

English 221

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Resonance and Readability:

An Examination of Personal Style and Voice at Goucher College

Introduction

Of all the elements in the complicated and oftentimes confusing process of written composition, personal style or voice is perhaps the most controversial aspect. What makes writing sound unique, academic, or awkward? Can a writer's voice be influenced, or is it uniquely theirs? Furthermore, what makes a style or voice effective? In this paper, we address these questions with a review of the literature and original research done at Goucher College.

Whilst browsing the library's books on composition and style, we identified six different theories of what good style is and how it can be developed: Nativism, The Social View, Language Style Matching, Grammatical Style, Devices and Tricks, and Rhetorical Dualism. Nativism claims that the best style or voice comes from the writer's inner self. The Social View is the opposite, claiming that writers' styles are an amalgamation of everything they have read or heard. Language Style Matching takes this a step further, saying that writers automatically mimic the style of what they are currently reading. Grammatical Style maintains that prescriptive grammatical rules are necessary for effective style. Devices and Tricks suggest tips on how to improve the readability and rhythm through sentence structure. Finally, Rhetorical Dualism argues that the best style or voice is whatever most clearly expresses the writer's thoughts. However, we found that there were ways in which these seemingly contradictory theories could be combined, and decided to also examine a compromise theory.

We then wanted to examine the role that style and voice take in Goucher coursework. This research goal was prompted by two observations. First, we had both thought of this element as something that was always overlooked or skimmed through in composition courses. Professors have always expected an effective voice, but never really defined their expectations. Secondly, we wanted to clear up these expectations so that we could better help students in the writing center make stylistic choices in their papers. Thus, we conducted a survey of Goucher professors from a variety of disciplines that would evaluate which theories they subscribed to, how they addressed style or voice in the classroom, and what expectations they had of style in students' writing. We specifically asked them to comment on informal versus formal writing. The results were surprising in many ways. First of all, more professors claimed they addressed style in the classroom than we expected. Secondly, although we expected professors to divide into camps following different theories, most chose a combination. Also, most seemed to prefer writing in between the extremes of formal and informal. Again, we discovered a compromise between theories that we did not originally expect. In our conclusion, we will examine what exactly these compromises and combinations mean for the importance of style and how it is taught at Goucher College.

Part I: Review of the Literature

Nativism

The first theory that we are exploring is nativism, which is the idea that writers have their own innate, unique voice inside of them. Uncovering this and developing it is the best way to present a strong, compelling voice. Authenticity is the keyword, and grammar is rejected. Rules constrain and change your style or voice, making it less powerful.

Peter Elbow provides a well-developed and convincing argument in favor of this theory in the chapter “Writing and Voice” of his 1981 book *Writing with Power*. He contemplates voice as a “mysterious and subjective business” that follows no obvious pattern (285). Looking deeper, he presents three main categories: no voice, voice, and real voice (291). The first, no voice, is perhaps easiest to identify; it is technical, removed from the writer, and sounds like a textbook. This is the voice that we use when you dissect our writing and make it fit the rules. It sounds official and unbiased, but it is not enjoyable to read (291-2). On the other hand, when a paper has voice, you can tell that a human wrote it. It has rhythm and “breath”—a living quality. You can get a sense of the author’s personality (288). *Real* voice, however, is where you get power. Elbow uses a resonance metaphor to describe this mystical quality that stands out to the reader and captivates them. A new violin will play notes, but it is perfectly constructed to resonate louder and richer for just one frequency. Once it is “played in,” though, it begins to resonate at other frequencies as well. Writers are the same—they have one true voice that resonates when they use it (281-282). It is authentic and compelling, but often it is buried under fake voices that they put on to protect themselves from the pressures of audience (292). You can find your real voice by writing honestly about topics close to you. Through this introspective journaling, you become “played in,” and can resonate in any subject you write on. The real voice can give power to any form of writing (286).

However, this voice is not necessarily “good” writing in a traditional sense. It may not be grammatically correct, it may not flow, and it may not be concise. In fact, the actual words are not important to voice. Instead, it’s the relationship between the words and the writer that matters. Real voice is more than a sentence; it conveys thoughts, feelings, and an “implicit message about the condition of the writer” (299). It comes from the inside. At the same time,

Elbow considers the fact that the resonance may come from a relationship between the words and the individual reader, which explains why there is never a complete consensus on what constitutes good voice (300).

Elbow recognizes that writers have many voices—both written and spoken. A man might use a smooth, confident tone at his work but be informal at home (292). He rejects, however, the relativist view that all of these voices have an equal claim to the man's identity. This view proclaims that what we might consider someone's defining voice is actually just the one that is the most practiced. Elbow disagrees, because he does not necessarily find the most practiced voices in his students' journals to be the most compelling. The passages that jump out to him as real voice are often "rusty and halting" (294). This true voice needs to be fostered and developed (294). He identifies his theory as "roughly Piagetian," because it requires inner development and rejects outside influences (302).

Unfortunately, Elbow does not give an example of real voice in an academic paper to illustrate his claim that it can be applied to any writing. Although he provides excellent examples of resonance in passages of fiction, opinion, and poetry and shows how both simple and elaborate wording can be effective, we would have appreciated an example of this quality in an academic work—where voice is so often lacking.

Gabriele Lusser Rico's guide to better writing, *Writing the Natural Way*, is based on the nativist theory as well. She defines voice as the "manner of expression that is unique to you" and considers it a product of your inner, authentic self (15). You can uncover it by doing her structured freewriting exercises, which are designed to expand your imagination and make connections. They include making clusters, thinking metaphorically, and using imagery. She also has a "less-is-more" theory of revision (20). This is writing the "natural way" because it

ignores rules and focuses on developing the imagination. She claims natural writing improves connectedness, coherence, texture, rhythm, authenticity, and emotional intensity (16).

Rico encourages writers to compose quickly and pay no attention to grammar. She claims that children's writing has a compelling authenticity, but the focus on teaching writing through mechanics, grammar, and vocabulary destroys this. Writing the natural way is a self-discovery process; you ignore these rules and explore what you find underneath (16).

However, although she says that writing the natural way can improve any type of writing, she also only provides examples of effective poetry, not an academic work. Additionally, both of the poems she provides are inherently introspective and fail to show how writing from within can be applied to an impersonal subject (24).

The Social View

Certain scholars agree that everyone has their own style, but do not agree with the nativist theory's assertion that this style is innate. This leads to the second theory of style: that each person's individual style is affected by what he or she reads. This theory is broken up into two camps. The first camp could be called the social view of style. Ayn Rand is a proponent of this theory of style. In her book *The Art of Fiction Writing*, she states that "style is the result of subconscious integration" (105). She stresses that style is not something you can tackle head on; you have to let it come out naturally through your writing. Rand says, "You cannot develop a style consciously. But you *can* give your subconscious the standing order that you like stylistic color and want it to occur when possible" (107). She then explains how this should be done. Her methods involve identifying passages while reading that you find have particularly striking style, noting consciously that you like the way that the author is saying whatever it is that they

are saying, and then forgetting about it. Similarly, she says that you should identify examples of what you deem “bad style,” and explore why such style appears “bad” to you. This type of literary exercise allows you to “develop the subconscious premises from which your own style will come” (Rand 107).

Rand then gives an example of how she developed the “color” in her own writing. The first piece that she ever wrote to be published was dry. As a result, the publisher handed her a pamphlet about Max Linder filled with “colorful” writing. After reading it, she was able to add a bit of flare to her own work. This was just the beginning. Ten years later, Rand was still using the Max Linder pamphlet as her “golden standard” of style. For her early writings, that pamphlet was the single most influential work on her writing style (Rand 108). It might not occur exactly like this for every writer. It usually happens over time, after identifying example after example of good and bad style. But Rand’s description of the origins of personal style and her anecdote both illustrate perfectly the social view of writing style. According to this theory, style is not innate; it comes from an infinite number of other styles observed by the writer. It is developed over time so that, when writing, good style comes naturally.

Edgar Schuster’s article, “Sentence Comparison: An Activity for Teaching Style” describes an exercise for teaching style based on the social view of writing. In this activity, student writers are presented with examples of writing in different styles. They identify which sentences have “good” style and which sentences have “bad” style, then file away their choices. Through this exercise, Schuster says, students are able to develop their own personal style. This mimics Rand’s suggestions for the development of style, albeit in a rather more clinical manner. Both Schuster and Rand support the theory that writing style is something that cannot be pinned down, but can be developed through identifying good and bad style in literature.

Language Style Matching

There is a second, similar camp of the theory that personal style is affected by readings. This camp is called Language Style Matching, or LSM. According to an article written for *The Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* by Molly Ireland and James Pennebaker, humans naturally sync up with the writing style of an author they have recently read or follow the same style of a writing prompt. We repeat the “function, closed class, or junk words” that we read (Ireland and Pennebaker 551). In essence, Ireland and Pennebaker studied how closely writers matched the style words of the reading that they had recently finished. They analyzed the repetition of conjunctions, prepositions, pronouns, articles, and auxiliary verbs in order to determine if Language Style Matching occurred in three situations. They first studied whether college freshmen and sophomores would match the style presented in a prompt. Four prompts were given in four different styles: straightforward, convoluted, ditzy, and pedantic. The students’ responses to the prompts were analyzed based on the frequency of different classes of function words. The coefficient by which the students matched the style of prompt was determined by this analysis. The conclusion of this first study was that people do naturally match the style of a prompt that they are given. This occurs more frequently in students with higher grades in class, those that held a higher socioeconomic status, and women.

The second study gave students excerpts from short stories to read. The control group was told to write the next scene, while the experimental group was told to write the next scene imitating the style of the author. The same analytical process occurred as in the first study. The analysis showed that the experimental group had no higher level of synchronization than the

control group. This means that, according to this study, writers cannot consciously increase the extent to which they match the style of writing they have just read.

The third study analyzed the works and letters of famous pairs of writers: Carl Jung and Sigmund Freud, Elizabeth Bennett and Robert Browning, and Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes. Ireland and Pennebaker wanted to determine both if the pairs matched each other's style and if the style matching saw increases and decreases based on the state of the relationship. After much analysis, the conclusion was drawn that language style matching did occur between the pairs. Additionally, the synchronization was greatest when the relationships were sound and least when there were conflicts in the relationships.

Through a study in psychology, Ireland and Pennebaker scientifically backed up one of the theories of style. They showed that recent readings and prompt style have an effect on a writer's personal style. This is unlike the social view of writing in that personal style is not developed over time by the conscious recognition of good and bad style. It is instead a simple mimicry of the most recent style seen. It is possible, though, that a combination of these two camps is true. Writers can consciously recognize good and bad style. They can integrate good style into their own personal style. They may, however, be subconsciously more inclined to mimic the most recent "good" style they have been exposed to. What is important to gain from these two theories is that style might come from somewhere other than a natural tendency. It is quite possible, probable really, that what we read has a profound effect on how we write.

Grammatical Style

The strictest set of stylistic rules is that of prescriptive grammar. While some writers dismiss these rules as secondary, many hold them in the highest esteem. For these writers,

Strunk and White's *The Elements of Style* is the bible. William Strunk wrote this handbook in 1918, and ever since, it has been the foremost manual for style in composition. In the 2008 edition, a foreword by Roger Angell states that Strunk's rules of style really do help a confused writer. He says, "They help—they really do. They work. They are the way" (ix). This is the generally held consensus in the writing community. If it were not, this book would not still be coming out in various editions waiting for the eager writing student to grab onto it. The specific rules of style that Strunk outlines follow basic grammatical concepts. They are even written in a numbered list:

11. "Use the active voice: The active voice is usually more direct and vigorous than the passive." However, he does provide the exception of when you need to emphasize the object.
12. "Put statements in positive form: Make definite assertions. Avoid tame, colorless, hesitating, non-committal language. Use the word not as a means of denial or in antithesis, never as a means of evasion."
13. "Omit needless words: Vigorous writing is concise. A sentence should contain no unnecessary words, a paragraph no unnecessary sentences, for the same reason that a drawing should have no unnecessary lines and a machine no unnecessary parts."

And so on and so forth.

He also provides a section on commonly misused words. This details rules such as the proper usage of "whom" as the object of a sentence and "should" instead of "would" in a first person sentence in the conditional. Strunk's theory of good style, then, is a very prescriptive one. Good style follows a specific set of rules of grammar. This theory leaves almost no room

for creativity that transcends the rules of grammar. Because Strunk's book is so popular, it would follow that this view of good style is held by a good portion of the writing community.

Devices and Tricks

Other composition scholars do not stress grammar, but do recognize the use of devices and tricks to improve style and voice. These rules have specific reasoning behind them, usually to make writing more clear, concise, and readable. An example is Joseph M. Williams' 1981 handbook *Style: Ten Lessons in Clarity and Grace*. He agrees with Strunk and White on many aspects of clarity, but differs somewhat when it comes to grace and personal expression. He is not a stickler for prescriptive grammar rules—such as “do not split an infinitive”—referring to them as “well-meaning but empty generalities” (ix). He says that writers who always follow these rules lose the flexibility of language. However, he does give specific, sometimes formulaic, rules on how to achieve precise, direct, and graceful writing. These rules should be addressed during revision, after the writer's thoughts are down on paper. He considers style a secondary step in the process, separate from the content.

Much of the book focuses on being concise. He says to use active verbs, avoid passive voice, and stop wordiness by cutting out redundant phrases (10-35). Writers can control sprawling sentences by avoiding long series of modifying clauses or breaking them into shorter sentences where “and” is used (65-66). On the other hand, Williams realizes that these guidelines for conciseness do not always promote a graceful voice. He gives sentence diagrams that show how to structure a sentence in a rhythmically pleasing way. For example, a coordinating series sounds better if the phrases are ordered from shortest to longest (141). He also recognizes what is sometimes referred to as the “given-new principle:” a sentence should

start with old or predictable information and end with the new or unpredictable information (108). It is acceptable for a sentence to be in the passive voice so that it does not violate this principle.

Overall, Williams' lessons in clarity and grace promote a readable style that he thinks is best. He acknowledges an even more personal style, though, which is based on adherence to prescriptive grammar:

“Finally, I think, we choose among these [grammatical rules] less on the basis of their real or supposed usage than according to a sense of our own personal style. Some of us are straightforward, plain, direct; others take pleasure in a bit of elegance, a touch of self-conscious ‘class.’ The *shalls* and the *wills*, the *whos* and the *whoms*, the split and unsplit infinitives are the small choices that let us express a sense of our individual personae” (183).

This seems to present a very narrow range of what is considered acceptable style and a pretty bleak set of options that we can use to express ourselves. However, Williams is speaking only in terms of traditional academic or business writing. His purpose is to communicate well, not to reveal the writer's soul.

Rhetorical Dualism

One last theory of style, rhetorical dualism, links content and meaning directly with word choice. According to Stephen Ullman's book *Language and Style*, there are two aspects to style: expressiveness and choice. Expressiveness, Ullman states, “covers a wide range of linguistic features” that do not affect the actual information conveyed (101). These linguistic features do change, however, the “emotive overtones, emphasis, rhythm, symmetry, euphony, and also the

so-called ‘evocative’ elements” (101). The other stylistic consideration, choice, is “the possibility of choosing between two or more alternatives—‘stylistic variants’” (102). In Ullman’s dissection of stylistic studies, writers may convey the same information with different degrees and variations of emotion, emphasis, tone, rhythm, phonetic structure, and stylistic register. It is the writer’s objective to choose the words that not only best convey the information clearly, but that also convey the correct degree of evocative connotation.

Louis Milc establishes in his article, “Theories of Style and their Implications for Teaching Composition,” a style theory based on the very expressiveness and choice that Ullman describes. In Milc’s “rhetorical dualism,” the best literary style is that which most precisely conveys the ideas of the writer. This theory states that ideas exist sans language, and that it is the writer’s job to find the perfect linguistic avenue for conveying an idea, along with the intended degree of evocation. According to this theory, a writer would struggle until he or she found the perfect word (or word phrase, or sentence, or paragraph) to express his or her idea. Only when there has been sufficient editing, revising, and questioning from an outsider (professor, peer, tutor) can the most complete meaning be arrived at. You know that this has occurred when a reader presented with the material has that “there seems to be no other way to say it,” moment.

Now, Milc’s article was published in 1965 and Ullman’s book in 1966. It seems as though there has not been much written on rhetorical dualism since then. It is an interesting and seemingly accurate theory of what *good* style is. But perhaps it did not receive much attention because of its limited usefulness. Writers have been trying to find just the right words since writing began, and most definitely before these articles were published. The process of editing has been trying to help writers find the perfect style—the perfect way of expressing ideas—for

ages. So, as interesting as rhetorical dualism is, it does not say anything new or anything helpful. It is a way of describing what everyone already knew but never thought about.

The Compromise

Although we originally thought of these different theories of the development of voice as contradictory, John R. Trimble's *Writing with Style* describes a compromise between all of them. He suggests starting a paper with a nativist-type process: start with a subject that you are genuinely interested in. "If you ignore your real feelings, which is perilously easy to do, or if you try to write with just your head, the inevitable result will be phony, bloodless prose" (5). This connection between your true, inner self and powerful writing is important in nativism. He continues, advising writing a conversational, natural first draft as if you were talking to a friend. Do not censor anything or use fancy vocabulary—simply write (10). Later, during revision, you can add "small touches of eloquence" (35).

Although he does not specifically comment on the social view, it underlies his explanation of Formalism. Formalism is the "stylistic majesty" that has come to be synonymous with academic intelligence and the only style acceptable for academic writing (71). It started as an individual's attempt to appear smarter, but became engrained as a dogma, and is now automatically imitated by students. The problem with this imitation is that there is no freshness or original thought; there are ready-made academic phrases that can simply be strung together (72).

Trimble advocates for a combination of the nativist conversational writing and the socially bred academic writing. He calls this General English, and he argues that it is the hardest style to achieve; informal is easy because it is simply talking on paper, and Formalism is easy

because it is simply rearranging others' words. Ideally, it combines the precision and conciseness of Formalism with the ease and freshness of informal writing (73-75).

He gives several tips and guidelines on how to achieve this, which correlates with the theory that there are specific rules a writer can follow to improve their style. These rules are not always grammatical; he says that most skilled writers break rules like "never end a sentence with a preposition" all the time (85). His rules simply promote a precise, but conversational tone. He suggests that to be concise, a writer should use active verbs when possible and use more descriptive nouns instead of adjectives. Similarly, instead of using adverbs like "very," they should use stronger verbs or adjectives (79). However, he suggests keeping it conversational by occasionally using contractions, referring to yourself as "I" and the reader as "you," and picturing the reader as a friend with a good sense of humor (77-78). His last tip is actually based on Language Style Matching; he says that if you experience a crisis where nothing sounds right, take a ten minute break to read an author whose style you admire. Then return to your paper, and try to think how that author would express your idea (81-82).

Trimble's book showed us that there is a middle ground, and that you do not need to be either strictly nativist or social-view, informal or formal. In our survey of Goucher professors, we found the same compromise. Most professors' views on style contained a combination of the theories we have presented.

Part II: Original Research

Personal style or voice is an integral part of academic writing. Good style allows for the smooth conveyance of precise concepts, while bad style distracts readers and hinders their grasp of the content. We noticed from our own experience, however, that style seemed to be an afterthought in the teaching of composition. It seemed to us that professors focused on aspects

of composition such as grammar, organization, content, and incorporating sources far more than style or voice. This seeming lack of focus on style prompted us to explore the topic within Goucher College coursework.

We surveyed professors in the English department and across the disciplines in order to get an idea of what—or if—they think about style in writing. We chose to send the survey to professors from writing-intensive subject areas mostly in the humanities and social sciences. These subject areas included Communications, Dance, Economics, Education, English (of course), History, Peace Studies, Philosophy, Religion, Political Science, Sociology/Anthropology, and Women's Studies. We chose to exclude the sciences because we thought that they might end up producing hard-to-define outliers in our results. Writing scientifically is a very prescriptive process in and of itself because of the strict rules of scientific publications that leave little room for stylistic wiggle. It follows, then, that the style used in science writing would be less a matter of professors' opinions and more a matter of the nature of the subject. We focused, instead, on studying style where it is more ambiguous.

The survey we sent to our selection of Goucher professors was structured in a way that it would answer various questions about written style and voice in their classes:

- What style theory (or theories) are Goucher professors most inclined to adhere to?
- Do Goucher professors believe that style can be developed?
- Do Goucher professors address style when discussing writing and grading in their classes?
- To a Goucher professor, what is good style?

We hoped to answer these questions through a variety of question types. Our survey started with a list of statements that each professor had to strongly agree, agree, disagree, or

strongly disagree with. There was also a “Don’t Know” option if the professor was unsure. Each of the first six of these statements conveyed the general idea of one of the style theories discussed in the previous section. The first statement, *Each writer has his or her own innate, unique style or voice*, corresponded to the nativist theory of style. The second statement, *A writer's personal style or voice is created from things he or she has read*, corresponded to the social view of writing. The third, *A writer's personal style or voice mimics what he or she is currently reading*, corresponded to Language Style Matching. The fourth, *Good style and voice is always concise and grammatical*, corresponded to the theory that proper grammar is a necessary component of good style. The fifth, *Good style or voice precisely conveys the writer's thoughts*, corresponded to rhetorical dualism. Finally, the sixth statement, *There are tricks that writers can use to improve their style or voice*, corresponded to the style theory that there are certain devices and rules that, when used in a composition, add to its style. By analyzing the responses to these six statements, we would then be able to determine which style theory is most supported by Goucher professors.

The last three statements had to do with beliefs about the development of style. One of the statements evaluated—in a very straightforward manner— whether or not Goucher professors thought that style can be developed: *Style or voice can be consciously developed*. From there, the statements moved on to how precisely style can be developed. Each of the two remaining statements corresponded to both a statement from the first half of the section and a certain style theory. One statement said *Freewriting can be a technique to help develop style or voice*. This corresponded to the first statement—the one that related to the nativist theory of style. The last statement was, *A writer can develop his or her style or voice while revising a*

paper. This statement related to the both the fourth and fifth statements—the ones that corresponded to the grammatical theory of good style and rhetorical dualism.

We hoped that this exercise would allow us to analyze how Goucher professors viewed style and if it could be developed. Each theory of style inherently holds a certain belief in the teaching of style. By better understanding how Goucher professors understand the definition of, origin of, and development of style, as well as what good style is, we would be better suited to aid the student writers in this oft overlooked aspect of writing.

On the next page of the survey, we asked three questions. The first was, *Do you ever address writing style or voice in your classroom? If so, how?* This question would help us determine what role—if any—style or voice played in Goucher classes. If style did not play a role in the classroom, then why? It obviously plays an important role in writing in general. This would have located a hole in the teaching of composition at Goucher. If style did play an important role in the classroom, then *Do you take writing style or voice into account when grading? How would you describe the type of style or voice you prefer?* Answering this question would give writing center tutors a better idea of what to look for and develop in student writing and what to discourage in student writing. These questions were answered in open text boxes. This way, we would gather responses that most closely reflected the way that professors addressed style. We realized at the outset that this could produce radical, un-analyzable results. But such is the nature of finding the truth. It is sometimes messy with seemingly no coherence, and it is the job of the researcher to find the unity within the raw information given. While choosing to allow professors to freely respond to these questions, we were confident in our ability to dissect the responses and find the common threads, especially with such a relatively small sample size.

The last question on this page was *Do you allow or encourage students to use the first person in research papers?* We threw this in simply because we were curious. The answers to this question would not only fulfill our personal curiosity, though. This is a question that many students have, and one that presumably gets asked quite frequently in the writing center. This survey question would give the writing center tutors a general idea of what is acceptable to Goucher professors concerning the first person point of view.

The last page of the survey gave the professors two writing samples. One was in a rather colloquial, off-beat style and the other was written in an overly academic style. We asked the professors to choose one and then explain briefly why they made that choice. While the two samples presented were extremes, we hoped that they would give us an idea of the professors' personal preferences about different styles. The comment box eliminated the false dichotomy of the question. It allowed each professor to explain why they liked or disliked the passages, and what they would actually look for in student writing.

Of the 35 professors we sent it to, 18 responded to our survey; 11 were from the English department, and the remaining 7 were from Economics, Sociology/Anthropology, History, Philosophy, and Dance. We did not take the department into account when analyzing the list of statements correlating with our theories, but it was a factor in our analysis of how Goucher professors address style and voice in the classroom.

We made a number of interesting conclusions from the list of statements. The following chart summarizes the data:

	Agree or Strongly Agree	Disagree or Strongly Disagree	Don't Know
Each writer has his or her own innate, unique style or voice.	13	5	0

A writer's personal style or voice is created from things he or she has read.	13	1	4
A writer's personal style or voice mimics what he or she is currently reading.	5	8	5
Good style and voice is always concise and grammatical.	7	9	2
Good style or voice precisely conveys the writer's thoughts.	14	3	1
There are tricks that writers can use to improve their style or voice.	13	3	1
Style or voice can be consciously developed.	18	0	0
Freewriting can be a technique to help develop style or voice.	16	0	2
A writer can develop his or her style or voice while revising a paper.	18	0	0

First, we noticed that there were more agrees than disagrees throughout the chart. In fact, the only statement that had a majority disagreement was *A writer's personal style or voice mimics what he or she is currently reading*, which correlated with the Language Style Matching theory. We thought that this was ironic because it was the only theory backed by conclusive cognitive science. We also thought that it was interesting to note that the professors were split fairly even in their answers to *Good style and voice is always concise and grammatical*. This highlights the controversial nature of strict grammatical rules and their role in college papers. Exempting these two statements, the results showed an overwhelming agreement to all of the theories and techniques for developing style. Goucher professors supported almost all of the theories: nativism, the social view, rhetorical dualism, and the idea that there are tricks and devices can improve style. Everyone agreed that *Style or voice can be consciously developed*, and revision and freewriting were both seen as viable techniques to do so.

These results surprised us, because we had created many of the statements to be contradictory. For example, *Each writer has his or her own innate, unique style or voice*, was

meant to be nativist and opposite from the next statement, *A writer's personal style or voice is created from things he or she has read*, which represents the social view. Therefore, we were surprised to find that 10 professors agreed or strongly agreed with both of these statements. Also, the nativist theory stresses freewriting but limits revision. Eleven people who agreed with the nativist statement agreed that *Freewriting can be a technique to help develop style or voice*, but 13 people who agreed with that statement also agreed that *A writer can develop his or her style or voice while revising a paper*. There appeared to be no separate nativist or social view camps, and techniques for developing voice did not correlate with these theories. This illustrated that—similar to Trimble—Goucher professors believe in a combination of these theories, and perhaps the categories are not as exclusive as we originally thought.

The next section of the survey examined how Goucher professors addressed personal style or voice in their classes. For this section, 17 participants responded. Eleven were from the English department, and 6 were from other departments. Overall, 15 professors said that they addressed style or voice in the classroom, and 5 of these professors emphasized their answers with statements like “usually” or “all the time.” The 2 professors who said that they did not address the topic were from the Sociology/Anthropology and Economics departments. This result was not surprising; English professors are more likely to address a specific component of composition than professors from other departments. In fact, more professors from outside departments addressed style or voice than we expected. As students, we have always considered style and voice as overlooked or addressed as an afterthought in both English classes and other courses. Clearly, professors believe that they emphasize it much more.

There was a combination of ways that professors approached this issue. Eight professors said that they examine the effectiveness of other authors; for example: “We discuss writing style

and voice of authors read for class. We also discuss how genre, field, topic, and audience influence a writer's choices concerning style and voice.” Others specifically examine student writing in workshops or comments on papers. One professor said, “I typically approach the question of voice by talking about the “non-voice”—the cookie cutter, somewhat stilted academic voice that I find beginning students often confuse with sounding learned or formal,” which correlates with Peter Elbow’s no-voice category.

The ways in which professors take personal style and voice into account when grading were also very interesting. Every professor said that it was a factor in grading, but they approached it different ways. Three professors said explicitly that they value content over style, and many others implied this in their answers. Three professors also said that style was more of an afterthought, not the “make or break issue” but it may push the grade up or down in the end. Two professors, both from the English department, said that they only take it into account in a negative sense. They take points off if it is “stilted or awkward” or “not sufficiently academic.” The professors’ ideal styles also differed. Some professors preferred a more formal academic style; for example, one said, “I encourage my students to write college level, expository prose,” and another, “Of course. Precise and concise.” Others emphasized the connection between writer and writing: “I like a voice that allows me to know there is a thoughtful human being on the other end,” or, “I think a style or voice should reflect the writer's unique viewpoint.” Many cited that the appropriate style depends on the context of the assignment: “I do not have preferred style or voice; I go for what's effective in each particular paper.”

These answers illustrate a combination of views about style and voice that can be confusing for a student who has to change his or her writing for each new class. However, the next question—*Do you allow or encourage students to use the first person in research*

papers?—presented perhaps the most unequivocal and helpful data in the survey. Out of 16 professors, 14 answered yes. One of the 2 who answered not qualified her answer by saying that it was allowed for original research conducted by the author, but not for a review of existing literature. This was a surprising result, because it is a commonly held belief that research papers must avoid the first person in order to be unbiased. This rule can be frustrating because it can force you to adopt an awkwardly roundabout way of writing. It is also one of our most frequent questions when writing papers, and very likely a question for many students who visit the writing center. We can now tell students that, more often than not, professors in the humanities will accept the first person in research papers—although students should check with their professor if they are not sure.

The last question, which presented the professors with a passage of writing in informal and formal styles and asked which they preferred, turned out to have the most controversial results in the survey. The following table summarizes the data:

Answer Choice	Number of Professors (of 17)
Informal: <i>Elbow's article was slightly annoying to read because, as an audience member (!), I read his title—compelling, provocative—and then I proceeded to read the rest of the article, which waffles and qualifies to the point of complete wishy wash. From a purely formal perspective, it's as though he's succumbed to the very thing he's writing against: —Start with a bang-up title! they say. Grab the reader by the balls! Cite a hip poet, that always helps! But Oh, they say, Allow for complexity! Don't be doctrinaire!</i>	4 (23.5%)
Formal: <i>Elbow's article was moderately vexing. The title was compelling and provocative; however, the remainder equivocated and qualified until his entire argument was reduced to ambiguity. From a purely formal perspective, it seems as if Elbow has succumbed to the very practice he denounces. The scholars that he opposes advise student writers to start with an engaging title in order to capture the reader's attention. They may make such suggestions as quoting a contemporary poet. Additionally, these scholars urge the writer to allow for complexity and avoid doctrinarism.</i>	9 (52.9%)
Neither	3 (17.6%)

When formulating this question, we purposefully strove for the extremes of formal and informal writing, while trying to keep the content consistent. We did not expect that so many professors would reject both passages because of their extremity. For example, one professor said, “I refuse to choose--both are reductions!” In fact, two professors who chose the formal version and one who chose the informal version mentioned problems with both passages. Only one professor said that she liked both passages.

Interestingly, all of the professors who chose the informal version cited positive reasons for their choice, such as “It says the same thing but with language that lives and breathes,” and “The student blends academic questions with personal responses.” On the other hand, only one professor cited purely positive reasons for choosing the formal option: “It's much easier to follow and understand.” Three only mentioned negative aspects of the informal version, such as: “The first passage is way too self-conscious and cute. I find the punctuation to be particularly annoying. No college paper should depend upon the exclamation mark.” Three others mentioned both positive aspects of the formal and negative aspects of the informal.

From this section, we concluded that most professors prefer the clarity and directness of formal academic writing. However, they also do not want their students to sound like they have “swallowed a dictionary.” They would generally prefer a blend of these two styles—something that combines the precision of academic writing with the freshness and living quality of a colloquial style. These results also correlate with Trimble’s idea of General English as the best style.

Closing Remarks and Future Research:

It seems that the Goucher professors surveyed do not abide by one particular theory pertaining to the origin of style, what good style is, or how one can develop style. Like Trimble, our Goucher professors see style as an amalgamation of various factors, and they prefer a style that combines academic and colloquial features. Two things that they agree on are that style should precisely convey the ideas of the writer and that it can be developed. Luckily, most professors follow up the belief that style can be developed with teaching or at least mentioning style in class. One remaining question is how the professors address style in the classroom. Some responses answered this question. They said that they reserved addressing style for personal conferences or only addressed it when it had a negative effect on a paper. It would be interesting to find out how exactly professors “teach” style in their classes. One way to study this would be to sit in on Goucher composition classes. This would give the researchers a true impression of how Goucher professors affect the style of student writing.

We were surprised by the number of professors who said that they did address style in class. In our experience, style was not an aspect of writing that was focused on. Perhaps it would be worth surveying students about their experience of being taught style in class. This, then, opens the door for a whole world of research. We would see, from the student’s perspective, how professors affect style and how the teaching of style affects not only the end product but the writing process. This could possibly lead to studies of style preferences in teachers and writer’s block, the cramping or inspiring way that style can be taught, and the list goes on.

Almost all of the professors preferred an academic style over a rather colloquial “voiced” style. This aligned with our previously held beliefs about academia. Students are trained to write academically, and are probably in turn trained to like academic writing. So the professors

of today may have learned—just as we are learning—that academic writing is the best style. But where did this train of academic readers and writers start? Was it with William Strunk’s *The Elements of Style*, published in 1918? It would be interesting to study the changes in style throughout history. As much as we sometimes hate the restrictions of the academic style, there may be a good reason for its continued use.

The over-arching theme that we have pulled from this research- from the review of literature and from our original research- is that style is not an end in and of itself. It is a means to create writing that is easy to follow and engaging. The professors addressed style in the classroom, but only in order to help their students convey information more clearly. Professors picked the academic writing sample in the last question generally because it more clearly conveyed what the writer was trying to say. A few professors picked the colloquial sample, explaining that it “lived and breathed” – or that it was engaging. Style preferences are not arbitrary to Goucher professors. They do not appreciate one style more than another “just because”; they prefer the styles that are both clear and engaging. This is shown by so many professors’ requests for a writing sample that was a mix between the academic writing sample and the colloquial one. It could be that clarity is more important than engagement when writing in academia, and that is why most professors chose the clearer sample (academic style) over the engaging one (colloquial).

This, more than any information about specific style preferences and style teaching methods, is important for writing center tutors to know. When helping a student with a paper, the most important thing to consider is if the writing clearly expresses ideas. According to our research, this is what professors look for most in the style of student writing. If the writing is sufficiently clear, then the next thing to address would be how engaging the paper is for the

audience. When a paper is both clear and engaging, you know it has good style that will be appreciated by both the professor it was written for and whoever else might read it. This research gave us a clearer idea of what style is, what good style is, why some styles are appreciated over others, and how important style is to Goucher professors. We hope that the information provided will help writing center tutors for years to come.

Appendix: Survey Form

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