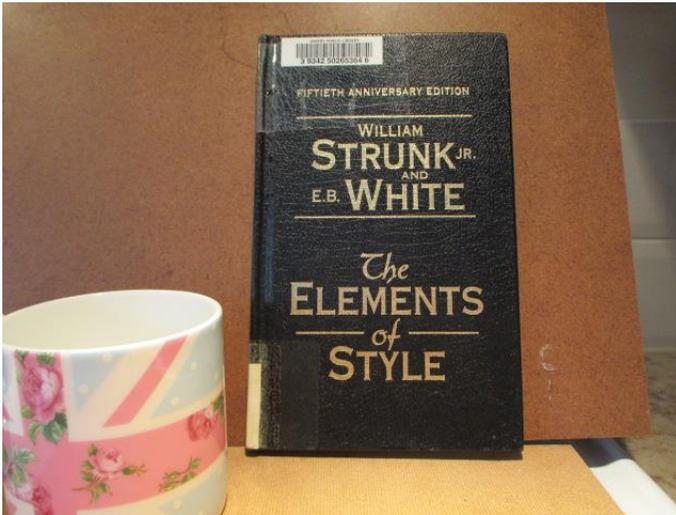


# The Elements of Style: A Writer's Guide

By Rod Fraser

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In 1919, while a student at Cornell University, E. B. White was given a style guide for use in his English classes. The author, Professor Wm. Strunk, published it in 1920, hoping it might appeal to a wider readership.

Many years later, in 1957, someone reminded White of this guide. After finding a copy, he wrote a complimentary essay about it in the New Yorker, describing it as a "forty-three-page summation of

the case for cleanliness, accuracy and brevity in the use of English.”

The essay was well received and it prompted MacMillan to ask White to update the book for publication. Strunk had passed away over a decade earlier. White had championed the guide in his article. He was the logical person to revise it.

This revision, including the addition of new material and an updating of the book for current usage, was a success. *The Elements of Style* sold over 2 million copies in 1959, and 10 million in total.. It became popularly known as the ‘*Strunk and White*’ style guide.

The book was popular because of its compact size (now 105 pages), solid advice and clear writing. It is a lot of fun to read. You will smile when Strunk cuts those nasty rules of English down to size. You may even argue with some of his opinions.

Dorothy Parker, a well-known journalist in New York in decades past had this to say about *The Elements of Style*:

*If you have any young friends who aspire to be writers, you should give them a copy of this wonderful book. Of course, it would be better to shoot them now, while they are still happy.*

Here are some of its pearls of wisdom.

### **1) Omit Useless Words**

Strunk wrote, "Writing should be concise. A sentence should contain no unnecessary words, a paragraph no unnecessary sentences...." Every word should tell.

To help his students with this rule, Strunk told them, "The active voice is more concise than the passive, and a positive statement more concise than a negative one."

Here are a couple of examples of clutter. When your dentist asks if you are experiencing any pain, you might wonder why he doesn't ask, "Does it hurt?" When on the next visit, he asks you to clench your teeth tightly, you might wonder if there is any other way? In writing, it's best to trim wordy sentences. Your readers will thank you.

Among his other eccentricities, Strunk hated the phrase "*student body*". At Cornell, he once visited the *Alumni News* to rail against the term, arguing they should use '*studentry*' instead. He argued it was akin to the word *citizenry*. The paper was impressed with his reasoning and adopted '*studentry*' without a qualm.

## **2) Write with Nouns and Verbs**

This is a rule I have heard before. In his memoir, *Goodbye to All That*, Robert Graves mentioned he was taught “to write English by eliminating phrases that could be done without, and by using verbs and nouns wherever possible.” This is likely why Graves’ writing is so clear and readable.

Another guru of good writing, William Zinsser, also railed against adjectives and adverbs, arguing they should only be used when they “do work that needs to be done.... Not every oak tree has to be ‘gnarled.’”

Zinsser added, “If it’s important to tell the reader the house was drab or that a girl was beautiful, by all means use ‘drab’ and ‘beautiful’. They have their proper power because you have learned to use adjectives sparingly.”

## **3) Revise and Rewrite**

James Michener once quipped, “I’m not a very good writer, but I’m an excellent rewriter.” A funny line with much truth to it. He wrote a number of books over the years and his writing was clean and concise.

Like many authors, his first draft was just the start. From there, he polished and rewrote his books to get them to say what he wanted them to say. It

wasn't an easy process.

E.B. White noted, "Revising is part of writing. Few writers are so expert that they can produce what they are after on the first try.... Remember, it is no sign of weakness or defeat that your manuscript ends up in need of major surgery. This is a common occurrence in all writing, and among the best writers."

And finally another bit of help by Zinsser, "With each rewrite, I tried to make what I wrote tighter, stronger and more precise, eliminating every element that was not doing useful work."

#### **4) Be Clear**

"Clarity, Clarity, Clarity. When you become hopelessly mired in a sentence [and you will], it is best to start fresh; do not fight your way through [this tangle].... The sentence needs to be broken apart and replaced by two shorter sentences."

E.B. White urged, "When you say something, make sure you have said it. The chances of you having said it are only fair. Prefer the specific to the general."

#### **5) Words or Expressions Commonly Misused**

This is a part of the book where you can have a bit of fun. Many of us like to quibble about the rules

of grammar.

**Divided into / Composed of** – “Plays are *divided into* acts; but poems are *composed of* stanzas. An apple is *divided into* sections, but an apple is *composed of* seeds, flesh and skin.”

**Farther / Further** – “The two words are commonly interchanged, but ... *farther* serves best as a distance word; *further* as a time or quantity word. You chase a ball *farther* than the other fellow; you pursue a subject *further*.”

**Flammable** – According to my Concise English Dictionary, inflammable means “liable to catch fire.” Unfortunately, many people are distracted by the ‘in’ at the beginning of the word and think it means ‘not combustible’. For this reason, trucks carrying gasoline or explosives are marked *Flammable*. In formal writing, Strunk suggests you use *inflammable*.

**Insightful** – “The word is a suspicious overstatement for *perceptive*. If it is to be used at all, it should be used for instances of remarkably penetrating vision.”

**Less / Fewer** – “*Less* refers to quantity; *fewer* to numbers.” There are *fewer* eggs in the basket; there is *less* crime in the city.

**Memento** – “often incorrectly written momento.”

**Nice** – “A shaggy all-purpose word to be used sparingly in formal composition.”

**Offputting / Ongoing** – “New found adjectives to be avoided because they are inexact and clumsy.”

**People** – “The word *people* is best not used in words of number in place of *persons*. If of six *people*, five went away, how many *people* would be left? Answer: one *people*.”

**Respective / Respectively** – “These words may usually be omitted with advantage.”

**Secondly / Thirdly** – Don’t use “unless you are prepared to begin with firstly and defend it (which will be difficult)... Modern usage prefers second, third, and so on.”

**That / Which** – There are two parts to this rule.

First, know when to profitably omit *that* from a sentence. The ear helps us with this decision. “She knew she could do it” sounds better than “She knew that she could do it.”

On the other hand, be sure to say, “He felt that his big nose ... made him look ridiculous.” If you omit

*that*, you have, "He felt his big nose ...."

Second, be sure to distinguish *that* from *which*. "The lawn mower *that* is broken is in the garage. Whereas the lawn mower, *which* is broken, is in the garage."

Using *that* in the first sentence identifies the lawn mower. Using *which* in the second sentence "adds a fact about the lawn mower in question." It's a subtlety to be sure, but Strunk felt it an important distinction for formal composition.

**The Foreseeable Future** – "A cliché and a fuzzy one. How much of the future is foreseeable? Ten minutes?"

**Verbal / Oral** – "*Oral* limits the meaning to what is transmitted by speech. *Oral* agreement is more precise than *verbal* agreement."

**Very** – "Use this word sparingly. Where emphasis is necessary, use words strong in themselves."

## 6) Conclusion

I think I should stop right here. While I could go on, given all the material in *The Elements of Style*, I suggest you buy a copy to call your own. It is a handy resource for those of us who write, and that

includes almost everyone these days.

This book provides a lively walk down memory lane and is a good guide to proper writing. It is a lot of fun to read.

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