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## Making Style Conscious: A Response to Paul Butler's "Style in the Diaspora of Composition Studies"

Star Medzerian Vanguri  
Nova Southeastern University, [sm1850@nova.edu](mailto:sm1850@nova.edu)

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## **Making Style Conscious: A Response to Paul Butler’s “Style in the Diaspora of Composition Studies”**

In his 2007 *Rhetoric Review* article “Style in the Diaspora of Composition Studies,” Paul Butler explains that while style seems to have vanished from the field of rhetoric and composition since the 1980s, it has actually been appropriated by areas within our discipline including genre theory, rhetorical analysis, personal writing, and even race, class, gender, and difference studies. Using Janice Lauer’s metaphor of the “diaspora” of composition studies to guide his analysis, Butler examines the ways that style, like invention, has “migrated” in the field. He claims that style is both absent and ubiquitous in our scholarship. Because “style in its dispersed form is often not *called* style but instead is named something else within the field,” it remains central to our field although its presence is masked (5). That is, while it seems as though style is simultaneously absent and present in our discipline, the *concept* of style has remained present and it is the *name* style that is now absent. Therefore, style’s place within composition studies is not paradoxical at all. “Style” appears to have gradually separated from the concept with which it was associated and has taken on other names that better fit the trends and developments of our discipline.

It is natural that as our discipline changes, our language adapts to fit our concerns, values, and interests. So why does it matter whether or not style is called “style”? Butler, through a series of stylistic analyses, begins to answer this question. He names three sites of style’s “dispersion”—genre theory, rhetorical analysis, and personal writing—and provides examples of how the methodology of stylistics is lost when we call style by other names. In response to a passage from Jeanne Fahnestock and Marie Secor’s rhetorical analysis of an editorial by Stanley Fish, for instance, he explains that Fahnestock and Secor discuss style but call their analysis “rhetorical” rather than stylistic. When they do mention style explicitly, “they seem to see it primarily as an historical

phenomenon, and not one currently part of the lexicon of rhetoric,” failing to acknowledge that the analysis they conduct is indeed stylistic (14). Butler argues that because Fish’s style is integral to building his ethos in this piece, an analysis of its stylistic features is needed to fully understand its persuasive effects. That is, Fish’s style contributes to, though it is not synonymous with, his rhetorical message. Through this and other examples, Butler makes a case for why we should employ stylistic analysis in our scholarship and acknowledge explicitly that we are doing so.

Acknowledging style as a crucial part of rhetorical analysis has important implications for us as critics and as teachers. In response to James Jasinski’s question, “What might it mean to take style seriously as a topic for theoretical reflection and critical analysis?” (qtd. in Butler 22), Butler remarks, “It seems that the diaspora of composition offers an ideal site for the discipline to begin to answer that question” (22). While Butler certainly illustrates the usefulness of style in our scholarly work outside of the classroom, it is equally necessary for teachers of composition to “take style seriously” within our classrooms. Many have discussed the benefits of incorporating style exercises into composition curricula, perhaps most notably Louis Milic in “Theories of Style and Their Implications for the Teaching of Composition” (CCC 16 [May 1965]: 66–69, 126). Milic and other scholars writing about style and pedagogy often praise style exercises for what they teach students about their *own* craft but neglect to consider what style can show us as *teachers* about the ways our students compose.

As a composition teacher, I have become familiar with long nights of reading student writing and the frustration of eventually having to assign it a grade. Specifically, I struggle with defining the “thing” that sets exceptional writing apart and wonder how I can assess it when I cannot name it and certainly have not explicitly taught it. What happens when a student accomplishes something the assessment method does not account for, when she produces an essay that compels me to read more, to want to trust her as a writer not only for her ideas but for the conviction with which she expresses them? Recently, in an effort to demystify style’s place in the composing process, I analyzed stylistic features of six of my composition students’ research essays. Having graded the essays earlier in the semester without explicitly considering style, I wondered if there would be any significant stylistic differences between the essays receiving the highest grades and those receiving the lowest grades.

My analysis revealed significant stylistic differences, which suggests a possible relationship between style and other aspects of writing. For example, the higher-scoring essays had greater variation in sentence type—simple, compound, complex, and compound-complex—and number of sentences per paragraph. One reason for the variation in the number of sentences per paragraph seemed to be that the higher-scoring essays let ideas dictate paragraph breaks. More specifically, when an idea changed, the student moved to the next paragraph rather than

attempting to make the paragraphs consistent in length. In addition, the structure of sentences within the higher-scoring essays reinforced their content. For example, compound sentences are an effective way to convey equality of ideas, and the higher-scoring essays used them almost exclusively for this purpose. Butler provides an excerpt from Margaret Willard-Traub's analysis of Ruth Behar's "Writing in My Father's Name" as an example of this concept. Using stylistic analysis, Butler explains how Behar's use of repetition and antithesis allow her to mirror "syntactically—and stylistically—the reciprocal effects of her actions" (19). That is, her stylistic devices reflected the essay's content as my students' did.

Another significant stylistic difference between the higher-scoring and lower-scoring essays was in the use of figurative language, specifically metaphor. In the higher-scoring essays, metaphor tended to be more directly related to the paper's topic than in the essays earning lower scores. For example, a student writing about gold farming—the process of acquiring virtual money for online role-playing games—carries the "farming" metaphor through his analysis of each step of the process, using such words as *crop*, *grow*, and *till*. In the lower-scoring essays, however, metaphors were often clichéd and decontextualized. For example, one student in an essay about pirate legends compares a letter of marquee to a get-out-of-jail-free card, a reference to Monopoly, which is outside the scope of this particular paper's topic.

While these observations certainly do not speak for all composition students or all student writing, I think they provide a glimpse into how style can directly benefit teachers of composition by revealing to us how students compose. The stylistic features I saw in the students' writing were effective when they were used in ways that reinforced the content of the essays. This is exciting for teachers of composition because it demystifies the concept of style as an entity a writer either has or does not have and instead defines it as a learnable strategy that can enhance the content of student writing. Butler argues that style has not disappeared but has rather "diffused" our field and taken on other names as a result. But regardless of whether style has disappeared from or diffused composition studies, style as "style" is certainly nowhere to be found. "Style in the Diaspora of Composition Studies" is a valuable attempt few have made to revive style for our work in the field of rhetoric and composition. Butler moves beyond other scholarship on style with his observation that what we call style does indeed matter. Becoming conscious of style as "style" taught me how students achieve certain effects in their writing and has allowed me to incorporate that knowledge into my teaching. When we explicitly identify a methodology, we can use the tools it offers, and the tools of stylistic analysis have much to offer our discipline both academically and pedagogically.

STAR MEDZERIAN  
*The University of Arizona*