

Readerly Expectations and Writerly Style

by Sasha Johnson

A great story is often buried under strange words or an unfamiliar style. Looking back to an older style of writing can reveal some interesting information about the audience and their expectations of what a good story should be. Not only modern authors have to be mindful of their readers; even Shakespeare and Dickens had to write for their audiences. A little analysis of prose stylistics can reveal a lot about the assumptions both author and reader are making.

Consider the example of Jules Verne's 19th-century stylistics. Unlike most modern children's books, which begin *in medias res*, Verne's classic 19th-century novel, *20,000 Leagues under the Sea*, prefaces the meat of the story with a sensible introduction, which serves to orient the reader to the specifics of the tale. The dogma of modern editorial stylistics insists on a catchy first line; whereas, Verne's entire first chapter functions to slowly draw you in with a voice of informed authority and realism, only to finally hook you with a fantastic claim in the last line. After that, you simply must go on to chapter two. His writing assumes a readership of practical, serious-minded individuals, who avidly devour newspapers and maintain a sense of world affairs, and who, nonetheless, nurse a wonderful penchant for the bizarre. The first chapter simulates a travelogue or journalism, communicating strange-but-true current affairs, presenting a hulk of evidence so that the fantastic element of the plot approaches believability.

How you conceive of your reader has a great influence on how you develop your style. There is a delicate balance between writing just as you like and writing for your audience. If you try too hard to please your audience, you run the risk of losing the soul of your work. If you write for yourself and no one else, there is the danger of wrapping your writing in a personal mystique which needs to be decoded or of leaving too much unsaid. A good editor or a personal friend may be able to help you by proofreading your work and offering suggestions about difficult passages. You may have a great story which just needs a little fleshing out to fill in the gaps or to develop a metaphor for greater clarity. You may accept some editorial suggestions and turn others down, but in the end, only you will be able to make the final decision about your work. Is it true to the purpose? Does it express your thoughts the way you intended? Perhaps you expected your readers to work a little harder for their story, or perhaps you wanted to bring it to them piece by piece. But then, what do your readers expect from you?