

ENGL 109

Reading 5

- Clear and vigorous writing
- Purposeful Paragraphs
- Levels of Style

ENGL 109

Clear and vigorous writing

Some guidelines:

Think about whole pages and whole paragraphs, not just individual sentences.

Build sentences around actual, specific subjects and objects

“Who is kicking who?” [Subject is ...] <-identified

CONFUSING Current tax policies necessitate congressional reform if the reoccurrence of a recession is to be avoided.

BETTER Congress should reform current tax policies to avoid future recessions.

CONFUSING In the prohibition era, tuning cars enabled the bootleggers to turn ordinary automobiles into speed machines for the transportation of illegal alcohol by simply altering certain components of the cars.

BETTER In the prohibition era, bootleggers modified their cars to turn them into speed machines for transporting illegal alcohol.

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Clear and vigorous writing

Some guidelines:

Think about whole pages and whole paragraphs, not just individual sentences.

Build sentences around actual, specific subjects and objects

SUBJECT IS VERBING

OBJECT

Joe is watching TV. NOT TV is watched by Joe.

OR

SUBJECT VERBS

THE OBJECT

Joe watches videos. NOT Videos are watched by Joe.

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Clear and vigorous writing

Some guidelines:

When applicable, use *specific* nouns and noun phrases

GENERAL

school

store

sneakers

fish

book

worker

my belongings

SPECIFIC

art institute

Loblaws

?

?

?

?

?

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Clear and vigorous writing

What might make sense in your head may not translate 100% to what's on the page:

EXAMPLE: Signs from around the world:

In a laundromat:

Automatic washing machines. Please remove all your clothes when the light goes out.

In a department store:

Bargain Basement Upstairs.

Seen during a conference:

For anyone who has children and doesn't know it, there is a day care on the first floor.

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Clear and vigorous writing

Some guidelines: Avoid sprawling phrases.

Watch out for:

Multiple strings of prepositional phrases (at the bottom of the well in the yard past the gate)

Verbs turned into nouns (implement to implementation)

Too many articles (the, a) or too many modifiers for verbs (really only ever makes cookies)

WORDY

members of the student union at University of Waterloo

the producing of products comprised of plastic

the prioritization of decisions for policies of the executives

BETTER

students at Waterloo

plastic production

the executives' priorities

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Clear and vigorous writing

Some guidelines: Avoid sentences with long windups.

It's possible to write a complex sentence **but ask yourself if you may be losing your reader along the way.**

Remember: if you bury the point of your sentence at the end, you may work counter to regular conversation (i.e., when we talk we often move our subject and object to the front of the sentence).

ORIGINAL A new scam email that appears to be a solicitation from the IRS and the U.S. government for charitable contributions to victims of the recent Southern California wildfires has been making the rounds.

REVISED A new scam email making the rounds asks for charitable contributions to victims of the recent Southern California wildfires. Although it appears to be from the IRS and the U.S. government, it is a fake.

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Clear and vigorous writing

Some guidelines: Use simple, active verbs.

Wordy verb phrase

We must make a decision soon.

Students are absolutely reliant on federal loans.

Engineers proceeded to reinforce the levee.

Better

We must decide soon.

Students need federal loans.

Students rely on federal loans.

Engineers reinforced the levee.

Watch for nondescript words like “is,” “are,” etc.

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Clear and vigorous writing

Some guidelines: Avoid strings of prepositional phrases. (*Do you keep a list of prepositions?*)
between a rock and a hard a place, with all of us, in case of this, from this point on, etc.

TOO MANY PHRASES	We stood in line at the observatory on the top of a hill in the mountains to look in a huge telescope at the moons of Saturn.
-------------------------	---

BETTER	We lined up at the mountaintop observatory to view Saturn's moons through a huge telescope.
---------------	---

TOO MANY PHRASES	To help first-year students in their adjustment to the rigors of college life, the Faculty Council voted for the creation of a new midterm break during the third week of October.
-------------------------	--

BETTER	To help first-year students adjust to college life, the Faculty Council endorsed a new break in mid-October.
---------------	--

On the one hand, a prepositional phrase seems like a helpful addition to the sentence because you are adding an extra detail ... but as we can see with these examples, we are talking about the potential risk of having **too many** prepositional phrases.

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Clear and vigorous writing

Some guidelines: Avoid repeating key words close together.

REPETITIVE Students in writing courses are often assigned common readings that they are expected to read to prepare for various student writing projects.

BETTER Students in writing courses are often assigned common readings to prepare them for projects.

Note: sometimes with technical writing or discipline-specific terminology, you have no choice but to repeat key words.

The *New Horizons* payload is incredibly power efficient, with the instruments collectively drawing only about 28 watts. The payload consists of three optical instruments, two plasma instruments, a dust sensor, and a radio science receiver/radiometer.

— NASA, “*New Horizons* Spacecraft Ready for Flight,” NASA.gov, October 2005

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Clear and vigorous writing

Some guidelines: Avoid doublings.

When we talk, we slip into repetitions and saying something a few times in slightly different ways.

Make sure you are looking for redundancies:

- totally dead
- current fashion
- empty hole
- reply back
- later in time
- old in age
- first-year rookie
- extremely outraged
- blend together

Can you think of others?

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Clear and vigorous writing

Some guidelines: Turn clauses into direct modifiers.

Watch for: that, which, who, etc.

Can you simplify by eliminating those specific words?

WORDY Our football coach, **who is nationally renowned**, expected a raise.

BETTER Our **nationally renowned** football coach expected a raise.

WORDY Our football coach, **who is nationally renowned and already rich**, still expected a raise.

BETTER Our football coach, **nationally renowned and already rich**, still expected a raise.

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Some guidelines: When applicable, cut introductory expressions.

Watch out for: *It is, It was, There is, There was, etc.*

Note how the sentence is strengthened just by eliminating words like “quite evident” and “is important”

WORDY It is necessary that we reform the student loan policies.

BETTER We should reform student loan policies.

WORDY There were many incentives offered by the company to its sales force.

BETTER The company offered its sales force many incentives.

SLOW It is quite evident that an argument sociologist Annette Lareau supports is that it is important to find the balance between authoritarian and indulgent styles of parenting because it contributes to successful child development.

BETTER Sociologist Annette Lareau believes that balancing authoritarian and indulgent styles of parenting contributes to successful child development.

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Clear and vigorous writing

Some guidelines: Vary sentence lengths and structures.

If every sentence has the same length, your reader may subconsciously start to get bored. A changeup in sentence strategy can be helpful.

[Carl] Newman is a singing encyclopedia of pop power. He has identified, cultured, and cloned the most buoyant elements of his favorite Squeeze, Raspberries, Supertramp, and Sparks records, and he's pretty pathological about making sure there's something unpredictable and catchy happening in a New Pornographers song every couple of seconds — a stereo flurry of *ooohs*, an extra beat or two bubbling up unexpectedly.

— Douglas Wolk, “Something to Talk About,” *Spin*, August 2005

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Clear and vigorous writing

Some guidelines: **Read aloud what you have written.**

Notice how the simple act of reading these sentences aloud gives us the chance to “hear” the awkward aspects of the sentence?

When you read aloud what you wrote:

Where did you pause? Where did you stumble?

Did you feel awkward in any places?

Have you felt a sense of rhythm throughout? Did it sound/feel like rhythm was lacking?

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Clear and vigorous writing

Some guidelines: Cut a first draft by 25 per cent or more.

For those who are wordy: try the takeaway game.

Can you pare down unnecessary phrases and expressions?

Did you find yourself saying the same thing 2 or 3 times unnecessarily?

Will others feel like they are reading a text that is trying to hit a specified word count?

For content that falls outside the scope of your purpose / thesis / requirements, have you “killed your darlings”?

I believe more in the scissors than I do in the pencil.

— Truman Capote

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Clear and vigorous writing

The takeaway game – how to **take away** parts of a sentence to make the sentence read simpler and less cluttered:

To begin, it is important to note that the witnesses were tentative.

Considering both options, the management team should choose option 1.

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Clear and vigorous writing

The takeaway game – how to **take away** parts of a sentence to make the sentence read simpler and less cluttered:

To begin, it is important to note that the witnesses were tentative.

vs.

The witnesses were tentative.

Considering both options, the management team should choose option 1.

vs.

Option 1 is recommended.

Clear and **Vigorous Writing**

If you are aware that you tend to say more than you need to in your writing, then get in the habit of trying to cut the first drafts that you have written by at least one-quarter. There may be good reasons for you to put all your thoughts and ideas down on the page when you are in the process of drafting a paper or project. But when you are in the process of editing, you should be sure to cut every unnecessary word that is not needed or necessary. You may find it advantageous to think of it as a competition or a game. In making your cuts, it is important that you don't eliminate any important ideas that may be | essential or facts that may be important. If you find it possible, you might consider asking an honest friend whom you trust to read your writing and ask them to point out those places in your writing where you might make your language tighter.

Clear and Vigorous Writing

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Purposeful paragraphs

Some guidelines: Make sure your paragraphs lead somewhere.

Your topic sentence should guide your reader for what is to follow through rest of paragraph.

The American Revolutionaries weren't rejecting their identity as Englishmen; they were asserting it. As they saw it, George III was violating the "ancient constitution" just as King John and the Stuarts had done. It was therefore not just their right but their duty to resist, in the words of the delegates to the first Continental Congress in 1774, "as Englishmen our ancestors in like cases have usually done."

Nowhere, at this stage, do we find the slightest hint that the patriots were fighting for universal rights. On the contrary, they were very clear that they were fighting for the privileges bestowed on them by Magna Carta. The concept of "no taxation without representation" was not an abstract principle. It could be found, rather, in Article 12 of the Great Charter: "No scutage or aid is to be levied in our realm except by the common counsel of our realm." In 1775, Massachusetts duly adopted as its state seal a patriot with a sword in one hand and a copy of Magna Carta in the other.

— Daniel Hannan, "Magna Carta: Eight Centuries of Liberty," *Wall Street Journal*, May 29, 2015

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Purposeful paragraphs

Some guidelines: Make sure your paragraphs lead somewhere.

Sometimes you can reveal your point in the concluding sentence:

It's 1992, and I'm hating on my mom's newest CD: a synth-heavy recording by Mexican girl group Pandora called "... Con Amor Eterno" ("With Eternal Love"). She plays it every Saturday morning while doing morning chores, blasting it from Kenwood speakers and making my teenage life miserable. I don't mind the tight harmonies of the trio, or even the overwrought music and lyrics of love and lament. What I can't stand is the man who wrote their tunes: Juan Gabriel.

— Gustavo Arellano, "As a Boy, I Was Taught to Ridicule Juan Gabriel. As an Adult, I Revered Him"

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Purposeful paragraphs

Some guidelines: Make sure your paragraphs lead somewhere.

By and large, paragraphs should do at least some of the following:

- introduce a subject
- move a narrative forward
- offer a new argument or claim
- provide support for a claim already made
- contradict another point
- amplify an idea
- furnish more examples
- bring discussion to an end

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Purposeful paragraphs

Some guidelines: Develop ideas adequately.

Contrary to some trains of thought, paragraphs **don't** have a set number of sentences.

Experienced writers don't have to worry about numbers of sentences in paragraphs. They make sure the paragraph length matches the space necessary to match how idea is presented.

A powerful Sikorsky Sea King helicopter, already hovering nearby as they [the *Apollo 17* crew] hit the water, retrieved the astronauts and brought them to the carrier, where the spacecraft was recovered shortly later. The recovery crew saw not a gleaming instrument of exotic perfection, but a blasted, torn, and ragged survivor, its titanic strength utterly exhausted, a husk now, a shell. The capsule they hauled out of the ocean was all that remained of the *Apollo 17* Saturn V. The journey had spent, incinerated, smashed, or blistered into atoms every other part of the colossal, 363-foot white rocket, leaving only this burnt and brutalized 9-foot capsule. A great shining army had set out over the horizon, and a lone squadron had returned, savaged beyond recognition, collapsing into the arms of its rescuers, dead. Such was the price of reaching for another world.

— David West Reynolds, *Apollo: The Epic Journey to the Moon*, 2002

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Purposeful paragraphs

Some guidelines: Organize paragraphs logically.

Narrative paragraph describes changes in Blue's behavior.

-----■ Blue, Heather's normally affectionate and obedient Rottweiler, began tearing up the house shortly after Heather went back to work as an accountant after several years at home. The contents of the trash cans were strewn all over the house. A favorite comforter was destroyed. Then Blue began peeing all over Heather's expensive new living-room carpet and systematically ripped through cables and electrical wires.

Katz uses causal pattern to explore Blue's behavioral problem.

-----■ Lots of dogs get nervous when they don't know what's expected of them, and when they get anxious, they can also grow restless. Blue hadn't had to occupy time alone before. Dogs can get unnerved by this. They bark, chew, scratch, destroy. Getting yelled at and punished later doesn't help: The dog probably knows it's doing something wrong, but it has no idea what. Since there's nobody around to correct behaviors when the dog is alone, how could the dog know which behavior is the problem? Which action was wrong?

A simple statement/proof structure organizes the next paragraph.

-----■ I don't believe that dogs act out of spite or that they can plot retribution though countless dog owners swear otherwise. To punish or deceive requires the perpetrator to understand that his victim or object has a particular point of view and to consciously work to manipulate or thwart it. That requires mental processes dogs don't have.

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Purposeful paragraphs

Some guidelines: Organize paragraphs logically.

Taken together, the two paragraphs in this second passage from Katz's essay follow a problem/solution structure common in proposal arguments.

-----■ Why will Clementine come instantly if she's looking at me, but not if she's sniffing deer droppings? Is it because she's being stubborn or, as many people tell me, going through "adolescence"? Or because, when following her keen predatory instincts, she simply doesn't hear me? Should my response be to tug at her leash or yell? Maybe I should be sure we've established eye contact before I give her a command, or better yet, offer a liver treat as an alternative to whatever's distracting her. But how do I establish eye contact when her nose is buried? Can I cluck or bark? Use a whistle or hoot like an owl?

I've found that coughing, of all things, fascinates her, catches her attention, and makes her head swivel, after which she responds. If you walk with us, you will hear me clearing my throat repeatedly. What can I say? It works. She looks at me, comes to me, gets rewarded.

—From *Slate.com*, October 6, 2005

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Purposeful paragraphs

Some guidelines: Use paragraphs to make transitions.

i.e.

PARAGRAPH OF 5 LINES ... and then

Boom!

or:

Nonsense!

or:

Go figure.

or:

And that was that.

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Purposeful paragraphs

Content content content content content content content content content content
content content content content content content content content content content
content content content content content content content content content content
content content content content content content content content content content
content content content content content content content content content content.

Boom!

content content content content content content content content content content
content content content content content content content content content content
content content content content content content

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Purposeful paragraphs

Content content content content content content content content content content
content content content content content content content content content content
content content content content content content content content content content
content content content content content content content content content content
content content content content content content content content content.

Nonsense.

content content content content content content content content content content
content content content content content content content content content content
content content content content content content

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Purposeful paragraphs

Content content content content content content content content content content
content content content content content content content content content content
content content content content content content content content content content
content content content content content content content content content content
content content content content content content content.

And that was that.

content content content content content content content content content content
content content content content content content content content content content
content content content content content content

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Purposeful paragraphs

Some guidelines: Design paragraphs for readability.

How does it look on the page?

Maybe there are graphics that will be included.

One way to test:

After a text is printed, **how does it look to the eye?**

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Levels of style

High (formal, scholarly, scientific, follows proper grammar sentence structure)

Low (conversational, jargon, informal)

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Levels of style

High style (formal, scientific, scholarly writing) can be found in:

- professional journals
- formal addresses
- *some* newspaper editorials
- scholarly books
- technical writing
- legal briefs
- essays and reports
- a thesis
- *many* cover letters

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Levels of style

Features of **high style** (formal, scientific, scholarly writing):

- serious subjects
- has a professional audience in mind
- impersonal point of view that uses third-person pronouns (he, she, it, they)
- has complex sentences that display
 - *parallelism, balance, repetition*
- sophisticated or discipline-specific vocabulary (technical, abstract)
- ~~doesn't~~ does not use contractions and rarely uses colloquial expressions
- follows grammar and punctuation conventions
- standardized document format or design

High style: Scholarly journal, an expert writing for his or her peers

Temperament is a construct closely related to personality. In human research, temperament has been defined by some researchers as the inherited, early appearing tendencies that continue throughout life and serve as the foundation for personality (A. H. Buss, 1995; Goldsmith et al., 1987). Although this definition is not adopted uniformly by human researchers (McCrae et al., 2000), animal researchers agree even less about how to define temperament (Budaev, 2000). In some cases, the word *temperament* appears to be used purely to avoid using the word *personality*, which some animal researchers associate with anthropomorphism. Thus, to ensure that my review captured all potentially relevant reports, I searched for studies that examined either personality or temperament.

— Sam D. Gosling, "From Mice to Men: What Can We Learn about Personality from Animal Research?" *Psychological Bulletin*, February 2001

- Technical terms introduced and defined.
- Sources documented.
- Perspective generally impersonal—though I is used.

High style: 2013 presidential proclamation

Throughout our history, America has advanced not only because of our people's will or our leaders' vision, but also because of paintings and poems, stories and songs, dramas and dances. These works open our minds and nourish our souls, helping us understand what it means to be human and what it means to be American. . . .

Our history is a testament to the boundless capacity of the arts and humanities to shape our views of democracy, freedom, and tolerance. Each of us knows what it is like to have our beliefs changed by a writer's perspective, our understanding deepened by a historian's insight, or our waning spirit lifted by a

■----- Opening is general and serious—with carefully balanced sentences.

■----- Vocabulary is learned and dignified.

Ideas expressed are abstract and uplifting.

-----■ singer's voice. These are some of the most striking and memorable moments in our lives, and they reflect lasting truths—that the arts and humanities speak to everyone and that in the great arsenal of progress, the human imagination is our most powerful tool.

Voice is "presidential," speaking for the nation.

-----■ Ensuring our children and our grandchildren can share these same experiences and hone their own talents is essential to our Nation's future. Somewhere in America, the next great author is wrestling with a sentence in her first short story, and the next great artist is doodling in the pages of his notebook. We need these young people to succeed as much as we need our next generation of engineers and scientists to succeed. And that is why my administration remains dedicated to strengthening initiatives that not only provide young people with the nurturing that will help their talents grow, but also the skills to think critically and creatively throughout their lives.

Final paragraph evokes well-calibrated emotions.

-----■ This month, we pay tribute to the indelible ways the arts and humanities have shaped our Union. Let us encourage future generations to carry this tradition forward. And as we do so, let us celebrate the power of artistic expression to bridge our differences and reveal our common heritage.

— Barack Obama, Presidential Proclamation, National Arts and Humanities Month, September 20, 2013

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Levels of style

Features of **middle style** (personal, argumentative, some academic writing):

- commonly used, has a great deal of variety, active voice, sentences vary in length
- may use informal expressions, slang, dialogue, contractions
- used in journalism, magazines, manuals, commercial websites, popular books
- should be used in:
 - position papers, letters to editors, personal statements, business emails
- falls in between formal and everyday language
- topics can be serious to humorous
- general audiences, can use 1st or 2nd person point of view
- a personal voice (not a voice that suggests an institution)
- general vocabulary and explains or defines unfamiliar terms

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Levels of style

Middle style for an article in *Psychology Today* that presents scientific information to a general audience

Families often inherit a negative thinking style that carries the germ of depression. Typically it is a legacy passed from one generation to the next, a pattern of pessimism invoked to protect loved ones from disappointment or stress. But in fact, negative thinking patterns do just the opposite, eroding the mental health of all exposed.

When Dad consistently expresses his disappointment in Josh for bringing home a B minus in chemistry although all the other grades are A's, he is exhibiting a kind of cognitive distortion that children learn to deploy on themselves — a mental filtering that screens out positive experience from consideration.

Or perhaps the father envisions catastrophe, seeing such grades as foreclosing the possibility of a top college, thus dooming his son's future. It is their repetition over time that gives these events power to shape a person's belief system.

— Ellen McGrath, "Is Depression Contagious?" *Psychology Today*, July 1, 2003

■----- Vocabulary is sophisticated but not technical.

■----- Familiar example (fictional son is even named) illustrates a technical term: *cognitive distortion*.

■----- Phrase following dash offers further clarification helpful to educated, but nonexpert, readers.

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Levels of style

Middle style that uses impersonal and personal style at an awards event, delivered by Michelle Obama:

So for every Janelle Monáe [an artist recognized at the luncheon], there are so many young people with so much promise[that] they never have the chance to develop. And think about how that must feel for a kid to have so much talent, so much that they want to express, but it's all bottled up inside because no one ever puts a paintbrush or an instrument or a script into their hand.

Think about what that means for our communities, that frustration bottled up. Think about the neighborhoods where so many of our kids live — neighborhoods torn apart by poverty and violence. Those kids have no good outlets or opportunities, so for them everything that's bottled up — all that despair and anger and fear — it comes out in all the wrong places. It comes out through guns and gangs and drugs, and the cycle just continues.

But the arts are a way to channel that pain and frustration into something meaningful and productive and beautiful. And every human being needs that, particularly our kids. And when they don't have that outlet, that is such a tremendous loss, not just for our kids, but for our nation. And that's why the work you all are doing is so important.

— Remarks by First Lady Michelle Obama at the Grammy Museum's Jane Ortner Education Award Luncheon, July 14, 2014

■----- Style is personal, with feelings close to the surface.

■----- Sentences and clauses are parallel, rhythmic, and evocatively short.

■----- Vocabulary choices are crisp and varied. Note the use of "kids" throughout.

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Levels of style

Features of **low style** (personal, informal, playful writing):

- not necessarily “negative” – more like colloquial or informal
- used for emails to friends and families, instant messages, ads, blogs, magazines
- subjects are everyday topics or off-the-wall, possibly humorous or a parody
- often specific audience whom you know
- shorter sentences, fragments, irregular sentence structures
- personal points of view (I, me, you, us)
- vocabulary from everyday life, pop culture, familiar expressions
- grammar and syntax can be irregular
- sources do not need to be cited (and, sometimes, they are not acknowledged)

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Levels of style

An example of **low style** that is sent by a professor, but clearly is not meant to emulate a high style of writing:

Opening lines create the vehicle for the satire, a letter to students.

Windy, inelegant sentences full of mundane details and deliberate repetition ("I would rather . . .") underscore the horrors of grading.

The hyperbolic prose perhaps mimics student speech?

Deliberate fragments for emphasis.

- Dear Students Who Have Just Completed My Class,
- I would rather do anything else than grade your Final Papers.
- I would rather base jump off of the parking garage next to the student activity center or eat that entire sketchy tray of taco meat left over from last week's student achievement luncheon that's sitting in the department refrigerator or walk all the way from my house to the airport on my hands than grade your Final Papers.
- I would rather have a sustained conversation with my grandfather about politics and government-supported healthcare and what's wrong with the system today and why he doesn't believe in homeowner's insurance because it's all a scam than grade your Final Papers.
- Rather than grade your Final Papers, I would stand in the aisle at Lowe's and
- listen patiently to All the Men mansplain the process of buying lumber and how essential it is to sight down the board before you buy it to ensure that it's not bowed or cupped or crooked because if you buy lumber with defects like that you're just wasting your money even as I am standing there, sighting down a 2 × 4 the way my father taught me fifteen years ago.
- I would rather go to Costco on the Friday afternoon before a three-day
- weekend. With my preschooler. After preschool.
- I would rather go through natural childbirth with twins. . . .

— from *McSweeney's Internet Tendency*, May 2, 2016

Levels of style

An example of **low style** where the complexities of commission on events of 9/11 tragedy are presented visually so that the info and content reaches a wider audience:



- Panels combine verbal and visual elements to tell a story.
- Political figures become characters in a real-life drama.
- Sounds (*Shoom!*) are represented visually—as in superhero tales.
- Real images (the photograph on the left) are sometimes juxtaposed with cartoon panels as part of the collage.