

The Lost Art of the Rant

By Daniel Seidel for *Slate*

<http://www.slate.com/id/2176968/pagenum/2> (This article has been condensed.)

While there are many examples of literary rants, ranting used to be primarily an oral tradition, perfected in taverns and street corners and smoke-filled comedy clubs. The Oxford English Dictionary defines a rant as a "high-flown, extravagant, or bombastic speech or utterance; a piece of turgid declamation; a tirade." Merriam-Webster offers a drier and tamer definition—"to talk in a noisy, excited, or declamatory manner"—but also emphasizes the medium of speech.

Some of the first rants of the modern era—at least some of the first to be referred to as such—were associated with a short-lived, 17th-century English sect known (to their enemies) as the "Ranters." Its members' penchant for tobacco, alcohol, women, and swearing sprung from a belief in the divinity of all things and a rejection of the idea of sin altogether. They were frequently accused of blasphemy and of profaning religious rituals. A Ranter preacher, Abiezer Coppe, once swore for an entire hour while standing at the pulpit. [*Note: this does not mean swearing and cursing are acceptable in school assignments!]

Oral tirades are still with us, of course, yet the last decade or so has also seen more and more written rants, a form that has blossomed on the Web. The Web is often rightly criticized by the guardians of high culture for encouraging bilious discourse and sloppy writing, with cruel message-board postings and bloggers attacking one another at the slightest provocation. But in this new golden age of the rant, when the Web allows anyone to lash out about anything at all, it would be foolish to dismiss the more artful and entertaining instances of the genre with the artless ones.

Consider the following example from the "best-of-craigslist" called "NYC Subway Rant." An anonymous author lists the "mental rolodex of the people I share the subway with on a daily basis ... the monsters I can't get used to and won't accept." The list includes guys who wear sunglasses, the jerk who leans into you to look at the subway map, the "ghostfarther," and the lady that hugs the pole on a crowded train. All of these monsters have committed various sins against the cardinal law of riding the subway: Don't make it any more miserable than it already is.

A good rant, like this one, expresses a real passion, and it is often a passion that has been enflamed by a feeling of powerlessness.

Such powerlessness can explode into violent language, but the rant also tends to possess a playful element as well. Wherever a rant may fall (excuse-making, apology-making, lesson-teaching, for example) there is neither the expectation of nor the desire for a response. The rant is an end in itself, an adrenaline-fueled literary catharsis. That's the paradox at the heart of ranting—its theatricality usually overwhelms all else, including the desire to change whatever outrage has elicited the rant in the first place.

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Writing the Rant - Share Your Opinions Without Offending Your Audience

Opinions are dangerous things. They can damage feelings, break relationships, even start wars.

As a writer, you can manipulate the words you use to share your ideas without offending your readers. You have the power to write about whatever is really bugging you and lead people to agree with you or see your side of things, without ever telling them they were wrong in the first place.

An unselfish article puts your reader's interests first. It shares your opinions but not your criticisms. It teaches your reader how to do something beneficial, but doesn't lecture them on why they're wrong.

An unselfish article gives your reader room to disagree with you. A statement such as "If you engage in this action, you're wrong" will likely alienate a reader who does engage in that behavior and does believe it's a good idea. Instead, give reasons why your ideas are better.

Turn your list of "don'ts" into a list of "dos" or even "whys." Readers would find that article helpful instead of critical.

The best article writers have strong opinions and write about them openly. That's how readers get to know them and learn to trust them. Some of my favorite writers have extreme opinions that I strongly disagree with. They remain my favorites because they show me new ways to think about things, but they don't ever come out and tell me I'm wrong for not taking their advice.

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The Assignment

Thoughtfully consider which of the many things that you would like to see changed in the world. After all, as we have learned in the past weeks, the best and most effective rant will be organized vivid, powerful, interesting, and persuasive. Edit carefully so that grammar, usage, and spelling errors will not distract from your message.

Produce as unforgettable a piece of writing as you have ever created before in 150 words or less. That means it should be enjoyable to you in some way to produce it – and that, in turn, implies that this particular complaint of yours is one you relish expressing, disseminating, examining in detail. Fire away!

- ☐ Write, type, edit, proofread, and print out an original rant.
- ☐ Limit yourself to 100-150 carefully chosen words on the topic of your choice.
- ☐ Keep in mind the tips from the above article, as well as the information and examples presented in class.
- ☐ Rants will be scored on the 5 point holistic scale.