

On Style

by Emily Hiestand

An essay from
Telling True Stories
A Nonfiction Writers' Guide

from the Nieman Foundation at Harvard University
Edited by Mark Kramer & Wendy Call
Penguin Plume Books, 2007

[Words+Images Home](#)



Telling True Stories

Inspiring stories and candid advice from some of America's most respected journalists & nonfiction authors, including Susan Orlean, Tracy Kidder, Phillip Lopate, and others.

For more information about the book, table of contents, editors and contributors bios, reviews, etc. visit the [Telling True Stories page on the Nieman Foundation site.](#)

To return to [Words+Images News and Home.](#)



"All right, here goes—but I feel as if my petticoat were showing."

This was the endearing message I once received from a seasoned journalist at work on an essay for Orion magazine. I was her editor, the subject was urban nature, and the author's note was by way of agreeing to include more personal reflection and sensory detail. In her superb reporting, the writer was accustomed to muting her quirky observations on the world. But Orion values the personal voice, and one of the joys of my tenure there was giving journalists permission to cut loose in the expansive territory of the personal essay.

I wrote back saying "Thanks. Have fun; remember, personal isn't the same as private. Let's see what happens." Over the following weeks, these things appeared in her narrative: the mottled sycamores of Central Park, circa 1955; the author's Uncle Abraham eating a homegrown tomato in a Brooklyn kitchen; fig trees wrapped in burlap against the winter cold; and an ode to puddingstone, the composite rock native only to Morocco and Boston. Suffused with the warmth of memory, telling detail and wit, the essay was wonderful company.

There are many ways to be good company for our readers. One is to offer the pleasures of stylish prose—language written with attention to texture and tone, imagery, music, and the resonance between words. The poet Derek Walcott tells his students that their language should be as clear as water, and so complete that readers can detect the weather of the poem. Like poets, prose stylists are alert to the ways meaning can dwell in the particularities of language. Ultimately, prose style is the expression of a whole self (and like a self, resistant to dissection), but aspects of style can be named and explored. I offer the following thoughts with some trembling—not only because journalists are among my culture-heroes, but because on the matter of defining great style, even the master E.B. White must say, "Here we leave solid ground." Indeed, my first and most confident suggestion is: keep Strunk & White's *The Elements of Style* ever close at hand.

Embody ideas in the nature of the language. Language is not a conveyer belt trundling a cargo of something called "the idea," but is itself integral to the idea. Poets, those pure research scientists in the laboratory of language, might say that language is entirely the idea. But even in prose, whatever else our words mean to convey, the nature of the language is itself a mighty signal. Idiom, cadence, the leanness or langor of language, all work connotatively to communicate, often as strongly as an overt message. The links between ideas and language may emerge unconsciously; I noticed a stately, burnished sound—long lines and calm rhythms—showing up in an essay on the history of our watershed, and a sparkling feel in a story about neon automotive accessories. A writer's voice has a signature, of course, and tonal changes from one work to another are not a chameleon act. They are variations within a voice, representing our capacity to enter into various ideas imaginatively, to explore subjects via language.

Consider Henry James. Famously, one can be mesmerized for pages of a Jamesian narrative only to realize gradually that nothing is actually happening, except, say, Isabel Archer has shifted her arm. But every possible psychological vibration in the room has been registered. As James explores the contours of consciousness, he unpacks the density and reverberations of even brief exchanges. After spending time in his company, we may notice more nuance in our own inner lives too. Like his subject, James's language is complex: sentences are convoluted, and verbs delayed as passages of observation unspool. In this way, in the very nature of his style, James alters our capacity for perception.

Restore worn out words. The poet George Starbuck often advised his students to "Work with words that make you wince." Starbuck wanted to see apprentice poets wrestling with cliché and other damaged language because one of the poet's duties is to restore words to a culture—to redeem lost and sullied words and make them new. Just so, prose stylists are free to roam the whole continuum of



"The mottled sycamores of Central Park, circa 1955; fig trees wrapped in burlap against the winter cold; an ode to puddingstone, the composite rock native only to Morocco and Boston...."

—Emily Hiestand,
Telling True Stories,
A Nonfiction Writers' Guide



vocabulary and speech, exploring formal, colloquial and dated words, as well as the specialized lingo of engineers, neurologists, and teenagers. The simple word over the fancy one, sure, but also consider the uncommon word that simply appeals to your ear. The most current meanings of words only skim the surface; as any time with the OED reveals, each word is a house of history.

Take an art class. One enjoyable way to develop an eye for detail is to take an art class. Much of what visual artists learn in school is how to see: how to look at the world free of the abstracting preconceptions and the myriad simplifications that we form in order to navigate life. Visual assumptions (train, waitress, tooth) are crucial shorthand, of course, but they also become a cage that prevents fresh contact. To draw or sculpt something, however, we must call on the mind's eye to look again. Seen well, rust stains on a bridge are hardly ugly, but a field of subtle color, like a brindled pelt or a Rothko painting—a visual insight that can flow directly into words. Similarly, even if we have no ambition to write poetry, many of the concerns of prosody—a syllable-by-syllable attention to sound, a feel of rhyme and breath—will also quicken prose.

Use concrete detail. Surely we love writing that is alive with concrete detail because the mind develops in response to sensory experience, and because our intelligence is so multi-faceted. Writing

that honors the senses—presenting sea smoke ghosting over lake; the whirr of a fan; a cool plum in the hand—engages not only the logical mind, but also our visual, physical, and emotional intelligences. Sensory-rich writing awakens the full spectrum of consciousness and our myriad ways of knowing. It is also respectful of readers, at the core of the “Show, don’t tell” mantra.

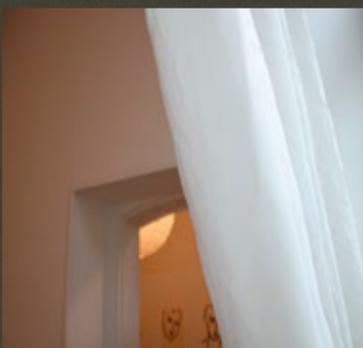
Compose the pace. A narrative essay can bolt from the gate, amble into our affection, or move symphonically through passages of varying energies. The pace can be in alignment with the subject—moving glacially for the slowed-down time of grief—or can counter the subject. There are usually two forces at work in a piece of writing—a forward motion (this happens, then this), and a sense of dwelling in place. Dwelling is a way of dropping a plumb line for meaning and pleasure. Think of Theolonius Monk probing one corner of a musical phrase for dozens of bars before moving on. In narrative, we like the reassurance of forward motion; if we feel we are in good hands, we also savor digression, linguistic riffs, and sustained immersion.

Experiment with form. One glory of the essay is that it is not bound by a firm structure—like the plot points of the Hollywood screenplay, or the inverted pyramid of traditional news. Instead, the essay is elastic, promising adventure and exploration. There are significant distinctions among the forms of literary nonfiction, but all of them combine the power of fact with the pleasures of style. Not only can an essay take various forms, a single work can incorporate aspects of, say, a short story, reportage, and biography. All of these forms, and others, are available to the narrative journalist.

By its nature, a narrative implies order in the world. Very appealing. And yet, the past is imperfectly known, the future uncertain. Biological order is based on dynamic change; the earth itself proceeds with the open-endedness of radical creativity, neither rule-bound nor chaotic, but creative within evolving forms. So we also need storytelling that experiments with structure, and creates clearings for new ways of thinking and being. Perhaps narrative is at once daring and humble, in the way that science is, offering provisional truths, saying in essence: This is the best story we can tell now, based on limited knowledge.

Finding one’s own style. In Bertrand Tavernier’s brooding 1986 film “Round Midnight,” jazz great Dexter Gordon plays the role of saxophonist Dale Turner—a character based on two real musicians, Bud Powell and Lester Young, during their years at the Blue Note club in Paris. The center of gravity of this film may be the scene in which Turner stands by his hotel window talking to a young fan and aspiring musician. In a voice gravelly with age and hard living, Turner shares the essence of style with the younger man: “You don’t just go out and pick a style off a tree one day,” he says, “The tree is already inside you. It is growing, naturally, inside you.”

Which isn’t to say there is nothing for us to learn. For our species, learning *is* natural. Note the jazzman says the tree is growing. Style and technique are not only tools for expression—for translating our moral, intellectual, emotional responses into words—but are also tools for learning. The writer’s lifelong engagement with craft and style is a remarkable time-honored way to discover what we think, what we care about—who we are.



"On Style" © 2007 Emily Hiestand
From Telling True Stories
Penguin Plume Books
© 2007 Mark Kramer and Wendy Call
All rights reserved.

