

Writing in Different Registers

Select a short, compelling personal anecdote of your choice.

Step 1: Condense this story into one paragraph of between 200 and 400 words. Write as you would to a close, personal friend of your own age. Write it as you would speak it in casual conversation. (See example on the right.)

Step 2: Rewrite this paragraph in four different ways by using different narrative registers - colloquial, formal, literary, commercial, etc. – conveyed noticeably through tone, vocabulary and idioms usage. For example, pretend that you want to describe this same incident in a letter to different people from entirely dissimilar backgrounds.

Choose four from the following examples:

| Type | Hints | Due by | Revision by |
|--------------|---|--------|-------------|
| Formal | Explanation of an incident to an influential official (policeman, judge, insurance agent, politician, etc.) | | |
| Vernacular | Telling the incident to a Harley mechanic who never even reads the articles in Playboy. | | |
| Academic | Description for a pedantic professor who refuses to understand slang. | | |
| Lyric | Description for a musician as an inspiration for a song. | | |
| Journalistic | As an article for a newspaper (tabloid or broadsheet?). | | |
| Literary | As a setting for a short story. | | |
| Commercial | As an informative passage for a tourist brochure. | | |
| Scientific | As an entry under psycho-socio behavioural studies. | | |
| Humorous | Pretend you are on stage in front of 50 people who are waiting for you to make them laugh. | | |

Step 3: Revise your five distinct paragraphs by improving vocabulary and descriptive style. Ideally, the register of the writing should clearly convey the character of its intended reader.

Example: Personal Anecdote

I got jumped by a gang only once while living in New York City. This was the early 90's in Williamsburg, then a gritty neighbourhood smelling like trash and urine, yet one full of young painters, writers, dancers and drunks living out there 'cause of the cheap rent. I had stepped off the J train at Marcy walking to my nest on South 4th. Two other young men were walking in my direction up the wide and better-lit 5th street at about 10 at night. Half-way up the block, we hear behind us a gang turn the corner yelling loud and tough. One guy took off immediately up the street. The second guy started walking faster, passing me on my right. I heard running footsteps behind us and suddenly saw a flying brick strike this guy on my right hard on the shoulder. He raced over to a house up the street fumbling with his keys as the gang scrambled after him. I was thinking to myself, "Boy, they don't like him at all—"Just in the nick of time, he slipped in the door as a shower of rocks pummelled against the building façade. There were about 15 to 20 kids, some in their 20's, some in their teens. Mostly Spanish, a few whites and blacks. Regular Boyz in Da 'Hood types in dark, slouchy hooded sweatshirts. I only had a few seconds, for then they all turned on me. The first jumped me from behind, putting my head in an arm lock. Others started to circle around me, always moving around pretending that they had pistols or knives in their hands. I thought about kong fu-ing them all flat – taking a couple cuts and blows but still looking cool enough to get the girl afterwards. Or I could have pulled out my harp and blown some wild blues that would have charmed them all into making me a brother in the gang. But you know how too many of them Brooklyn boys are simply unpredictable, reckless, itchy to draw blood and look tough in front of their bro's. My healthy sense of survival kicked in: I pointed at one kid's t-shirt asking what was written on it; when they all looked, I took off up the street, slowin' down at Bedford, yet making it home just in time to catch the last two innings of the Mets on the radio.

A:

Audience:

Register:

After visiting friends in Manhattan, I caught the J Train at 10:00 pm, getting off at Marcy. I headed towards my apartment on South 4th walking down the wide and better-lit 5th street. Two other young men were walking in my direction, though we did not speak. Half-way up the block, we hear behind us a gang turn the corner yelling loud and tough. One of the pedestrians near me took off immediately up the street. The second started walking faster, passing me on my right. I heard running footsteps behind us and suddenly saw a thrown brick strike this man on my right hard on his shoulder. He ran over to a house up the street as the gang scrambled after him. Just in the nick of time, he slipped in the door before a shower of rocks hit against the building façade. There were about 15 to 20 kids, some in their 20's, some in their teens in dark, slouchy hooded sweatshirts. I only had a few seconds before they then all turned on me. The first jumped me from behind, putting my head in an arm lock. Others started to circle around me, always moving around pretending that they had weapons in their hands. My experience is that, while some of such boys are more or less playing, some are simply unpredictable and reckless. They want to prove themselves tough in front of their peers and will often become violent without provocation. Assessing the odds, my sense of survival won: I took off up the street to Bedford where there was more traffic. It all happened very quickly; again, it was dark and most wore their hoods up. I wish I could help you more, but I cannot say for certain that I recognize the face. Where did you find his body?

B:

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|------------------------|
| Audience: Register: |
|------------------------|

Neoteny, my dear troglodyte, one sees it all the time. Our own urbanity stunts entire neighbourhoods. Last week I ran into a small herd of up-and-coming ghetto pigmies as I returned from the library. I had been researching more of Calabran's early pre-court writings – fascinating, by the way, how his perspicuity utterly baffled the pompous bags of affected iambs from the neighboring courts south-west of Dublin: "Who does see the colour of the wind? Who does smell the scent of your soul? Who is aware of the wall that the human carries at all times, the Wall with Nine Doors?" Delicious. Where was I?

Oh yes, the South Side Swagboys with Supinating Superegos. Most will no doubt end up in jail or slit open on the street, simply because they were born as the next link in the chain that has enslaved entire strata of society since Joseph outwitted Esau. Some of these street boys are exceptionally astute, yet if no one in their tight, trusted circle has witnessed the breadth of human existence, then they inevitably experience formative years warped by drug addictions, brutality, rape and exploitation. When such is the norm, how can one hope that they become grounded again as an interactive member of a broader, self-sustaining community? They huddle into gangs in order to transform themselves into a pack of hyenas and feel that terrific rushing fix of pure power that a gutter rat alone can never experience.

After jumping me from behind, would they have then listened to anything I could have said? Perhaps they would have heard me mumbling through a mouthful of blood, but they never would have listened, because a beaten sack of flesh has nothing worthwhile to say. But – and here is a hot tip worth remembering – say certain words in a completely different context and those words are capable of turning even gutter rats into powerful, self-aware individuals. Imagine a youngblood with the charisma of Eminem slamming those words with some rap and scratch. There exist words which, when spoken in the right way at the right time, can open the inner eye of even the most jaded and cynical individual. Open this eye and this person becomes awake to an outer clarity and an inner strength previously unimaginable. If only that could happen to the Mets, did you see that game last week?

C:

Audience:

Register:

you guys got it sweet here in the bowery. nobody dares ta fuck around on the street coz they know you boys'll find out and fuck him up. while back though i was living in williamsburg south side. there was some mothafuckin grit there, man, like the lower east side back in the 60's. some of you hell's angels could open shop there easy-like. If you could stand the stink - like roomful of moldy winos. trash bags littered the streets for weeks: the stench reeked half a block away. leave your car parked overnight and it'll be stripped by midnight. every half hour a different car alarm wailed "dee doo dee doo" or "woop, woop, woop." shit, after 6 in the evenin, the only jacks on the streets were those lookin for trouble. north side was mostly polish and more cozy-like; south side was mostly spanish and you better watch your ass if you white. in bars they talk at least before letting fists fly. shot pool wit some blackshirts on 3rd in a puerto rico joint - no women or children allowed. but out on the street gangs would jump anyone, even pregnant women. I got tagged one night walking down 5th from the marcy stop. another guy caught the brick on the shoulder. i thought the boys knew the guy and just wanted to fuck wit im. but then they turned on me just for being there. About 15 punks, 20's and teens. there's always a couple in those gangs who are just itching to get their knives wet or pop a bullet in a brain, so i skipped out before the bloodlust fever could rise. thing is, i can't blame em really. if you got no pad to call your own, then you take over the street 'coz mothafucka if you ain't got no turf to lose, you ain't got nothing to win.

hey who rides that '66 pan-shovel over there with the canary yellow tank and fends?

D:

Audience:

Register:

Overhead, the J Train rattles off east into the night over the yellowish haze of Broadway. But this ain't the Broadway in Manhattan. Lights from greasy spoon diners and black hole bars beckon escape from the trash, weeds, drug paraphernalia and cigarette butts that litter the grungy sidewalks. Steel gates barricade the few grocery stores, wash-o-mats and druggeries between graffitied vacant storefronts. Those street lamps that still work blink with neglect. Women wearing racy underwear beneath long open overcoats flash their flesh and painted puckering lips to passing cars. To the few people walking by they flirt outrageously, familiarly, then laugh lewdly.

One walks through south-side Williamsburg from one stench cloud to another, each one slightly different in its mixture of sewage, rotting trash, cheap perfume, gasoline, oil, urine and excrement odours. Trash bags lie for weeks, sometimes months on the street. Some clouds burn the nose while others are milder. Here and there, one smells the savoury scent of fried bacon, onion, garlic or hamburger. Such small treasures take on a heightened sense of meaning.

To the west, the Williamsburg Bridge rises up and over to the sparkling Manhattan skyline. Below the bridge on the south, the streets are utterly deserted and dark, except for the limos lined up in front of Peter Luger's Steakhouse, an insider secret and favourite mafia hangout.

5th Street north of the bridge is also deserted. Traffic from nearby avenues composes a subdued musical background syncopated with varied sirens, screeching tires, car alarms and honking. Nearby, from the few open windows facing the street, TV blare plays in the foreground along with crying babies, people shouting at each other, a female voice spitting Spanish out like a machine-gun. Lovers do not draw attention to themselves here.

Halfway up the block, a porch light burns, a small inverted cone of light like an oasis in the dark. Three young white males walk unspeaking up the street. Behind them around the corner they hear shouts and tough-guy threats from a group of young males who soon turn the corner, strutting, hopping, some banging rhythms on trash cans with sticks and pieces of pipe. Some jump over the porches, nickerknocking front doors. Some climb over parked cars, break off side mirrors and emblems.

Some jeer at open windows, toss rocks at faces that dare to peer out into the street - into *their* street, for now it belongs to them.

E:

Audience:
Register:

Champion Boxer KO'ed on the Street

Early Friday morning, 19 year old Daniel "Dannyman" Igrelias was found unconscious in a pool of his own blood in front of his apartment on 3rd Street between Bedford and Driggs, in the Williamsburg district of north Brooklyn. Knife wounds to his stomach, arms and face were confirmed by hospital authorities, who pronounced his condition as critical, yet stable. Fortunately, a neighbor leaving the house at 4:00 am for work found Daniel and called an ambulance.

Police investigation has determined that his wounds were a result of a fight between Daniel and other youths that took place shortly after midnight. Several local residents heard shouts and crashes lasting between 10 and 15 minutes, after which those involved ran off. That Daniel lay bleeding on his own doorstep has caused anger among neighbors, who have spent years petitioning local officials to take action against the crime which has flourished for years in the South Side district.

"Violence, vandalism and theft are daily occurrences to such a degree that no one takes notice any longer," according to Ms Theresia Merandinos, who is the current chairwoman of the South Side Residents Association. She claims that police receive bonuses to protect more wealthy neighborhoods, leaving poorer ones to fall victim to gang criminality.

District Mayor Dr Michael Thrip denied her claim, yet called for increased police action. "Such incidents demand a more active measures of protection. A surveillance veil would have enabled us to catch those responsible for this atrocious act of gratuitous violence."

A surveillance veil, such as in London and the Lower Manhattan Security Initiative, would consist of thousands of cameras monitoring vehicles and individuals, along with pivoting gates that would be installed at critical intersections, allowing authorities to block off traffic at the push of a button.

Daniel Igrelias, member of the Brooklyn Boxing Club, recently won the welterweight title in the borough's boxing tournament held on July 7. A rising star in the local boxing scene, Dannyman Igrelias was described by his trainer Denzi Washington as "a dedicated young man who knew what he wanted and was determined to make it big in the world. Tough, but fair. He never hit below the belt. He never hit first, but always hit last. He never provoked trouble. I don't know why or how he got hurt, but it don't smell fair to me nohow."

<http://www.mta.info/nyct/maps/busbkln.pdf>