

The College of  
**Arts&Sciences**

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Document Title: Voice, Genre, Style, Diction, Tone: A Musical Guide to Writing Style  
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Course Title: Queer Identity and Popular Music

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## Fall 2020 Knight Award for Writing Exercises and Handouts

The Knight Award for Writing Exercises recognizes excellence in short exercises and/or handouts designed to improve student writing. Appropriate topics may be drawn from the whole range of writing issues, large scale to small scale, such as development of theses, use of secondary sources, organization of evidence, awareness of audience, attention to sentence patterns (e.g., passive/active voice; coordination/ subordination), attention to diction, uses of punctuation, attention to mechanics (e.g., manuscript formats, apostrophes). Exercises and handouts may be developed for use in or out of class.

Submissions should comprise three parts: (1) A copy of the handouts or instructions that go to students. (2) An explanation of the exercise/ handout and of the principles behind it, addressed to future instructors who may use the material. (3) If possible, an example of a student response.

Submissions may range in length from one to four or five pages.

Winning entries will be deposited in a web accessible archive and made available to other instructors under a creative commons attribution, non-commercial license. (See [creativecommons.org](http://creativecommons.org) for more information about cc licensing. **No undergraduate student's writing will ever be published in this archive.**)

To facilitate future searching of the Institute's archive, we ask that you provide a brief descriptive abstract (about 75 words) of your document, and a short list of appropriate keywords that might not appear in the text. Examples might include terms like "rhetorical situation," "style," "citation," etc. **Any borrowings such as quotations from course texts or handbooks must be cited properly in the document itself.**

The two winning entries will receive \$350; second place winners (if any) will receive \$125.

Submissions are due by Monday, December 21. No exceptions can be made.

## Fall 2020 Knight Award for Writing Exercises and Handouts

~Please type or print clearly. Do not staple. Use paper clips only~

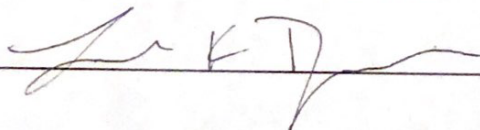
Instructor's name Lee Tyson

Dept & Course # FGSS 1114 Course title Queer Identity and Popular Music

Should I win a prize, I give the John S. Knight Institute permission to publish, quote from, and/or distribute copies of the writing exercises, and to distribute publicity to newspapers and other publications, local and/or national, about my winning the prize. I also grant the Knight Institute permission to deposit the writing exercises in a web accessible archive and make them available under a creative commons attribution, non-commercial license. I am prepared to send electronic versions of my text to Donna Newton ([dlo1@cornell.edu](mailto:dlo1@cornell.edu)) in the Knight Institute. I understand that I will receive the award for my prize-winning essay upon submission of the electronic text.

"Voice, Genre, Style, Diction, Tone: A Musical Guide to Writing Style"  
Title of Writing Exercises

Instructor's signature



Date

1/11/21

## FGSS 1114: Queer Identity and Popular Music

Instructor: Lee Tyson

### Handout: “Voice, Genre, Style, Diction, Tone: A Musical Guide to Writing Style”

**Abstract:** This handout explains and clarifies the distinctions among aspects of writing style (voice, genre, style, diction, and tone) through parallel concepts in music. While particularly useful in a writing course on musical topics, this handout offers an accessible introduction to writing style concepts for students who are attuned to music in their daily lives, as listeners or performers. An accompanying writing style analysis peer review activity is included.

**Keywords:** voice, genre, style, diction, tone, music, peer review, style analysis

**Rationale:** As a writer and writing instructor, I have had difficulty in finding a clear, concise, and detailed explanation of basic writing style concepts. Many writing handbooks, style guides, and online resources offer conflicting or vague definitions, especially confusing distinctions between writerly voice, style, and tone—a result of the concepts’ interconnectedness. While developing my own guide, I found myself drawing on my musical background and making connections to similar concepts in music. Ideas of musical voice, style, and tone generally have clear definitions and distinctions among them, and are therefore useful tools for clarifying parallel concepts in writing.

Describing the connections between concepts in writing and music offers students an alternative and perhaps more accessible approach to understanding writing style concepts, as parallel musical terms are more prevalent in the pop cultural landscape. Most individuals have some personal connection to music, as performers or as listeners, which can in turn facilitate a greater connection to writing. Examples from contemporary pop music are included for reference and relevance. In a music-centric course, a portion of class time could be devoted to guided listening through each aspect before turning to writing examples; training the ear can help train the eye.

After becoming familiar with the handout, students may then complete the accompanying writing style analysis peer review activity to develop and assess comprehension, while serving as feedback for essay revisions. It guides students to closely examine each element of writing style and its effectiveness. This worksheet can be adapted for analyzing assigned readings or serve as a self-assessment tool for student writing.

## Voice, Genre, Style, Diction, Tone: A Musical Guide to Writing Style

Developed by Lee Tyson for  
FGSS 1114: Queer Identity and Popular Music

The differences among voice, genre, style, tone, and diction in writing can be blurry, especially because they are all interconnected. You might hear writers say, “voice is your individual writing style” or “style is the tone of your writing,” which makes things more confusing. As a musician, I like to think of parallels in music as one way to clarify the distinctions between these terms:

**Voice** is your unique personality as a writer and it flavors everything you write. Just as you can have a unique speaking voice but talk about different subjects and in different ways, your writerly voice can appear whether you’re writing a news article, a research paper, or a poem. Beyoncé could sing R&B or opera, and it would still sound like Beyoncé. And like a trained singer or a person who has spoken throughout their life, a writer’s voice emerges through frequent writing. It is discovered and cultivated, but not forced or formulaic, so be patient!

**Genre** describes categories of writing that share specific conventions. Common non-fiction genres include essays, journalism, textbooks, memoir, biography, creative non-fiction, diaries, and scientific reports. Fiction genres include satire, romance, horror, fantasy, short stories, mythology, and humor.

Genre is also a term used to describe categories and subcategories of music. These classifications might be based on function (art [i.e. classical], popular, religious, traditional, video game), loose collections of shared traits (world music, electronic music), specific musical styles or techniques (disco, blues, flamenco; opera, symphony), or audiences (tween pop, adult contemporary); they often arise from musicians, audiences, and/or marketing.

**Style** is the manner of expression—the *how* rather than the *what* of writing—and emerges from the writing’s purpose. People often say that there are five common writing styles: expository, analytical, descriptive, narrative, and persuasive; however, I think of these as techniques that are part of style, but that don’t define it. These specific techniques are often associated with, but not exclusive to, specific genres (memoir is often narrative, an advertisement is often persuasive, academic essays are often analytical) and some genres are named after these techniques (narrative essay, persuasive essay). These techniques serve a purpose; for example, if you want to write about snakes (the *what* of writing), you can use any of these five techniques (you can describe snake physiology, narrate a snake’s daily routine, persuade someone to buy a snake) but your word choice (see Diction below) and attitude (see Tone below) matter (your narration can be simple or elaborate, your persuasion can be earnest or facetious).

I find it limiting to equate style with this specific range of techniques. It’s like defining musical style by instrument: rap often has beats, opera usually involves singers and an orchestra, rock music is guitar based—sure, but that only gets you so far (lots of genres use guitars!). I think of style in a broader sense, as the overall collection of writing elements, the purposes they serve, and how they

seek to engage an audience. Each aspect of language, mechanics, organization, and writing techniques influences style. Diction and tone, which I describe below, have a significant impact on style because they are perhaps the most variable. For style, consistency is key.

As in writing, a musical style is a manner of expression. For instance, disco is a popular music style that expresses themes of artificiality and transcendence through a collection of musical features. This includes specific instruments (drums, voice, violins, synthesizer, bass) but also how those instruments are played (a driving four-on-the-floor drumbeat, soaring violins, a funky bass, simple and repetitive vocals). So, you will definitely hear a disco style in disco as a genre, but you'll also hear a disco style's influence in Harry Style's "Adore You" and Lizzo's "Juice."

**Diction** is an element of style and means word choice or vocabulary. It helps to convey a writer's tone and meaning. Types of diction include formal, informal (everyday language), and vernacular (specific to a particular group or region). A writer must be conscious of any given word's denotation (standardized meaning or dictionary definition) and connotation (cultural, personal, or emotional associations) in order to assess whether that word is appropriate for a given purpose. A writer can choose to include or exclude jargon (technical terminology particular to a subject), slang (informal in-group language), or idioms (phrases or expressions with a non-literal meaning) based on their audience and desired self-presentation. Things to avoid include clichés, vagueness, wordiness, and unnecessary complexity.

I compare diction to the kind of musical materials a musician might choose—things you might learn in a music theory class (and beyond, since these classes typically only teach music by dead, white, German, male composers of classical music). This includes notes and rhythms that can be combined to make melodies, harmonies, ornamentation (musical flourishes), hooks (a memorable musical phrase), riffs (repeated patterns), and so on. The titular phrase in Donna Summer's "Love To Love You Baby" conveys the topic of love (denotation) and implies sexual desire (connotation); additionally, her simple, repeated melody emphasizes the driving, consistent erotic desire.

**Tone** is the use of words to convey one's attitude towards a topic. Much like how the tone of one's voice can affect meaning and interpretation, tone in writing can convey a feeling or viewpoint. As in verbal expression, tone can be described as formal or informal, optimistic or pessimistic, enthusiastic or calm, apathetic or impassioned, serious or humorous, sarcastic or sincere, intimate or detached, and so on. Certain genres of writing are typically associated with certain tones: journalism is often serious and detached, academic writing is often formal and critical, creative writing is often intimate; however, these lines are frequently blurred. Tone should be in service of the writing's purpose and audience engagement.

In music, "tone" is usually a term that means musical pitch, so we can think of musical quality or timbre as a parallel to writerly tone. Musical sounds can be smooth or harsh, calm or excited, somber or elated, delicate or rough, and so on. Certain musical genres and/or styles are often associated with certain musical qualities and the attitudes they evoke: punk is often harsh and emphatic, folk music may be bouncy and jovial, and disco typically has thick, lavish textures.

## Writing Style Analysis: Peer Review

Essay author's name:

Reviewer's name:

What is the essay's overall story or message, in your understanding? Summarize briefly in your own words.

What writing techniques are present in the essay (i.e. exposition [explanation], analysis, description, narrative, persuasion)? There is likely more than one.

How is the essay organized? In what order do the techniques you list above appear? Are they mixed?

How does this organization impact the overall narrative?

Would a different organization, or rearranging specific elements, strengthen the overall narrative?

How would you describe the paragraphs? Are they generally similar or varied? Are they short or long? Do they each cohere around a single idea or are there paragraphs that aren't focused?

How do these qualities or features impact the writing?

Would changes to any of the paragraphs strengthen the overall narrative?

How would you describe the sentence structures? Are they long, short, or a mix? Are they consistently varied or similar in structure?

How do these features of sentence structure impact the narrative?

Would any changes to sentence structure better support the writing?

How would you describe the overall diction, using one or more adjectives? Is it varied or consistent?

What are three specific words the author uses that stand out to you? List them.

Are there any words or phrases that are unclear, cliché, or seem out of place? If so, what are they?

Are there any sentences that seem too wordy, vague, or unnecessarily complex? If so, what are they?

Do you have any other suggestions about diction that would enhance the writing?

How would you describe the overall tone, using one or more adjectives? Are there multiple tones at play?

What is one phrase or sentence that conveys this tone? Quote it.

Does the tone suit the overall narrative, or are there places where the tone doesn't match the narrative?

Any other comments or suggestions regarding style?