

Should authors strive to have a consistent and recognisable style of writing?

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As academics look to write for different audiences and in more accessible ways, it is worth paying closer attention to the variety of styles across different genres. **James Hartley** asks, do writing styles change over time – or are they consistent – or do they vary for different kinds of writing? And if there are consistent writing styles, how are they acquired?



Just as a person's handwriting is usually recognisable, is it possible that there are similar consistencies in the ways that academics write? Certainly some well-known (non-academic) authors do write in a consistent style (e.g., Jane Austen, Raymond Chandler). But does consistency also appear in more formal writing genres and where do these writing styles come from? Computer-based technology now allows us to answer some of the above questions. Texts can be analysed electronically in different ways and using different measures. Forensic studies have been carried out to look for changes in styles of written testimony (to see, for example, if different parts of the text have been written by the same person or have been 'adjusted' by someone-else: see '[Forensic Linguistics](#)' in Wikipedia). Other investigators have looked to see if the authors of online messages can be identified by examining their text structures, vocabulary, and content (e.g., [Labbe, \(2007\)](#), [Savoy \(2012\)](#) and [Zheng, Li, Chen and Huang \(2006\)](#)).

Are writing styles consistent?

Some studies with adults suggest that people's writing styles remain consistent across the life-span, although others question this, documenting changes with age (e.g., [Pennebaker and Stone, 2003](#)). In one such study, ([Hartley, Howe and McKeachie, 2001](#)), three of us examined our academic writing styles over a period of forty years (from 1960-2000). We found that our own individual styles of remained much the same, even though our methods of writing had changed over time – from writing by hand, then by typewriter, and then by computer. Furthermore, although each of us wrote in a consistent manner, we clearly differed from each other in our writing styles. These data suggested to us that writing styles were individual and persistent.

However, a problem in this study was that each of us was writing a different kind of text. I was writing academic review articles, Michael Howe was writing textbook chapters, and Bill McKeachie writing addresses for public delivery. So perhaps it was the genre that constrained the style?

Do text genres affect the results?

What might happen if the same writers are analysed writing different kinds of texts? Three possibilities occur here. The writer's style will not differ across different texts. The writer's style will vary slightly according to the texts. The writer's style will vary considerably depending on what is being written.

Studies have found examples of writers in all three categories. For example, in the first category, the literary style used by Alistair Cooke for over 40 years in his *Letters from America* did not differ from that used in his travelogue *The American Home Front*. In the second category we found that the writing style of the British scholar Lisa Jardine was simpler and easier to read in her 'Points of View' radio broadcasts than it was in one of her history texts. In the

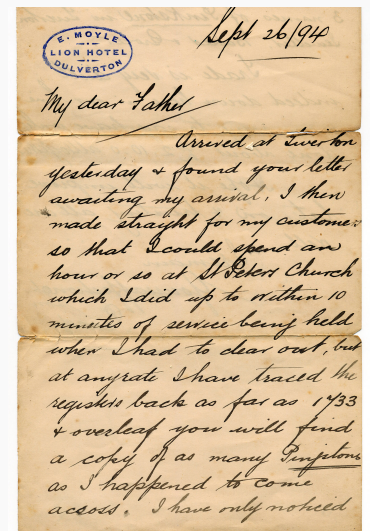


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third category we found that the writing style of the motoring journalist Jeremy Clarkson, although similar in many respects, varied slightly according to the kind of text he was writing. Thus virtually all of his weekly car tests in the *Sunday Times* start with a lengthy vignette before getting round to reviewing the car in question. But there are few such vignettes in his other more topical newspaper columns. And, in these newspaper examples, there are many more short paragraphs (containing only one or two sentences) than there are in his book chapters. (For more on this, see Hartley & Jeon, 2010. “What are writing signatures and where do they come from?” Unpublished paper available from the authors.)

Where do authors' writing styles come from?

If there is consistency within the writing styles of different authors, the final questions become: Where do these writing styles come from? How are they acquired? And when do they become relatively fixed? Perhaps the answer lies in being taught specific techniques at school. Apparently P. G. Wodehouse and Raymond Chandler were taught at one point by the same English schoolmaster – but this does not show in their prose! Perhaps we learn from reading other texts and absorbing ways of writing that appeal. Personally I find that *listening* to sculptured prose – of the sort presented on the BBC's 'Points of View' radio programme – immensely appealing (with the exception of Will Self). Clearly, we don't really know where such writing styles come from, and I think it unlikely that computer-aided forensic analyses will help us to find out. But I might be wrong.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the Impact of Social Science blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please review our [Comments Policy](#) if you have any concerns on posting a comment below.

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