

Project 2: Developing Prose—Style, Voice, and Idiom

Although successful as a painter, Edgar Degas struggled to produce sonnets, and found poetry discouragingly hard to write. To his friend, the poet Stephane Mallarme, he complained, “What a business! My whole day gone on a blasted sonnet, without getting an inch further... and it isn’t ideas I’m short of... I’m full of them.”

“But Degas,” said Mallarme, “you can’t write with ideas—you write with words!”—XJ Kennedy

In this class, we don’t write sonnets, but Mallarme’s advice stands. Writing requires ideas; it requires arguments; it requires media; and it requires context, purpose, and audience. But first, it requires words. In this assignment, we will focus on the *expression* of your ideas, the *style* of your writing, and the *voice* with which you address your audience.

Part I: Evaluating Style

At its best, our writing reflects our situation, our readers, and our environment. But writing is also intensely personal. The best writers of prose (whether persuasive, expository, literary, or other) produce texts that need no byline—they are unmistakable from the words themselves. This is style, what makes your writing different from that of others, and voice, what makes your writing an expression of you.

Before you can write with style, though, you’ve got to have a good grasp on what style is—what separates one genre, mode, or idiom of writing from another. In order to develop this knowledge, we’ll take a look at three pieces of highly stylized prose, which I will distribute to you in class. We’ll discuss what makes them work, how they’re similar and different, and what elements of the text contribute to their overall “feel.” We’ll connect those discussions to our consideration of ethos in Project One.

Then, you’ll write a **two page, double-spaced** analysis of **one** of the three texts. Unlike our rhetorical analysis in Project One, which focused on the *arguments* of your chosen text, this analysis will focus on questions about *language* and *form*. Some examples of those kind of questions might include

- Is your chosen text formal? Informal? Academic? Personal? Comedic? Mournful? Technical? How do you know?
- Is the text first person, second person, or third person? What effect, if any, does the point of view have on the ethos of the text?
- Does the text employ slang? The deliberate use of old-fashioned or obscure terminology? Is there reference to art or media? Is that art or media considered high culture? Pop culture?
- Is there any pattern to the length of the sentences that seems remarkable or unusual? To the length of the paragraphs? For example, are there a series of short, clipped sentences? If so, what is the effect?
- Does the writer utilize any figures of speech, quotes, or constructions in a repetitive or systematic way? If so, what is the effect on the text?
- If you had to characterize the text in one word, what would it be? Why?

You are being assigned Part I today, XXX. Your analysis will be due on XXX. A *Short Guide* can help you; consider especially the three texts (literary analysis, business writing, and science writing) in Chapter Six and the analysis of their conventions and language.

Part II: Rewriting Style

Nobody is born with stylish writing; good writers develop their style through practice and experimentation. In Part II of this project, you will practice utilizing stylized prose by *rewriting* another writer's work. Each student will choose a piece of writing, between 250-500 words, and rewrite it in a markedly different style than its original form. Your text could be chosen from a speech, a magazine article, a piece of fiction, even poetry. You'll preserve the overall structure, the ideas, the plot, etc., but change the language to dramatically change the effect, such as in this example.

<p>Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears; I come to bury Caesar, not to praise him. The evil that men do lives after them; The good is oft interred with their bones; So let it be with Caesar. The noble Brutus Hath told you Caesar was ambitious: If it were so, it was a grievous fault, And grievously hath Caesar answer'd it. —<i>William Shakespeare</i></p>	<p>Hipsters, flipsters, and finger-poppin' daddies, Knock me your lobes, I came to lay Caesar out, Not to hip you to him. The bad jazz that a cat blows, Wails long after he's cut out. The groovey is often stashed with their frames, So don't put Caesar down. The swinging Brutus hath laid a story on you That Caesar was hungry for power If it were so, it was a sad drag, And sadly hath the Caesar cat answered it. —<i>Lord Buckley</i></p>
---	---

Remember, your rewrite should be markedly different from the original. In order to achieve that, you might consider writing in a deliberately exaggerated style—take it to 11. As seen in the example, the use of slang can often be an effective way to achieve this exaggeration. Other useful tools for exaggerating style include figures of speech like metaphor or simile, old fashioned or obscure terminology, extensive use of personal reference and the first person, and references to pop culture and media.

While almost any kinds of style will be permitted (including the use of profanity, provided that use isn't deliberately antagonizing or provoking), I caution you that the appropriation of ethnic or racial voices that I deem offensive will not survive the conferencing process. Use your head.

This assignment is likely quite different from those you are used to. It's therefore essential that you read the models I will provide for you, that you attend class and participate, and that you make the most of our conferencing time. During conferencing, you'll need to show me the piece you've chosen to rewrite and discuss with me your strategy for changing its style. Your rewrite should approximate your original piece in length. Part II is being assigned today, XXX, and will be due on XXX.

Part III: Composing with Style

Now that we've learned a thing or two about what style is and how it works, it's time to employ a little of our own. For Part III, you'll craft your own text, utilizing your own style. As with Part II, we're looking to make our style unmistakable, so don't be afraid of going too far. You'll write at least **two double spaced pages** of your own prose.

What kind of prose? Because this assignment concerns the style of what you're writing and not the purpose of your text, **there are no genre requirements**. While I'll advise you in conferencing away from projects that seem too difficult or involved, ultimately the decision on what kind of prose to write is up to you. Remember: for this assignment, your style should come first. In other words, let your style determine the genre you choose, not the other way around. Some suggested genres you could attempt include

- **A review.** Reviews of movies, books, music, restaurants, video games, etc. can be great places to showcase your style. Reviews are inevitably personal and inherently subjective; make sure your review is more oriented towards your opinion about the quality of what you're reviewing and less towards summarizing what you're reviewing.
- **A profile.** As short, narrative-driven considerations of a person or event, profiles are a great vehicle to demonstrate your personal style. The key to effective profiles is specific, interesting detail; make sure you use references to the five senses. Remember that a good profile requires observation, so give yourself enough time to observe, compose, and revise.
- **A narrative.** Telling personal stories can be among the most direct ways to highlight your own style and your voice as a writer. Any good narrative requires that the writer answers a basic question: why should someone else care about this story? Remember that your own life is always more interesting to you than to someone else. Make sure there's a hook that helps a reader connect with your narrative.

I will evaluate your work on how distinct your language is, how developed your style is, and how consistently that style is applied across the document. While this is not a project in genre forms, it is important that you invest effort in making your document a successful example of the genre you choose—your style, after all, needs worthwhile text in which to “live.”

Once again, effectively writing with style takes practice and know-how, so classroom and conference attendance is essential. We'll have a peer review session on XXX, where you'll have an opportunity to see how real readers react to your style. I am assigning Part III today, XXX, and it will be due on XXX.