

Prose style

SUU Writing Center

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First, let's define our terms. Prose is writing that is not poetry or verse. It can be fiction, non-fiction, or a combination of the two. Everyone writes in a different way, and these differences manifest themselves in style. A writer's style consists of the way in which he/she combines words to form ideas, not the ideas themselves. For example, these two passages both discuss "languor" in very different ways:¹

He did not still feel weak, he was merely luxuriating in that supremely gutful lassitude of convalescence in which time, hurry, doing, did not exist, the accumulating seconds and minutes and hours to which in its well state the body is slave to both waking and sleeping, now reversed and time now the lip-server and mendicant to the body's pleasure instead of the body thrall to time's headlong course.

--William Faulkner

Manuel drank his brandy. He felt sleepy himself. It was too hot to go out into the town. Besides there was nothing to do. He wanted to see Zurito. He would go to sleep while he waited.

--Ernest Hemingway

While these differences are not bound to specific rules, here are a few suggestions to strengthen your style and your prose (Strunk and White Chapter 5).

- 1- **Be natural:** Your writing should reflect your own personality and your own voice while still avoiding slang.
- 2- **Use adjectives and adverbs sparingly:** Descriptive adjectives and adverbs cannot make up for a weak verb in a sentence. Find verbs of action and description instead of the mundane. Kent Templeton, a College of Eastern Utah professor explains that there are seven deadly verbs in writing: *is/was/were, have/has/had, got, want, make, do, go*. These seven do not show action; they tell without describing. Use them sparingly.
- 3- **Revise:** Writing is an arduous process that requires work and patience. No one expects to write a perfect rough draft. Revision is the key to good writing. You should revise and rewrite papers until you are satisfied that they fulfill their purpose, show good grammar, and reflect your personal style. This level of achievement is seldom attained in one or two drafts. Be patient and diligent.

Wordiness, clarity, and style are all intertwined in the writing process. If you desire further information, the Writing Center has a copy of Strunk and White's *Elements of Style* which provides excellent tips and examples that are too extensive to cover here.

¹ These two passages are from page 68 in *The Elements of Style Third Edition* by William Strunk, Jr. and E.B. White.