Refiguring Prose Style

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Grammar is a set of rules; style is a matter of choice. One of my high school English teachers gave me these two definitions, and I believed them as truths until I took my first introduction to literature course at a large midwestern university. During my first college English class, it didn’t take long for me to realize that style had its boundaries—for example, a student was dismissed from class one time for using the idiom “kick the bucket” and the diction “unnecessary abortion” in the same sentence—and that grammar had its preferences. Like most first-year students, I didn’t fully understand grammatical conventions, so I developed my writing style by imitating the “grammar” of the model essays that the instructor gave to us as sample A’s. If the sample essay had a lot of dashes, so did mine; I often employed similar diction as was found in the A authored paper; I copied the same syntactical structures; I even tried to use humor in the same places or a similar catchy title. To my astonishment, I scored poorly on my first poetry analysis, which contained the following end comment: “While I’m intrigued by your comparison of these two poets [sic] personas, I find it disturbing that you refer to William Wordsworth in your essay as Wordsworth and Emily Dickinson as Emily. Also, please watch those comma [sic] splices! Grade: C.”

Although the red marks on my essay convinced me that my low grade was due to errors of grammatical conventions, a brief meeting with the instructor during office hours revealed that it was my use of “Emily” that had deeply offended my feminist instructor. In short, I had fallen short of the desired A because I had a sexist style, not because I couldn’t write well. On subsequent assignments, I referred to all authors by their last names only and eventually scored an A in the course.

I didn’t know it then, but what I took from my instructor was a small piece of what Kathryn Flannery and others have called cultural capital. In The Emperor’s New Clothes: Literature, Literacy, and the Ideology of Style, Flannery argues: “What counts as style, what counts as valued written
form, is part of and derives its meaning from a matrix of elements that comprise a given culture” (1995, 3). Therefore, in order to succeed in academe, I had to learn to write not only what was grammatically correct but also what was considered stylistically correct by the given culture, namely my professors. The conventions for style and grammar depended upon the type of class, writing assignment, and text, but mostly on my professors’ whims. They were my primary audience, and once I figured out their stylistic conventions, I did well. It was discovering these hidden taxonomies that was difficult, though, because most professors didn’t and still don’t overtly explain their writing style preferences because to do so would be contrary to the democratic and humanistic cultural capital of our profession’s ideology. We let our students uncover what we want from a piece of writing—and/or what the given culture wants—under the guise of critical thinking and original thought (see Berlin 1991; Harris and Rosen 1991; Spellmeyer 1991). Unfortunately, demonstrating what makes a text an example of great writing in our culture via innuendo only—if we choose to address writing style at all in our classrooms—leaves our students on the losing end of a very complex guessing game. Thus, my purpose in this essay is to encourage more overt style instruction in our composition courses so that our students can be empowered not only through receiving the cultural capital that is inherently linked to appropriate academic writing styles but also so that they can have a better working knowledge of grammar through this effective style instruction.

**GRAMMAR REMAINS A FOUR-LETTER WORD**

For the past forty years, many of us have believed we have justifiable reasons for erasing formal grammar instruction from our composition classrooms. The Braddock Report of 1963—*Research in Written Composition* (Braddock, Lloyd-Jones, and Schoer 1963)—and similar studies since then have told us that formal grammar instruction not only does not improve our students’ writing but in fact may have an adverse affect on their compositions. Such studies, combined with the push for process pedagogy since the early 1980s, have placed audience, purpose, and politics in the writing classroom well above grammar. Our reasons for snubbing style, however, are less clear. Edward Corbett reassures us that we ignore style because “all the requirements—and time constraints—of a composition course” make addressing style “more than [we] can handle” (1996, 222). Or we don’t teach it because we think our students first need a better understanding of grammar (Harris and Rowan 1996, 258).
I think both of these excuses are suspect, and the recent bemoaning of our discipline’s abject treatment of style and grammar, as evidenced in Sharon Myers’s “ReMembering the Sentence” (2003), Robert Connors’s “The Erasure of the Sentence” (2000), and Peter Elbow’s “The Cultures of Literature and Composition: What Could Each Learn from the Other?” (2002), among others, illustrates a need to reconsider grammar and style instruction in the composition classroom. I contend that we owe it to our students and ourselves to teach style in the composition classroom to help our students become better writers and to reveal that good writing style is essentially linked to cultural capital. I base this assertion partially on style advocates’ scholarly attention to the traditions of classical rhetoricians and the practices of imitation and sentence combining, but the greater part of my motivation for treating style as an approach to effective student writing in composition studies stems from the disciplines of business and technical communication. In both of these fields, students are taught style as an effective means of improving their own writing. Unlike composition studies, most authors of business and technical communication textbooks address style overtly, often devoting an entire chapter or more to the subject. In addition, business and technical communication textbooks routinely and successfully treat grammar as style issues, an approach that I argue might solve the “grammar wars” in composition studies during the last four decades.

Grammar scholars like Martha Kolln (1999) and Rei Noguchi (1991) and anthologies such as Susan Hunter and Ray Wallace’s *The Place of Grammar in Writing Instruction: Past, Present, and Future* (1995) have tried to rescue grammar through advocacy scholarship and development of new approaches to teaching grammar. We remain in the shadow of Braddock’s study. Style, on the other hand, has recently experienced a resurgence in scholarly and pedagogical interest as we continually return to classical rhetoricians for guidance in writing instruction practices. Aristotle’s concept of ethos still underlies how we teach argument to our composition students. According to Aristotle, “the technical study of rhetoric” (1984, 2153) is necessary to understand the modes of persuasion, and this technical study involves the analysis and learning of effective stylistic conventions in order to achieve a successful rhetoric. For example, students today may consider a speaker’s appeals to reason as more effective than appeals to emotion (Flannery 1995, 201), and we as instructors may teach our students types of logical fallacies, such as ad hominem, post hoc, overgeneralization, and so on, so that they can identify these
fallacies in others’ arguments as well as avoid them in their own writing. Like Aristotle, Quintilian also believed in analyzing oratory to understand and create rhetoric that is more effective. Quintilian is best known for his conceptualizing rhetoric around the ideal of *vir bonus dicendi peritus* from the *Institutio Oratoria*, which is most commonly translated as “good man speaking well.” Both Cicero and Quintilian believed one of the most important precepts of learning good rhetoric was imitation, or using the models of excellent rhetoricians in order to learn how they effectively employ language (Quintilian 1987, 125). In sum, these classical rhetoricians often employed analyzing or copying the grammatical structure of language to achieve a successful style, one that is appropriate to the cultural conventions of the time.

Although the imitation of language content is considered taboo today (plagiarism), the copying of syntactical structure—or the “form” of writing—is still accepted by some compositionists as a constructive means of teaching style. Robert Connors, Sharon Myers, and William Gruber are just a few supporters; however, imitation as a pedagogical approach remains largely out of favor because it is “perceived as ‘mere servile copying,’ destructive of student individuality and contributory to a mechanized, dehumanizing Skinnerian view of writing” (Connors 2000, 114). Because sentence-level instruction suggests “demeaning” grammar drills to many compositionists, we avoid it, unless we teach or do research in basic writing, remedial composition, or ESL classes. This is unfortunate, considering the success that classical rhetoricians and modern-day compositionists have had with imitation exercises. Says Corbett, “In my own rhetoric texts, I have suggested a number of imitative exercises that have proven fruitful for me and my students” (1996, 222). However, rhetoric and composition texts like Corbett’s are in the minority today because of the process pedagogy push of the 1980s. Most post-1980 composition textbooks contain no grammar instruction, save an occasional brief editing checklist. Nonetheless, we saturate our basic writing and ESL textbooks with word-, sentence-, and paragraph-level exercises and examples. It is important to note the striking differences between the treatment of style issues in Rise Axelrod and Charles Cooper’s enduring composition textbook, *The St. Martin’s Guide to Writing* (2004), and a basic writing textbook such as Barbara Clouse’s *Progressions with Readings* (2005). Seventy-five percent of Clouse’s textbook is on style, with entire sections devoted to “The Paragraph”; “Effective Sentences”; and “Grammar and Usage.” Conversely, *The St. Martin’s Guide to Writing* contains only brief editing
checklists at the end of certain assignments, which is the norm for composition textbooks.

If we continually deny that grammar instruction improves student writing, why do we still teach it in textbooks that are aimed at (mostly) marginalized students? Perhaps it is because, as Lynn Bloom notes, we tend to “punish lower-class students for not being, well, more middle class” (1996, 655) by giving them grammar instruction instead of the “cultural capital” of critical thinking that we save for our “mainstream” composition students. The loss is twofold: our composition students miss out on valuable style instruction, whereas our basic writing and ESL students are denied access to what we view as valuable cultural capital until—if and when, that is—they pass the remedial course and take a “higher-level” writing class. Thus, grammar remains in exile for composition studies, and we are scolded for talking about it; in “Grammar, Grammars, and the Teaching of Grammar,” Patrick Hartwell instructs us to “move on to more interesting areas of inquiry” (1985, 252).

Like imitation exercises, sentence combining has a mixed past in the field of composition. While research by Rosemary Hake and Joseph Williams (1985) and other similar studies have demonstrated sentence-combining instruction to be beneficial to student writing, many teachers of composition devalue sentence combining. Moreover, many compositionists believe that sentence combining and other word-, sentence-, and even paragraph-level exercises are designed for either basic writers, ESL students, or for teachers invested in product-oriented pedagogy. But articles like Richard Gebhardt’s “Sentence Combining in the Teaching of the Writing Process” clearly defend sentence combining as a necessary and helpful component of process pedagogy. According to Gebhardt, sentence-combining instruction “can help students develop the ability to combine many facts and details into fewer generalizations, with a resultant reduction in the cognitive overload” (Gebhardt 1985, 232). If we continue to avoid style instruction via sentence-level instruction, such as sentence combining and imitation exercises, we are potentially missing out on an opportunity to enhance our students’ composing process as well as the quality of their finished work.

**WHY ADDRESS GRAMMAR AS STYLE?**

The position that grammar instruction is boring and even disempowering has persisted for decades in composition studies. In his 1964 *English Journal* article “Grammar and Linguistics: A Contrast in Realities,” Don
Wolfe describes why English teachers and students hate grammar: “The more grammar, the less self-expression; it was grammar that defined the student’s [negative] attitude toward English, not themes which opened the deep streams of life and let them flow into burning images” (73). Grammar was perceived then as it often is now as contrary to creative and critical thinking, although no studies have supported this conviction. Wolfe also makes that point that grammar is separate from style and that “[m]any critics felt, indeed, that no great amount of grammar teaching could be applied to style” (73). For Wolfe, grammar is a set of rules, whereas style is based on language usage. Today in composition studies, scholars and teachers still make a case about defining style and grammar as separate categories with distinct conventions, definitions, and functions. For example, Joseph Williams’s influential Style: Ten Lessons in Clarity and Grace (2002) mentions grammar only twice in passing and once in detail, and his twenty pages on grammar in detail is entirely about punctuation.

When Peter Elbow says in “The Cultures of Literature and Composition” that he misses “sophistication” in writing, namely “elegance and irony and indirection—qualities that composition has sometimes reacted against” (2002, 540), he is talking about his pining for style, and for Elbow, it is a literary style. However, because many of our composition students tend to shut down when they hear grammar terms, combined with our belief that grammar instruction impedes creative thought and good writing, we as composition researchers, instructors, and textbook writers avoid grammar when possible. Our interest in style, as indicated by Elbow, Flannery, and others, is on the rise; however, it is difficult (if not impossible) to discuss style without including grammar. Richard Weaver’s The Ethics of Rhetoric explains the interdependence between grammar and style:

The verb is regularly ranked with the nouns in force, and it seems that these two parts of speech express the two aspects under which we habitually see phenomena, that of determinate things and that of actions or states of being. Between them the two divide up the world at a pretty fundamental depth; and it is a commonplace of rhetorical instruction that a style made up predominantly of nouns and verbs will be a vigorous style. (1953, 135)

I believe that our longing for more style discourse in composition studies stems from a desire to inform our students about grammar issues in a more meaningful and useful way. I advocate teaching grammar as a style issue because our students can and will benefit from it.
At first glance, it would appear that teaching grammar as style would be limiting; for instance, in “Grammar, Grammars, and the Teaching of Grammar,” Patrick Hartwell glosses over his “grammar 3” as a matter of “linguistic etiquette.” However, he does refer to “grammar 5” as stylistic grammar, and he includes Joseph Williams’s style classifications as well as Martha Kolln’s definition: “grammatical terms used in the interest of teaching prose style” (Kolln, 1981, 140). In teaching grammar to composition students, style works: students care about writing style and discuss it willingly, without the fear and loathing they traditionally have toward grammar. The “Postscript: Classroom Dialogue” to Flannery’s The Emperor’s New Clothes illustrates how students are open to talking about rhetorical style, even if they do not yet have the terms available to describe why they prefer one style over another (1995, 199–202). We as teachers can more freely talk about grammar issues with our students as elements of style; our students will, for example, see their diction and syntax choices not as grammar rules but instead as a critical means of reaching and impressing their target audience.

Although Peter Elbow and others have turned to the field of literature to rejuvenate the teaching of style in the composition classroom, my motivation for treating style as an approach to effective student writing in composition studies stems mainly from the field of business and technical communication. For instance, research in business communication supports the teaching of style as an effective means to improving student writing. In “Exploring How Instruction in Style Affects Writing Quality,” Kim Sydow Campbell and associates argue that formal style instruction, via classroom exercises and textbook instruction, noticeably improves student writing. Through studying the student writing samples of pre- and post-style classroom instruction over the course of a single semester, Campbell et al. discovered that students improved in the areas of appropriate active/passive voice usage, parallelism, conciseness, directness, and diction. These are all areas of style, but grammar instruction was inherently linked to each area: for example, appropriate active/passive voice usage involved instructions and exercises about the syntactical roles of the agent vs. the patient; instruction on parallelism involved identification of verb consistency; and so on. Campbell et al. conclude that their study “supports a commonsense yet controversial notion among business communication instructors that word- and sentence-level instruction must be taught” (1999, 85). Moreover, Kathryn Riley and associates’ Revising Professional Writing in Science and Technology, Business, and the Social Sciences (1999), one of the texts used in
Campbell et al.’s study, teaches grammar as style in order to help students see their writing as based on word and sentence choices about audience and genre suitability, not language conventions. Business communication students “learn grammar” in the context that changing a word, choosing punctuation, or rearranging syntactical structures in their writing is done with respect to audience needs and expectations rather than from obedience to abstract grammar rules.

Other business and technical communication textbooks routinely and successfully treat grammar as style issues. Most devote at least one detailed chapter to the subject; others include elements of style instruction throughout the text. Mike Markel’s Technical Communication (2001) includes a chapter on “Drafting and Revising Effective Sentences” and another chapter on “Designing the Document,” which includes instruction on formatting as well as appropriate style issues for an intended audience. John Thill and Courtland Bovée’s Excellence in Business Communication (2001) approaches style instruction recurrently in each chapter. As with Riley et al.’s text, grammar is treated as a style issue, and students reading Thill and Bovée’s textbook are consistently encouraged to stylistically compose, adapt, and revise their documents based on rhetorical situations. A. C. Krizan et al.’s Business Communication (2002), Mary Ellen Guffey’s Essentials of Business Communication (2001), and John Lannon’s Technical Communication (2002) all take a similar approach to the necessary relationship between style instruction, audience, and document appropriateness. Finally, Rebecca Burnett’s Technical Communication (2001) devotes the first four chapters to style issues as related to the rhetorical situation (reader, writer, text) and then later gives a chapter on revision and editing entitled “Ensuring Usability: Testing, Revising, and Editing,” which links writing high-quality documents to pleasing the target audience. In addition, Burnett includes a “Usage Handbook” at the end of her text. No mention is made of the word “grammar” in the index, table of contents, or headers, yet “grammar lessons” per se clearly exist throughout all of the above textbooks in the form of style instruction.

What most business and technical communication textbooks have in common is that they address grammar as a choice, as an issue of style. Recently, some composition textbooks have begun addressing grammar as a style issue. Former College English editor James C. Raymond wrote his first-year composition textbook, Moves Writers Make (1999), almost completely as a writing style guide. Raymond shows through his discussion and analysis of writers’ “moves” that good writing is merely a matter of
writer agency: writers, including student writers, must choose the appropriate subject, words, and arrangement of words in sentences. Students are then encouraged to make their own “moves” and to change these moves or use new style moves, depending on the genre of writing, the discipline, and the audience. Raymond also supports localized imitation of sentence structure and style as a means of improving student writing. In *Moves Writers Make*, composition students are instructed to copy the “moves” or syntactical forms that authors make in writing, but not the diction. In chapter 12, entitled “Sentence Exercises,” Raymond tells students to read sentences from famous authors and then “write sentences of your own, imitating the moves you like best” (289) in the section of this chapter called “Additional Sentences for Analysis and Imitation.” Raymond encourages students to look at grammatical structures, such as an author’s effective use of present participles to avoid overuse of the “to be” verb, and copy those syntactical structures in an attempt to master some elements of good writing.

Similarly, Joseph Williams’s *The Craft of Argument* (2003) is one of the few composition textbooks that includes extended style instruction. All of “Part 4: The Languages of Argument,” which includes chapters on “Clear Language” and “The Overt and Covert Force of Language,” provides specific instructions and examples on how students can revise their writing through specific style instruction. As in his influential *Style: Ten Lesson in Clarity and Grace*, Williams’s use of style in *The Craft of Argument*, like the treatment of style in technical and business communication textbooks, is symbiotic with grammar: Williams mentions phrases and clauses, subject and verb agreement, and the like. Grammar as a term or concept, however, is not formally addressed or mentioned.

Neither my proposal to teach grammar as style nor my desire to broaden the definition of style is new. The clearest example of grammar addressed as style is Virginia Tufte’s *Grammar as Style* (1971), a book-length study of professional writing that “presumes that grammar and style can be thought of in some way as a single subject” (1971, 1). Tufte’s text offers excellent examples of grammatical constructions and formations that can be most easily understood and even mastered when they are interpreted as elements of a stylistic discourse. Although most of Tufte’s sentences and paragraphs are taken from technical and business writers, some familiar literary names are present as well: Ernest Hemingway, Thomas Wolfe, E. M. Forster, and Aldous Huxley, to name a few. Readers of *Grammar as Style* learn the parts of speech, modifiers, cohesion, and
so on only in the context of how certain elements create effective style in specific rhetorical contexts. The popularity of William Strunk, Jr. and E. B. White’s *The Elements of Style* (1999) is further evidence that treating grammar as a style issue is a desirable approach not only to become a better writer but also to learn grammar.

In 1974, Tim Shopen argued in “Some Contributions from Grammar to the Theory of Style” that style was about ideas, whereas grammar was more about meaning (775). Although Shopen does clarify his difference between ideas and meaning later in his article, for me his article serves as support as to why we might not want to split hairs over the differences in a composition classroom context. Not surprisingly, Shopen also defines grammar as rules and style as language use, and his figure 1 on page 777 of this piece illustrates how he views grammar almost like a bank from which elements may be plucked in order to create an effective style. For first-year composition pedagogy, I would propose a reversal of this figure, where style is more the catchall term, and features like “punctuation” and “capitalization” and “spelling” are addressed in our classrooms as elements of writing style. This approach would loosen the grammar albatross that has been choking our profession for four decades, and at the same it would allow our students to learn effective writing strategies that would improve both their cognitive processes and their final written products.

**HOW SHOULD WE TEACH GRAMMAR AS STYLE?**

In order to teach grammar as style, we must first adjust our curriculum and research to include, more readily, style discourse. According to Edward Corbett, unless composition teachers “devote at least two weeks to the study of style, either in a concentrated period or in scattered session throughout the semester,” we might as well not teach style at all (1996, 216). Corbett bases this time frame on the diligence of the classical rhetoricians and the Renaissance teachers who spent countless hours each week on style instruction. Campbell addressed style in her business communication classes in “6 of 28 class meetings during the semester (around 20 percent)” (Campbell et al. 1999, 80), and I also teach style to my composition, business, and technical communication students for at least one-fifth of the semester if not more. Unlike Corbett, I do not break my style instruction into two-week blocks but rather incorporate discussions of style throughout the entire semester. However, I agree with Corbett that “[m]any students learn their grammar while studying style” (1996, 216). Students in my classes see style discourse as empowering and
fun, and given the opportunity to learn style, most write better papers and are more confident writers at the end of the semester. Style instruction has a purpose beyond rote memorization of rules or being scolded for writing something incorrectly; students compose, revise, and shape their writing to suit the assignment and their target audience. Moreover, they learn about grammar in a fun, nonthreatening atmosphere; they explore appositives, participles, and other “grammatical conventions” under the guise of effective writing for their target audience. A misplaced modifier, instead of serving as an example of the student’s failed knowledge of grammar, under style instruction becomes an element that the student can choose to move elsewhere in the sentence in order to improve the style quality of his or her writing.

There are a number of ways we as composition teachers can approach style with our students. Sentence combining is just one of many exercises our students can do. The assignment below, adapted from James C. Raymond’s “Trick the Teacher” assignment in Writing Is an Unnatural Act (1986), employs the imitation methods of Cicero and Quintilian, with a specific focus on writing style.

Find a passage of published, credible, and professional writing that is a work of literature or that analyzes or discusses a work of literature. Then, create your own “forgery” that you hope will “trick the teacher.” Pick a paragraph about the size of the example below or longer (at least ninety words). Make sure you cite the author and title of your passage. Type your passage and bring twenty-five copies to Friday’s class. If you “trick the teacher,” you will get an extra credit of five points. For doing this assignment, you will receive a homework credit of fifteen points.

Note: Do not indicate on the copies which passage is the forgery. Instead, bring in a copy of the original piece of literature, stapled to your forgery. Please note that your entry will be disqualified if (1) the original is not provided at the end of the trick session; (2) there are any typographical or grammatical errors on the copies; (3) the example is too short; (4) your version is too much like the original; (5) there are not twenty-five copies; (6) the example is not from a credible source.

Here is an example from one of my classes. Read the following passages closely and decide which one is the forgery.

1. His life had begun in sacrifice, in enthusiasm for generous ideas; he had traveled very far, on various ways, on strange paths, and whatever he followed it had been without faltering, and therefore without shame and without regret.
In so far he was right. That was the way, no doubt. Yet for all that the great plain on which men wander amongst graves and pitfalls remained very desolate under the impalpable poesy of crepuscular light, overshadowed in the center, circled with a bright edge as if surrounded by an abyss full of flames. (Joseph Conrad, *Lord Jim*)

2. From the multitude, then, he effectively concealed the agonizing stamp of humanity with which he was branded. But to a precious few—those who, by looking at his face, caught a glimpse of the conflagration in the man’s soul—the mythic power of Tuan Jim was overshadowed by the horror that enveloped his very existence. They knew he had come to their country not to escape the outside world but to wrest himself free from his own self, his own shadow of shame and iniquity that tortured him to the core. He had come to escape his own fate. (Joseph Conrad, *Lord Jim*)

(In case you’re curious, the second passage is the student forgery.)

Because this assignment is based on the imitative methods developed by classical rhetoricians, the danger of this assignment for today’s composition student is obvious in terms of plagiarism: for example, I have had a student copy some of the diction (three words or more in a row) from the original source, and the entry was disqualified. But the goal of this assignment is to show students that they can successfully write syntactical structures and use tone similar to that of published writers. This assignment also opens the door for discussions of plagiarism as well as style use. Using the style repertoire we have been compiling all semester, we as a class discuss why we think one of the paragraphs is or is not the forgery. Are there incidences of ineffective repetition? Is there enough sentence length and syntactical variety? Is the diction inflated or too general? I usually do this activity toward the end of the course in order to reinforce the style concepts we have been working on all semester. In those cases where the student successfully “tricks the teacher” into thinking that the student’s paragraph is the original and the published work is the student forgery, the student sees him- or herself as similar to a published author. The students not only learn improved style and voice through this assignment, but they also discover that they are authors, just as good as and sometimes better than published ones.

Not only should we use style instruction to teach our students how to write more effectively, but we should also tell them why we are advocating a certain style. For example, if we advocate a nonsexist style with our
students, we could use this style instruction to explore issues about why sexist language is not effective and is usually harmful. In addition, many of us teach visual rhetoric to our students; we have them analyze visual cues in magazine advertisements, commercials, and now Web pages so that they will understand the cultural capital of visual rhetoric features in hopes that they won’t become victimized consumers. Therefore, the transition for us to talk about stylistic elements in prose texts should be an easy one. If our students already analyze texts for purpose and organization, they should be able to break down the whole of a text into the sum of its stylistic parts. However, I encourage that grammar as style instruction be implemented only in the context of the students’ own writing. I agree with Patrick Hartwell’s assertion that “one learns to control the language of print by manipulating language in meaningful contexts, not by learning about language in isolation” (1996, 250). We can accomplish this contextual goal by using examples from our students’ own work for instruction. Sentence-combining exercises could be developed from the student essays. Examples of excellent elements of writing style, whether word-, sentence-, paragraph-, or essay-level, could be taken from one student’s work and shown to the rest of the class. Imitation exercises, like the “Trick the Teacher” assignment, have also proven effective. Another approach to addressing style in the composition classroom is through textual analysis. As mentioned earlier, Flannery’s rhetorical analysis in “Postscript: Classroom Dialogue” demonstrates how style discourse liberates us from formal grammar instruction while still allowing our students to openly discuss grammar as style issues in their writing.

Style instruction has been advocated by classical rhetoricians and is recently thriving as a successful means of improving student writing in business and technical communication. Instead of demarcating style and grammar as related but still very distinct elements of language, I have suggested that addressing grammar in the research and teaching of composition as a feature of style will open doors for new means of improving students’ writing and increasing their confidence with their knowledge of language and writing style. This type of pedagogy can be done as formal instruction and/or classroom discourse, provided it is performed within the context of the students’ rhetorical situation(s). In addition to improving the finished writing product, style instruction has also shown, as in the case of Gebhardt and others’ use of sentence combining, to be an effective means of enhancing and encouraging a more successful writing process. Finally, grammar as style instruction will expose our students
more readily to the cultural capital of creative and critical thinking as well as the politics of writing style, subjects we already promote in our research articles as being the most worthwhile use of our and our students’ time in the composition classroom.