

A rose of purple prose arose

Written by 'Grammar Guy' By Curtis Honeycutt Guest Columnist
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When you think about the color purple, what comes to mind? Probably the movie *The Color Purple*. That makes sense.

Beyond that, you might think of Prince's *Purple Rain* or maybe even Sheb Wooley's 1958 hit *The Purple People Eater*. Not to be discounted, Jimi Hendrix's *Purple Haze* probably outranks Wooley's song on my popular purple song chart.

What do you get when you come to the intersection of "purple things" and grammar? You get "purple prose," a style of overly ornate, elaborate language most often reserved for descriptions of intimate interactions in paperback romance novels and teenage love poems.

I'm sure you're just dying for an example at this point, and I won't disappoint you. In the Victorian era, the purple prose style took off.

We see this trend in authors like Charles Dickens. Here's how Dickens describes Oliver Twist's breathing condition in the eponymous novel: "The fact is, that there was considerable difficulty in inducing Oliver to take upon himself the office of respiration—a troublesome practice, but one which custom has rendered necessary to our easy existence ..."

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You'll notice that I trailed off at the end of that sentence; Dickens continued to describe poor Oliver's asthma. As a reaction to this type of writing, enter Ernest Hemingway.

The Old Man and the Sea author was not a fan of purple prose. Hemingway writes, "A writer's style should be direct and personal, his imagery rich and earthy, and his words simple and vigorous. The greatest writers have the gift of brilliant brevity, are hard workers, diligent scholars and competent stylists."

I prefer Hemingway's no-nonsense prose even though Dickens got paid by the word. I'm guessing Dickensian purple prose came about as a result of his novels being published in installments. But that was way back then. Surely this style went the way of the dinosaur, right?

Here's an example of recent purple prose. See if you can guess the book from whence it comes.

"His skin, white despite the faint flush from yesterday's hunting trip, literally sparkled, like thousands of tiny diamonds were embedded in the surface ... His glistening, pale lavender lids were shut, though of course he didn't sleep. A perfect statue, carved in some unknown stone, smooth like marble, glittering like crystal."

Did you guess the novel-turned-movie series? It seems as though *Twilight* author Stephenie Meyer has brought purple prose into the twenty-first century. Her description of vampire Edward's sparkly skin could have been much shorter. When it comes to purple prose, I am definitely on Team Hemingway.

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