



The
University
Of
Sheffield.

School
Of
English.



Support Materials: Practical Stylistics

Practical Stylistics

In the second semester of your first year you take your first core module in language and literature: **Practical Stylistics**. This module is your first introduction to the key approaches and techniques which are central to our degree programme. Broadly, we are interested in the **style** through which writers of literary (and some non-literary) texts express themselves; why they have chosen the words they have, as opposed to alternatives, and why they have arranged them in this particular order. The study of style thus involves the application of linguistic concepts and frameworks to literature. This is known as **stylistics**. The module is called Practical Stylistics because it not only engages you in hands-on analysis of specific texts, but also encourages you to be creative in coming up with your own examples.

Sample Exercise

Consider the opening to Anne Tyler's novel *Ladder of Years* and the questions below:

1. This all started on a Saturday morning in May, one of those warm spring days that smell like clean linen. Delia had gone to the supermarket to shop for the week's meals. She was standing in the produce section, languidly choosing a bunch of celery. Grocery stores always made her reflective. Why was it, she was wondering, that celery was not called "corduroy plant"? That would be much more colourful. And garlic bulbs should be "moneybags," because their shape reminded her of the sacks of gold coins in folktales.
 - Who is speaking here? Whose thoughts are we presented with?
 - What impression do you get of Delia from this opening?

Now think about a possible alternative way in which this opening could have been written:

2. This all started on a Saturday morning in May, one of those warm spring days that smell like clean linen. I had gone to the supermarket to shop for the week's meals. I was standing in the produce section, languidly choosing a bunch of celery. Grocery stores always made me reflective. Why was it, I was wondering, that celery was not called "corduroy plant"? That would be much more colourful. And garlic bulbs should be "moneybags," because their shape reminded me of the sacks of gold coins in folktales.

- Who is speaking here? Whose thoughts are we presented with?
- Now what impression do you get of the central character? How is it different to that in passage 1?
- Why do you think Anne Tyler chose the actual opening over an alternative such as passage 2? Which is more likely to engage you and make you read on?

This example illustrates the difference that a writer's stylistic choices can make on the reader's interpretation of a text. In fact only five words have been altered between passage 1 and passage 2, yet the potential change in effect is huge. Specifically, the example shows the importance of **narrative point of view**; that is, who is telling the story, and the perspective through which characters, situations and events in a narrative are seen.

Along with point of view, other topics we cover in the module include:

- nouns and noun phrases
- verbs, time and tense
- sounds, rhyme and metre
- narrative structure
- speech and thought presentation
- metaphor

In each case we look at how the small choices writers make can have enormous significance. The module is assessed by online tasks and exercises throughout the semester, followed by a final essay in which you choose your own text to work on. We will introduce you to the key principles of stylistics which you will take with you throughout the rest of your degree: to be rigorous and detailed in your stylistic analysis, and to consider carefully the function of the formal features you notice.