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Review of Paul Butler, *The Writer's Style: A Rhetorical Field Guide*

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Butler, Paul. *The Writer's Style: A Rhetorical Field Guide*. Louisville, CO: Utah State UP, 2018. 176pp.

When we think of field guides, I imagine many of us conjure images of birds and plants, rocks and trees. It's no surprise then that when I picked up Paul Butler's *The Writer's Style: A Rhetorical Field Guide* (*TWS*) for the first time, I envisioned an energetic writer, notebook and pen in hands, trekking through a forest, furiously scribbling observations of the natural world, short meditations inspired by the wilderness, and ideas for essays and articles to write. While we may dispute that language is "natural," I think most of us would agree that it can most certainly at times represent a wilderness all its own. Even more important perhaps, to our students—those brave hikers and explorers to whom *TWS* seeks to provide inspiration, support, and, of course, guidance—an overly complex and sometimes impenetrable wilderness is exactly what it can represent.

On its surface, *The Writer's Style* may look similar to a text like Joseph Williams' classic *Style: Ten Lessons in Clarity and Grace*, but, really, *TWS* represents a much-needed evolution in the genre. Despite some of its benefits, works like *Ten Lessons*, which feature arguably prescriptivist teachings, regularly task students with adopting rather specific language and a somewhat staid, though "correct" style in writing. Williams' commandment in *Ten Lessons* is simply "it is good to write clearly" (4), and students are given specific ways of doing just that, so long as we take "good" and "clear" writing to mean writing that aligns with historically white, male, and middle-class tastes. As a result, style in *Ten Lessons* becomes an ability to align one's writing with dominant language conventions, i.e., to write in a way that is recognized as successful and effective by empowered institutions. These lessons, in turn, result in students understanding style in binary terms: right or wrong, sleek or sloven, clear or hazy, elegant or crude. If this is a bit of an overgeneralization, it's not much of one. Butler's *TWS*, in contrast, presents style as always present and *changing* in language, and which can therefore *always* be studied, analyzed, learned from, and experimented with. Butler formulates style, then, not as incognito prescriptivism, but as "a way of writing" (*TWS* 9), as "contextual and rhetorical" (12), as "inseparable from meaning" (14), and, perhaps most important, as a matter of "choice" (15). Hence why *TWS* is a *field guide*: it helps students identify the (very plural) forms and uses of style that romp in the wild, understand their habits, and recognize that there's always so much more to know and discover about style's affordances in writing. Much like how a typical field guide will not tell you that an eagle is better than a hummingbird or igneous rocks are better than metamorphic, *TWS* does all this without ever arguing that one form or use of style is inherently better than another—only rhetorically different.

From the 2000s onward, we have seen a quickly accelerating reanimation of style studies by scholars interested in clearing up some misconceptions about style, including its ties to prescriptivism as well as its applications to pedagogies, theories, and research relevant to the contemporary university.{1} [#note1] This surge of scholarship in style studies over the last 15 or so years is evidenced by not only the numerous monographs and articles on the subject, but also by the four edited collections on style specifically,{2} [#note2] other collections in which style figures prominently, and an uptick of panels devoted to style studies at conferences, such as 4Cs. I mention these collections and panels to highlight the growing interest in style

studies among *swaths* of scholars, not just a handful. Given this buzz around style studies, then, it seems like an opportune time to feature a book like *TWS* in the classroom. It represents a direct, pedagogical application of much of this recent scholarship and interest. It also means that *TWS* has arrived on the scene with an already-built market and audience of teacher-scholars, who have been eagerly awaiting its arrival. And those scholars and readers interested in style-based approaches to writing instruction continue to grow because there are innumerable benefits to writing pedagogies built around style, as *TWS* invariably shows.

Striking that balance between digestible theory and practice, *TWS* offers students, in the traditions of writing about writing, exposure to discourses around style and ample opportunity to both think toward specific rhetorical ends and write toward specific rhetorical goals. Put another way, it shows students what language can do and how to do things with language. Take for example how Butler introduces students to the idea of normativity in language practice, a concept that, in my experience, students often struggle to grasp when it is presented to them too abstractly, which it often is. In Chapter 3, "Style as Thinking Outside the Box," Butler writes:

> What makes it possible to view something we take for granted in a new light? Sometimes style can be associated with approaches that lie beneath the surface or do not come across as immediately apparent ... While style is often considered part of a normative system, calling style *a deviation from the norm* allows us to consider a writer's intentional departure from habitual practices. Deviations in style forces readers to transcend conventional thinking to see things from a new perspective, subverting normative structures and thinking outside the box. (22-24)

Having already outlined in the previous chapter the central ways students are asked to think about style's major conceits (9-21), here Butler presses them to consider how style may be a site at which to productively challenge language expectations. By inviting students to consider the affordances of stylistic deviation in writing, Butler moves the discourse around style away from pedagogies of error and toward those of rhetorical choice. In this, students learn that style is not a set of rules but instead a way of thinking about writing and a way of approaching a writing practice.

Now, a book designated as a rhetorical field guide wouldn't be of much use if it didn't offer students a chance to identify and discuss on their own terms the stylistic features of language they are learning. To that end, each chapter of *TWS* ends with invitations to one of a couple types of writing work. Butler might ask students to respond to questions on style's use in works on contemporary topics, such as the relationship between technology and loneliness (132-33). Or he presents some interesting writing exercises that give students an opportunity to put into practice the aspects of style they just learned about, such as sentence combining (120). Several chapters and sections target specific benefits of a mode of writing while remaining cognizant of style's affordances: how to use style effectively in one's sentences (Chapter 6); how to use style in one's essays to better achieve their rhetorical goals (Chapter 8); how to use style to revise one's work (Chapter 12), etc. Numerous assignment themes and iterations on those themes comprise the penultimate "Chapter 11: Practicing Style" (134-150) and provide students an opportunity to practice and challenge the conventions of various genres.

Compositionists teaching a class with *TWS* might be interested in how Butler incorporates scholarship by a host of familiar names: Gloria Anzaldúa, David Bartholomae, Anis Bawarshi, Suresh Canagarajah, Edward Corbett, Jeanne Fahnestock, Peter Elbow, Linda Flower, Keith Gilyard, Bruce Horner, Richard Lanham, Min-Zhan Lu, Carolyn Miller, Richard Ohmann, Geneva Smitherman, and Vershawn Ashanti Young, among others. By modeling a discourse around the salient features of written and spoken language, *TWS* offers instructors a way to engage students with some of the major threshold concepts in our field. Certainly, no student will come away from the short sections on, for example, translingualism and code meshing (68-71) fully versed on their major conversations, but that's okay. Students have now been introduced to the concepts,

along with a way to *start* exploring them by considering style as an arbiter of language difference.

As with any teaching text, of course, there is room for growth in *TWS*. Given the scale and importance of the digital turn in composition pedagogy, *TWS* says little about the stylistic affordances and constraints of digital composing practices, design thinking, and multimodality, along with the major concepts in their tow, such as remix, remediation, and circulation. Chapter 8, "Style in Essays, Including Imitation and Digital Rhetoric," begins to touch on these concepts but mostly discusses the digital with regard to "Internet-inflected linguistic developments" (96)—Twitter speak, for example—instead of brokering richer discussions of style-*as*-digital composition. Perhaps Butler will consider including more robust discussions of and exercises built around the digital in a second edition. If not, then an instructor could easily supplement *TWS* with any number of chapters from handbooks specifically focused on digital composing techniques and make connections to style on their own.

In my experience using *TWS*, students have responded incredibly well to the freedom this field guide offers them to explore and experiment in their language practices with style. Because students still often report to me that they've been taught that style is a way of "classing up" or correcting their language in essays for the benefit of their teachers, students appreciate the departure from such pedagogies that *TWS* provides in its framing of style as a way to see language, an approach to analyzing the rhetoricity of language, and a way to make language choices of their own. In effect, Butler has taken the canon most often treated as an afterthought and re-presented style as a way of discovering routes through the rhetorical geographies always before us and a way of venturing into them.

Notes

1. Since this is a review, I won't go into more detail here, but, if you're interested, Brian Ray's *Style: An Introduction to History, Theory, Research and Pedagogy* (2015) is worth checking out. (Return to text. [#note1_ref])

2. Relevant works for consideration might include: *Refiguring Prose Style* (2005), *Style in Composition & Rhetoric* (2009), *The Centrality of Style*(2013), and *Style and The Future of Composition Studies* (2020). (Return to text. [#note2_ref])

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