

AN EDITING GLOSSARY

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6. Style, Synopsis, Titles and Headings

Style

What is “style” in writing? Various definitions include:

- A writer’s (or even a country’s or a time period’s) manner of expressing thought in language
- Language/grammar choices writers make that express their individuality as a writer and at the same time appeal to, engage, and build emotional relationships with their readers
- A writer’s choice of words and sentence and paragraph structure to convey meaning in a particular way
- The techniques a particular writer uses to reach out to readers, such as syntax, tone, and word choice
- The “voice” readers listen to as they read a writer’s work; the writer’s self-expression through language
- Aspects of one author’s writing that differentiates it from the writing of other authors
- The choices a writer makes when deciding to “follow the rules” of writing or to “break the rules” for a particular purpose
- The way a writer expresses meaning clearly, concisely, and convincingly
- The methods a particular writer uses to trigger emotions and ideas in the reader’s mind
- The way an author writes, depending on the purpose of the writing and the target audience

Sometimes style is used to refer to different types of writing, or to aspects of writing such as verb tenses and point of view of the narrator, or to formal vs informal writing, but we’re going to stick to the ideas presented by the definitions above.

Developing your unique writer’s style

New writers often ask, “How can I develop my own unique style? What makes my writing style unique to me? What do readers like about my writing?” Here are some tips:

- Your various pieces of writing may well be different in some ways (for example, formal or informal; serious or humorous; factual or imaginative; technical or creative), and yet, if

you have developed your own writing style, there will be a feeling, an overall tone, that is recognized by your readers as being unique to your personality as a writer. This includes your “authorial voice.”

- The purpose of your writing and your target audience are important for each piece of writing you do. You do, after all, want to appeal to your audience and their needs and desires. But the more you write, the more your personal style will become evident—and readers who especially enjoy your style will soon become your fans and want to read all kinds of things you might write, even if some of those things might not be a reader’s usual personal interest.
- Whatever type of writing you do, you will want to generally follow the required/expected format for your genre or subject matter, following the appropriate style guide. Yet your personality, your own character, and your approach to communicating will still shine through in your writing to some degree, no matter the particular type of writing. So, you and another writer can write on the same nonfiction subject or in the same fictional genre on the same topic—and end up with quite different works because you have different personal styles. A good writer, once the “rules” of writing have been learned and practiced, can then experiment with “breaking the rules” to reflect his or her personality and voice.
- While you can certainly experiment to develop your style by trying to analyze and imitate the styles of writers you admire, in the end your goal should be to write in a way that reflects you, your worldview, your “take” on life. Take from your experiments what really works for you and integrate it into your writing, but don’t force into your writing methods or approaches that just “aren’t you.”
- Your style will often result in your different works frequently focusing on similar themes, life ideas, thoughts, beliefs, and viewpoints that are most important to you personally.
- In developing your personal style, write in a way that is comfortable to you. Write in the way you talk, the way you converse with people. You can even experiment with telling a story orally, using a spoken writing program (dictation software) which types your words as you speak—and then edit it to fit the requirements of the type of writing you are doing, while still maintaining your personal “voice” style.
- Your different types of writing may also reflect your passions and interests, so your passion for gardening might show up in a fictional story which features a character and/or plot in which gardens are a key element; poetry about gardens; non-fiction works about how to garden or how to best grow a certain type of plant; scientific works on a particular type of garden plants; or a memoir in which your experiences with gardening are a central through-line. Yet despite all these different approaches and aspects of the topic of gardening, your readers will recognize your personal writing style—you, in fact—in all of them.

Synopsis

A synopsis is a book summary that familiarizes the reader with your story's plot and how it unfolds. As a writer, you are wise to write an initial synopsis as part of your story planning. On the other hand, if you are a pantsier and prefer to write your story "off the top of your head," then once the first draft is completed, read it right through and then write your synopsis. Either way, the synopsis will help to guide the rest of your writing and editing process—and will be helpful for your beta readers and other self-publishing team members, and for your editor, literary agent, designer, and/or publisher down the road. It will also help you develop a log line, title and subtitle, back cover blurb, elevator pitch, and for a non-fiction book, your proposal (which itself will include the synopsis and chapter summaries, among other requirements).

Your synopsis will convey, in a page or two, the plot (or context/main ideas for nonfiction) of your book, and it must be intriguing. Provide a brief hook at the beginning and use wording and sentence structure that keeps your reader interested. As you work through your writing and editing process, continue to refine your synopsis. By the time your manuscript is ready for submission to an editor, or to an agent and/or publisher, it should be so well written that it makes these people want to read your entire manuscript.

Make sure your synopsis:

- Contains a complete narrative arc (the full story line)
- Features your own voice and other unique story elements
- Includes the ending or resolution (unlike a query, with leaves the reader in suspense by not including the ending)
- Falls in a range of one to two single spaced pages (or two to five double spaced pages) unless otherwise instructed by the publisher or agent. Sometimes you may be asked for a more detailed synopsis of up to seven to ten double-spaced pages. It is crucial to keep your synopsis enjoyable to read, and agent/publisher friendly, by following their requirements carefully.
- Also prepare an additional "brief" synopsis for agents who ask for a single page or less.

Include in your synopsis:

- The major characters and setting (including character motivations at the beginning which justify the inciting incident). Without good characters, there is no story.
- The inciting incident (the scene that ignites the central conflict of your story)
- The main events of the rising action and how they build tension in your story
- The climax (the height of the action)
- The resolution or ending. Note any unexpected plot twists that bring home the resolution.

Helpful hints:

- Write in third person, present tense so story is told smoothly.
- Refer to a diagram of the “three act structure” while writing your synopsis so you don’t miss any of the key points of the structure.
- Highlight your writer’s voice and the novel’s tone through your wording as you write the synopsis, so the reader has a sense of these important elements.
- Use very deliberate word choice and sentence structure to demonstrate your distinctive point of view and unique perspective.
- Clarity and conciseness are very important as you are telling the whole story in just a few paragraphs. Edit excess wording from your synopsis but be sure to include the important points or events. Eliminate irrelevant or minor details.
- Unlike in the story itself, the synopsis tells rather than shows. So “tell” the story—briefly.
- Make sure your synopsis flows clearly and smoothly and hits every important point.
- Emphasize the critical moments and unique aspects of the story.
- Give your synopsis to your self-editing team members such as beta-readers or critique team members to check.
- Use professional synopses as models.
- Write your synopsis repeatedly as you go through the writing and self-editing process, so it will accurately reflect both your story and your developing writing craft.
- Boiling down your novel-length story (or non-fiction book) to a few paragraphs reveals the overall shape of the work, somewhat like a good map.
- Doing a synopsis like this brings your story down to its essential elements, which ensures the work has coherence.

Since most manuscripts (whether fiction or nonfiction) can be reduced by at least a quarter to a third to make them more effective, creating a synopsis forces you to see the key elements and at the same time helps you see what you can remove.

Titles and Headings

Titles for fiction works—and titles with sub-titles, plus headings and sub-headings for non-fiction works—are extremely important. In fact, creating good titles and headings is an art which you should study and practice. The title is often the first thing that catches a prospective reader’s eye, and headings help readers scan through a work to help them decide whether this is an article or book they want to dig into. Online, effective use of titles and headings is extremely important for blog posts, news items, and so on. A good title (and sub-title as well as headings for nonfiction) will do at least two or three of the following:

- Hook readers and draw them in. (Beware of using “click bait” titles that promise spectacular results but don’t deliver on their promise. Most readers instantly recognize click bait, are totally fed up with it, and won’t read any further).
- Create intrigue and a great first impression.
- Define your topic. The title should give a general overview and the sub-title should feature what is unique about your perspective or approach.
- Showcase your imagination and creativity. Consider using poetic elements like alliteration to help the reader “hear” what your article or book is offering.
- The title may be a special phrase or idea from the text or may hint at something intriguing and unusual.
- It will reflect your personality and style—your voice.

A final note to be aware of: If you will be publishing with a traditional publisher, there is a good chance the company will change your book title to suit their ideas of how the title will best market the book. If you can come up with several titles you like, they might actually choose one of them; otherwise, they will often create their own title.

Don’t forget to place this exercise in your binder or Duotang.