them when they're there. They add subtlety, elegance, and continual, if brief, bursts of surprise.

Edward P. J. Corbett points out that at first exposure to the tropes and schemes a student may seem a little overwhelmed. After all, two hundred figures! Enough to quicken even the stoutest heart. But it's neither an accumulation nor memorization game we need play: let students learn what they will. We can show them the forms

and help them practice and hope that students will find a few to be useful, that they will stick. After all, as Corbett remarks, the figures have been around for a long time; they became a living part of the language before the rhetoricians began cataloguing. In fact, students may be surprised to find that they are already using many of the figures of speech and that they have been doing so-- naturally, without affectation--for years (Classical 426-27).

## CHAPTER FIVE: METHODS

We have discovered a number of practical suggestions for helping students with the various elements of style, but is there a way to organize some of these disparate bits of information, perhaps a comprehensive approach that pulls many of them together? And if there is an approach, might we be able to integrate it into a thirty-week long syllabus and so accommodate the needs of the most ill-equipped, first-semester freshmen writers through the more advanced students at the end of the term? Though no one method, of itself, may be up to the task, perhaps a combination of several will. Cumulative sentence building, sentence combining, and creative imitation may have this potential.

Francis Christensen favors the cumulative sentence not only as a way to increase "syntactic fluency" but actually to "generate ideas" (26). Both of these would be a plus for students new to college-level writing, who often have difficulty initially even coming up with material. And Christensen uses his system primarily with the narrative and descriptive modes, both of which are common in introductory composition courses. During the second half of a first semester, sentence combining might be added to a syllabus to augment or replace cumulative sentence building. Sentence combining, too, has been shown to help students manipulate

new sentence patterns and can help resolve the punctuation difficulties that plague so many inexperienced writers (Lindemann 135).

Creative imitation might be more appropriate for a second-level composition course, one given to more analytical and persuasive writing. By this point, we can hope, students have resolved their most glaring grammar and punctuation difficulties and have gone beyond some of their previous syntactic limitations. They are familiar with the concepts of clarity and concision and so can begin to focus more on style. In creative imitation, students read a passage carefully, analyze it for stylistic elements, and then create their own content, based either loosely or closely on the structure of their models (D'Angelo 200). This not only allows them to consider the rhetorical effectiveness of the passage but also encourages them to incorporate new devices into their own style.

All three of these approaches seem to hold promise for increasing the maturity of a student's mode of expression with relatively little pain. Using a minimum of grammatical terminology and a maximum of practical application, we may see our students' prose become more lucid, concise, and interesting.

### Cumulative Sentence Building

Francis Christensen tells us clearly from the beginning of his article "A Generative Rhetoric of the Sentence" how he feels about student writing: "I deplore our limitation to the plain style. . . . I want them to become sentence acrobats, to dazzle by their syntactic dexterity" (36). His method for producing these syntactic athletes? The cumulative sentence. Christensen explains his approach to this structure with four principles: "addition" (the most essential component of any sentence is the modifier), "direction of modification or direction of movement" (the cumulative sentence moves backward toward the base clause "so that the sentence has a flowing and ebbing movement"), "levels of generality or levels of abstraction" (base clauses tend to be abstract with modifiers more concrete), and "texture" (the more modifiers the more "dense" or "rich" the style) (26-30). Christensen sees the cumulative sentence as more natural than the periodic (a form "reshaped, packaged, and delivered cold") and feels that a good style depends on the "noun and adjective clusters and the absolute" (36) rather than subordination.

So instead of embedding grammatical units in the main clause as a sign of a more mature style, Christensen would have students add degrees of modification, preferably either

in or after the main clause. Each time one element modifies another, the sentence has achieved another level of sophistication, as in the following example:

1 He dipped his hands in the bichloride solution  
and shook them,

2 a quick shake, (NC)

3 fingers down, (AB)

4 like the fingers of a pianist above the  
keys. (PP)

Sinclair Lewis (31)

There is some controversy between Christensen and the advocates of sentence combining. Christensen insists that better writing is characterized by shorter (an average of 13.3 words in his sample) rather than longer base clauses (main clauses with no non-restrictive modifiers) ("Defining" 144). Whereas John C. Mellon says, "[S]entences with long, deeply embedded, and restrictively modified base clauses abound in mature writing. . ." (12). For our purposes the question may be moot. We are more concerned with achieving a variety of expression, which will include both treatments of base clauses, rather than fixing on one at the expense of the other. And Christensen's emphasis on "free" (non-restrictive) modifiers as one mark of superior writing seems valid. In addition, since these free modifiers should be

concrete image builders, students who use them will add depth and color to their writing.

Erika Lindemann is one who approves of cumulative sentence building and is not concerned with one of the criticisms of the technique: that it leads to overly complicated and unwieldy constructions. She points out that her students are pleasantly surprised just to find that they can create long sentences. Although "quantity not quality intrigues them" (138) at first, at least students are willing to experiment with new forms--for many young writers, a feat in itself. It's up to the instructor to help sort out any mess that may ensue, using the opportunity to identify the different phrase and clause structures and to help students decide which of their creations are the most rhetorically effective.

#### Sentence Combining

Since the Hunt and Bateman-Zidonis studies in the middle sixties, the use of sentence combining has been steadily gaining ground in English curriculum. The technique--"multiple embedding of kernel sentences" to produce more syntactically mature writing (O'Hare 18)--is relatively simple, is easily learned by both teachers and students, and has been verified as effective by repeated research (Strong 210). Length is used as the overall

criterion for measuring "syntactic maturity" (O'Hare 24), with half a dozen individual factors considered: "words per T-unit" (a main clause with all of its subordinate elements); "clauses per T-unit"; "words per clause"; and "noun, adjective, and adverb clauses per 100 T-units" (O'Hare 49). As more grammatical elements are embedded, of course, the longer, more complex, and so more "mature" sentences become.

But aside from producing more complex sentences, what value does sentence combining have? Charles R. Cooper points out, along with many others, that it "permit[s] the teacher to guiltlessly eliminate the teaching of a formal grammar. . . ." (121). Through working the cued exercises, students learn some of the terminology, but far more important they learn how to put it into practice. Erika Lindemann sees several additional advantages, not the least of which is help with mechanics: "Sentence-combining exercises . . . illustrate how punctuation organizes sentence elements . . . [and] how to solve punctuation problems. . . ." (134). Along with Frank O'Hare, she notices that student writing becomes less monotonous, and as they try different arrangements "they're not only exercising syntactic options but also making rhetorical choices. [S]tudents develop an eye and ear for prose rhythms" (135). Perhaps these are the kinds of virtues that lead

"experienced teachers" to agree that beyond just creating more complicated structures, "sentence combining improves writing quality" (Strong 210). Finally, William Strong mentions that "significant gains in syntactic fluency" remain with students for at least several months after they leave a course" (210).

On another level--student satisfaction--sentence combining recommends itself. O'Hare speculates that as students gain more experience with sentence patterns they become more confident, more willing to experiment with new forms, even those they don't practice specifically in class. He says that sentence combining "concentrates on student success" (72-73). Donald A. Daiker et al. would agree, explaining that students focus on their own writing in a sentence-combining course and that "because students sense their growing mastery of skills and strategies, they generally enjoy" the work (169). For any of us who have ever had to drag students toward their assignments, then wheedle and coax till the due date, the spirit of a sentence-combining course must sound attractive.

Varied sentence structures, correct grammar and punctuation, sensitivity to prose rhythms--it seems almost too good to be true. These are fundamental elements of style with which almost every student can use help. If we were to try sentence combining in our own classrooms, we

could choose from either "open," "closed," or a combination of the two exercises.

Closed sentence-combining problems are directive: they provide the kernel sentences and whatever grammatical signal the teacher wants the student to work with. Charles R. Cooper offers examples of the cued variety:

Participle

a. ing

He saw the dog.

The dog sleeps.

\* He saw the sleeping dog. (122)

Appositive phrases

My old friend is a plumber.

My old friend is Bill Jones.

\* My old friend Bill Jones is a plumber. (123)

Open exercises do not provide any specific cues for combining; however, an instructor might want to direct students to add details, extra information, and so on (Daiker et al. 163). Donald A. Daiker recommends using blocks of kernel sentences that can be combined to create an essay. This kind of exercise provides a rhetorical context for students, and so encourages them to consider aspects of communication beyond the sentence level. Here are the first

two sentence possibilities for an open exercise entitled "The Home Front":

1. "Rosie the Riveter" was the symbol for the civilians.
2. The civilians worked for the war effort.
3. The work was during World War II.
4. She was like all of them.
5. All of them rode to work at a war factory.
6. The riding was in a '38 Studebaker.
7. The Studebaker had bald tires.
8. The car was filled to capacity.
9. But the car was short on gas. (161)

After students have completed their essays, Daiker suggests copying several, distributing them to the class, and then discussing the different choices students have made (i.e., thesis placement, paragraphing, introduction, conclusion, sentence structure. . .) (165-66). This kind of exercise seems fertile enough to him that it "can help teach just about any significant writing skill or strategy" (168).

As valuable as sentence combining has proven, we may want to keep in mind several cautionary notes. Erika Lindemann, for one, is quick to point out the sometimes "exaggerated claims" from proponents of this technique.

She is particularly wary of those who would build an entire course around sentence combining, rejecting other methods and not requiring students to write anything other than their combining exercises (133). Richard Graves, while acknowledging the use of sentence combining, calls it a "low-level activity." His criticism is, I think, leveled primarily at closed exercises, which focus entirely on "relationships inside the sentence" (195). And there is always a danger that students will interpret the emphasis on combining sentences to mean that long sentences are necessarily better ones. While there is no question in my mind that syntactic fluency is a vital element of a maturing style, so too is versatility. Students should be able to build complex structures when it will serve their rhetorical ends, without feeling chained to them.

#### Imitation

Cumulative sentence building and sentence combining both can improve clarity, concision, and variety--at least at the sentence level. But if we are to help students beyond merely being able to create intricate single structures, and do so within the limited time frame of a fifteen-week composition course, we need to look elsewhere. Imitation, with its long and successful history, may be the solution.

Imitation has been widely used since classical times. Quintillian, perhaps taking a cue from Cicero, has this to say about the effectiveness of the practice in rhetoric:

From these authors, and others worthy to be read, a stock of words, a variety of figures, and the art of composition, must be acquired; and our minds must be directed to the imitation of all their excellences; for it cannot be doubted that a great portion of art consists in imitation, since, though to invent was first in order of time, and holds the first place in merit, yet it is of advantage to copy what has been invented with success. (334)

Through the centuries the popularity of imitation in learning style, among other elements of rhetoric, has varied; but many have endorsed it: Ben Jonson, Benjamin Franklin, Robert Louis Stevenson, Winston Churchill, Somerset Maugham . . . and the list lengthens (Corbett, Classical 449-452) (Kehl 136). Clearly, there is some value here.

Frank J. D'Angelo also believes in imitation for teaching style, saying that imitation is "generative." As students practice and learn new forms, they will more readily use them to express themselves; and since more sophisticated forms often communicate more subtly, so

student writing will gain depth (199). Rather than watch a student blunder about inductively, occasionally stumbling across and assimilating a different technique, D'Angelo recommends imitation as a shortcut to style. And William F. Irmischer would use imitation as "a way of getting inside another writer's strategy." Students will learn that "the rhetorical strategies that have elaborate names are not inaccessible at all. They come . . . quite naturally in composing once we become aware of them" (137).

Although imitation has been out of fashion in rhetorical circles of late, more teachers are beginning to rediscover the value of it. Frank D'Angelo, Edward P. J. Corbett, and D. G. Kehl offer some suggestions for implementing the practice in the freshman classroom.

For imitation to work for students, they must not be intimidated by it. The teacher who leaps into the heart of a rhetorical analysis of a lengthy essay without adequately preparing her students is likely to overwhelm them. D. G. Kehl insists that "models should be congenial to the students," that "at least initially, the sparrow might emulate an effective sparrow, the crow a proficient crow" (137). This seems like reasonable advice (although neither Corbett nor D'Angelo have included the cautionary note); they all, however, agree that students should be free to choose an author's work that they admire.

D'Angelo begins with the ten-sentence-long introductory paragraph of a short story, which he helps his students analyze at the word, phrase, and clause levels. Their conclusions reflect the rhetorical purpose of the passage-- motion is conveyed through participial and absolute constructions--and the almost exclusive use of the cumulative sentence seems to support Christensen's contention that it is the primary structure in current writing, at least of the narrative sort (202). D'Angelo would have his students begin by imitating individual sentences and reproducing the same kinds of active verbs and manner adverbs, absolute and participial phrases, and sentence length (204). From sentences, students then progress to a "close" imitation of the entire passage. This close imitation asks students, using their own experiences and language, to create a paragraph that corresponds as closely as possible to all significant elements in the original. The next step would be "loose" imitation, which allows students to vary length and to rearrange sentences in whatever order works best for their content. D'Angelo stresses the importance of preserving a rhetorical context within the exercises, to impress on students that "[i]t is not manner alone that counts nor is it matter, but rather the interconnection of the two" (205).

Corbett is also concerned that questions of style not be divorced from message. He feels unequivocally that "there is an integral and reciprocal relationship between matter and form" and further that this belief "is the basis for any true understanding of the rhetorical function of style" (Classical 385). To dispel the notion in any mind that the practice of imitation is mere slavish reproduction, without concern for meaning, Corbett emphasizes the difference between the terms "similar" and "identical." None of the classical rhetoricians expected their pupils simply to reproduce a work. They should "observe . . . and emulate." Not become Demosthenes but be able to speak "as effectively as Demosthenes" (Theory 305). After making this clear, Corbett proceeds to list a number of features a student might look for in a stylistic analysis.

While D'Angelo does not recommend a word-for-word transcription as a warm-up exercise, Corbett does. In fact, he feels that it is essential. "I would estimate that by copying you will detect at least three times as many features as you will by merely reading and rereading the text" ("Method" 299). This copying, then, helps a student become aware of the elements she will analyze. Corbett breaks them down as follows:

A. Kind of diction

1. general or specific

2. abstract or concrete
  3. formal or informal
  4. Latinate (usually polysyllabic) or Anglo-Saxon (usually monosyllabic)
  5. common words or jargon
  6. referential (denotative) or emotive (connotative)
- B. Length of sentences (measured in number of words)
- C. Kinds of sentences
1. grammatical: simple, compound, complex, compound-complex
  2. rhetorical: loose, periodic, balanced, antithetical
  3. functional: statement, question, command, exclamation
- D. Variety of sentence patterns
1. inversions
  2. sentence openers
  3. method and location of expansion
- E. Means of articulating sentences (coherence devices)
- F. Use of figures of speech
- G. Paragraphing
1. length (measured in number of words and

- number of sentences)
2. kind of movement or development in paragraphs
  3. use of transitional devices

(Classical 408-09)

And what might the student hope to learn from the result of this sort of in-depth analysis? Corbett makes several points about the various categories, beginning with diction. Remarking about the need for a writer to develop a flexible style, one that will be equal to any rhetorical situation, Corbett notes that "the 'tone' of [the writer's] style can be measured partly by the texture of his words-- their phonic values, their relative abstractness or concreteness, their level of usage." The level of style, he says, formal or informal, depends to a great extent on word choice (Classical 409-10).

Students can learn quite a bit about their own style of sentences by studying those of professionals. For instance, average sentence length will vary depending on the rhetorical situation, but a student who finds his running much higher or lower than the average modern sentence (around twenty words) might want to modify his style. Also, he might watch for excessive compounding. Parataxis is not as common a method for developing sentences as it once was in English; today we tend to rely more on subordination and

apposition (Classical 410). Based on Christensen's study of sentence openers, Corbett mentions, students needn't feel constrained to use every one in the handbook. Most sentences begin with a "subject cluster," and of those that don't, most begin with some form of adverbial structure (411-12).

In terms of the "articulation" of sentences, Corbett finds that many young writers have a great deal of difficulty with coherence. As they focus on the common "coherence devices (pronouns, demonstrative adjectives, repeated words and phrases, and some of the conjunctions)" of professionals, students can see for themselves why a work flows smoothly (414-15).

"There is a style of paragraphing as well as a style of sentence structure," says Corbett. By examining other styles besides her own, a student will be able to see that there is a psychology behind paragraph breaks, that different modes call for different tactics, and that the transitional paragraph can be invaluable for orienting the reader (416).

Observing that "[p]rose rhythm is one of the most difficult aspects of style to analyze," Corbett suggests that students simply read their work aloud to catch any annoying consonant or vowel repetition (412). Curiously enough, he doesn't ask students to consider the benefits to

pacing or onomatopoeic nuance that both alliteration and assonance can have in a sentence.

As to the figures of speech, students should note and try to use them if they can do so without straining for effect (Classical 416).

After students have completed an analysis of a prose passage and have perhaps written an essay detailing what they have learned, they can begin a word-for-word transcription of the model. To do this effectively, students should observe a few brief rules: 1) write only "fifteen or twenty minutes" at a stretch 2) copy "with a pen or pencil," not a typewriter 3) select several authors to increase exposure to various stylistic techniques and to avoid "servile imitation" 4) read through the entire piece first, each sentence before copying, and then the whole after finishing 5) copy slowly and legibly (465-66). At this point, Corbett, like D'Angelo, suggests that students try a loose imitation, using their own content but based on the "kind, number, and order of clauses and phrases" of the imitated passage. As students develop more syntactic sophistication, says Corbett, they "will acquire more confidence in [their] writing ability" (466).

And this is, after all, what we're after. Despite the suspicions of some educators who view imitation as a "structured, fettered" activity (Corbett, "Theory" 311), it

has clearly shown its worth over the past twenty-four hundred years of rhetorical tradition. Imitation helps young writers surmount their limitations--and can do so with students generating their own material, within a structured, but unforced rhetorical context. "For some students," as Richard Eastman says, "whose individual writing manners have prematurely 'set,' imitation may offer the only way of breaking out into greater range and flexibility" (33; emphasis added).

Imitation is not a universal panacea. Some students will take to and benefit from it; others will resist--perhaps resent--and profit not at all. Close imitation in particular, as beneficial as it can be, is rough going. As William Irscher points out, it "reverses the natural process of composing": instead of beginning with meaning and finding form, we start with structure and fill it in (137). Even so, Frank D'Angelo insists that "imitation exists for the sake of variation." Students who practice it will become more "original" (199). Although Edward Corbett, in an article written in 1971, saw little hope for imitation making "much of a comeback in our schools during the coming decade" ("Theory" 311), there have been some changes in attitude since then. In an updated article in 1979, D. G. Kehl, after much qualifying, finally decides that imitation may re-emerge after all: "The consensus [among contemporary

writers] seems to be a guarded approval" (137). If so, Corbett would be pleased, since for him imitation "is that internalization of structures that unlocks our powers and sets us free to be creative, original, and ultimately effective" ("Theory" 312).

#### A Few Closing Remarks

Knowing the elements of the flexible Middle Style that we would like to teach is a start. Finding the vehicles to carry the information gets us that much closer.

Implementing the activities on a daily basis can bring us all the way home. Teaching style in the freshman classroom can work; we just need a road map.

Cumulative sentence building, sentence combining, and creative imitation seem to hold much promise. Certainly they all can increase syntactic fluency, help with grammar and punctuation problems, and promote student confidence in their writing abilities. In addition, Christensen's generative theory may actually help students create material, and does encourage them to seek concrete detail, to construct vivid images with specific language. Both cumulative sentence building and sentence combining seem appropriate for a first-semester composition course, especially since time limits our options: we only have our .

captive audience for fifteen weeks; less efficient methods won't do.

Creative imitation, if we have to choose among the three, might be more effective in a second-semester (or advanced, for that matter) composition class, one in which the students have already reached a certain level of syntactic maturity and have some mastery over both clarity and concision. At this level they may be expected to learn the more challenging skills of critical analysis and argumentation. Analysis is integral to imitation, and the art of persuasion requires ever-more-refined rhetorical skills, the skills students can learn by imitating the masters. Imitation provides structure, not bondage, and encourages students to creatively explore rhetorical options in the full context of any written discourse: author, subject, and audience. Not the only way, perhaps not even the best way, but apparently an effective way for us to increase the range and depth of our students' possibilities for expression--creative imitation. As Edward P. J. Corbett declares, "Imitate that you may be different" ("Theory" 312).

## CONCLUSION

Teaching style in the freshman classroom is neither beyond our means nor beyond our students' abilities. But if we would do so, we must first believe this. And so we must look toward a theory of style that will allow choice, that will admit to manipulation of structure. Louis Milic puts it succinctly: "[F]orm cannot be taught by those who do not believe in it. . ." (260). Richard Ohman's proposal, however, of "epistemic choice," a kind of self-limited selecting among options, bridges the gap between the organic and dualist approaches to style, allowing us to work with shape and substance.

On this theory we can build a flexible Middle Style that continually borrows from both High and Low, borrows specific elements that we can point out to our students and with which they can learn to work. As students become more practiced with moving back and forth along a continuum to meet each rhetorical situation, they can continue to refine the several components of effective style: clarity, concision, personality, and variety. And we can help students with this by pointing to the cankers on good style: overcrowding, clutter, stuffiness, and monotony. But more than this, we can give students the exact advice they need to eliminate problems.

Methods that will help put our suggestions to work are cumulative sentence building, sentence combining, and creative imitation. We can arrange these techniques in an ascending order that finally emphasizes the figures of speech, particularly tropes, and an ear for rhythm and euphony in language. Combined, these practices will help our students' styles mature.

Our jobs, then, are far from hopeless: we have an ample stock of remedies with which to treat anemic expression--and our reluctant charges needn't suffer too horribly from our ministrations, feeling the cure worse than the illness.

In "Teaching Style: A Possible Anatomy" Winston Weathers remarks on what he feels are the three essential features of teaching style: "relevance, viability, and credibility." If we are to be successful, we must manage each one (187). Viability. We have looked at a number of demonstrable features of styles at varying levels and have considered practical approaches for students who would upgrade their manner of expression. Further, we might point out to students that they already have a style. They have been writing for years before they arrive in our classrooms and have been making lexical and syntactic choices within an ever-expanding repertoire of stylistic options. We are simply here to help them accelerate the process. Also, we might note the structures that they commonly manipulate--

apposition, parenthesis, parallelism, ellipsis--and demonstrate their more sophisticated applications.

As to relevancy (why should they bother with this style business anyway?), Weathers thinks this may be the most important issue of all (188). If students don't really feel a need for learning style, their performances will be half-hearted at best, inspired by grade anxiety or perhaps a mild desire to "please the teacher," but with no real personal commitment. Weathers suggests we mention "that style has something to do with better communication," that it adds "technicolor to otherwise black-and-white language" (187), but this is only intellectual motivation. More important is "that style is the proof of a human being's individuality. . ." (187).

Young people in particular are wrestling with this issue of identity, as they escape from parental overseers only to find peer groups that often impose an even more rigid kind of uniformity. Weathers talks about achieving freedom through style, how, politically, democracies flourish through individual expression and how totalitarian regimes forbid it (188). And he mentions Aristotle's comment that "character is the making of choices" (187). Students may come to see that their style can truly reflect who they are . . . and certainly affects the way others perceive them. This concept of persona is crucial to an

effective writing style and is intimately bound up with the writer's sense for her audience.

As we attempt to establish the relevancy of learning style to our students, we can dwell for a time on the image a person projects in every communication. We can talk about what makes a writer seem believable and what makes a reader want to believe him. We can talk about the value of "humanness" in writing: the personable, affable, maybe even genuinely warm aspects of character that are likely to engage an audience. We can discuss why a professional writer and teacher like C. H. Knoblauch does not lament "the loss of professional voice--that neutral, neutered, pompous, omniscient, oracular, cold-blooded professorial sound that makes academic discourse so . . . monumental" (144). We can take a hard look at the rhetorical triangle, noting the interdependence of the three points surrounding language, and we can look with particular care at ethos.

Once we have established with our students that learning style is both relevant and viable, our next chore is to convince them of our own credibility (Weathers 191). Although our academic validation (M.A./Ph.D.) and our position behind the lectern initially at least (I hope) legitimizes our advice, unless we can show students that our suggestions work in real writing situations, we may ultimately expect a certain amount of valid skepticism.

Students have listened to teachers tell them for years how to go about writing, what page of the handbook to read to learn, for instance, a parallel structure or a cumulative sentence, but not often enough have students actually seen their instructors create these devices themselves (191). Winston Weathers says in exasperation: "We are an amazing lot of piano players refusing to play the piano" (191). The NCTE Commission on Composition in 1974 said flatly: "Writing teachers should themselves be writers" (Lindemann 227). Since most of us are practicing writers anyway, it would be little enough trouble to show our students this from time to time--it couldn't help but instill confidence in our charges that we not only consider important the techniques of style that we teach but also that in our own work we actually, actively use them.

Weathers suggests that we all take a turn at the blackboard, preferably each class period, and--spontaneously--compose. A paragraph would do. We can show students that this is not prearranged, that we are doing exactly what we expect them to, by having one student provide a noun, another a verb, and then creating (192). If teaching style in the freshman classroom is a worthwhile undertaking, important enough for us to work with it on an ongoing basis for the entire thirty weeks of composition instruction, the least we can do is show our students our

own style. If they see what we say, they may even believe us. To teach style, we must be piano players willing to play.

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