

# Let's Write!

## Elements of Writing Style

### Word Choice

Also called diction, word choice refers to the artistic decisions a writer makes in choosing one word over another, and how those decisions affect the meaning, mood, tone, and ideas conveyed to the reader.

Take a look at the following two example sentences. Only one word has been changed in each sentence, and those words are synonyms, but the changed word has a huge impact on the way each sentence is read.

1. The Union beat The Confederacy during the American Civil War.
2. The Union subjugated The Confederacy during the American Civil War.

As you can see, changing "beat" to "subjugated" affects every part of the sentence. The sentence moves from neutral and informative to passionate and descriptive; the idea, once impartial, now comes across as heavily invested in the outcome of the Civil War. A word like "subjugated" transmits to the reader that the Union was extremely powerful, even suggesting that the Confederacy was a victim of the North.

### Syntax

Syntax refers to sentence structure—how rearranging the order of words impacts the meaning transmitted to the reader. It is closely related to diction, but where diction is concerned with the choice of words, syntax is concerned with the arrangement of those words, as well as the length and complexity of sentences.

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Much of syntax is innately learned, especially to native English speakers. For example, an English sentence is typically constructed with the subject first, and then the verb, followed by the object of that verb. See below:

- The quick brown fox (subject) jumped (verb) over the lazy dog (object).

If the daring writer wanted to complicate this syntactical order, they might write "Over the lazy dog, the quick brown fox jumped." Of course, such experimentations can prove dangerous, as the reader might misinterpret that construction, or read it as shallow or pretentious.

Nonetheless, paying close attention to the structure, length, and word order of sentences can allow writers to develop their writing styles. Here are some other ways one might experiment with syntax:

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- **Structure** (active to passive): The lazy dog was jumped over by the quick brown fox.
- **Length**: The fox jumped over the dog. OR: The quick, sly, and daring fox jumped right over the lazy and motionless dog.
- **Word order**: The brown fox jumped quickly over the dog lying lazily.

Notice how each of these syntactical changes affect the rhythm, meaning, and style of the sentences. Some changes certainly worsen the effect of the sentence.

A final element of syntax is punctuation. Commas, colons, semicolons, em-dashes, and periods each have their own specific use in English grammar. How the author decides to use each punctuation mark contributes to the overall style of their sentences.

### Economy and Concision

All stylish writers know how to use. They know how to use fewer words, not more, and they know how to make every word count.

There are certainly rules and guidelines for concise writing. The economic writer knows to:

1. Avoid adverbs.
2. Use strong, visual verbs.
3. Employ prepositions sparingly.
4. Only use adjectives when necessary.
5. Stay inside the active voice, unless the passive is necessary.
6. Provide only the important details.

Here's a simple, effective sentence:

We careened from California to Maine.

The wordy writer has many reasons to make this sentence more complicated. Perhaps the reader does need more information. But, the writer might also be insecure about their own writing, or else they might think every detail needs to be ornate (a tactic called purple prose). Here's the above sentence, written wordier. In parentheses are the rules broken from the list above.

We were driven (5) swiftly (1) and without (3) direction in (3) our little blue Chevy (4, 6), somehow (1) finding (2) our way from California to Maine.

Perhaps the little blue Chevy is important to the story. It does add some personality to the people in the car. Otherwise, this sentence is haphazard, conveying too much to the reader in too many words.

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## Literary devices

Literary devices are specific writing techniques that forge novel connections and possibilities in language. You are probably familiar with common devices, like metaphors and similes. However, there is a wide range of devices available to creative writers, from the hyperbole to the synecdoche, from the onomatopoeia to the paronomasia.

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In any work of creative writing, literary devices are essential to both the author's meaning and their writing style. Sometimes, the device is confined to a single sentence in the text. Other times, various elements of the writing—its plot, characters, and settings—act as metaphors for broader ideas and themes.

Here's an example of a metaphor that's daring, stylish, and effective:

"Love is so embarrassing. I bled in your bed. I'm sorry. I have built you a shore with all my best words & still, the waves."

Out of *Bound* by Claire Schwartz

This is a striking metaphor, heartbreaking in its imagery. The speaker laments at the imperfectness of love and language: how, no matter how carefully and precisely a lover chooses the words they use to love another, those words are, inevitably, broken down by "the waves." What do those waves represent? Perhaps the limits of language—the ever-present gap between what is spoken and what is understood. In the same way that love is modified by language, the shore is always modified by the waves.

Many stylistic decisions go into the construction of literary devices, including:

- Which devices are used.
- The images used to convey deeper meanings.
- The word choice and syntax of those devices.

Indeed, the construction of literary devices is closely related to syntax and word choice, but the way that the writer employs those devices and makes connections and comparisons is key to honing an author's writing style.

To learn more, check out our articles on common literary devices and rhetorical devices.

## Context and Purpose

While an author's writing style is the product of their own artistic integrity, some creative writing styles develop in relation to the context and purpose of the writing itself.

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For example, an author might choose to write a murder mystery novel, a middle grade fiction book, and a historical account of the Sino-Japanese War. Each publication would have its own unique writing style, because the writing serves a different purpose in each book, and the author will have to write towards different audiences. We'll explore this shortly when we look at the different types of writing styles.

In creative writing, the question of audience can matter a great deal. You would not want someone with a hard-boiled writing style to publish a romance novel in the same voice, nor would you expect a law critic to write poetry using the same word choice.

While audience should not define the author's style and intent, it is a necessary consideration in the editing process before a work is published.

Source: [writers.com/writing-styles](https://writers.com/writing-styles)