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Rhetorical Style Analysis of the Statement of Purpose (SP) Genre: A Shared Understanding of Lexis in Successful SPs

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Abstract

The author examined the rhetorical style of twenty-four successful SPs submitted to the MS in technical communication program at a U.S. university by employing rhetorical stylistic analysis as a research method. To understand the role of style in the participants' SPs, the author looked for a limited set of stylistic markers—personal pronouns, contractions, sentences, and paragraphs—as she analyzed each SP sentence by sentence. Results showed that the applicants made their SPs personal and formal by using first-person personal pronouns heavily and contractions sparingly. They used a combination of long and short sentences and paragraphs to create an engaging style. They used simple and loose sentences predominantly to maintain clarity and lucidity. The stylistic trends found in the sample can help prospective Master's students use rhetorical style effectively in their SPs and educators in technical communication and composition discuss this student-writing academic genre with their undergraduate students.

Introduction

The statement of purpose (SP), also known as a *personal statement* or PS in the United States (Barton, Ariail, & Smith, 2004; Bekins, Huckin, & Kijak, 2004; Ding, 2007) and a *motivation letter* in some other places (Lopez-Ferrero & Bach, 2016), is an important student writing genre (Samraj & Monk, 2008) and academic self-promotional genre (Bhatia, 1993). However, we should note here that the SP genre is different from other academic writing or self-promotional genres in some ways. For example, in the SP genre, the applicants are not under any obligation to follow any stringent rule, structure, and format like research abstracts and job application letters (Ding, 2007). In most cases, the applicants are not given any substantive instructions to write their SPs, and the SPs are shaped by "local cultural values and national academic traditions" (Swales & Feak, 1994, p. 229). The SP plays an important role in graduate applications (Ding, 2007), and it helps in initiating a relationship with a particular unknown audience or discourse community (for example, an admission committee). According to Miller's (1984) genre definition, the SP genre can be understood as follows: the SP is written in response to a situation that recurs in society, such as applying for admission to graduate school. This rhetorical situation further gives rise to an exigence (an individual's need to submit an application package),

which in turn motivates an individual to engage in social action (such as writing an SP). That action mediates private intention (the individual's desire to gain admission and make a better future for himself or herself) and a public need (a university's need to recruit students and a society's need to educate its citizens) (Malone & Wright, 2018, p. 124).

Previous scholars have focused on the SP genre primarily to analyze the rhetorical moves and steps—one type of structural analysis—used by applicants to achieve their goals in their SPs (Barton et al., 2004; Bekins et al., 2004; Brown, 2004; Ding, 2007; Henry & Roseberry, 2001; Lopez-Ferrero & Bach, 2016; Samraj & Monk, 2008). A few scholars conducted a stylistic analysis on other promotional genres, such as grant proposals (Khadka, 2014; Tseng, 2011). However, no researchers have tried solely to understand applicants' rhetorical style (the closest equivalent is *elocutio* in Latin, which translates to "speaking out," or *lexis* in Greek, which translates to "thought" and "word"), which is not only ornamenting (Kennedy, 2007, p. 197) or "the dress[ing] of thought" (Corbett & Connors, 1999, p. 338), but also "putting ideas into words" (Cunningham, Malone, & Rothschild, 2019, p. 160), in SPs.

Stylistic analysis is a component of genre analysis; genre analysis is concerned with two main aspects: firstly, common and conventional textual features contributing to the pedagogical understanding of genre in terms of form and function and secondly, "socio-cultural" and "cognitive constraints" prevalent in a specific field (Bhatia, 1993, p. 16). The stylistic analysis is one way of analyzing textual features primarily focusing on lexico-grammatical features (i.e., primarily a statistical analysis of grammatical features and common language usage in a genre), text-patterning (i.e., an analysis of syntax or language choices), and structural interpretation of the text genre (i.e., structural interpretation of moves and steps in a genre) (Casañ-Pitarch & Calvo-Ferrer, 2015, p. 77). In other words, a rhetorical stylistic analysis reveals how language works in a system (in my study, the SP genre) and what kinds of meanings a certain type of text conveys (Jeffries & McIntyre, 2010). With an aim to inform prospective graduate students on how to employ an effective style in their SPs in order to persuade the admission committee and to explore the SP genre rhetorically or specifically to analyze the SP texts through the interpretation of language (Simpson, 2004), I attempted to determine my participants' use of rhetorical style in their SPs. Because stylistic analysis might reveal the good qualities of the writing (Li, 2009), I assumed that my analysis will help identify the effective stylistic features in my successful SP sample. Additionally, I hope that my study will inspire the educators in technical communication and composition to integrate this genre into their courses; students will learn through either SP analysis or SP writing how to use style as a persuasive strategy to influence an audience.

I conducted a stylistic analysis of the SPs submitted by former and current graduate students at a public research university in the United States. They wrote their SPs to gain admission to a Master's (MS) program in technical

communication. The university does not offer a doctoral degree in technical communication, but it offers both Bachelor of Science and Master of Science degrees in technical communication. To understand the role of style in their SPs, I looked for a limited set of stylistic markers (personal pronouns, contractions, sentence length and variety, and paragraph length) as I analyzed each SP sentence by sentence. I organize this article in the following way. I first provide my style-related literature review on the SP genre. Then, I explain the approaches taken for analyzing style and discuss the findings from that analysis. Finally, I conclude this article with a summary of the major stylistic trends found in the SPs and suggestions for future research on the SP genre.

Rhetorical Style in the SP Genre

In the scholarly literature, I was not able to find explicit research on style in the SP genre. However, some popular books and websites provide recipe-type guidance on style so that prospective applicants can write their SPs. For example, Mumby (1962) emphasized “clarity,” “originality,” and “content” (p. 130) in a winning SP. He stated that an SP should contain “affirmative statements” (p. 130) and include only appropriate (relevant) content devoid of controversy and jocularity. Regarding clarity, he mentioned that the SPs should be free of mechanical errors and be perfect grammatically. Stewart (2002) extended this conversation by stating that SPs have a high success rate to the audience when applicants use first person, choose words characteristic of formal writing, avoid discipline-specific jargon and creative writing tactics, apply conventional typefaces and fonts, and adhere to word and page limits in their SPs. Overall, he stated that the applicants should avoid “unconventional” and “gimmicky” writing styles (p. 17).

In her textual analysis of SPs, Ding (2007) considered the lexical strategies taken by applicants. She conducted a genre analysis of SPs (n=30), both edited and unedited, submitted to medical and dental schools. Along with a move analysis, she paid special attention to lexical features (analysis of words) to understand what kinds of words and word structures differentiated the edited and unedited SPs. She used concordance software, Concapp and Concordance, to run frequency word counts on edited and unedited SPs submitted to medical or dental schools in the United States. She found that a higher percentage of binary noun phrases related to medicine- or dentistry-related content was used in the edited SPs, whereas a lower percentage was used in the unedited SPs. More irrelevant content, particularly noun phrases expressing content irrelevant to the medicine or dentistry field, were used in the unedited SPs.

Previous studies indicate a dearth of research in analyzing the SP genre from a stylistic perspective. Mumby (1962) and Stewart (2009) offered some advice regarding style, but that advice is not objective (or perhaps lacks practical application). For example, Mumby (1962) stated that prospective graduate applicants should maintain clarity and originality in their SPs; however, his

definition of clarity and originality and their applications in the practical sense are difficult to understand. Also, previous research studies did not thoroughly analyze the SPs graphologically, morphologically, syntactically, semantically, and lexically. The use of pronouns, contractions, sentences, and paragraphs in the SP genre has never been studied, to the best of my knowledge. Therefore, I decided to examine my participants' use of diction (personal pronouns and contractions), sentences (length and types), and paragraphing (length) in their SPs.

Methods

This article is part of a larger Institutional Review Board (IRB)-approved project studying the shared understanding of rhetorical moves, appeals, and style in SPs. Over a period of three months (August 2018–October 2018), I collected a corpus of twenty-seven SPs from both current and former students, including my own SP, submitted to the MS in technical communication program at the same US university. For my stylistic analysis, I examined only twenty-four SPs because the other three SPs (including my SP) were used for the pilot study of the rhetorical-move analysis—one of the parts of my larger study. Also, my sample included only successful SPs submitted to the department from 2005 (the year in which the program began) to 2019 (the year in which I began my research for this study). Because some of the current and former students did not allow me to access their SPs, my sample does not include all the successful SPs submitted to the department since 2005.

The SPs in my sample were written in response to one of two prompts. From 2005 to 2011, applicants were prompted to write a letter of application to the department chair and, in that letter, to state their reasons for applying to the MS program and express their interest in a graduate teaching assistant (GTA) position if they desired funding. From 2012 to 2019, applicants were prompted as follows: "Statement of Purpose: Please type or paste your personal statement of 1,000 words or less here."

For the stylistic analysis, I followed primarily the subsets of stylistic features proposed by Corbett and Connors (1999), but I did not consider all the features in my study. Corbett and Connors (1999) outlined seven features—kind of diction, length of sentences, kinds of sentences, variety of sentence patterns, means of articulating sentences, uses of figures of speech, and paragraphing—one should look for "when analyzing prose style" (p. 360). In my study, I chose four stylistic markers—kind of diction, length of sentences, kinds of sentences, and paragraphing—to determine the stylistic trends followed by my twenty-four participants in their SPs. For my analysis of diction, I considered each occurrence of a personal pronoun and contraction as the unit of analysis. For the analysis of sentence length and sentence type, I considered each sentence as the unit of analysis. For the analysis of paragraph length, I considered each paragraph as my unit of analysis.

Kind of Diction

Corbett and Connors (1999) suggested looking for the following features of diction:

- Latinate (usually polysyllabic) or Anglo-Saxon (usually monosyllabic);
- Formal or informal;
- Common words or jargon;
- Passive or active voice;
- General or specific;
- Abstract or concrete; and
- Referential (denotative) or emotive (connotative). (p. 360)

All these features aid the researcher in analyzing writing style, but, in this article, I focus only on the formal or informal feature for my diction analysis. Regarding formal or informal feature, Corbett and Connors (1999) stated that "Judgments about the formality or informality of a person's style are made largely on the basis of the level of diction used" (p. 361). The four widely accepted levels of diction are as follows: *formal*, *informal*, *colloquial*, and *slang* (Jones, 1998, p. 87). However, the identification of accurate levels of diction in a writing might often be subjective; for example, Jones (1998) stated that "*colloquial* refers to conversation or diction used to achieve conversational prose" (p. 88) and *slang* is "the most informal" diction and sometimes slang and colloquial dictions overlap. Probably, because of this subjectivity, Markel and Selber (2018) cautioned that there is "no standard definition of levels of formality" (p. 228). Even Jones' (1998) definitions of *formal* and *informal* dictions are subjective: "formal means following an established form, custom, or rule" (p. 87) and "informal refers to ordinary, casual, or familiar use" (p. 88).

Therefore, in order to use the formal-informal distinction in my objective approach to diction analysis, I relied on the definition of formal style in SUNY Geneseo's Writing Guide (Schacht & Easton, 2008). This guide gives us the quantifiable markers for analyzing the formality of writing style. The guide suggested that formal prose has the following features:

- Conservative (adherence to professional writers' and editors' stamp approval);
- Contraction-free (absence of contractions);
- Restrained (absence of coarse language and slang);
- Impersonal (absence of personal pronouns); and
- Properly documented (adherence to standard forms of documentation)

Among these features, I focused on contractions and personal pronouns for my diction analysis. Because in academic writing genres (for example, research papers) contractions are scarcely used (Babanoğlu, 2017), I assumed that it would be worth studying whether the SP writers used them frequently or

infrequently. Additionally, contractions are easily quantifiable, and the previous scholars hardly studied them "as a linguistic item" in academic writing genres (Babanoğlu, 2017, pp. 56–57). Although SUNY Geneseo's Writing Guide (Schacht & Easton, 2008) claims that formal writing follows an impersonal style by avoiding "I," "me," and "my," I was confident that the SP writers used personal pronouns heavily because it is hard to state an applicant's purpose for graduate school in the third person. Therefore, I intended to understand the quantity and types of personal pronouns used by the applicants to establish a personal style and the frequency of contractions used to establish either a formal or informal writing style in their SPs.

Use of Personal Pronouns

Pronoun usage indicates the way audiences are perceived and conceptualized by speakers and writers in academic discourse (Fortanet-Gomez, 2004)—or, as in my study, how my participants conceptualized the audience (admission committee) of their SPs. More specifically, considering Casañ-Pitarch's (2016) framework, I intended to analyze how personal pronouns were used in a rhetorically persuasive style. In my analysis of personal pronouns (taking the place of specific persons, groups, or things in terms of person, i.e., first, second, and third, number, gender, and case), I followed the classification systems of Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech, and Svartvik (1972, 1985) and Casañ-Pitarch (2016) (see Table 1). I treat possessive pronouns and reflexive pronouns as types of personal pronouns. Moreover, I separate the possessive pronouns into possessive determiners (*my*, *her*, *their*, etc.) and possessive pronouns (*mine*, *hers*, *theirs*, etc., sometimes called nominal pronouns or absolute possessive pronouns).

Person	Number and Gender		Subject	Object	Possessive		Reflexive
					Determiner	Pronoun	
First	Singular		I	Me	My	Mine	Myself
	Plural		We	Us	Our	Ours	Ourselves
Second	Singular/Plural		You	You	Your	Yours	Yourself
Third	Singular	Feminine	She	Her	Her	Hers	Herself
		Masculine	He	Him	His	His	Himself
		Nonpersonal/ Neuter/Neutral	It	It	Its	Its	Itself
	Plural		They	Them	Their	Theirs	Themselves

Table 1: Model of personal pronouns used in this thesis (Quirk et al., 1972, p. 209; Quirk et al., 1985, p. 346; Casañ-Pitarch, 2016, p. 39)

First- and second-person pronouns are directly related to the author and the audience, so I focused on these two types of pronouns in this study along with third-person personal pronouns. Also, first-person pronouns help in understanding the "specific attitude" of a writer's involvement or responsibility (Casañ-Pitarch, 2016), and second-person pronouns involve directness

(Williamson, 2006). Third-person pronouns, though not directly related to the reader and the writer, still play a major role in understanding the style of a person's writing by showing whether the writer uses "indirectness" (Cornish, 2005). Similarly, the study of neutral pronouns (i.e., *it*, *its*, and *itself*, which refer to things, animals, or ideas) gives us an idea how many times a writer uses neutral pronoun forms to refer to "direct and indirect ideas or things within the text without revealing the identity of these" (Casañ-Pitarch, 2016, p. 41). These pronouns are traditionally classified as neuter or nonpersonal in grammatical gender, and I included them, along with other third-person personal pronouns, in my study. Although Klammer and Schulz (1992, p. 88) stated that only pronoun person, gender, and number are relevant when studying diction, I also considered case: "case is determined by the pronoun's function in the sentence—subjective, objective, or possessive" (Kolln & Gray, 2019, p. 208).

For both quantitative and qualitative analysis of pronouns, I followed Casañ-Pitarch's (2016) four-step protocol:

1. In the first step, I counted the personal pronouns in each SP; results were presented as frequencies (average);
2. In the second stage, I classified those pronouns into categories according to case and/or some other property: subject pronoun, object pronoun, possessive pronoun, possessive determiner, and reflexive pronoun;
3. In the third stage, I determined each pronoun's person, number, and gender; and
4. Finally, I compiled the results in a tabulated form and qualitatively analyzed the main uses of pronouns in the SP genre and the reason behind emphasizing certain types of pronouns.

Use of Contractions

I chose to analyze the use of contractions along with personal pronouns to find out if the applicants attempted to create a formal or informal style in their SPs. Although the definition of a contraction is widely accepted, I use Jones's (1998) definition in this study: "A contraction is a shortening of a word, syllable, or word group by omission of a sound or letter. An apostrophe is used to substitute for the missing letter or letters: *can't* for *cannot*; *shouldn't* for *should not*" (p. 99).

Not only does SUNY Geneseo's Writing Guide (Schacht & Easton, 2008) confirm that contraction-free writing belongs to the formal style, but also other scholars, such as Jones (1998) and Kolln and Gray (2019), argue that contraction-free writing creates a formal writing style. Jones (1998) stated that, if a writer wants to "achieve an informal style" (p. 99), then he or she should use contractions. Kolln and Gray (2019) also stated that contractions aid in a "more conversational, less formal" writing style (p. 182).

In this study, I modified and used the categories suggested by Kolln and Gray (2019) when I was identifying contractions in my sample:

- Negatives, for example, *don't* (do not)*, can't* (cannot)*, isn't* (is not), *hasn't* (has not), *shouldn't* (should not), and *won't* (will not);
- Main verbs (usually *be* or *have*) or helping verbs (i.e., either primary auxiliaries, *be*, *have,* and *do*, or modal auxiliaries), for example, *you're* (you are), *I've* (I have), *he's* (either he is or he has), *she'd* (she had or she would), *it's* (it is or it has), and *I'm* (I am); and
- Other, for example, *ma'am* (contraction of a noun), *o'clock* (contraction of a preposition and omission of an article), and *'tis* (contraction of a pronoun).

I did not expect to find any contractions in the "Other" category in my sample of SPs because these contractions are fairly uncommon in most writing situations.

Length of Sentences

I used MS Word to determine the length of each sentence in each participant's SP by counting the words in a given text by using spaces between words as separators, when I highlighted each sentence separately. The length of each sentence was measured in number of words. At first, I calculated the average length of sentence (total number of words/total number of sentences). Then, I identified the longest and shortest sentence (in number of words) in each SP. Lastly, I calculated above- and below-average sentence lengths following Corbett and Connors (1999). They define an above-average sentence as more than ten words over the average sentence and a below-average sentence as five words or more below the average sentence (p. 370). The goal of this quantitative-sentence-length analysis was to make a "tenable generalization" (Corbett & Connors, 1999, p. 361) about my participants' use of sentence length in their SPs and to understand the relationship between sentence length and rhetorical situation. Also, my goal was to understand if applicants used varying sentence lengths in their SPs because variations in sentence length play an important role in establishing an effective style (Jones, 1998). Jones (1998) believed that, particularly in technical writing, "too many short sentences" create a "choppy style" and "too many long sentences" create a "wordy style" (p. 155).

Sentence Type

To understand the syntactical style of the SPs in my sample, I focused on the grammatical and rhetorical types of sentences. The grammatical types of sentences are simple (one independent clause), complex (one independent clause and one or more dependent clauses), compound (two or more independent clauses), or compound-complex (two or more independent clauses and one or more dependent clauses). The rhetorical types of sentences are loose (main idea or clause placed first and one or more subordinate clauses at

the end), periodic (main idea or clause placed later in the sentence), balanced (a pattern is repeated at the beginning and in another place in the same sentence), and antithetical (a balanced sentence making a contrast), based on the arrangement of the material.

For my analysis of sentence types, I primarily coded each type of sentence as either one of the grammatical types or one of the rhetorical types, for example, "simple" or "loose," with a few exceptions. Because a sentence can be more than one type, I coded some of the sentences as both periodic and balanced (Jones, 1998). For example, one applicant wrote,

> **"Because I can** see that good communication can significantly benefit these environments whether through documentation, presentations, or informal discussions and **because I know** that I have many key skills and experiences that enable me to communicate in a particularly effective fashion in each of these cases, I have developed an intense desire to seek out methods through which I may contribute to the improvement of communication practices in as many sectors of industry as possible."

After coding, I counted the total number of occurrences of each sentence type and then calculated the percentage by using the following formula:

> (Total Number of Occurrences of a Sentence Type/Total Number of Sentences) X 100

In the case of those sentences containing both periodic and balanced types, I counted the sentence once as periodic and once as balanced. For the grammatical sentence analysis, I did not need to consider occurrences within each sentence because each sentence was only one of the following: simple, compound, complex, or compound-complex.

Paragraphing

I identified paragraphs in one of three ways: either by indentation of the first line of a block of text, extra line spacing between blocks of text, or a substantial gap between the end of a sentence and the right margin. In my sample of SPs, my participants used extra line spacing between paragraphs far more often than first-line indentation to demarcate paragraphs. Thus, when the first line of a paragraph was not indented but there was extra line spacing between paragraphs, I assumed that the extra line spacing was for paragraphing. In an SP with no first-line indentation or extra spacing between paragraphs, I looked for a larger-than-normal gap between the end of a sentence and the right-hand margin. In those cases, I considered the next sentence as the beginning of a new paragraph. When an SP consisted of a single block of text, I considered that block of text to be a standalone paragraph. After identifying paragraphs, I calculated the average paragraph length (total number of sentences/total number

of paragraphs), average longest paragraph, and average shortest paragraph in twenty-four SPs.

Results and Analysis

Results showed that while first-person personal pronouns and simple and loose sentences were used frequently, contractions were used sparingly in my sample of SPs. A combination of long and short sentences and paragraphs was predominant. In the following sections, I provide excerpts from the SPs so that the reader can draw important conclusions from the data. In the excerpts, I did not alter any grammar, punctuation, or capitalization. I chose each example on the basis of its ability to demonstrate the findings accurately and describe the most important phenomena.

Kind of Diction

My diction analysis in the SPs revealed the heavy use of first-person personal pronouns—a finding that I expected at the beginning of my study. In the sample, I found only a few contractions. The implications of the applicants' rhetorical strategy of using personal pronouns but not using contractions are discussed below.

Use of personal pronouns

Table 2 summarizes the total number and average number of personal pronouns in my sample and the number of SPs containing a specific personal pronoun. Results showed that first-person pronouns in subjective, objective, and possessive cases and reflexive form were predominant in my sample. In twenty-four SPs, there were 1203 personal pronouns, and 1061 of those personal pronouns were devoted predominantly to first-person singular and plural personal pronouns (*I*, *we*, *me*, *us*, *my*, *our*, *mine*, and *myself*).

Among the different forms of personal pronouns, the most prevalent were *I* as subject pronoun and *my* as possessive determiner. In their SPs, all participants used first-person pronoun in subjective case (i.e., *I*), twenty-three in objective case (i.e., *me*), two in possessive case (i.e., *mine*), and twenty-four as possessive determiner (i.e., *my*). Only one participant used second-person pronouns in subjective case (i.e., *you*), but five used them in objective case (i.e., *you*) and eight used them as possessive determiners (i.e., *your*). Second-person personal pronouns in possessive case and reflexive form were entirely absent. The participants in my sample used third-person personal pronouns more than second-person pronouns. Six participants used the third-person plural pronoun in subjective case (i.e., *they*), nine in objective case (i.e., *them*), and seven as possessive determiners (i.e., *their*). One participant used this pronoun in reflexive form (i.e., *themselves*). No participant used this pronoun in possessive case (i.e.,

theirs). Sixteen participants used the third-person neutral pronoun in subjective case (i.e., *it*) and nine in objective case (i.e., *it*). Six used the neutral pronoun as possessive determiners (i.e., *its* as in "I wish to develop my career to its fullest potential") and only one used it in reflexive form (i.e., *itself*). No subject used this pronoun in possessive case (i.e., *its* as in "My speed is no match for its").

My findings suggested that the applicants established *ethos* (ethical appeal) by using first-person personal pronouns and generally avoiding an impersonal style in their SPs. The applicants used first-person personal pronouns to describe their academic qualifications, skills, professional experiences, and/or other information. I found that some of the applicants used *I* five or six times in a single sentence. The following excerpts by two participants illustrate this point:

> **"I** understand that the challenges and situations that **I** will face as a graduate student will be notably different than those that **I** have faced as an undergraduate, and **I** look forward to these encounters and to the things that **I** will be able to learn through them."
> **"I** must admit that this time **I** do not know exactly what job **I** will be looking for once **I** graduate, but **I** do know that **I** will have a wider variety of careers to choose from."

Some of the applicants used *my* many times in a single sentence in my sample of SPs. For example, one participant wrote,

> "I strove to do the best I could in **my** classes, and **my** efforts are reflected in **my** grades and **my** professors' interest in me as an apt student."

The pronoun *my* was used to convey both the applicants' possessions (for example, grades and classes) and powers (for example, the applicant was able to draw his or her professor's interest by his or her hard work and expertise) primarily in this sentence.

Pronoun	Total[a]	Average[b]	SP[c]
Subject Pronouns	**659**	**27.45**	**24**
I	606	25.25	24
It	36	1.5	16
They	8	0.33	6
We	5	0.2	4
She	2	0.08	2
You	1	0.04	1
He	1	0.04	1
Object Pronouns	**143**	**5.96**	**23**
Me	104	4.33	23
It	18	0.75	9
Them	11	0.46	9
You	7	0.29	5
Her	2	0.08	2
Us	1	0.04	1
Him	0	0	0
Possessive Determiners	**379**	**15.79**	**24**
My	320	13.33	24
Their	20	0.83	7
Your	18	0.75	8
Its	11	0.46	6
Our	5	0.21	4
Her	3	0.13	2
His	2	0.08	2
Possessive Pronouns	**2**	**0.08**	**2**
Mine	2	0.08	2
Ours	0	0	0
Yours	0	0	0
Hers/His	0	0	0
Its	0	0	0
Theirs	0	0	0
Reflexive Pronouns	**20**	**0.83**	**11**
Myself	18	0.75	11
Itself	1	0.04	1
Themselves	1	0.04	1
Ourselves	0	0	0
Yourself	0	0	0
Herself/Himself	0	0	0

[a]**Total:** Total number of pronouns used in twenty-four SPs
[b]**Average:** Average number of pronouns used in twenty-four SPs
[c]**SP:** Total number of SPs that use the pronoun

Table 2: Frequency of Personal Pronouns in Twenty-four SPs

You as an object pronoun (seven out of 143 object pronouns) was used mostly when the applicants wanted to thank the audience for either reviewing their SPs or for considering their SPs. Through using *you* as an object pronoun, an applicant was able to show his or her politeness: the applicant showed that he or she really appreciated the audience's effort in taking the time to review the SP. Additionally, the applicant was able to thank the individual reviewer (i.e., each member of the admission committee individually) as well as the entire committee collectively because both the singular and plural forms of the second person pronoun are *you*.

The applicants used third-person personal pronouns in greater frequency than they used second-person pronouns. However, the applicants used third-person personal pronouns in much lower frequency than they used first-person pronouns expectedly. Rather than discussing other people or emphasizing others' influence on their lives by using third-person personal pronouns, the applicants highlighted their own personal accounts by using first-person personal pronouns. My participants used both the third-person personal pronoun *they* and the third-person neutral pronoun *it* (i.e., in subjective case) while discussing the organizations, schools, or colleges they worked for and the colleagues and students they worked with in the past; however, the third-person neutral pronoun, i.e., *it*, was used more often than the third-person personal pronoun, i.e., *they*.

Use of contractions

I found that only four out of twenty-four participants (16.67% of all SPs) used contractions. Table 3 summarizes the use of contractions in my sample of SPs. Out of those four participants, three of them used "be" and "have" verbs acting either as main verbs or as helping or auxiliary verbs, for example, "I'm" and I've." Two of those four participants used negative contractions, for example, "didn't" and "can't." However, even these four participants used contractions sparingly, a maximum of five times in an SP. On average, the twenty-four participants used contractions 0.45 times in their SPs.

Contraction	Total[a]	SP[b]
Negatives	**3**	**2**
Didn't	1	1
Can't	1	1
Don't	1	1
Main verbs	**12**	**3**
I've	7	3
I'm	4	3
I'll	1	1
Other	**0**	**0**

[a]**Total:** Total number of contractions used in twenty-four SPs
[b]**SP:** Total number of SPs that use the contraction

Table 3: Quantitative Analysis of Contractions

This absence of contractions from most of the SPs in my sample suggested my participants' shared understanding of the formality level of the SP genre. Biber, Johansson, Leech, Conrad, and Finegan (1999) stated that contractions are mostly found in speech and informal and fiction writing, but formal genres like academic texts are not characterized by contractions. Babanoğlu (2017) also stated that contractions result in the "informal tone to writing" (p. 56). Therefore, the absence of contractions from most of the SPs suggested my participants' tacit assumption about the SP genre: the SP genre is generally perceived as a formal writing genre. However, the SP genre is not a traditional formal writing genre in which contractions, colloquial languages, and first-person personal pronouns are scarcely used (Babanoğlu, 2017; Biber et al., 1999); this genre has its own norms that essentially require first-person writing style.

Sentence Length

Table 4 summarizes the results regarding the average sentence length and average longest and shortest sentences in twenty-four SPs. I rounded the percentages to the nearest whole number for the sentence length analysis. On average, I found that the applicants used twenty-four words per sentence, which was longer than the average sentence length (eighteen words) in technical prose and technical manuals, as pointed out by Jones (1998, p. 155) and Teklinski (1992). However, the applicants' average sentence length (twenty-four words) was shorter than sentence lengths common among writers in earlier centuries (Corbett & Connors, 1999). I noticed a significant difference between the longest and shortest sentences in all twenty-four SPs. In my sample, while the longest sentence was ninety-six words, the shortest sentence was just five words. In the sample of twenty-four SPs, the average length of the longest sentence was forty-one words while the average length of the shortest sentence was eleven words. Another notable finding was that the above average sentences were much lower in number than the below average sentences.

Total number of words	14664
Total number of sentences	612
Average sentence length (in number of words)	24
Longest sentence (in number of words)	96
Average longest sentence (in number of words)	41
Shortest sentence (in number of words)	5
Average shortest sentence (in number of words)	11
Number of sentences that contain more than 10 words over the average	83
Percentage (%) of sentences that contain more than 10 words over the average	13.56
Number of sentences that contain 5 words or more below the average	259
Percentage (%) of sentences that contain 5 words or more below the average	42.32

Table 4: Quantitative Analysis of Sentence Length and Longest and Shortest Sentence in Twenty-four SPs

Because the MS program in technical communication at this U.S. university does not require any writing sample, the SP plays an important role in understanding the applicant's writing ability. My participants' average sentence length (in number of words) suggested that they probably wanted to express their expert level writing skills to the admission committee. Also, clarity—which is inherently associated with style—can be utilized properly by articulating ideas in well-written sentences. Sometimes, complex information cannot be provided in just five words. Therefore, my participants attempted to vary their sentence lengths to showcase their ability to control the long sentences grammatically and use both long and short sentences simultaneously in order to avoid monotony in the writing.

The use of varying sentence length is said to be one indicator of experienced writing. Lu et al. (2018) noticed that native English speakers were more proficient in using varying sentence lengths than non-native speakers. My analysis suggested that, in order to show writing skill in the SPs, the applicants, irrespective of being native or non-native English speakers, attempted to vary their sentence lengths. I noticed two types of strategies of using long and short sentences in my sample of SPs. In the first strategy, an applicant stated a fact by using a short sentence and then supported the fact with evidence in a long sentence. In the second strategy, an applicant took a different approach by placing the supporting arguments in a long sentence and then claiming a fact by using a short sentence.

For example, one participant wrote,

> "I would like to apply for teaching assistantship. After graduating with a degree in Chemistry, I taught several courses in Chemistry and Biology at [X] school and [X] academy where I really enjoyed working with students and found out we can only learn more by teaching."

In this excerpt, the participant first stated that he or she wanted to apply for the teaching assistantship in a short sentence (8 words) and then wrote a supporting statement in a long sentence (38 words) to substantiate his or her teaching experiences and interests.

Another participant wrote,

> "Through studying these subjects [communication subjects] I understood how people's needs, aspirations, desires, culture, level of knowledge, socio economic and political background shape the way a person lives and communicates; I believe that communication should be sensitive to all these aspects in order to be successful. And that's what I find highly interesting about it."1

In this excerpt, the participant first wrote the supporting arguments on why he or she is interested in communication-related subjects in a long sentence (44 words) and then stated the fact about his or her interests in those subjects in a short sentence (9 words).

Only in one participant's SP did I find that a series of long sentences was used when both stating a fact and supporting it. One exceptional participant continuously used long sentences in his or her SP (an average sentence length of 52 and a longest sentence of ninety-six words). The example of that participant's longest sentence is as follows:

> "Overall, I firmly believe that I would make a strong candidate for the M.S. program for Technical Communication at [redacted][1], especially as a participant in the Graduate Teaching Assistantship, because of the foundational skills I've acquired as an Undergraduate, the distinct opportunity for further academic and professional growth in this particular graduate program, the opportunity to contribute to the department directly through teaching one of the service courses, and the passion that I have for learning the subject matter and applying it in effective ways in the communication contexts in which I find myself."

In this long sentence, the applicant tried to convince the audience about his or her suitability for a GTA position. In this sentence, the applicant chose three

[1] The university name is redacted here.

different moves to demonstrate his or her suitability: the applicant's previous relevant educational background, intention to contribute to the department, and passion for learning from the teaching opportunity. The applicant could have divided this sentence into three separate sentences for the audience, but he or she made the rhetorical decision to use one long sentence (ninety-six words). The applicant's goal was to obtain a GTA position; therefore, he or she did not want to distract the readers from the single point—that he or she is a suitable candidate for the GTA position—by breaking it into three separate sentences. Interestingly, in my sample, most of the applicants (eighteen out of twenty-four, i.e., 75%) used their longest sentence to prove their suitability for the GTA position. For example, another participant's longest sentence is as follows:

> "I always tried to create an environment for the students to participate in classroom discussion so that they could be eager to learn new things and I could fulfill the goal that I set for every class."

This sentence indicates the applicant's previous relevant experience in teaching and eventually demonstrates his or her suitability for the GTA position. This common strategy of presenting information regarding the suitability for a GTA position in one long sentence attempted to achieve one of the following three goals or all the three goals:

- To launch an argument (suitability for a GTA position) and explain that argument thoroughly;
- To create suspense by revealing the main point (suitability for a GTA position) at the end of a sentence; and
- To substantiate an argument (suitability for GTA position) with various and vivid descriptions and proofs, for example, previous relevant experience, passion, or zeal for teaching.

In my sample of SPs, the shortest sentences were used mostly in the introductory and concluding paragraphs. For example, two participants' shortest sentences are as follows:

> "Thank you for reviewing my application."
> "Thank you for your time and consideration."

In the first and last paragraphs of the SPs, the applicants often used short sentences. More importantly, in those paragraphs, the information was quite simple, not complex. Usually, in the first paragraph, the applicants stated their purpose for writing the SP and discussed their general background, and in the last paragraph, they thanked the audience either for reading their SPs or for reviewing their application materials. These short sentences in the last paragraphs created a polite tone in the SPs either by expressing the desire to apply for the program, by thanking the audience, or by stating their decision for their pursuing graduate study.

In the middle paragraphs, applicants provided more complex information while describing their credentials (academic and professional) and specific reasons for applying to the technical communication program. Therefore, rhetorically it is quite significant that the applicants resorted to long sentences in the middle paragraphs, particularly while walking the audience through narratives of relevant experience and educational background.

Sentence Types

Jones (1998) believed that "sentence variety is essential for achieving an effective style" (p. 155). However, Corbett and Connors (1999) found that modern writers do not always create "a notable variety" in their sentences (p. 363). In my sample, I found that the participants generally varied the grammatical types of sentences in their SPs. Table 5 summarizes my analysis of grammatical types of sentences in twenty-four SPs.

Total number of sentences	612
Total number of simple sentences	314
Percentage (%) of simple sentences	51.31
Total number of compound sentences	144
Percentage (%) of compound sentences	23.53
Total number of complex sentences	103
Percentage (%) of complex sentences	16.83
Total number of compound-complex sentences	51
Percentage (%) of compound-complex sentences	8.33

Table 5: Quantitative Analysis of Grammatical Types of Sentences in Twenty-four SPs

Results showed that simple sentences (51.31%) were more prevalent than the other types of sentences, and compound-complex sentences (8.33%) were less common than the other types. The applicants preferred compound sentences after simple ones in terms of frequency. Complex and compound-complex sentences are considered to be earmarks of an advanced style of writing, and inexperienced writers might make mistakes while creating complex sentences.

The arrangement of the sentence conveys the rhetorical style taken by the writers (Jones, 1998). Table 6 summarizes the use of rhetorical sentences in twenty-four SPs.

Total number of sentences	612
Total number of loose sentences	200
Percentage (%) of loose sentences	32.68
Total number of periodic sentences	98
Percentage (%) of periodic sentences	16.01
Total number of balanced sentences	76
Percentage (%) of balanced sentences	12.42
Total number of antithetical sentences	0
Percentage (%) of antithetical sentences	0

Table 6: Quantitative Analysis of Rhetorical Types of Sentences in Twenty-four SPs

No applicants used antithetical sentences in my sample of SPs. Loose sentences (32.68%) predominated my sample of SPs, and the high frequency of loose sentences indicated the applicants' choice of maintaining directness, naturalness, and lucidity throughout the SP. Jones (1998) mentioned that loose sentences are "easier for readers to understand because the main clause is at the beginning" (p. 149). Therefore, this high percentage of loose sentences further suggested that the applicants did not want to create any suspense for the readers by making them wait to comprehend the main message until the sentence's end. Also, since periodic sentences are difficult to comprehend (Jones, 1998), the applicants' rhetorical strategy of using more loose sentences in their SPs was reasonable.

Paragraphing

Table 7 summarizes the average paragraph length, average longest paragraph, and average shortest paragraph in number of sentences in my sample (n=24) of SPs. Results showed that my participants averaged six sentences per paragraph, which can be considered as a fairly developed paragraph. Corbett and Connors (1999) found that students in two sections of an Honors Freshman class were generally averaging three to four sentences per paragraph. In my sample, the average paragraph length of almost six sentences suggested that my participants were not unpracticed writers; rather, they already possessed professional writing skills to enter a graduate-level writing program (technical communication).

Average paragraph length (in number of sentences)	6
Longest paragraph (in number of sentences)	21
Average longest paragraph (in number of sentences)	6
Shortest paragraph (in number of sentences)	1
Average shortest paragraph (in number of sentences)	2

Table 7: Average Paragraph Length, Average Longest Paragraph, and Average Shortest Paragraph in Twenty-four SPs

Similar to the sentence analysis results, I found a significant difference between the longest and shortest paragraphs. My twenty-four participants used six sentences on average for the longest paragraph and two sentences on average for the shortest paragraph (see Table 7). As inexperienced writers are often unable to create substantive paragraphs containing five to six sentences (Jones, 1998), the length of the longest paragraph suggested that the applicants were experienced or proficient writers. The results of my paragraph-level analysis were similar to the results of the sentence-level analysis: the participants varied the lengths of their sentences as well as the lengths of their paragraphs to show writing proficiency.

Interestingly, I also found that most of my participants wrote a single-sentence paragraph in the concluding or last paragraph. For example, one participant wrote,

> "To realize my cherished dreams I need a context and association with faculty and people with profound professional skills and that can only happen if my candidature for the Master's program is considered favorably."

Another participant wrote,

> "I believe I am fully equipped both academically and intellectually to pursue a graduate degree in Technical Communication, and I am very excited to embark upon this journey."

Another participant wrote,

> "Thank you for considering me as an applicant, and I look forward to hearing from you soon."

According to Corbett and Connors (1999), these sentences do not meet the traditional definition of a paragraph because a single sentence cannot convey a unit of thought large enough to be a paragraph (we should note here that this statement might not be suitable for every genre, for example, the letter genre, where writers often conclude with a single-sentence paragraph). However, these single-sentence paragraphs helped to convey the larger units of thought in other paragraphs in the SP. In the provided examples, the applicants emphasized their enthusiasm for joining the intended program, restated their interest and qualifications in the context of obtaining admission, and politely ended the document by acknowledging or thanking the readers. These single sentences communicated the goal of the applicants' writing their SPs and brought the readers' attention back to the main agenda of the SP: gaining admission to the MS program and securing financial support. Additionally, these single-sentence paragraphs acted as attention-getters and transition tools from complicated topics to simple ones (Kolln & Gray, 2019).

Conclusion

Although this preliminary study of stylistic analysis of the SP genre produced interesting results, still my study was limited in scope by having only twenty-four SPs as the data and my analyzing only SPs submitted to one university program. Valid generalization cannot be made to the overall SP genre. As this kind of stylistic analysis in the SP genre is the first of its kind, I was not able to compare my findings. Additional studies on stylistic analysis in the SP genre will help me compare my findings and provide deeper insights of stylistic features to the prospective graduate students. Future researchers should conduct style analysis in SPs submitted to other departments, consider more stylistic markers (for example, cohesive devices, figures of speech, and sentence openers), and include greater sample numbers. Also, future researchers can focus on individual stylistic markers in more detail while analyzing SPs. Furthermore, a future researcher might undertake a comparison of how domestic and international students and/or native and non-native English speakers use the diction, sentence, and paragraphing in their SPs. Finally, it would be interesting to see the role of style in other student-produced genres, like the Master's thesis and Doctoral dissertation.

My stylistic analysis of twenty-four SPs submitted to the MS in technical communication program at a U.S. university revealed the following commonalities among the applicants' SPs:

- First-person personal pronouns were used as the persuasive tool to maintain personal style—a result consistent with Stewart's (2002) suggestion of using first person in the SPs;
- A combination of long and short sentences was used as the persuasive tool to maintain engagement;
- Short sentences were used as the persuasive tool to maintain politeness;
- Simple sentences were used as the persuasive tool to maintain clarity;

- Loose sentences were used as the persuasive tool to maintain lucidity; and
- Varying paragraph lengths were used as the persuasive tool to grab attention and smoothe transition.

My twenty-four participants wrote their SPs independently, and they were given few instructions by the university about the content, organization, and style of the SP. The participants came from diverse backgrounds in terms of their educational and professional qualifications, countries of origin, and hobbies and interests. Yet, collectively they relied upon a common core of stylistic features in their SPs to persuade the audience. This common core suggests a shared understanding of the SP genre as social action (Miller, 1984). This social action occurred in response to a recurrent or typified rhetorical situation associated with a specific discourse community (in this case, the technical communication admission committee).

My study might not provide a ready-made answer to "how to write a statement of purpose" to prospective Master's students; however, the common stylistic threads identified in my sample offer future students a glimpse of what stylistic choices were commonly and independently used by a small group of students to achieve two main purposes: gaining admission and securing funding. Pedagogically, my study can offer some style heuristics to students in technical communication and composition for understanding this genre. Educators can discuss this genre from a stylistic perspective with their undergraduate students and teach their students how to create a personal, engaging, lucid, consistent, and easily understandable SP by applying rhetorical style effectively.

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