

VARIATIONS IN COMPOSING STYLE

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Several years ago, frustrated at the terrible essays my students had produced after I had spent an entire week instructing them in formal outlining, I asked a friend, who was writing a book, to describe to me how she wrote. Her answer was lengthy and fascinating. Bolstered by her assurance that she never wrote a formal outline, I dropped formal outlining from my composition courses forever, but intrigued by the rest of her answer, I began a new hobby. I started asking everyone I knew who wrote regularly to describe their writing process to me: academics, authors, graduate students, business professionals, lawyers. I expected either to find one predominant strategy for successful writing (which I could then pass on to my students or, perhaps, copyright and sell) or to discover that there were as many variations as there were writers. In fact, I did find many minor variations: people wrote with different implements, at different times, in different places, and for different reasons. But I also found that writers tended to use one of two cognitive strategies in the process of composing. These are the strategies I would like to describe in this paper.

The first strategy is one I characterize as the “think-write” style. An example of a writer who employs this style is a friend of mine, a teacher and textbook writer. She describes her procedures for writing chapters in the textbook she is currently working on in this way. First, she says, she begins by spending weeks before she begins to write in thinking about what she is going to say, reading what others have said on the same topic, and discussing some of her ideas with others. Then, when she feels that her material is “altogether,” she talks it through, often giving herself lectures as she drives to work on the expressway. After she’s rehearsed the material in this way for several weeks, she sits down and writes the chapter, usually completing it in a day or two.

Another friend, who writes articles for magazines and journals in his field, reports that he usually goes for a long, long walk before he starts to write. When he returns, he sits down and types out the article, writing almost as quickly as he can type. After he finishes typing, he reads over the article once and makes stylistic changes, and then sends it out to be retyped.

A third person I interviewed, a consultant, said that she often washes the dishes before she begins to write because this activity keeps her from pacing, while leaving her mind free to meditate on her topic. When she finishes washing the dishes, she sits down at her desk and writes an outline. She says, "Writing the outline is the most difficult part for me. It takes a long time, but once I've worked out the outline, the writing itself is easy, almost anti-climactic."

These three authors all write in what I am calling the think-write style. This style has the following features:

First, writers who exhibit this style typically have an extended prewriting stage. After they have gathered their material, they may spend days, weeks, even months or years mulling over their subject before they begin to write.

Second, during this extended pre-writing stage, they often compose in situations which preclude the use of pen and paper: they talk to themselves while driving, or go for long walks, or wash dishes.

Third, some begin to write by writing an outline, while others don't. Those who don't, however, say that they have their organizational framework worked out before they begin to write.

Fourth, these writers frequently commented to me that, once they began to write, they felt as if the hardest work of writing was over.

Fifth, for writers in this group, their writing time was relatively rapid and continuous.

Sixth, most of them reported writing few drafts, usually only one or two.

Seventh, usually these writers reported that revisions after the first draft were revisions for grammar and style, rather than for content and organization.

I'd like to contrast this style with a radically different procedure, one which I call the "write-rewrite" style. This style was used by fully half of the thirty or so writers I interviewed. The writing habits of a graduate student I know are typical of this style. She reports that when she is

preparing to write a paper, she gathers together all of her materials: notes, books, paper, and a fistful of newly sharpened pencils—and isolates herself in a room. Then she begins to write, using the backs of old dittos as paper, because they remind her that what she is writing is only a draft and doesn't really count. Often she begins by writing summaries of her notes and readings. Then she'll pick out one heading that she may use in her final paper and try to write that section, producing six to eight pages of what she uncharitably describes as "mess." She states that out of these six to eight pages, she might only get one or two sentences that she'll actually use. When she has written a number of sections, she arranges them in some order and types them. Then she begins to revise the typed copy, writing the next draft in longhand. She continues in this manner, alternating handwritten drafts with typed drafts until she has a final product that satisfies her—which may be anywhere from 5 to 15 drafts after her original attempt.

A second writer, a lawyer, says that she begins writing as soon as she finishes her legal research. She says, "I write quickly and produce pages and pages. If an idea 'dries up,' I just pick the next idea and try to develop it. Then I rewrite, and rewrite, maybe doing a new draft every day for a week. By the end of the week, I can see where my arguments are going. Then I start to polish, and three or four drafts later, I'm ready for the typist."

These two writers exhibit the write-rewrite style. This style has the following characteristics in contrast to the think-write style:

First, unlike the think-write writers who reported a long delay between gathering their material and commencing to write, these authors typically begin to write their first draft immediately after they feel they have sufficient material.

Second, unlike the think-write writers, who place themselves in situations where they can't use pencil and paper, write-rewrite writers create situations that will encourage them—or force them—to begin to write, like the woman who gathered all her material together and isolated herself in a room.

Third, none of these writers wrote an outline or had an organizational schema in mind before they began to write, unlike the think-write writers, who usually did.

Fourth, think-write writers reported that the writing was fairly easy in contrast with the pre-writing. Write-rewrite writers report the opposite: one writer described the writing of the first draft as “tortured.”

Fifth, the writing of write-rewrite authors is slow compared to that of think-write writers: a page takes an hour or six to eight pages produce one or two usable sentences.

Sixth, as opposed to the one or two drafts produced by write-rewrite writers, think-write writers produce multiple drafts: I heard estimates ranging from four to fourteen.

Seventh, these writers revise after the first draft for content and structure. Revisions for grammar and style only begin after the work has, in their words, “begun to take shape.”

In his essay, “Internal Revision: A Process of Discovery,” Donald Murray describes writing as the process of discovering what we want to say by writing about it.¹ By writing the first draft, writers, Murray says, “stake out a territory to explore.” They then use successive drafts to explore this territory, confirming, altering or developing their original vision as they go. Murray’s description clearly fits the second style I defined, but is inappropriate as a description of the think-write style. Yet I found both styles being used by competent writers. Both groups of writers, it seems to me, go through the same processes he describes: delineating a territory, then exploring and developing and changing their ideas and the structure of their text until they have a whole that satisfies them, and then turning their attention to matters of style and correctness. What differentiates the two styles is that writers who exhibit the think-write style search for and find the meaning and shape of their ideas *before* they begin to write, while writers who exhibit the write-rewrite style do the *same* cognitive work, but do it while they are writing.

In his seminal essay, “Thought and Word,” the Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky differentiates between “inner speech,” speech for oneself, and “external speech,” speech for others.² Inner speech is the language of inner thought, while external speech is the language of thoughts encoded for others in speech and writing. Inner speech, since it is egocentric, is highly abbreviated and saturated with meaning. Writing, on the other hand, as the most highly decontextualized form of external speech, demands explicitness. Since inner speech and written language

are at opposite poles, drafts are necessary in order to make the transition from one to the other—drafts, Vygotsky says, which can either be mental drafts or written drafts. The process of drafting, then, can be seen as the process of making the transition, step by step, from inner to external speech. The two styles of composing that I’ve delineated can be viewed as two alternative but equally effective cognitive strategies for writing, one using the medium of inner speech, and the other using the medium of external speech.

However, in my title, I went beyond calling the two methods of composing that I identified strategies, or processes or techniques; instead, I referred to them as styles. Why?

We teachers of composition and literature think of style in terms of the style a writer exhibits in his written product but, in fact, many activities have style. We can talk about different styles of playing basketball, different driving styles, even teaching styles. We can describe styles: for instance, I would say that my teaching style is casual and inductive—more a workshop style than a lecture style.

How did I develop this style? When I first began teaching, I was absolutely eclectic: I frantically tried to remember the techniques used by every teacher I had ever had, and I tried them all. Gradually, I found that some didn’t work at all, and some, which clearly worked for others, didn’t work well for me. I began to use the ones that worked for me more and more frequently. Gradually my techniques became habitual, they became characteristic of me—they became my style. I can switch styles when I need to—I do occasionally lecture. But on the whole, I’m more comfortable sitting on the edge of the desk and asking questions.

A writing style, I’d like to suggest, develops in much the same way. We’re presented with models (often many different models: one for every writing class we take) of how to write in school, and we faithfully try them out. But our writing experience continues after our writing classes, and we begin to modify our original model. Perhaps one time we try to write the way our roommate does, or one time we write an entire paper on the typewriter because it’s due the next day. Gradually, as our writing experiences broaden and we use different techniques in composing, we begin to sift out the methods that work for us from those that don’t, and to use, more and more, the methods that work for us, until a dominant style emerges.

Most of the people who discussed their writing style with me were committed to the style they described as their dominant mode of operation, that is, committed in an odd sort of way. They all believed that, even though they might occasionally vary their work habits, the formula they had hit on for writing was the *only* one that worked for them. In fact, one informant gave me some interesting evidence that suggests that it may, in fact, be difficult to switch composing styles. He typically used the think-write style. After talking to me, he decided to see if he could write in the other style: the write-rewrite style. He tried to write down a first draft of a poem that he had just begun to work on in his head. Later he told me, "I was horrified at seeing so much tentativeness in black and white. I crumpled up the paper and threw it away." Perhaps one of the determinants in which composing style we prefer is where we prefer our messiness—on paper or in our minds.

But I said that the commitment to the writing style that my sources used was an odd sort of commitment. Even though the writers I interviewed were adamant that their writing style was the best for them, they also frequently thought that their way of writing was the *wrong* way. For instance, one of the writers I interviewed often collaborated with another writer in writing articles. Jim wrote in the write-rewrite style, while his co-worker, Addison, used the think-write style. Jim told me that he envied the way his partner wrote, and wished that he could write like him, but he couldn't. He explained further that Addison could write the way he did because he had learned to write in private prep schools, while Jim, my informant, had been taught in public schools. Likewise, in the same essay I mentioned earlier, Donald Murray recounts a story about a professor who, until he talked to Murray, was always ashamed of the way he wrote because he never knew what he wanted to say when he sat down to write. He had to write and write to find out, and he thought that because he wrote like this, he must have been stupid—after all, doesn't every one know what they want to say before they say it?

Think-write writers also think the methods they use are wrong. They worry about how long they procrastinate before they begin to write. They characterize themselves as lazy, or as often experiencing writer's block, and they look with envy on their peers who are busily working on their second—or fourth, or eighth draft. One think-write writer reported to me that she always thought that she didn't polish her work enough, because she had read that professional writers always did at least seven drafts, and she never wrote more than two.

I can't explain—although I wish that I could because I'm intrigued by the question—why these two styles, among all the possible variants, predominate, or why one style works for one person as opposed to another. But I do think that this knowledge has strong implications for our teaching practice. For one thing, I think that knowing how we ourselves compose will make us better teachers. If we are aware of the complexity of the styles we use in our own writing, and that others will employ in their writing, we will be less likely to offer pat formulae to our students.

On the other hand, there is a natural tendency to generalize from our own experiences. If we ourselves use one style predominantly, we are in danger of making that style the rigid formula we present to our students as *the* way to write. Instead, I believe that we should expose our students to a variety of composing styles. They are in the same position that I was in when I began teaching: they are just beginning to investigate composing techniques. They need to try out many techniques so that through such experimentation they can discover what will work for them.

We can help our students to discover their own composing styles in many ways. For one thing, we can provide them with situations for writing that allow for such variations. For some assignments, we can structure an extended pre-writing period, allowing them to read about their subjects, and discuss them with one another or with us. For other assignments, we can guide them through multiple drafts, beginning with free writing and gradually moving to a more structured form. Furthermore, we can provide them with the important information that not everyone writes in the same way, so that perhaps when they develop their own style of composing, they won't consider it to be an idiosyncratic style that works for them, but that *only* works for them because they're stupid or lazy.

Finally, we can help them to reflect on their writing experiences, perhaps helping them to decide what method works best for them. We can, as Sharon Crowley suggests, ask them to keep journals in which they record and evaluate their reactions to different writing experiences.³

I think that, as our knowledge of the composing process increases, we will change our view of our role as teachers of writing. No longer will our task be to find and present to our students the right way to write; instead, our task will be to lead our students through writing experiences, helping them discover the best way to write for themselves.

NOTES

¹ Donald Murray, "Internal Revision: A Process of Discovery," in *Research on Composing: Points of Departure*, ed. by Charles R. Cooper and Lee Odell (Urbana: NCTE, 1978), p. 87.

² Lev Semenovich Vygotsky, "Thought and Word," in *Thought and Language* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1962), p. 131.

³ Sharon Crowley, "Components of the Composing Process," *CCC*, 28 (May, 1977), p. 166.