Refiguring Prose Style

Pace, Tom, Johnson, T.R.

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Why is it that the one feature most popularly associated with writing is the one most ignored by writing instructors? Many of us who became English majors in college and later pursued careers as professionals in graduate programs did so because of a love for the written word, that feeling of magic and mystery that overcame us when we read a well-crafted sentence or a perfectly placed word in our favorite book, poem, play, or essay. We wanted our writing to achieve at least some semblance of that magic. We wanted our writing to be beautiful, our language to inspire, our words to mean something to someone. For those of us who became English teachers, perhaps we wanted to help others appreciate a well-wrought sentence or paragraph, to arouse others to be moved by beautiful language. Perhaps we wanted our students to appreciate the beauty of the way John Keats describes a centuries-old urn, the way Virginia Woolf describes the winds and waves during a journey to a distant lighthouse, or the way Toni Morrison relates the pain of a young girl upon being thrust into a terrifying world of racism and hate. Or perhaps we wanted our students to recognize the political power of language, its capacity to lead people to social justice—the way Martin Luther King, in a speech on a hot August day, inspired an entire generation to change the world. Whatever our reasons, all of us at one time or another came across words that stirred us enough to want to make that love of language our life’s work.

But many writing teachers since the mid-1980s or so have gravitated away from teaching the actual craft of writing interesting sentences, well-chosen words, or finely tuned paragraphs. Many professionals in the field
of composition studies have shunned, it seems, the one feature most readers and writers associate with good writing—style. While the public, as well as professors outside of English departments, complain loudly about student writers’ lack of stylistic grace and control, many writing teachers devote very little of their courses to direct instruction in style or to analysis of stylistic choices. Part of the reason why many instructors neglect to introduce their students to style stems from their misunderstanding of the term and its place within rhetorical education.

In a 2002 opinion piece in *College English*, Peter Elbow makes a call for the field of composition and the field of literary studies to learn from, rather than oppose, one another. Elbow hopes that “both cultures could fully accept that a discipline can be even richer and healthier if it lacks a single-vision center. A discipline based on this multiplex model can better avoid either-or thinking and better foster a spirit of productive catholic pluralism” (544). In the course of this argument, he makes a confession: “I miss elegance.” He also misses the fun of playing with language that the field of composition, he insists, has lost. Elbow continues: “I’m sad that the composition tradition seems to assume discursive language as the norm and imaginative, metaphorical language as somehow special or marked or additional. I’d argue that we can’t harness students’ strongest linguistic and even cognitive powers unless we see imaginative and metaphorical language as the norm—basic or primal” (536).

Elbow, in other words, misses style. He says as much late in the essay when he suggests a list of traits that the field of composition could learn from literary studies: “And what do I wish people in composition could learn from the culture of literature? More honoring of style, playfulness, fun, pleasure, humor. Better writing—and a more pervasive assumption that even in academic writing, even in prose, we can have playfulness, style, pleasure—even adornment and artifice—without being elitist snobs” (543).

Amen.

Elbow is insisting here that studying and teaching style—and playing with language in both scholarship and the classroom—are by no means an exercise in some type of dainty humanism for a few privileged souls, or dull regurgitation of rules. No. Rather, Elbow is suggesting that the study and teaching of style should reside at the very heart of what we should do as composition teachers—instruction in the craft, the skill, and the infinite richness of language. And, I would add, the teaching of style, the playing around with words, the messing around with metaphorical
language is conducive, not adverse, to academic writing and to socially responsible writing instruction. But how did the field of composition find itself in this state? What is it about the condition of composition studies at the beginning of the twenty-first century that could lead Elbow to make such a confession? One answer to this question is that compositionists over the last twenty years or so have regarded style as a throwaway element of writing pedagogy, an element that has less to do with knowledge building and more to do with mere surface correctness. Many of these scholars operate within a linear narrative that assumes more complex writing theories supersede less complicated ideas about composing. A review of a key moment in composition and rhetoric’s more recent past, the early process movement, will show that their multifaceted approaches to stylistics is not as simplistic as has been previously imagined.

**STYLE AND THE EARLY PROCESS MOVEMENT**

This desire for disciplinary status in composition studies has led to a tension between the desire to tackle what John C. Gerber, in the very first issue of *College Composition and Communication* (CCC) in 1950, called the “practical needs of the professions” and the desire to elevate its “professional standards” (12). In her essay “Reading—and Rereading—the Braddock Essays,” Lisa Ede reflects on the early days of the CCCC conference and of its journal, CCC. Ede recognizes that this tension informed much of the work during the early process years:

> Service to colleagues, students, and society—or progress as a scholarly discipline? Since the inception of the CCCC, many have believed that it is possible and necessary to achieve both goals. Indeed, many have hoped not only to achieve these goals but also to contribute broadly to progressive values and practices—to function, in other words, as agents of social, political, and economic changes. . . . Beliefs such as these have marked the field as transgressive within the academy, even as many in the field have worked to acquire accoutrements of traditional disciplinarity “such” accoutrements as graduate programs and specialized journals, conferences, and associations (all of which have had the effect of extending the scholarly and professional enterprise of composition beyond the domains of the CCCC and CCC) (1999, 11).

Ever since, the field of composition has been working through the tensions among its service mission, its agenda for social reform, and its desire for professional status. The early process movement of the 1960s and 1970s, in many ways, was an attempt “to achieve both goals,” as Ede put
it. The sense was that in studying how students learned to write, writing teachers could accomplish the two goals at once—one, discover practical, usable pedagogical methods to teach writing more effectively and two, build a body of research and methods of inquiry that could serve as the foundation for composition studies. These two results combined led the way for social reform.

Out of this work, style became an important aspect of writing pedagogy during the days of the early process movement. Style was often seen as a tool of writing instruction in which students could learn various writing strategies and learn to conceive of writing as choice. Certain compositionists drew from several areas of inquiry to develop pedagogies that used style as a key element of teaching writing: Ken Macrorie wrote a textbook, *Telling Writing* (1970), in which he encouraged students to break out of the routine of writing dull, monotonous prose—which he termed “Engfish” – and stretch their writing legs by using journals and analyzing word choice in an effort to make connections between language use and personal experience; and Peter Elbow published such works as *Writing without Teachers* (1973) and *Writing with Power* (1981), in which he provided numerous writing exercises and prompts in an effort to encourage people to think of themselves as writers, to break through the conventional roadblocks of traditional grammar instruction and drill exercises, and to write with vividness and magic. In many ways, these teachers were offering alternatives to the tradition-bound constraints of grammar instruction and the focus on surface error that process pedagogy also countered. For these teachers and scholars, the teaching of style formed the centerpiece of writing pedagogy, a type of pedagogy that connected language acquisition to its contexts.

Francis Christensen, for instance, drew from a background in linguistics to develop a method of teaching writing that focused on sentence- and paragraph-level writing instruction. Edward P. J. Corbett looked to the recovery of classical rhetorical texts as sources for the teaching of style. And Winston Weathers examined alternative writing styles as a way of teaching students to resist dominant, oppressive forms of language. Although these scholars drew from different sources and backgrounds, they all used studies in style as a gateway for students to become more sophisticated and proficient users of language.

Unfortunately, their work has not always been remembered in that way. In 1991, *The Politics of Writing Instruction: Postsecondary*, edited by Richard Bullock and John Trimbur, appeared. This collection features
essays on the political implications of teaching writing in college and offers many examples of classrooms influenced by critical pedagogy. Yet, none of these essays says anything about the teaching of style, or even about the teaching of writing in general. That same year, Patricia Harkin and John Schilb published their collection titled *Contending with Words*, a series of essays that explores the role of composition studies in a postmodern world. As the introduction attests, this collection is “for college and university teachers of English who believe that the study of composition and rhetoric is not merely the service component of the English department, but also an inquiry into cultural values” (1991, 3). Again, nothing on style or on teaching the craft of writing appears in its pages. On the contrary, one of the essays, John Clifford’s “The Subject in Discourse,” regards the teaching of craft as antithetical to teaching critical pedagogy. Clifford argues that institutions of education, including writing classrooms, are subservient to dominant ideologies. He criticizes such composition textbooks as *St. Martin’s Handbook* that make assumptions about apolitical subjectivity based on “romantic” notions of the individual writer. Clifford concludes: “We should do the intellectual work we know best: helping students to read and write and think in ways that both resist domination and exploitation and encourage self consciousness about who they are and can be in the social world” (1991, 51).

What strikes me about Clifford’s argument is the dichotomy he establishes between teaching writing as a service and teaching writing as critical literacy. Clifford appears to suggest that teaching skills such as diction, sentence structure, and paragraph organization contradict the goals of teaching students that writing is a site “where hegemony and democracy are contested, where subject positions are constructed, where power and resistance are enacted, where hope for a just society depends on our committed intervention” (1991, 51). If we see style merely as a prescriptive set of colonizing rules—as Clifford argues such books as *St. Martin’s Handbook* do—then, yes, it can be very destructive. But style is more than just a set of colonizing rules. Style can find a space within critical pedagogy.

Ten years later, Gary Tate, Amy Ruppier, and Kurt Schick edited a series of essays entitled *A Guide to Composition Pedagogies*, in which the only mention of style comes in William Covino’s essay on “Rhetorical Pedagogy.” Here, Covino refers to style only in his review of how Ramus placed it under “Rhetoric” as part of his method. These three collections
of essays on writing pedagogy ignore completely the teaching of style as a viable element of writing pedagogy in the post-process era.

This dismissal suggests that the teaching of style has been ignored over the last twenty years, with many believing the work of the early process-movement compositionists to be “uncritical” or worse, elitist. But as a rereading of Christensen, Corbett, and Weathers will show, their work in style encourages students to become sophisticated language users and, in some instances, to resist dominant forms of discourse. In some ways, these collections had an unforeseen effect: while they were successful at articulating the political nature of writing instruction, they did so at the expense of lumping some early composition scholars into a collective heap that labeled their work as devoid of contextual concerns. In other words, those of us who came of age in composition and rhetoric graduate programs during the mid- to late 1990s, in the wake of “the social turn,” often assumed that the work of scholars such as Christensen, Corbett, and Weathers was oversimplistic, too surface-oriented, and apolitical.

FRANCIS CHRISTENSEN’S GENERATIVE RHETORIC

Francis Christensen was a composition and language scholar who was interested in discovering ways for students to write sentences and paragraphs in the manner of professional writers. His hope was that teachers could introduce the composing of sentences and paragraphs to their students in a fashion that would lead students to generate ideas at the same time that they learn new and varied writing strategies. Christensen called this idea “generative rhetoric,” and he developed it in a pair of articles for CCC—“The Generative Rhetoric of the Sentence” (1963) and “The Generative Rhetoric of the Paragraph” (1965)—and later in a longer work, Notes toward a New Rhetoric (1967; I cite from the second edition of 1978). Christensen’s method of using generative rhetoric to help students develop their style while inventing ideas in their writing at the same time enjoyed a brief period of popularity during the 1960s and 1970s.

“We need,” he wrote, “a rhetoric of the sentence that will do more than combine the ideas of primer sentences. We need one that will generate ideas” (1978, 26). Rather than teach students how to develop sentences based on traditional classifications, such as loose, balanced, or periodic sentences, or on traditional grammatical structures—simple, compound, complex—Christensen’s method asks students to examine the ideas expressed in the sentences and then rephrase the idea in a more effective way. In “The Generative Rhetoric of the Sentence,” Christensen develops
the idea of the “cumulative sentence,” in which ideas are generated by student writers who add modifying words and phrases to their sentences, either before, after, or within the main clause of the sentence. The words or phrases that modify the base clause can have either a subordinate or coordinate relationship to the base clause. In other words, Christensen sees the sentence not as a simple list of words that convey ideas. The sentence, he says, “is dynamic rather than static, representing the mind thinking.” He adds that “the mere form of the sentence generates ideas” (p. 28). For Christensen, therefore, instruction in sentence development is not a static exercise but is the very way writers construct meaning in their texts.

Christensen suggested that students practice studying multiple sentence types to recognize how meaning is developed by the addition of various clauses and clusters. Again, his assumption here is not for students to develop stylistic flourish and confidence in a decontextualized environment. Rather, he stressed that these exercises give students more options for their own compositions, as well as help them develop into stronger readers. In “The Generative Rhetoric of the Sentence,” Christensen argues that his exercises go beyond decontextualized drill and provide students with the tools they need to develop confidence in their reading of texts and in their writing:

What I am proposing carries over of itself into the study of literature. It makes the student a better reader of literature. It helps him thread the syntactical mazes of much mature writing, and it gives him insight into that elusive thing we call style. Last year, a student told me of rereading a book by her favorite author, Willa Cather, and of realizing for the first time why she liked reading her: she could understand and appreciate the style. For some students, moreover, such writing makes life more interesting as well as giving them a way to share their interest with others. When they learn to put concrete details into a sentence, they begin to look at life with more alertness (1978, 37–38).

Here, Christensen makes the connection between instruction in style and instruction in larger, contextual factors that go into language learning. He insists that classroom focus on the stylistics of language allows students to make connections between their writing and their reading and, in the process, leads them to be able to make larger connections that go beyond the classroom.

Christensen’s idea of coordinate and subordinate combine to create what he terms “cumulative sentences.” In other words, students create
new sentences and phrases at the same time they develop new ideas for composition. So, in a very concrete way, Christensen’s rhetoric of the sentence is not merely a tool to develop style but is an invention technique as well. His rhetoric encourages student writers to examine their thoughts and the meanings that their words convey. Christensen’s ideas provide students with a way to make their writing more textured, more rich, and less threadbare. They will create and make meaning as they write more complex sentences. Christensen points out the difference between teaching the cumulative sentence and teaching the periodic sentence, a type of sentence that combines a number of thoughts and statements in a number of balanced clauses. Christensen notes that the cumulative sentence is a more effective sentence for composition instruction because of its capacity to be used as a tool of invention:

The cumulative sentence is the opposite of the periodic sentence. It does not represent the idea as conceived, pondered over, reshaped, packaged, and delivered cold. It is dynamic rather than static, representing the mind thinking . . . . The additions stay with the same idea, probing its bearings and implications, exemplifying it or seeking an analogy or metaphor for it. . . . Thus the mere form of the sentence generates ideas. It serves the needs of both writer and reader, the writer by compelling him to examine his thought, the reader by letting him into the writer’s thought (28).

As students work and grapple with the base clause by adding modifiers and other clauses to it, they generate ideas. These ideas expand on the basic idea conveyed in the main clause and, in the process, lead students to develop and engage additional ideas. Christensen’s rhetoric of the sentence, in many ways, hearkens back to Quintilian’s call for *facilitas* with language, because the generative nature of cumulative sentences allow student writers to work with and play around with language in a manner that provides students with numerous options and choices. This generative quality is ethical and political, not merely formal and apolitical.

Here’s a student example where additional description, via subordinate clauses, adds to the generative quality of the writing in a way that provides additional options for composing:

```
the hospital was set for night running,
   smooth and silent, (A + A)
its normal clatter and hum muffled, (Abs)
the only sounds heard in the white walled room distant and unreal: (Abs)
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a low hum of voices from the nurses’ desk, (NC)
quickly stifled, (VC)
the soft squish of rubber-soled shoes on the tiled corridor, (NC)
starched white cloth rustling against itself, (NC)
and, outside, the lonesome whine of wind in the country night (NC) and
the Kansas dust beating against the windows. (NC) (34)

Here, the student sets the scene for the reader: a hospital at night. One
by one, the writer adds additional clauses that not only add description
of the setting, but also add possibilities for new ideas and circumstances:
the “low hum of voices” introducing characters, the “lonesome whine”
suggesting a certain mood and atmosphere, “the Kansas dust” bringing in
geographical possibilities. In other words, the student has a long sentence
in which a series of events and circumstances can be further invented and
developed in a manner that leads the student to more mature composi-
tions and to a more mature style.

Christensen’s generative method has not been completely forgot-
ten. It is featured prominently in two popular handbooks for first-time
teachers of composition: The St. Martin’s Guide to Teaching Writing,
edited by Robert Connors and Cheryl Glenn (1995), and Erika
Lindemann’s A Rhetoric for Writing Teachers (1995). Both texts feature
chapters that introduce composition instructors to teaching style, sen-
tences, and paragraphs. But, while Christensen’s rhetoric has found a
space in these popular handbooks, it seems to me that his placement in
these texts merely reinforces the popular critiques of his work—that his
theories about rhetoric succeed for the more mundane, uncritical work
of actually teaching writing and have nothing to do with the social con-
text surrounding students’ writing experiences. For example, The St.
Martin’s Guide relegates Christensen to the back of its text in a chapter
titled “Teaching the Sentence and the Paragraph.” This chapter comes
after lengthy chapters on invention and arrangement. Their placement
of Christensen’s rhetoric suggests that his rhetoric of the sentence and
paragraph should be reserved for matters of composition outside of
invention and arrangement, or other elements where ideas may be
discovered. Rather, assumptions at play in The St. Martin’s Guide hold
that Christensen’s method is a prescriptive one that teaches students
rigid form without exploring the tension between form and content.
In The St. Martin’s Guide, the editors write that Christensen’s generative
rhetoric reinforces a mechanistic, surface-driven pedagogy:
Should you become uncomfortable with the prescriptive nature of any of the approaches in this chapter, you are not alone. We all may worry that in condensing writing to discrete, mechanical formulas, we are taking away from more than we are giving. But be assured that with continued reading and practice in writing, your students should eventually transcend rigid, formal rules. In the final analysis, a grasp of the rules seldom holds anyone down and, when understood correctly, can help keep one up (Connors and Glenn 1995, 262).

On the one hand, Connors and Glenn recognize that sentence rhetorics like Christensen’s are useful in teaching a student to write. On the other hand, they assume that Christensen’s methods reinforce “rigid, formal rules,” and are “discrete, mechanical formulas” that are to be learned and then quickly advanced upon. Christensen’s call for a generative rhetoric of the sentence and the paragraph gets at the very heart of the tension between form and content and, in the process, provides students with tools to develop syntactic maturity while, at the same time, they develop ideas to write about.

EDWARD P. J. CORBETT AND CLASSICAL STYLE

Corbett was among a coterie of scholars who rediscovered and made available to writing teachers classical rhetorical texts during the 1960s and 1970s. His first article for CCC was titled “The Usefulness of Classical Rhetoric” (1963). In his preface to Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student, Corbett connects his interest in classical rhetoric to the preparation of students for civic participation. It is acknowledged that a knowledge of rhetoric helps citizens defend against demagogues and other “exploiters of spurious arguments, half-truths, and rank emotional appeals to gain personal advantage rather than to promote the public welfare” (1990, 30).

Style, of course, played a significant role in Corbett’s recovery of classical rhetoric. For Corbett, style was not simply a matter of writing pretty language for the sake of artifice but was interwoven with discovering ideas and creating textual choices. In his textbook on rhetoric, Corbett connects style to Aristotle’s definition of rhetoric:1 “Style does provide a vehicle for thought, and style can be ornamental; but style is something more than that. It is another one of the ‘available means of persuasion,’ another of the means of arousing appropriate emotional response in the audience, and of the means of establishing the proper ethical image” (1990, 381).

He dismissed the notion that style is merely “dressed up thought,” and tried to remind the field that classical rhetoricians also rejected the
idea that style is mere ornament, noting that “none of the prominent classical rhetoricians—Isocrates, Aristotle, Demetrius, Longinus, Cicero, Quintilian—ever preached such a doctrine” (1990, 381). But again, many in the field did not perceive these classical rhetoricians in this way—due in large part to the types of histories that were being written, as well as composition’s desire to define itself differently from its classical predecessors. Corbett understood that how something is written directly affects what is being conveyed in the writing. “A writer must be in command of a variety of styles,” Corbett asserted, “in order to draw on the style that is most appropriate to the situation” (1990, 381). He stressed that the modern student could become a better writer by focusing primarily on invention.

In “The Usefulness of Classical Rhetoric” Corbett reminds readers that imitation is not merely slavish copying of someone else’s style but rather the study and adaptation of multiple styles that assist students in gathering the “available means.”

Many of our students need exercise in constructing their own sentence patterns. They can be assisted in acquiring this skill by such exercises as merely copying passages of sophisticated prose, constructing their own sentences according to models, varying sentence patterns. The term imitation suggests to some people the attempt to encourage students to acquire someone else’s style. Such a view betrays a total misunderstanding of what the rhetoricians meant by imitation and what they hoped to accomplish by it. (1963, 163).

In Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student, Corbett put together a series of imitation exercises to help students develop an eloquent style. The point here is for students to draw from a whole host of prose styles and not focus solely on one style. Here, Corbett echoes the suggestion of Erasmus nearly five hundred years earlier, who implored students at St. Paul’s not to imitate Cicero only but to draw from other writers as well. Corbett provides examples from a wide range of authors and prose styles, including the Bible, John Dryden, Edward Gibbon, Mary Wollstonecraft, Abraham Lincoln, James Baldwin, Susan Sontag, Alice Walker, and Toni Morrison, to name only a few. Corbett stresses that students who imitate writers do so with a pen or pencil, copying and imitating the authors slowly, paying attention to the sentence structure and placement of words. He encourages students to focus on a single passage each day, rather than try to cram many different passages into a single day’s work. “You must have time to absorb what you have been observing in this exercise,” Corbett advises,
“and you will not have time to absorb the many lessons to be learned from this exercise if you cram it into a short period” (1990, 476).

After students copy passages, Corbett suggests they move toward imitation proper. He recommends that students begin with simple sentences and work up to more complex sentences and eventually to imitation of entire passages. Corbett wants students to use these imitation exercises to introduce novice writers to the complexity and variety of professional prose styles. “The aim of this exercise,” Corbett cautions, “is not to achieve a word-for-word correspondence with the model but rather to achieve an awareness of the variety of sentence structures of which the English language is capable . . . writing such patterns according to models will increase [students’] syntactical resources” (Corbett 1990, 495). Again, Corbett supplies a variety of sample sentences for students to imitate. Corbett also draws from Erasmus’s method of expressing an idea in multiple ways. “Devising an alternate expression,” Corbett notes, “often involves the choice of different words and different syntactical structures” (498). Here, he models several sentences, showing variations of the sentence patterns as well as an alternate way to express the idea in a different style. Again, the purpose here, much like in copying other authors’ prose, is to be introduced to a variety of styles and to practice imitating and studying the sentence structure of various writers.

Corbett’s work on style is viewed as part of composition’s past that should we should acknowledge but move on from. Many compositionists today regard Corbett’s work as part of the preprofessionalization era of composition studies, work that is not as exciting, as innovative, or as complex as the post-process era. I find it interesting, as Connors notes in his introduction to Style and Statement (Corbett and Connors 1999), that the individuals who find Corbett’s work on style the most relevant are high school and college composition instructors, individuals who struggle every day with teaching students the actual craft of writing. I find this confession interesting because it suggests that the professionalization of rhetoric and composition has led scholars in the field away from the business of teaching writing. Indeed, many of us who came to the field in the mid- to late 1990s assumed Corbett’s work on style was part of a distant past that did not speak to the more “complex” issues of composition: postmodern identity, the negotiation of difference, and discourse communities, to name only a few. For example, during my first graduate seminar on the teaching of writing, our instructor introduced us to Corbett’s method of analyzing prose style. This method asks students to count
the number of sentences in an essay and identify their type—simple, complex, and so on—and count the number of words in each sentence. The rationale behind such an exercise is to determine the readability of a piece of writing and to determine areas for possible revision and editing. As we sat in the seminar listening to the instructor and applying this method to our own writing sample, I noticed most of us—budding composition and rhetoric scholars—resisting this exercise by rolling our eyes, grumbling under our breaths—in general, not taking it very seriously. Later, during our break, one of my class colleagues complained bitterly in the hallway that the exercise was a total waste of time, that it was too hard. At the time, I tended to agree. How does counting sentences help students write? What we failed to understand then, and what many of us still fail to recognize, is that Corbett’s pedagogy of style is not some series of surface-oriented exercises, but rather lies at the very heart of what rhetorical education attempts to provide: the ability in individuals to write eloquently and responsibly within numerous contexts, whether they be personal, academic, or public.

Corbett’s work on style, and his insistence that style should be taught within the realm of the whole rhetorical canon, came out of his reading and recovery of classical rhetorical texts—namely, Aristotle, Cicero, and Quintilian. His ideas about style have a decidedly Western canonical bent to them and, as a result, Corbett’s stylistic exercises do not cross the line into what we might think of as radical or alternative styles. But there is another scholar whose work attempts to break through traditional stylistic boundaries who has gone largely unrecognized for the past ten to fifteen years—Winston Weathers.

WINSTON WEATHERS: AN ALTERNATIVE

Weathers, a writing teacher and scholar from the 1960s and 1970s, overtly sought alternative styles and radical approaches to teaching writing. He published such titles as A New Strategy of Style (1978, with Otis Winchester) and Alternative Style: Options in Composition (1980). Weathers was interested in exploring a pedagogy of style that would lead students to resist dominant modes of discourse and write alternative prose styles. For Weathers, the teaching of style was itself a revolutionary act, which could lead to critical thinking against dominant forms of communication. One way that Weathers urged writing teachers and students to resist these dominant discourses was through the development of different styles, noting that “we can point out that with the acquisition of a plurality of styles (and
we are after pluralities, aren’t we? not just the plain style?) the student is equipping himself for a more adaptive way of life within a society increasingly complex and multifaceted” (2000, 295).

He encouraged writing teachers to use style as a tool to break through rigid systems and to teach writing that was more socially responsible, writing that took into consideration multiple styles and not just the socially sanctioned conventional style prevalent in most American writing classrooms. Alternative styles, for Weathers, was a place where most writers—professional and nonprofessional alike—wrote. In a 1996 interview with Wendy Bishop, Weathers reflects on the inspiration for his 1980 book, An Alternative Style: Options in Composition.

I’d long noticed that much of the great literature I was teaching was not written in the traditional straight/linear mode. I’d noticed, too, that out in the “real world,” a great many of the messages presented in advertising, publicity, promotion, in personal letters, journals, diaries, and even in more daring book reviews, testimonials, meditations, etc. were using writing techniques that no one in the nation’s English departments seemed to be teaching. The Academy occasionally acknowledged the existence of “experimental writing” but never suggested that ordinary writers might also practice something like it. My goal in writing An Alternative Style was simply to say to students (and their teachers) that there’s more to writing than the style usually found in the Freshman theme, the second semester research report, or the graduate literary essay. (Bishop and Weathers 1996, 76)

Style, for Weathers, is by no means some rigid, cold, mechanistic tool used to teach inflexible conventions of writing. For Weathers, style becomes a place where all people use language in fresh, inventive ways, ways that can be recast and used in socially responsible and democratic contexts. The rigid systems that Weathers recognized in most English departments needed to be challenged. One of those systems, of course, was the tradition of style as a surface-oriented tool of writing instruction that had been reinforced in the history of writing instruction since the Renaissance.

In an article originally published in CCC in 1970, “Teaching Style: A Possible Anatomy,” Weathers argued that for the teaching of style to be a viable element of writing pedagogy, instructors must accomplish three tasks:

1. make the teaching of style significant and relevant to our students,
2. reveal style as a measurable and viable subject matter, and
3. make style believable and real as a result of our own stylistic practices (2000, 294).
Weathers’s call for a richer pedagogy of style is significant because he assumes an integration of style in all forms of writing instruction and not just a technique for editing or polishing students’ prose. For example, he writes that students need a strategy of style so that they can accomplish two objectives in literacy acquisition, by “(1) identifying the categories of style, and (2) describing the constituency of those categories in terms of stylistic material” (2000, 297). In other words, Weathers wants teachers to incorporate the study of style into the larger purpose of writing instruction in a way that allows the student to develop a variety of prose styles to use in multiple rhetorical situations. Weathers follows much of the same ideas about imitation that Corbett learned from the classical rhetoricians and that Erasmus encouraged students in the sixteenth century to practice. “We ask the student to write a sentence or a topic of his own choosing, but following the model he has just studied,” Weathers writes. “In this process, the student is asked to recognize, copy, understand, and imitate creatively” (2000, 296–97). For Weathers, style becomes the very way students use language to make meaning in their worlds. The more styles students experiment with, Weathers argues, the more able they are to resist dominant structures of language and use language more democratically.

One of the more telling moments in this article occurs when Weathers associates alternative styles with democracy. Here, Weathers articulates the role that the teaching of style can play in a liberating pedagogy that teaches students to become responsible users of language:

Style is a gesture of personal freedom against inflexible states of mind; that in a very real way—because it is the art of choice and option—style has something to do with freedom; that as systems—rhetorical or political—become rigid and dictatorial, style is reduced, unable to exist in totalitarian environments. We can reveal to students the connection between democracy and style, saying that the study of style is a part of our democratic and free experience. And finally we can point out that with the acquisition of a plurality of styles (and we are after pluralities, aren’t we? not just the plain style?) the student is equipping himself for a more adaptive way of life within a society increasingly complex and multifaceted (2000, 295).

Even though Weathers is counseling writing teachers to resist rigid systems of writing instruction and encourage their students to write in a variety of styles, his caution against the totalitarianism of systems applies to the way histories are embraced and eventually become unyielding
systems in their own right. Questioning the received history of style allows current composition scholars to break through a system of instruction that consigns style to a rigid, surface-only concern. Weathers wants the teaching of style to be much more. He argues that teachers of writing can show the connections between style and democracy to their students, encouraging them to practice and study multiple verbalizations. Weathers pushes students to play with multiple styles in a manner that could suggest stretching the boundaries of traditional stylistic grounds. In other words, it may lead them on a path toward recognizing how multiple styles are representative of multiple points of view—indeed, the very essence of democracy.

Weathers wants students to recognize and be able to incorporate a plurality of styles. Such plurality, Weathers insists, is necessary for educating students to become vital participants in a democracy. “We can reveal to students the connection between democracy and style,” he writes, “saying that the study of style is part of our democratic and free experience” (2000, 295). Weathers wrote this call for an integrated pedagogy of style during a time when American society was being reminded of its own plurality in the form of the protest against the war in Vietnam, the civil rights movement, and the second-wave feminist movement. Such movements, of course, were particularly popular on college campuses. There, students were searching for ways to connect what they were learning in the classroom with their concerns for social justice. Weathers’s call to make style, and writing itself, more relevant in students’ lives shows how his work on style was not some exercise in getting students to prettify their language but rather to discover the richness of language and its uses in a democracy. “Many students write poorly and with deplorable styles simply because they do not care,” Weathers insists (2000, 295). Weathers simply wanted to make writing more relevant to student experience.

In 1980, Weathers published An Alternative Style: Options in Composition. The purpose of this textbook, as Weathers notes in the preface, is to provide student writers with ways to develop a varied prose style. “And so this book,” he writes. “Ready to be shared—as we become aware of more mentalities than one (left brain/right brain if nothing else), aware of more compositional goals than one, more life-styles than one, more human chemistries than one, more ‘voices’ than one” (2000, preface). Weathers wants student writers to be able to move in and out of different writing situations and adjust their writing styles accordingly, without being beholden to any one, dominant mode of writing. “I write for many
reasons,” he notes, “to communicate many things. And yet, much of what I wish to communicate does not seem to be expressible within the ordinary conventions of composition as I have learned them and mastered them in the long years of my education” (1). In an e-mail conversation with Wendy Bishop, almost twenty years after he published An Alternative Style, Weathers echoes his desire for teaching student writers multiple styles. “A good writer—like a good architect—should know how to design and build all kinds of structures: traditional, art deco, baroque, functional, etc,” he declares. “Who knows what ‘content’ requirements will be presented to us day after day? A concern with style is a concern with being prepared to build the best composition we can whatever the content happens to be” (Bishop and Weathers 1996, p.75). And encouraging students to build the best compositions they can forms the focus of Weathers’s interest in style.

In Alternative Style, Weathers offers a short explanation of his theory of alternative style and a variety of rhetorical devices and strategies that professional writers use to develop new and interesting styles. For Weathers, an alternate style means any type of style that seeks to go beyond tradition-bound notions of “good writing” in the effort to construct the best piece of writing possible. He distinguishes between what he calls Grammar A and Grammar B. Grammar A, according to Weathers, is the “traditional” grammar or instruction in style in most writing classrooms, which “has the characteristics of continuity, order, reasonable progression and sequence, consistency, unity, etc. We are all familiar with these characteristics, for they are promoted in nearly every English textbook and taught by nearly every English teacher” (1980, 6). Grammar B, on the other hand, seeks to expand Grammar A’s rigidity and open students to alternative ways to express themselves. “It is a mature and alternate (not experimental) style used by competent writers and offering students of writing a well-tested set of options that, added to the traditional grammar of style, will give them a much more flexible voice, a much greater communication capacity, a much greater opportunity to put into effective language all the things they have to say” (Weathers 1980, 8). Later, Weathers describes a number of characteristics of Grammar B and does so in a manner that allows users of the book to apply them to their own writing—some tricks of the trade, as it were.3

What’s important to keep in mind about Weathers’s theory of Grammar A and Grammar B is that they are not mutually exclusive. Grammar B,
for Weathers, is an expansion of Grammar A. He does not want to keep his students away from learning and understanding the dimensions of Grammar A. Not at all. He wants them to be able to break away from the conventions of Grammar A and become more imaginative and creative with their style, based on what the rhetorical constraints are. “Grammar B in no way threatens Grammar A,” he insists. “It uses the same stylistic deck of fifty-two cards and embraces the same English language we are familiar with. Acknowledging its existence and discovering how it works and including it in our writing expertise, we simply become better teachers of writing, making a better contribution to the intellectual and emotional lives of our students” (1980, 8). Here, Weathers echoes Aristotle’s definition of rhetoric as being the ability to discover the available means of persuasion. Grammar B becomes another of the available means. Playing around with and using crots, for example, allow student writers to find connections among ideas where they may not have looked before. His double-voice technique encourages students to examine ideas from various perspectives, while working on the stylistic features of their writing. Weathers’s desire for student writers to develop multiple, even subversive, writing strategies also echoes Erasmus’s call for teaching students to express ideas in a variety of ways. Students who incorporate Weathers’s suggestions for labyrinthine sentences and sentence fragments, alongside the more traditional sentences of Grammar A, give themselves more options for phrasing ideas in new and interesting ways.

Weathers has largely been forgotten among many rhetoric and composition specialists. Although his essay “Teaching Style: A Possible Anatomy” appears in the latest edition of the perennially popular *The Writing Teacher’s Sourcebook* (Corbett, Tate, and Myers 2000), most compositionists have ignored his work. Wendy Bishop notes that his “work didn’t seem to be half as influential as I thought it should be” (Weathers and Bishop 1996, 72). His work is rarely, if ever, cited in the pages of CCC or *College English* anymore, and his textbooks are out of print. Graduate programs in composition and rhetoric rarely include Weathers’s work as part of the curriculum or reading lists. It almost appears as if Weathers’s work has disappeared completely.

Weathers himself tells stories of how the field resisted vehemently his theories and ideas about the teaching of style (see the epigraph to this chapter). Weathers also tells the story of how he was received by his colleagues during his keynote address at the 1982 CCCC convention in San Francisco, a city Bishop, in a delicious moment of irony, calls “the city of alternative styles” (Weathers and Bishop 1996, 79):
It was, in effect, boycotted. I was invited to give the address by Donald Stewart. . . . He had read some of my work, had written about it in an article, which led to some correspondence, which led to the invitation. He was the CCCC program chairman at the time, as I remember. Alas, though the conference attendance was large, I gave the address to about fifty people—in a vast, cavernous Hyatt Regency ballroom that would have held a thousand. It was obvious that the title of the address, or my reputation perhaps, had led vast numbers of people to stay away. (79)

That was twenty years ago, and it seems safe to say that Weathers’s reputation has not changed much. My sense is that Weathers has been lumped into a group of compositionists—including Christensen and Corbett—whose work on style and rhetoric runs counter to the goals of critical and creative thinking espoused by the proponents of critical pedagogy.

As the 1970s turned into the 1980s, and social construction theories of composition slowly took precedence in composition programs and on the pages of composition journals, the stylistic and sentence-level pedagogies of Christensen, Corbett, and Weathers came under fire. Robert Connors argues that many of their critics pointed out that sentence-level rhetorics like Christensen’s “were quintessentially exercises, context-stripped from what students really wanted to say themselves” (Connors 2000, 115). James Britton, for example, called such writing exercises “dummy runs,” and condemned such writing instruction for its lack of contextual awareness, arguing that a student writer should be “called upon to perform a writing task in order (a) to exercise his capacity to perform that kind of task, and/or (b) to demonstrate to the teacher his proficiency in performing [the writing assignment]” (Britton et al., 1975, 104–5). Sabina Thorne Johnson, a contemporary of Christensen, voiced her critique by questioning Christensen’s claim that students can generate ideas by merely adding modifiers to their sentences. In her article “Some Tentative Strictures on Generative Rhetoric,” Johnson at first praises Christensen’s method for offering a “revolution in our assessment of style and in our approach to the teaching of composition” (1969, 159). But later she wonders why Christensen seems to believe that form can generate content. “I don’t believe it can, especially if the content is of an analytic or critical nature” (159). Later A. B. Tibbets chimed in on the complaint against Christensen, noting that the generative rhetoric method led students to produce clever sentences but not much else. Tibbets argues:
“What we are generally after in expository writing is accuracy rather than cleverness” (1976, 144). Tibbets assumes here that interesting sentences can’t produce interesting ideas. And he says as much later in his article when he notes that effective writing instruction leads students to separate content from form, as well as divide issues from one another (144). Tibbets’s assumptions about the split between form and content resonate with the other critiques of Christensen’s rhetoric. What most of these critiques assume, however, is that learning to write eloquent and interesting sentences and paragraphs is somehow antithetical to learning to express ideas effectively.

CONCLUSION

During the early process years of the late 1960s and 1970s, the teaching of style, via Christensen’s generative rhetoric, Corbett’s recovery of classical rhetoric, and the alternative style of Weathers, shared, along with the process movement, prominence across the composition landscape. As compositionists started to investigate more deeply the various social and political contexts that affect how students learn to write, the focus on stylistics became associated with oversimplistic, decontextualized writing pedagogy. The work of such figures as Christensen, Corbett, and Weathers subsequently became associated with this type of “uncritical” pedagogy. But reassessment of these scholars reveals that their work on style and the sentence was done under the assumption that the more stylistic options were available to students, the more likely that students would be able to demonstrate successful rhetorical activity.