

Major Divisions of Ancient Style Theory

Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 3.1-12 **Post-Aristotelian Rhetorics**

“Let the virtue (*areté*) of style be defined as to be clear . . . and not flat nor above the dignity of the subject but appropriate” (*Rhet.* 3.2.1)

4 “Virtues” (*aretai*) of Style:
 Clarity
 Ornamentation
 [Not too ornamented, too “poetic”]
 Propriety

“The first principle (*arkhé*) of style is to speak [‘good’] Greek (*to hellênizein*)” (*Rhet.* 3.5.1) Purity (*hellênismos, latinitas*)

Aspects of Expression

| | <i>Style “Types”</i> | | | | | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|--|-------------------------|----------------------|-------------|--|-------------------------------------|---------------------|---------|--------------|-------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Diction | <table border="0" style="width: 100%;"> <tr> <td style="width: 33%;">“Standard” Terms Tropes (e.g., metaphor)</td> <td style="width: 33%; text-align: center;">Aristotle (2 types)¹</td> <td style="width: 33%; text-align: center;">Cicero, etc. (3)</td> <td style="width: 33%; text-align: center;">Demetrius (4)</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Composition</td> <td>Figures of speech/thought Periodic sentence structure</td> <td style="text-align: center;">“Competitive” (<i>agônistikê</i>)</td> <td style="text-align: center;">“Forceful” Grand</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Euphony</td> <td>Prose Rhythm</td> <td style="text-align: center;">“Written” (<i>graphikê</i>)</td> <td style="text-align: center;">Grand Middle Elegant Plain</td> </tr> </table> | “Standard” Terms Tropes (e.g., metaphor) | Aristotle (2 types)¹ | Cicero, etc. (3) | Demetrius (4) | Composition | Figures of speech/thought Periodic sentence structure | “Competitive” (<i>agônistikê</i>) | “Forceful” Grand | Euphony | Prose Rhythm | “Written” (<i>graphikê</i>) | Grand Middle Elegant Plain |
| “Standard” Terms Tropes (e.g., metaphor) | Aristotle (2 types)¹ | Cicero, etc. (3) | Demetrius (4) | | | | | | | | | | |
| Composition | Figures of speech/thought Periodic sentence structure | “Competitive” (<i>agônistikê</i>) | “Forceful” Grand | | | | | | | | | | |
| Euphony | Prose Rhythm | “Written” (<i>graphikê</i>) | Grand Middle Elegant Plain | | | | | | | | | | |

¹ See *Rhet.* 3.12, and R. Graff, “Reading and the ‘Written Style’ in Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*” (2001).

Aristotle's Theory of Prose Style (*Rhet.* 3.1-12)

Lexis is Aristotle's word for verbal expression or "style," the subject treated in ch. 1-12 of *Rhetoric* 3. One aspect of Aristotle's account that has been especially troubling to commentators is the sense that he doesn't really want to treat style at all: In the same moment he introduces the subject of style (and delivery), he says that "true justice seeks nothing more in a speech than neither to offend nor to entertain; for to contend by means of the facts themselves is just, with the result that everything except demonstration is incidental; but, [delivery, also style?] has great power. . . because of the corruption of the audience" (3.1). Such an attitude occasionally shows through in later chapters, which are otherwise seemingly quite appreciative of good prose style, especially in its capacity to facilitate learning. He occasionally comments, however, on properly sensual or aesthetic elements as well.

Later style theory appears to have been heavily influenced by Aristotle's account – borrowing and refining the terminology and the divisions of the subject that appear first in *Rhetoric* 3.

I. Basic Divisions of the Subject of Prose Style

A. Diction (Word Choice)

“Standard” Terms (3.2, and passim)

Tropes (e.g., metaphor, simile) (3.2-4, 3.6-7, 3.10-11)

B. Composition (Sentence Construction)

Figures of speech/thought (e.g., antithesis) (3.9, and passim)

Periodic sentence structure (3.9)

C. Euphony (Sound Quality)

Prose rhythm (3.8)

D. “Urbanities” or “Well-Liked Expressions” (*Ta asteia*) (3.10-11)

A category unique to Aristotle, joining considerations of diction (metaphor), composition (antithesis), and even “thought-elements” (enthymemes are called “urbane” in 3.10).

Especially important here are metaphors that cast the idea as though it were in action, animated, and thereby bringing it “before-the-eyes”.

II. The “Virtue” of Style (*Aretê tês lexeôs*)

“Let excellence (*aretê*) of style be defined as
to be clear

(speech is a kind of sign, so if it does not make clear it fails to perform its function)

and neither flat

nor above the dignity of the subject

but appropriate” (*Rhet.* 3.2.1)

When this definition is decoded, it appears that, for Aristotle, *clarity* is fundamental to good prose – a sort of *sine qua non*. Yet, clarity alone is not sufficient. Aristotle asserts that good style requires a degree of elevation or ornamentation – but *not too* much elevation and certainly not all the fancy frills that make poetry “poetic.” (The unwelcome “excess” in diction is treated under heading of “frigidities” in 3.3)

In the end, then, *a virtuous prose style will be clear and occupy a mean between poetry (which is the highest stylistic “register”) and everyday talk (which is the lowest).*

III. Principle of the Mean in Style

The characteristically “Aristotelian” principle of the golden mean works through nearly all aspects of Aristotle’s account of prose style. For example:

| | Deficiency | “Happy Mean” | Excess |
|-------------|---|---|---|
| Diction | Only “standard terms” = “flat” | Standard terms + Metaphor (+ <i>some</i> more exotic terms) | Rare, poetic words = “frigid” |
| Euphony | Unrhythmical = “unlimited”, unpleasant | Paeonic rhythm, not too precise = “limited”, aids comprehension, & pleasing | Metrical (poetry) = “overlimited”, artificial |
| “Ideation”? | Superficial expression = unpleasant, nothing learned | Urbane expressions (<i>asteia</i>) = pleasing, instructive | Unintelligible exprsn = unpleasant, no learning |

IV. Appropriateness of Style (*To prepon*)

Appropriateness announced as a constituent of stylistic “excellence” at 3.2.

Bk. 3, ch. 7 is devoted to the subject:

“The *lexis* will be appropriate if it:
expresses emotion (*pathetikê*) and
[expresses] character (*êthikê*) and
is proportional (*analogon*) to the subject matter” (3.7.1)

V. Aristotle on Metaphor

Aristotle treats metaphor as a particular type of word (*onoma*); thus, the device falls under the category of diction, being a matter of *word choice*.¹

In the *Poetics*, he defines & enumerates 4 different sorts of metaphor. (The relevant passage can be found in our translation of *On Rhetoric*, pp. 275-277):

“Metaphor is the movement of an alien name from either genus to species or from species to genus or from species to species or by analogy”

¹ Technical terminology for style was rudimentary in the period. For all we can make out, Aristotle was a pioneer, but still quite inexact in certain key respects. He has no difficulty, for example, treating similes or even the figure of hyperbole as “metaphors” (see *Rhet.* 3.4, 3.11).

In the *Rhetoric*, it turns out that for prose he favors the “analogical” variety, in which “the second thing is related to the first as the fourth is to the third; for [a writer or speaker] will say the fourth for the second or the second for the fourth” e.g.,

The cup is the shield of Dionysius

OR

The shield is the cup of Ares

The spring has been taken from the year

[*For*: young men were killed and so vanished from the city]

Recommendation of metaphor as part of word choice/diction

Don't want types of words that are too high-sounding or exotic.

But also don't want language that is too plain or “flat.”

Metaphors have *a bit* of exoticism

But are “used in conversation by everyone” (3.2)

hence, metaphors are the chief resource for rhetorical prose

Operation of (effective, appropriate) metaphors

A metaphor generates surprise (see 3.11.6),

followed shortly thereafter by recognition of the underlying analogy

This recognition is a sort of learning

Learning is pleasurable, and more pleasurable when achieved quickly,

hence, metaphor, bringing quick learning, is very pleasurable (3.10-11)

Some recommended sources for further study of Aristotle on Style & Delivery:

There are the standard interpretive summaries of the chapters on style in Kennedy's *Art of Persuasion in Greece*, J. W. H. Atkins, *Literary Criticism in Antiquity*, vol. 1 (Cambridge UP, 1934) and especially E. M. Cope, *An Introduction to Aristotle's Rhetoric* (1867). Of other articles/chapters on Aristotle's theory of style, nearly all treat rather specific aspects; the following are especially helpful generally accessible.

Halliwell, S. "Style and Sense in Aristotle's Rhetoric, Bk. 3." *Revue Internationale de Philosophie* 47 (1993): 50-69.

Fahnestock, Jeanne. "Aristotle and Theories of Figuration." In Alan Gross and Arthur Walzer, eds., *Rereading Aristotle's Rhetoric*. Southern Illinois UP, 2000. [On Walter Library Reserve]

Graff, Richard. "Reading and the 'Written Style' in Aristotle's Rhetoric." *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 31 (Fall 2001): 19-44. (*item posted on course Moodle site*)

Graff, Richard. "Prose versus Poetry in Greek Theories of Style." *Rhetorica* 23 (2005): 303-335. (*item posted on course Moodle site*)

There are many many articles on metaphor in the *Rhetoric* and *Poetics*, but three good recent ones are:

Kirby, John T. "Aristotle on Metaphor." *American Journal of Philology* 118 (1997): 517-554.

Moran, Richard. "Artifice and Persuasion: The Work of Metaphor in the *Rhetoric*." In A. Rorty (ed.), *Essays on Aristotle's Rhetoric*. Berkeley: U of California Press, 1996. 385-398.

Newman, Sara. "Aristotle's Notion of 'Bringing-Before-the-Eyes': Its Contributions to Aristotelian and Contemporary Conceptualizations of Metaphor, Style, and Audience." *Rhetorica* 20 (2002): 1-23.

Two good studies of Aristotle's views on delivery are:

Fortenbaugh, William W. "Aristotle's Platonic Attitude Toward Delivery." *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 19 (1986): 242-254.

Sonkowski, Robert P. "An Aspect of Delivery in Ancient Rhetorical Theory." *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 90 (1959): 256-274.