

**The Effects of Explicit Instruction on Sentence Fluency and Style**  
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**Abstract**

This is a multi-institutional study whose purpose is to advance our understanding of how explicit instruction in composition courses influences students' sentence fluency and style. The study is designed to answer four questions:

1. What is the immediate effect of style instruction? How does students' work on exercises affect the sentences they produce as they write papers?
2. How does the effect of style instruction vary across contexts as students write in multiple disciplines and genres?
3. How does the effect of style instruction vary with the specific curricular approach (e.g., a focus on syntactic structures vs. a focus on figures of speech, or the placement of style as the course's central concern vs. style as one of many objectives?)
4. In contexts outside the writing classroom, what affordances and constraints affect students' deployment of skills in crafting sentences?

As described in our proposal, we are working with student papers and interview data.

**Summary**

At the University of Nebraska at Omaha, Nora Bacon collected data for three semesters, from the spring of 2014 to the spring of 2015.

Dataset #1: papers from Composition I classes with and without style instruction

- Papers from five sections of Composition I in which the teachers included explicit lessons in style focusing on the choice of subjects, predication, and sentence variety with particular attention to free modifiers.
- Papers from five sections of Composition I in which style was not addressed.

Dataset #2: data showing change over time

- From four sections – two with style instruction and two without – papers written at the beginning of the term and another set written by the same students at the end of the term.
- “Before,” “during,” and “after” papers from each of eight focal students. The “before” papers were written in the Comp I class at the beginning of the semester, prior to any explicit instruction in style, the “during” papers at the end of that semester, and the “after” papers the following semester.
- Three interviews with each focal student: an initial interview to glean background information, a discourse-based interview (DBIV) based on the “during” paper, and a DBIV based on the “after” paper.

Keith Rhodes moved from Grand Valley State College to Hastings College in Hastings, Nebraska. He began collecting data related to an Advanced Composition class that he taught in the fall, 2014 semester. Given that he was a new faculty member at a small school, the only feasible class for study was one of his own. In order to preserve confidentiality and avoid any sense of coercion, he waited until after course grades were final to solicit participants. During the class, students received instruction that included explicit lessons in style focusing on the choice of subjects, predication, and sentence variety with particular attention to free modifiers. Five of the nine students who completed the class agreed to participate in the study. All five participated in both initial interviews and discourse-based interviews. All five students contributed two writings from before class started, three writings done during the class at three stages of instruction, and one writing from the semester after the class was completed. These writings have been analyzed

for syntactic features that should be affected by their specific instruction in style. Deeper study, still in progress, of papers from two different stages will dig further into the exact changes produced by instruction.

Star Vanguri, at Nova Southeastern University, has collected 150 student papers for analysis, from classes she taught: 73 collected in the spring 2014 semester and 77 collected in the fall 2015 semester. In addition, Vanguri has coded students' reflective cover letters that were submitted concurrently with the essays in the spring 2014 semester. She has reviewed two of four rounds of student interviews, which began in April 2015 in an attempt to lessen fear of reprisal by students who were at the time enrolled in her second-semester composition course after being enrolled in her first-semester course in the fall. This year-long contact time with the same group of students may allow for a more sustained analysis of the student writing and the ability to measure syntactic "growth" over time.

### Data analysis and emerging findings

#### University of Nebraska-Omaha

At UNO, analysis of the papers began with copying the first 20 t-units from each paper into a spreadsheet. A "Ten Sections" spreadsheet lists 3,000 t-units representing 150 papers, 80 written by students in style sections and 70 written by students in no-style sections.

T-units were coded for the characteristics teachers had covered in class. Specifically, sentence subjects in the t-unit's main clause were coded as *human*, *concrete*, *abstract*, or *expletive* (there/it). Verbs were coded as *active*, *passive*, or *be*. The free modifiers that were taught in class – *ing verbal phrases*, *appositives*, and *adjective phrases* – were marked. *Series* were marked as parallel or non-parallel.

Analysis of papers from ten sections shows that explicit instruction in style had an effect on the choices students made in their papers. Key findings are summarized below:

Syntactic feature	Style sections	No-style sections	Significance
Human or concrete subject +	.590	.553	$\chi^2=9.83$ ; $p=.020$ *
Active verb +	.663	.588	$\chi^2=18.76$ ; $p=.0001$ **
Words per t-unit	16.91	16.00	$t=2.85$ ; $p=.002$ **
Variation in t-unit length**	8.09	7.54	$t=1.49$ ; $p=.068$
Taught free modifiers ***	9.31	7.63	$t=2.37$ ; $p=.009$ **
Verbal phrases***	3.84	3.04	$t=1.76$ ; $p=.038$ *
Appositives***	4.32	3.70	$t=1.37$ ; $p=.085$
Adjective phrases***	1.15	0.89	$t=1.02$ ; $p=.154$

+ relative frequency of t-units with this feature

++ "Variation" here means the standard deviation in words per t-unit within a paper; figures reported are averages for each group

+++ frequency per 1,000 words

\*significant at  $p<.05$

\*\*significant at  $p<.01$

If the question is framed in terms of transfer, what we have found is that sentence-writing skills gained through classroom lessons and exercises transfer to papers. This study, then, confirms earlier research on the effects of having students manipulate stylistic elements, demonstrating that even the small amount of style instruction in the UNO classes – five to six hours of class time – can have an impact. Analysis of the second dataset should show how student writers adapt their understanding of style as they write in new contexts over time.

The data can be further analyzed to determine whether style instruction has similar effects for writers working in “academic” vs. “creative nonfiction” genres. Effects appear to differ for L1 and L2 writers, but the number of L2 writers is too small to support statistical analysis.

### Hastings College

At Hastings College, all writings have had the first twenty t-units segmented into T-units, copied into a spreadsheet, and coded for these features:

- Sentence complexity (words per T-unit)
- Subject type (human/ concrete/ abstract subjects)
- Predication (active/ passive/ “to be” verbs)

Review of these features by percentage of use demonstrates a clear pattern that students’ perceptions of genre and audience have a larger effect on their style choices than any other factor. While students were being taught features of clear style and asked to use them, they succeeded in doing so; afterwards, in different rhetorical settings, they reverted to abstract subjects and static verbs—if anything, using them even more frequently than before. Note these patterns for key features from before the class, immediately after full instruction on style, and after the class:

	active subsjs	abstract subsjs	active verbs	other verbs	T-unit words
Before	46%	47%	60%	40%	17.47
During	73%	20%	73%	27%	20.36
After	45%	55%	54%	46%	20.9

For further study, we could hypothesize that students capable of writing more actively reverted to abstract style because they perceived other audiences as preferring it—and possibly became even better at delivering that abstract style once they understood their options better.

It should be noted that Hastings students were taught Joseph Williams’ approach to these style features. That method is quite coherent with Nora Bacon’s, but it places somewhat more emphasis on advocating for “cumulative” sentences, with modifiers mostly moved toward the end of the sentence, and especially discouraging extensive medial modification. Thus, early and later writings from Hastings students will also be compared according to the following:

- Number and frequency (by percentage of words per T-unit) of verbal phrases
- Number and frequency of appositives
- Number and frequency of adjective clauses
- Number and frequency of series
- Number and frequency of initial, medial, and terminal modifiers of all these kinds

It should prove interesting to see whether students kept the feature of added modification, and especially more terminal modification, even as they reverted to a more abstract style. Simply looking at word counts suggests that modification increased after the class compared to before the class, though most likely at lower levels than during the class. The location of modification might become an important factor, in that, if students decrease medial modification, it’s a sign that they retain some of what they learned.

From the initial interviews, we mainly learned that students valued imitation as the key to improving their style, rarely mentioning any other approach or specific style features. At the time that they gave these interviews, these students were in the “during” portion of the study, and so were using specific features of active style successfully. In the later discourse-based interviews, even that sense of having a method at all tended to disappear, as students discussed style features almost entirely in terms of wanting to have a kind of “sound” or “feel.” They discussed

wanting to have readers react in certain ways, or of simply wanting to be more concise—which they identified mainly as something that they sought to deliver because that professor wanted it.

### Nova Southeastern University

Papers collected at Nova Southeastern University were coded for syntactic complexity (words per t-unit), predication (percentage of passive voice), sentence variety (use of simple, compound, complex, and compound-complex sentence types), and use of schemes (including antithesis, antimetabole, asyndeton, polysyndeton, anaphora, and epistrophe). Decisions about which stylistic features to analyze were made based on what was most emphasized in the pedagogy. Comparisons of data have yet to be made among semesters, so significance of these initial counts cannot be fully determined. However, the use of schemes in the student writing samples varies dramatically based on the type of paper assigned, though style instruction was a constant and consistent aspect of the course pedagogy. T-units charted for coding rarely included schemes unless the student papers were personal narratives, in which case schemes were used readily and, most often, for a rhetorical purpose.

One of the more intriguing findings thus far is that while the student papers exemplified control over stylistic features, the appropriateness of given features for particular genres, the students' metacommentary did not reflect this same awareness. In the students' reflective cover letters, for example, students wrote about style as a local-level concern, conflated with grammar, that is "fixed" during revision. In one set of papers and corresponding reflections, the students' writing demonstrated increased use unconventional patterns of arrangement, while their reflections primarily mentioned error-avoidance and "proper" grammar. That is, their writing included the deviations from conventional structure taught in class, while their metacommentary reflected a conflicting rules-based notion of style.

A similar disconnect between the ways in which students "performed" style and talked about style was apparent in students' interview responses. In the initial background interviews, four of the five students interviewed shared the sentiment that they had "no idea" or "had never really thought about it" when asked to describe their writing style. All interviewees gave thought to the question and most asked for clarification before answering. The responses were surprising because they came *after* the course that includes style instruction was completed. When further prompted, students did describe their writing styles, mentioning attempts to give their writing "structure," and "pizzazz," to write in "first-person," and to write "creatively." While students tended not to recognize the concept of style when asked about it, they described their styles in fairly individualistic terms that were tied heavily to their own influences and motivations for writing.

Four of the five students completed discourse-based interviews, in which students were asked to discuss three separate passages, one taken from one of their papers and two rewritten by the researcher with stylistic variations. Students showed much more awareness when referring to particular sentence-level choices than they did when describing their styles more generally in the initial interviews. They generally remembered which sentences they had written and why they made certain stylistic choices, though it is impossible to determine if the justifications of their choices were done while composing or in retrospect. When asked which of the three versions of the sentences students found most effective, theirs or one of the two rewritten ones, students showed no consistency in their responses. Of note is that in two of the four initial discourse-based interviews, students based their judgments of effectiveness on genre and audience expectations, in both cases describing one sentence as "magazine" language and another as "academic." A tentative conclusion is that the discourse-based interview served as an exercise to help students consider stylistic variation and to think of it as embodying options for the writer.