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William
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The
Elements
of
Style

Third Edition

THE
ELEMENTS
OF
Style

BY
WILLIAM STRUNK Jr.

*With Revisions, an Introduction,
and a Chapter on Writing*

BY
E. B. WHITE

THIRD EDITION

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Introduction

AT THE close of the first World War, when I was a student at Cornell, I took a course called English 8. My professor was William Strunk Jr. A textbook required for the course was a slim volume called *The Elements of Style*, whose author was the professor himself. The year was 1919. The book was known on the campus in those days as “the little book,” with the stress on the word “little.” It had been privately printed by the author.

I passed the course, graduated from the university, and forgot the book but not the professor. Some thirty-eight years later, the book bobbed up again in my life when Macmillan commissioned me to revise it for the college market and the general trade. Meantime, Professor Strunk had died.

The Elements of Style, when I re-examined it in 1957, seemed to me to contain rich deposits of gold. It was Will Strunk's *parvum opus*, his attempt to cut the vast tangle of English rhetoric down to size and write its rules and principles on the head of a pin. Will himself had hung the tag “little” on the book; he referred to it sardonically and with secret pride as “the *little* book,” always giving the word “little” a special twist, as though he were putting a spin on a ball. In its original form, it was a forty-three-page summation of the case for cleanliness, accuracy, and brevity in the use of English. Today, fifty-two years later, its vigor is unimpaired, and for sheer pith I think it probably sets a

record that is not likely to be broken. Even after I got through tampering with it, it was still a tiny thing, a barely tarnished gem. Seven rules of usage, eleven principles of composition, a few matters of form, and a list of words and expressions commonly misused—that was the sum and substance of Professor Strunk's work. Somewhat audaciously, and in an attempt to give my publisher his money's worth, I added a chapter called "An Approach to Style," setting forth my own prejudices, my notions of error, my articles of faith. This chapter (Chapter V) is addressed particularly to those who feel that English prose composition is not only a necessary skill but a sensible pursuit as well—a way to spend one's days. I think Professor Strunk would not object to that.

A second edition of the book was published in 1972. I have now completed a third revision. Chapter IV has been refurbished with words and expressions of a recent vintage; four rules of usage have been added to Chapter I. Fresh examples have been added to some of the rules and principles, amplification has reared its head in a few places in the text where I felt an assault could successfully be made on the bastions of its brevity, and in general the book has received a thorough overhaul—to correct errors, delete bewhiskered entries, and enliven the argument.

Professor Strunk was a positive man. His book contains rules of grammar phrased as direct orders. In the main I have not tried to soften his commands, or modify his pronouncements, or remove the special objects of his scorn. I have tried, instead, to preserve the flavor of his discontent while slightly enlarging the scope of the discussion. *The Elements of Style* does not pretend to survey the whole field. Rather it proposes to give in brief space the principal requirements of plain English style. It concentrates on fundamentals: the rules of usage and principles of composition most commonly violated.

The reader will soon discover that these rules and principles are in the form of sharp commands, Sergeant

Strunk snapping orders to his platoon. "Do not join independent clauses by a comma." (Rule 5.) "Do not break sentences in two." (Rule 6.) "Use the active voice." (Rule 14.) "Omit needless words." (Rule 17.) "Avoid a succession of loose sentences." (Rule 18.) "In summaries, keep to one tense." (Rule 21.) Each rule or principle is followed by a short hortatory essay, and usually the exhortation is followed by, or interlarded with, examples in parallel columns—the true vs. the false, the right vs. the wrong, the timid vs. the bold, the ragged vs. the trim. From every line there peers out at me the puckish face of my professor, his short hair parted neatly in the middle and combed down over his forehead, his eyes blinking incessantly behind steel-rimmed spectacles as though he had just emerged into strong light, his lips nibbling each other like nervous horses, his smile shuttling to and fro under a carefully edged mustache.

"Omit needless words!" cries the author on page 23, and into that imperative Will Strunk really put his heart and soul. In the days when I was sitting in his class, he omitted so many needless words, and omitted them so forcibly and with such eagerness and obvious relish, that he often seemed in the position of having shortchanged himself—a man left with nothing more to say yet with time to fill, a radio prophet who had out-distanced the clock. Will Strunk got out of this predicament by a simple trick: he uttered every sentence three times. When he delivered his oration on brevity to the class, he leaned forward over his desk, grasped his coat lapels in his hands, and, in a husky, conspiratorial voice, said, "Rule Seventeen. Omit needless words! Omit needless words! Omit needless words!"

He was a memorable man, friendly and funny. Under the remembered sting of his kindly lash, I have been trying to omit needless words since 1919, and although there are still many words that cry for omission and the huge task will never be accomplished, it is exciting to me to reread the masterly Strunkian elaboration of this noble theme. It goes:

Vigorous writing is concise. A sentence should contain no unnecessary words, a paragraph no unnecessary sentences, for the same reason that a drawing should have no unnecessary lines and a machine no unnecessary parts. This requires not that the writer make all his sentences short, or that he avoid all detail and treat his subjects only in outline, but that every word tell.

There you have a short, valuable essay on the nature and beauty of brevity—sixty-three words that could change the world. Having recovered from his adventure in prolixity (sixty-three words were a lot of words in the tight world of William Strunk Jr.), the professor proceeds to give a few quick lessons in pruning. The student learns to cut the deadwood from “this is a subject that,” reducing it to “this subject,” a saving of three words. He learns to trim “used for fuel purposes” down to “used for fuel.” He learns that he is being a chatterbox when he says “the question as to whether” and that he should just say “whether”—a saving of four words out of a possible five.

The professor devotes a special paragraph to the vile expression *the fact that*, a phrase that causes him to quiver with revulsion. The expression, he says, should be “revised out of every sentence in which it occurs.” But a shadow of gloom seems to hang over the page, and you feel that he knows how hopeless his cause is. I suppose I have written *the fact that* a thousand times in the heat of composition, revised it out maybe five hundred times in the cool aftermath. To be batting only .500 this late in the season, to fail half the time to connect with this fat pitch, saddens me, for it seems a betrayal of the man who showed me how to swing at it and made the swinging seem worth while.

I treasure *The Elements of Style* for its sharp advice, but I treasure it even more for the audacity and self-confidence of its author. Will knew where he stood. He was so sure of where he stood, and made his position so clear and so plausible, that his peculiar stance has continued to invigorate me—and, I am sure, thousands

of other ex-students—during the years that have intervened since our first encounter. He had a number of like and dislikes that were almost as whimsical as the choice of a necktie, yet he made them seem utterly convincing. He disliked the word *forceful* and advised us to use *forcible* instead. He felt that the word *clever* was greatly overused: "It is best restricted to ingenuity displayed in small matters." He despised the expression *student body*, which he termed gruesome, and made a special trip downtown to the *Alumni News* office one day to protest the expression and suggest that *studentry* be substituted—a coinage of his own, which he felt was similar to *citizenry*. I am told that the *News* editor was so charmed by the visit, if not by the word, that he ordered the student body buried, never to rise again. *Studentry* has taken its place. It's not much of an improvement, but it does sound less cadaverous, and it made Will Strunk quite happy.

Some years ago, when the heir to the throne of England was a child, I noticed a headline in the *Times* about Bonnie Prince Charlie: "CHARLES' TONSILS OUT." Immediately Rule 1 leapt to mind.

1. Form the possessive singular of nouns by adding 's. Follow this rule whatever the final consonant. Thus write,
 - Charles's friend
 - Burns's poems
 - the witch's malice

Clearly, Will Strunk had foreseen, as far back as 1918, the dangerous tonsillectomy of a prince, in which the surgeon removes the tonsils and the *Times* copy desk removes the final *s*. He started his book with it. I commend Rule 1 to the *Times*, and I trust that Charles's throat, not Charles' throat, is in fine shape today.

Style rules of this sort are, of course, somewhat a matter of individual preference, and even the established rules of grammar are open to challenge. Professor Strunk, although one of the most inflexible and choosy of men, was quick to acknowledge the fallacy of inflexibility and the danger of doctrine. "It is an old

observation," he wrote, "that the best writers sometimes disregard the rules of rhetoric. When they do so, however, the reader will usually find in the sentence some compensating merit, attained at the cost of the violation. Unless he is certain of doing as well, he will probably do best to follow the rules."

It is encouraging to see how perfectly a book, even a dusty rule book, perpetuates and extends the spirit of a man. Will Strunk loved the clear, the brief, the bold, and his book is clear, brief, bold. Boldness is perhaps its chief distinguishing mark. On page 27, explaining one of his parallels, he says, "The left-hand version gives the impression that the writer is undecided or timid; he seems unable or afraid to choose one form of expression and hold to it." And his Rule 11 was "Make definite assertions." That was Will all over. He scorned the vague, the tame, the colorless, the irresolute. He felt it was worse to be irresolute than to be wrong. I remember a day in class when he leaned far forward, in his characteristic pose—the pose of a man about to impart a secret—and croaked, "If you don't know how to pronounce a word, say it loud! If you don't know how to pronounce a word, say it loud!" This comical piece of advice struck me as sound at the time, and I still respect it. Why compound ignorance with inaudibility? Why run and hide?

All through *The Elements of Style* one finds evidences of the author's deep sympathy for the reader. Will felt that the reader was in serious trouble most of the time, a man floundering in a swamp, and that it was the duty of anyone attempting to write English to drain this swamp quickly and get his man up on dry ground, or at least throw him a rope. In revising the text, I have tried to hold steadily in mind this belief of his, this concern for the bewildered reader.

In the English classes of today, "the little book" is surrounded by longer, lower textbooks—books with permissive steering and automatic transitions. Perhaps the book has become something of a curiosity. To me, it still seems to maintain its original poise, standing, in

a drafty time, erect, resolute, and assured. I still find the Strunkian wisdom a comfort, the Strunkian humor a delight, and the Strunkian attitude toward right-and-wrong a blessing undisguised.

E. B. WHITE

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I

Elementary Rules of Usage

1. *Form the possessive singular of nouns by adding 's.*

Follow this rule whatever the final consonant. Thus write,

Charles's friend
Burns's poems
the witch's malice

Exceptions are the possessives of ancient proper names in *-es* and *-is*, the possessive *Jesus'*, and such forms as *for conscience' sake*, *for righteousness' sake*. But such forms as *Moses' Laws*, *Isis' temple* are commonly replaced by

the laws of Moses
the temple of Isis

The pronominal possessives *hers*, *its*, *theirs*, *yours*, and *ours* have no apostrophe. Indefinite pronouns, however, use the apostrophe to show possession.

one's rights
somebody else's umbrella

A common error is to write *it's* for *its*, or vice versa. The first is a contraction, meaning "it is." The second is a possessive.

It's a wise dog that scratches its own fleas.

2. *In a series of three or more terms with a single conjunction, use a comma after each term except the last.*

Thus write,

red, white, and blue
gold, silver, or copper

He opened the letter, read it, and made a note of its contents.

This comma is often referred to as the "serial" comma.

In the names of business firms the last comma is usually omitted. Follow the usage of the individual firm.

Brown, Shipley and Co.

Merrill Lynch, Pierce, Fenner & Smith Incorporated

3. *Enclose parenthetical expressions between commas.*

The best way to see a country, unless you are pressed for time, is to travel on foot.

This rule is difficult to apply; it is frequently hard to decide whether a single word, such as *however*, or a brief phrase is or is not parenthetical. If the interruption to the flow of the sentence is but slight, the writer may safely omit the commas. But whether the interruption is slight or considerable, he must never omit one comma and leave the other. There is no defense for such punctuation as

Marjorie's husband, Colonel Nelson paid us a visit yesterday.

OR

My brother you will be pleased to hear, is now in perfect health.

Dates usually contain parenthetical words or figures. Punctuate as follows:

February to July, 1972

April 6, 1956

Wednesday, November 13, 1929

Note that it is customary to omit the comma in

6 April 1958

The last form is an excellent way to write a date; the figures are separated by a word and are, for that reason, quickly grasped.

A name or a title in direct address is parenthetical.

If, Sir, you refuse, I cannot predict what will happen.

Well, Susan, this is a fine mess you are in.

The abbreviations *etc.*, *i.e.*, and *e.g.*, the abbreviations for academic degrees, and titles that follow a name are parenthetical and should be punctuated accordingly.

Letters, packages, etc., should go here.

Horace Fulsome, Ph.D., presided.

Rachel Simonds, Attorney

The Reverend Harry Lang, S.J.

No comma, however, should separate a noun from a restrictive term of identification.

Billy the Kid

The novelist John Fowles

William the Conqueror

Pliny the Younger

Although *Junior*, with its abbreviation *Jr.*, has commonly been regarded as parenthetical, logic suggests that it is, in fact, restrictive and therefore not in need of a comma.

James Wright Jr.

Nonrestrictive relative clauses are parenthetical, as are similar clauses introduced by conjunctions indicating time or place. Commas are therefore needed. A non-