


The  
Elements  
of  
Style

William Strunk, Jr.  
& E. B. White

Macmillan Paperbacks  107 \$ .95

THE  
ELEMENTS  
OF STYLE

by  
WILLIAM STRUNK, JR.

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

by E. B. WHITE

*New York*  
*The Macmillan Company*

A DIVISION OF THE CROWELL-COLLIER  
PUBLISHING COMPANY

© The Macmillan Company 1959

All rights reserved—no part of this book may be reproduced in any form without permission in writing from the publisher, except by a reviewer who wishes to quote brief passages in connection with a review written for inclusion in magazine or newspaper.

MACMILLAN PAPERBACKS EDITION 1962

Library of Congress catalog card number: 59-9950

The Macmillan Company, New York  
Brett-Macmillan Ltd., Galt, Ontario

The Introduction originally appeared, in slightly different form, in *The New Yorker*, and was copyrighted in 1957 by The New Yorker Magazine, Inc.

*The Elements of Style*, Revised Edition, by William Strunk, Jr., and Edward A. Tenney, Copyright 1935 by Oliver Strunk.

Printed in the United States of America

## A Note on This Book

In the summer of 1957, I wrote a piece for *The New Yorker* about a textbook I had used when I was a student at Cornell. The book dealt with usage and style; the author was William Strunk, Jr., who had been my friend and teacher. When this piece of mine appeared in print, the editors of The Macmillan Company got hold of the textbook and arranged to reissue it, using my article as an introduction. They asked me to make revisions in the text and write a chapter on style, and I have done both things.

Professor Strunk was a positive man. His book contained rules of grammar phrased as direct orders. In the main I have not attempted to soften his commands, or modify his pronouncements, or delete 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. I did omit one intricate rule of composition—one that I suspected the author might have cut had he been alive today. In its place appears Rule 8, a substitution I thought proper and for which the reader must not hold Professor Strunk responsible. Here and there in the book, minor alterations have been made; a few outdated references have been dropped, a few fresh examples added. Mr. Strunk had once done some revising of his text, for subsequent editions; some of his revisions are retained here, others are not.

*The Elements of Style*, as originally conceived, was not an attempt to survey the whole field. In an introduction to his first edition, the author stated that he intended merely to give in brief space the principal requirements of plain

English style. He proposed, he said, to concentrate on fundamentals: the rules of usage and principles of composition most commonly violated. Essentially, his statement of purpose and scope remains valid for this new edition.

The final chapter of the original book was about spelling. That chapter has been discarded. In its place is the one I have contributed, Chapter V, called "An Approach to Style." Professor Strunk, it must be clearly understood, had no part in this escapade, and I have no way of knowing whether he would approve. These are strictly my own prejudices, my notions of error, my articles of faith. The chapter 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.

E. B. White

# Introduction

A small book arrived in my mail not long ago, a gift from a friend in Ithaca. It is *The Elements of Style*, by the late William Strunk, Jr., and it was known on the Cornell campus in my day as "the little book," with the stress on the word "little." I must have once owned a copy, for I took English 8 under Professor Strunk in 1919 and the book was required reading, but my copy presumably failed to survive an early purge. I had not laid eyes on it in thirty-eight years, and I was delighted to study it again and re-discover its rich deposits of gold.

*The Elements of Style* 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 hung the title "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. The title page reveals that the book was privately printed (Ithaca, N.Y.) and that it was copyrighted in 1918 by the author. It is a forty-three-page summation of the case for cleanliness, accuracy, and brevity in the use of English. Its vigor is unimpaired, and for sheer pith I think it probably sets a record that is not likely to be broken. The Cornell University Library has one copy. It had two, but my friend pried one loose and mailed it to me.

The book consists of a short introduction, eight rules of usage, ten principles of composition, a few matters of form, a list of words and expressions commonly misused, a list of

words commonly misspelled. That's all there is. The rules and principles are in the form of direct 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 10.) "Omit needless words." (Rule 13.) "Avoid a succession of loose sentences." (Rule 14.) "In summaries, keep to one tense." (Rule 17.) Each rule or principle is followed by a short hortatory essay, and 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 in a carefully edged mustache.

"Omit needless words!" cries the author on page 17, 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 short-changed himself, a man left with nothing more to say yet with time to fill, a radio prophet who had outdistanced 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 Thirteen. 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 which . . . ,” reducing it to “This subject . . . ,” a gain 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 gain 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 likes 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.

A few weeks ago 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 mended.

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 rulebook, 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 21, 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 is "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.

"The little book" has long since passed into disuse. Will died in 1946, and he had retired from teaching several years before that. Longer, lower textbooks are in use in English

classes nowadays, I daresay—books with upswept tail fins and automatic verbs. I hope some of them manage to compress as much wisdom into as small a space, manage to come to the point as quickly and illuminate it as amusingly. I think, though, that if I suddenly found myself in the, to me, unthinkable position of facing a class in English usage and style, I would simply lean far out over the desk, clutch my lapels, blink my eyes, and say, “Get the *little* book! Get the *little* book! Get the *little* book!”

# Contents

A NOTE ON THIS BOOK	v
INTRODUCTION	vii
I. ELEMENTARY RULES OF USAGE	i
1. Form the possessive singular of nouns by adding 's	i
2. In a series of three or more terms with a single conjunction, use a comma after each term except the last	i
3. Enclose parenthetic expressions between commas	2
4. Place a comma before a conjunction introducing an independent clause	4
5. Do not join independent clauses by a comma	6
6. Do not break sentences in two	7
7. A participial phrase at the beginning of a sentence must refer to the grammatical subject	8
II. ELEMENTARY PRINCIPLES OF COMPOSITION	10
8. Choose a suitable design and hold to it	10
9. Make the paragraph the unit of composition	11
10. Use the active voice	13
11. Put statements in positive form	14
12. Use definite, specific, concrete language	15
13. Omit needless words	17
14. Avoid a succession of loose sentences	19

15. Express co-ordinate ideas in similar form	20
16. Keep related words together	22
17. In summaries, keep to one tense	25
18. Place the emphatic words of a sentence at the end	26
<b>III. A FEW MATTERS OF FORM</b>	<b>28</b>
<b>IV. WORDS AND EXPRESSIONS COMMONLY MISUSED</b>	<b>33</b>
<b>V. AN APPROACH TO STYLE</b>	<b>52</b>
(With a List of Reminders)	
1. Place yourself in the background	56
2. Write in a way that comes naturally	56
3. Work from a suitable design	57
4. Write with nouns and verbs	57
5. Revise and rewrite	58
6. Do not overwrite	58
7. Do not overstate	59
8. Avoid the use of qualifiers	59
9. Do not affect a breezy manner	59
10. Use orthodox spelling	60
11. Do not explain too much	61
12. Do not construct awkward adverbs	62
13. Make sure the reader knows who is speaking	62
14.. Avoid fancy words	63
15. Do not use dialect unless your ear is good	64
16. Be clear	65
17. Do not inject opinion	66
18. Use figures of speech sparingly	66
19. Do not take shortcuts at the cost of clarity	67
20. Avoid foreign languages	67
21. Prefer the standard to the offbeat	67

# 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 *oneself* have no apostrophe.

- 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 be 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, 1956  
April 6, 1936  
Wednesday, November 13, 1929

Note that it is permissible 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 parenthetic.

If, Sir, you refuse, I cannot predict what will happen.  
Well, Susan, this is a fine mess you are in.

The abbreviations *etc.* and *jr.* are parenthetic and are always to be so regarded.

James Wright, Jr.

Letters, packages, etc., should go here.

Nonrestrictive relative clauses are parenthetic, as are similar clauses introduced by conjunctions indicating time or place. Commas are therefore needed. A nonrestrictive clause is one that does not serve to identify or define the antecedent noun.

The audience, which had at first been indifferent, became more and more interested.

In 1769, when Napoleon was born, Corsica had but recently been acquired by France.

Nether Stowey, where Coleridge wrote *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, is a few miles from Bridgewater.

In these sentences, the clauses introduced by *which*, *when*, and *where* are nonrestrictive; they do not limit or define, they merely add something. In the first example, the clause introduced by *which* does not serve to tell which of several possible audiences is meant; the reader presumably knows that already. The clause adds, parenthetically, a statement supplementing that in the main clause. Each of the three sentences is a combination of two statements that might have been made independently.

The audience was at first indifferent. Later it became more and more interested.



Napoleon was born in 1769. At that time Corsica had but recently been acquired by France.

Coleridge wrote *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* at Nether Stowey. Nether Stowey is only a few miles from Bridgewater.

Restrictive clauses, by contrast, are not parenthetical and are not set off by commas. Thus,

People who live in glass houses shouldn't throw stones.

Here the clause introduced by *who* does serve to tell which people are meant; the sentence, unlike those above, cannot be split into two independent statements.

When the main clause of a sentence is preceded by, or followed by, a phrase or a dependent clause, use commas to set off these elements. This rule is similar in principle to the rule governing parenthetical expressions.

Partly by hard fighting, partly by diplomatic skill, they enlarged their dominions to the east and rose to royal rank with the possession of Sicily, exchanged afterwards for Sardinia.

#### ***4. Place a comma before a conjunction introducing an independent clause.***

The early records of the city have disappeared, and the story of its first years can no longer be reconstructed.

The situation is perilous, but there is still one chance of escape.

Sentences of this type, isolated from their context, may seem to be in need of rewriting. As they make complete sense when the comma is reached, the second clause has the appearance of an afterthought. Further, *and* is the least specific of connectives. Used between independent clauses, it indicates only that a relation exists between them without defining that relation. In the example above, the relation is