

from **The Elements of Style**

Preface

THE FIRST writer I watched at work was my stepfather, E. B. White. Each Tuesday morning, he would close his study door and sit down to write the "Notes and Comment" page for *The New Yorker*. The task was familiar to him –he was required to file a few hundred words of editorial or personal commentary on some topic in or out of the news that week –but the sounds of his typewriter from his room came in hesitant bursts, with long silences in between. Hours went by. Summoned at last for lunch, he was silent and preoccupied, and soon excused himself to get back to the job. When the copy went off at last, in the afternoon RFD pouch –we were in Maine, a day's mail away from New York –he rarely seemed satisfied. "It isn't good enough," he said sometimes. "I wish it were better."

Writing is hard, even for authors who do it all the time. Less frequent practitioners – the job applicant; the business executive with an annual report to get out; the high school senior with a Faulkner assignment; the graduate-school student with her thesis proposal; the writer of a letter of condolence –often get stuck in an awkward passage or find a muddle on their screens, and then blame themselves. What should be easy and flowing looks tangled or feeble or overblown – not what was meant at all. What's wrong with me, each one thinks. Why can't I get this right?

It was this recurring question, put to himself, that must have inspired White to revive and add to a textbook by an English professor of his, Will Strunk Jr., that he had first read in college, and to get it published. The result, this quiet book, has been in print for forty years, and has offered more than ten million writers a helping hand. White knew that a compendium of specific tips – about singular and plural verbs, parentheses, the "that" – "which" scuffle, and many others – could clear up a recalcitrant

sentence or subclause when quickly reconsulted, and that the larger principles needed to be kept in plain sight, like a wall sampler.

How simple they look, set down here in White's last chapter: "Write in a way that comes naturally," "Revise and rewrite," "Do not explain too much," and the rest; above all, the cleansing, clarion "Be clear." How often I have turned to them, in the book or in my mind, while trying to start or unblock or revise some piece of my own writing! They help – they really do. They work. They are the way.

E. B. White's prose is celebrated for its ease and clarity – just think of *Charlotte's Web*, but maintaining this standard required endless attention. When the new issue of *The New Yorker* turned up in Maine, I sometimes saw him reading his "Comment" piece over to himself, with only a slightly different expression than the one he'd worn on the day it went off. Well, O.K., he seemed to be saying. At least I got the elements right.

This edition has been modestly updated, ... with a light redistribution of genders to permit a feminine pronoun or female farmer to take their places among the males who once innocently served him. Sylvia Plath has knocked Keats out of the box, and I notice that "America" has become "this country" in a sample text, to forestall a subsequent and possibly demeaning "she" in the same paragraph. What is not here is anything about E-mail – the rules-free, lower-case flow that cheerfully keeps us in touch these days. E-mail is conversation, and it may be replacing the sweet and endless talking we once sustained (and tucked away) within the informal letter. But we are all writers and readers as well as communicators, with the need at times to please and satisfy ourselves (as White put it) with the clear and almost perfect thought.

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. (* E. B. White wrote this introduction for the 1979 edition.)

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 reexamined 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 with 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 sentences short or avoid all detail and treat subjects only in outline, but that every word tell.

There you have a short, valuable essay on the nature and beauty of brevity – fifty-nine words that could change the world. Having recovered from his adventure in prolixity (fifty-nine 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. Students learn to cut the dead-wood from "this is a subject that," reducing it to "this subject," a saving of three words. They learn to trim "used for fuel purposes" down to "used for fuel." They learn that they are being chatterboxes when they say "the question as to whether" and that they 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 worthwhile.

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.

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 26, explaining one of his parallels, he says, “The lefthand version gives the impression that the writer is undecided or timid, apparently unable or afraid to choose one form of expression and hold to it.” And his original 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, floundering in a swamp, and that it was the

duty of anyone attempting to write English to drain this swamp quickly and get the reader up on dry ground, or at least to throw 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.

1979

V—An Approach to Style (With a List of Reminders)

UP TO this point, the book has been concerned with what is correct, or acceptable, in the use of English. In this final chapter, we approach style in its broader meaning: style in the sense of what is distinguished and distinguishing. Here we leave solid ground. Who can confidently say what ignites a certain combination of words, causing them to explode in the mind? Who knows why certain notes in music are capable of stirring the listener deeply, though the same notes slightly rearranged are impotent? These are high mysteries, and this chapter is a mystery story, thinly disguised. There is no satisfactory explanation of style, no infallible guide to good writing, no assurance that a person who thinks clearly will be able to write clearly, no key that unlocks the door, no inflexible rule by which writers may shape their course. Writers will often find themselves steering by stars that are disturbingly in motion.

The preceding chapters contain instructions drawn from established English usage; this one contains advice drawn from a writer's experience of writing. Since the book is a rule book, these cautionary remarks, these subtly dangerous hints, are presented in the form of rules, but they are, in essence, mere gentle reminders: they state what most of us know and at times forget.

Style is an increment in writing. When we speak of Fitzgerald's style, we don't mean his command of the relative pronoun, we mean the sound his words make on paper. All writers, by the way they use the language, reveal something of their spirits, their habits, their capacities, and their biases. This is inevitable as well as enjoyable. All writing is communication; creative writing is communication through revelation – it is the Self escaping into the open. No writer long remains incognito.

If you doubt that style is something of a mystery, try rewriting a familiar sentence and see what happens. Any much-quoted sentence will do. Suppose we take "These are the times that try men's souls." Here we have eight short, easy words, forming a simple declarative sentence. The sentence contains no flashy ingredient such as "Damn the torpedoes!" and the words, as you see, are ordinary. Yet in that arrangement, they have shown great durability; the sentence is into its third century. Now compare a few variations:

Times like these try men's souls.

How trying it is to live in these times!

These are trying times for men's souls.

Soulwise, these are trying times.

It seems unlikely that Thomas Paine could have made his sentiment stick if he had couched it in any of these forms. But why not? No fault of grammar can be detected in them, and in every case the meaning is clear. Each version is correct, and each, for some reason that we can't readily put our finger on, is marked for oblivion. We could, of course, talk about "rhythm" and "cadence," but the talk would be vague and unconvincing. We could declare *soulwise* to be a silly word, inappropriate to the occasion; but even that won't do – it does not answer the main question. Are we even sure *soulwise* is silly? If *otherwise* is a serviceable word, what's the matter with *soulwise*?

Here is another sentence, this one by a later Tom. It is not a famous sentence, although its author (Thomas Wolfe) is well known. "Quick are the mouths of earth, and quick the teeth that fed upon this loveliness." The sentence would not take a prize for clarity, and rhetorically it is at

the opposite pole from "These are the times." Try it in a different form, without the inversions:

The mouths of earth are quick, and the teeth that fed
upon this loveliness are quick, too.

The author's meaning is still intact, but not his overpowering emotion. What was poetical and sensuous has become prosy and wooden; instead of the secret sounds of beauty, we are left with the simple crunch of mastication. (Whether Mr. Wolfe was guilty of overwriting is, of course, another question – one that is not pertinent here.)

With some writers, style not only reveals the spirit of the man but reveals his identity, as surely as would his fingerprints. Here, following, are two brief passages from the works of two American novelists. The subject in each case is languor. In both, the words used are ordinary, and there is nothing eccentric about the construction.

He did not still feel weak, he was merely luxuriating
in that supremely gutful lassitude of convalescence in
which time, hurry, doing, did not exist, the accumulating
seconds and minutes and hours to which in its well state
the body is slave both waking and sleeping, now reversed
and time now the lip-server and mendicant to the body's
pleasure instead of the body thrall to time's headlong
course.

Manuel drank his brandy. He felt sleepy himself. It
was too hot to go out into the town. Besides there was
nothing to do. He wanted to see Zurito. He would go to
sleep while he waited.

Anyone acquainted with Faulkner and Hemingway will have recognized them in these passages and perceived which was which. How different are their languors!

Or take two American poets, stopping at evening. One stops by woods, the other by laughing flesh.

My little horse must think it queer
To stop without a farmhouse near
Between the woods and frozen lake
The darkest evening of the year.*

(* From "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" from *The Poetry of Robert Frost*, edited by Edward Connery Lathem. Copyright 1923, © 1969 by Henry Holt and Company, LLC. Reprinted by permission of Henry Holt and Company, LLC.)

I have perceived that to be with those I like is enough,
To stop in company with the rest at evening is enough,
To be surrounded by beautiful, curious, breathing,
laughing flesh is enough ...

Because of the characteristic styles, there is little question about identity here, and if the situations were reversed, with Whitman stopping by woods and Frost by laughing flesh (not one of his regularly scheduled stops), the reader would know who was who.

Young writers often suppose that style is a garnish for the meat of prose, a sauce by which a dull dish is made palatable. Style has no such separate entity; it is nondetachable, unfilterable. The beginner should approach style warily, realizing that it is an expression of self, and should turn resolutely away from all devices that are popularly believed to indicate style – all mannerisms, tricks, adornments. The approach to style is by way of plainness, simplicity, orderliness, sincerity.

Writing is, for most, laborious and slow. The mind travels faster than the pen; consequently, writing becomes a question of learning to make occasional wing shots, bringing down the bird of thought as it flashes by. A writer is a gunner, sometimes waiting in the blind for something to come in, sometimes roaming the countryside hoping to scare something up. Like other gunners, the writer must cultivate patience, working many

covers to bring down one partridge. Here, following, are some suggestions and cautionary hints that may help the beginner find the way to a satisfactory style.

1. Place yourself in the background.

Write in a way that draws the reader's attention to the sense and substance of the writing, rather than to the mood and temper of the author. If the writing is solid and good, the mood and temper of the writer will eventually be revealed and not at the expense of the work. Therefore, the first piece of advice is this: to achieve style, begin by affecting none – that is, place yourself in the background. A careful and honest writer does not need to worry about style. As you become proficient in the use of language, your style will emerge, because you yourself will emerge, and when this happens you will find it increasingly easy to break through the barriers that separate you from other minds, other hearts – which is, of course, the purpose of writing, as well as its principal reward. Fortunately, the act of composition, or creation, disciplines the mind; writing is one way to go about thinking, and the practice and habit of writing not only drain the mind but supply it, too.

2. Write in a way that comes naturally.

Write in a way that comes easily and naturally to you, using words and phrases that come readily to hand. But do not assume that because you have acted naturally your product is without flaw.

The use of language begins with imitation. The infant imitates the sounds made by its parents; the child imitates first the spoken language, then the stuff of books. The imitative life continues long after the writer is secure in the language, for it is almost impossible to avoid imitating what one admires. Never imitate consciously, but do not worry about being an imitator; take pains instead to admire what is good. Then when you write in a way that comes naturally, you will echo the halloos that

bear repeating.

3. Work from a suitable design.

Before beginning to compose something, gauge the nature and extent of the enterprise and work from a suitable design. (See Chapter II, Rule 12.) Design informs even the simplest structure, whether of brick and steel or of prose. You raise a pup tent from one sort of vision, a cathedral from another. This does not mean that you must sit with a blueprint always in front of you, merely that you had best anticipate what you are getting into. To compose a laundry list, you can work directly from the pile of soiled garments, ticking them off one by one. But to write a biography, you will need at least a rough scheme; you cannot plunge in blindly and start ticking off fact after fact about your subject, lest you miss the forest for the trees and there be no end to your labors.

Sometimes, of course, impulse and emotion are more compelling than design. If you are deeply troubled and are composing a letter appealing for mercy or for love, you had best not attempt to organize your emotions; the prose will have a better chance if the emotions are left in disarray – which you'll probably have to do anyway, since feelings do not usually lend themselves to rearrangement. But even the kind of writing that is essentially adventurous and impetuous will on examination be found to have a secret plan: Columbus didn't just sail, he sailed west, and the New World took shape from this simple and, we now think, sensible design.

4. Write with nouns and verbs.

Write with nouns and verbs, not with adjectives and adverbs. The adjective hasn't been built that can pull a weak or inaccurate noun out of a tight place. This is not to disparage adjectives and adverbs; they are indispensable parts of speech. Occasionally they surprise us with their power, as in

Up the airy mountain,
Down the rushy glen,
We daren't go a-hunting
For fear of little men ...

The nouns *mountain* and *glen* are accurate enough, but had the mountain not become airy, the glen rushy, William Ailing-ham might never have got off the ground with his poem. In general, however, it is nouns and verbs, not their assistants, that give good writing its toughness and color.

5. Revise and rewrite.

Revising is part of writing. Few writers are so expert that they can produce what they are after on the first try. Quite often you will discover, on examining the completed work, that there are serious flaws in the arrangement of the material, calling for transpositions. When this is the case, a word processor can save you time and labor as you rearrange the manuscript. You can select material on your screen and move it to a more appropriate spot, or, if you cannot find the right spot, you can move the material to the end of the manuscript until you decide whether to delete it. Some writers find that working with a printed copy of the manuscript helps them to visualize the process of change; others prefer to revise entirely on screen. Above all, do not be afraid to experiment with what you have written. Save both the original and the revised versions; you can always use the computer to restore the manuscript to its original condition, should that course seem best. 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.

6. Do not overwrite.

Rich, ornate prose is hard to digest, generally unwholesome, and sometimes nauseating. If the sickly-sweet word, the overblown phrase are

your natural form of expression, as is sometimes the case, you will have to compensate for it by a show of vigor, and by writing something as meritorious as the Song of Songs, which is Solomon's.

When writing with a computer, you must guard against wordiness. The click and flow of a word processor can be seductive, and you may find yourself adding a few unnecessary words or even a whole passage just to experience the pleasure of running your fingers over the keyboard and watching your words appear on the screen. It is always a good idea to reread your writing later and ruthlessly delete the excess.

7. Do not overstate.

When you overstate, readers will be instantly on guard, and everything that has preceded your overstatement as well as everything that follows it will be suspect in their minds because they have lost confidence in your judgment or your poise. Overstatement is one of the common faults. A single overstatement, wherever or however it occurs, diminishes the whole, and a single carefree superlative has the power to destroy, for readers, the object of your enthusiasm.

8. Avoid the use of qualifiers.

Rather, very, little, pretty – these are the leeches that infest the pond of prose, sucking the blood of words. The constant use of the adjective *little* (except to indicate size) is particularly debilitating; we should all try to do a little better, we should all be very watchful of this rule, for it is a rather important one, and we are pretty sure to violate it now and then.

9. Do not affect a breezy manner.

The volume of writing is enormous, these days, and much of it has a sort of windiness about it, almost as though the author were in a state of euphoria. "Spontaneous me," sang Whitman, and, in his innocence, let loose the hordes of uninspired scribblers who would one day confuse

spontaneity with genius.

The breezy style is often the work of an egocentric, the person who imagines that everything that comes to mind is of general interest and that uninhibited prose creates high spirits and carries the day. Open any alumni magazine, turn to the class notes, and you are quite likely to encounter old Spontaneous Me at work – an aging collegian who writes something like this:

Well, guys, here I am again dishing the dirt about your disorderly classmates, after pa\$\$ing a weekend in the Big Apple trying to catch the Columbia hoops tilt and then a cab-ride from hell through the West Side casbah. And speaking of news, howzabout tossing a few primo items this way?

This is an extreme example, but the same wind blows, at lesser velocities, across vast expanses of journalistic prose. The author in this case has managed in two sentences to commit most of the unpardonable sins: he obviously has nothing to say, he is showing off and directing the attention of the reader to himself, he is using slang with neither provocation nor ingenuity, he adopts a patronizing air by throwing in the word *primo*, he is humorless (though full of fun), dull, and empty. He has not done his work. Compare his opening remarks with the following – a plunge directly into the news:

Clyde Crawford, who stroked the varsity shell in 1958, is swinging an oar again after a lapse of forty years. Clyde resigned last spring as executive sales manager of the Indiana Flotex Company and is now a gondolier in Venice.

This, although conventional, is compact, informative, unpretentious. The writer has dug up an item of news and presented it in a straightforward manner. What the first writer tried to accomplish by cutting rhetorical

capers and by breeziness, the second writer managed to achieve by good reporting, by keeping a tight rein on his material, and by staying out of the act.

10. Use orthodox spelling.

In ordinary composition, use orthodox spelling. Do not write *nite* for *night*, *thru* for *through*, *pleez* for *please*, unless you plan to introduce a complete system of simplified spelling and are prepared to take the consequences.

In the original edition of *The Elements of Style*, there was a chapter on spelling. In it, the author had this to say:

The spelling of English words is not fixed and invariable, nor does it depend on any other authority than general agreement. At the present day there is practically unanimous agreement as to the spelling of most words.... At any given moment, however, a relatively small number of words may be spelled in more than one way. Gradually, as a rule, one of these forms comes to be generally preferred, and the less customary form comes to look obsolete and is discarded. From time to time new forms, mostly simplifications, are introduced by innovators, and either win their place or die of neglect.

The practical objection to unaccepted and oversimplified spellings is the disfavor with which they are received by the reader. They distract his attention and exhaust his patience. He reads the form *though* automatically, without thought of its needless complexity; he reads the abbreviation *tho* and mentally supplies the missing letters, at the cost of a fraction of his attention. The writer has defeated his own purpose.

The language manages somehow to keep pace with events. A word

that has taken hold in our century is *thru-way*; it was born of necessity and is apparently here to stay. In combination with *way*, *thru* is more serviceable than *through*; it is a high-speed word for readers who are going sixty-five. *Throughway* would be too long to fit on a road sign, too slow to serve the speeding eye. It is conceivable that because of our thruways, *through* will eventually become *thru* – after many more thousands of miles of travel.

11. Do not explain too much.

It is seldom advisable to tell all. Be sparing, for instance, in the use of adverbs after “he said,” “she replied,” and the like: “he said consolingly”; “she replied grumbly.” Let the conversation itself disclose the speaker’s manner or condition. Dialogue heavily weighted with adverbs after the attributive verb is cluttered and annoying. Inexperienced writers not only overwork their adverbs but load their attributives with explanatory verbs: “he consoled,” “she congratulated.” They do this, apparently, in the belief that the word *said* is always in need of support, or because they have been told to do it by experts in the art of bad writing.

12. Do not construct awkward adverbs.

Adverbs are easy to build. Take an adjective or a participle, add *-ly*, and behold! you have an adverb. But you’d probably be better off without it. Do not write *tangledly*. The word itself is a tangle. Do not even write *tiredly*. Nobody says *tangledly* and not many people say *tiredly*. Words that are not used orally are seldom the ones to put on paper.

He climbed
tiredly to bed.

He climbed
wearily to bed.

The lamp cord lay
tangledly beneath her chair.

The lamp cord lay in
tangles beneath her chair.

Do not dress words up by adding *-ly* to them, as though putting a hat on a horse.

overly over

muchly much

thusly thus

13. Make sure the reader knows who is speaking.

Dialogue is a total loss unless you indicate who the speaker is. In long dialogue passages containing no attributives, the reader may become lost and be compelled to go back and reread in order to puzzle the thing out. Obscurity is an imposition on the reader, to say nothing of its damage to the work.

In dialogue, make sure that your attributives do not awkwardly interrupt a spoken sentence. Place them where the break would come naturally in speech – that is, where the speaker would pause for emphasis, or take a breath. The best test for locating an attributive is to speak the sentence aloud.

“Now, my boy, we shall
see,” he said, “how well you
have learned your lesson.”

“Now, my boy,” he said,
“we shall see how well you
have learned your lesson.”

“What’s more, they would
never,” she added, “consent
to the plan.”

“What’s more,” she
added, “they would never
consent to the plan.”

14. Avoid fancy words.

Avoid the elaborate, the pretentious, the coy, and the cute. Do not be tempted by a twenty-dollar word when there is a ten-center handy, ready

and able. Anglo-Saxon is a livelier tongue than Latin, so use Anglo-Saxon words. In this, as in so many matters pertaining to style, one's ear must be one's guide: *gut* is a lustier noun than *intestine*, but the two words are not interchangeable, because *gut* is often inappropriate, being too coarse for the context. Never call a stomach a tummy without good reason.

If you admire fancy words, if every sky is *beauteous*, every blonde *curvaceous*, every intelligent child prodigious, if you are tickled by *discombobulate*, you will have a bad time with Reminder 14. What is wrong, you ask, with *beauteous*? No one knows, for sure. There is nothing wrong, really, with any word – all are good, but some are better than others. A matter of ear, a matter of reading the books that sharpen the ear.

The line between the fancy and the plain, between the atrocious and the felicitous, is sometimes alarmingly fine. The opening phrase of the Gettysburg address is close to the line, at least by our standards today, and Mr. Lincoln, knowingly or unknowingly, was flirting with disaster when he wrote "Four score and seven years ago." The President could have got into his sentence with plain "Eighty-seven" – a saving of two words and less of a strain on the listeners' powers of multiplication. But Lincoln's ear must have told him to go ahead with four score and seven. By doing so, he achieved cadence while skirting the edge of fanciness. Suppose he had blundered over the line and written, "In the year of our Lord seventeen hundred and seventy-six." His speech would have sustained a heavy blow. Or suppose he had settled for "Eighty-seven." In that case he would have got into his introductory sentence too quickly; the timing would have been bad.

The question of ear is vital. Only the writer whose ear is reliable is in a position to use bad grammar deliberately; this writer knows for sure when a colloquialism is better than formal phrasing and is able to sustain

the work at a level of good taste. So cock your ear. Years ago, students were warned not to end a sentence with a preposition; time, of course, has softened that rigid decree. Not only is the preposition acceptable at the end, sometimes it is more effective in that spot than anywhere else. "A claw hammer, not an ax, was the tool he murdered her with." This is preferable to "A claw hammer, not an ax, was the tool with which he murdered her." Why? Because it sounds more violent, more like murder. A matter of ear.

And would you write "The worst tennis player around here is I" or "The worst tennis player around here is me"? The first is good grammar, the second is good judgment – although the *me* might not do in all contexts.

The split infinitive is another trick of rhetoric in which the ear must be quicker than the handbook. Some infinitives seem to improve on being split, just as a stick of round stovewood does. "I cannot bring myself to really like the fellow." The sentence is relaxed, the meaning is clear, the violation is harmless and scarcely perceptible. Put the other way, the sentence becomes stiff, needlessly formal. A matter of ear.

There are times when the ear not only guides us through difficult situations but also saves us from minor or major embarrassments of prose. The ear, for example, must decide when to omit *that* from a sentence, when to retain it. "She knew she could do it" is preferable to "She knew that she could do it" – simpler and just as clear. But in many cases the *that* is needed. "He felt that his big nose, which was sunburned, made him look ridiculous." Omit the *that* and you have "He felt his big nose...."

15. Do not use dialect unless your ear is good.

Do not attempt to use dialect unless you are a devoted student of the tongue you hope to reproduce. If you use dialect, be consistent. The reader will become impatient or confused upon finding two or more versions of

the same word or expression. In dialect it is necessary to spell phonetically, or at least ingeniously, to capture unusual inflections. Take, for example, the word *once*. It often appears in dialect writing as *oncet*, but *oncet* looks as though it should be pronounced "onset." A better spelling would be *wunst*. But if you write it *oncet* once, write it that way throughout. The best dialect writers, by and large, are economical of their talents; they use the minimum, not the maximum, of deviation from the norm, thus sparing their readers as well as convincing them.

16. Be clear.

Clarity is not the prize in writing, nor is it always the principal mark of a good style. There are occasions when obscurity serves a literary yearning, if not a literary purpose, and there are writers whose mien is more overcast than clear. But since writing is communication, clarity can only be a virtue. And although there is no substitute for merit in writing, clarity comes closest to being one. Even to a writer who is being intentionally obscure or wild of tongue we can say, "Be obscure clearly! Be wild of tongue in a way we can understand!" Even to writers of market letters, telling us (but not telling us) which securities are promising, we can say, "Be cagey plainly! Be elliptical in a straightforward fashion!"

Clarity, clarity, clarity. When you become hopelessly mired in a sentence, it is best to start fresh; do not try to fight your way through against the terrible odds of syntax. Usually what is wrong is that the construction has become too involved at some point; the sentence needs to be broken apart and replaced by two or more shorter sentences.

Muddiness is not merely a disturber of prose, it is also a destroyer of life, of hope: death on the highway caused by a badly worded road sign, heartbreak among lovers caused by a misplaced phrase in a well-intentioned letter, anguish of a traveler expecting to be met at a railroad station and not being met because of a slipshod telegram. Think of the

tragedies that are rooted in ambiguity, and be clear! When you say something, make sure you have said it. The chances of your having said it are only fair.

17. Do not inject opinion.

Unless there is a good reason for its being there, do not inject opinion into a piece of writing. We all have opinions about almost everything, and the temptation to toss them in is great. To air one's views gratuitously, however, is to imply that the demand for them is brisk, which may not be the case, and which, in any event, may not be relevant to the discussion. Opinions scattered indiscriminately about leave the mark of egotism on a work. Similarly, to air one's views at an improper time may be in bad taste. If you have received a letter inviting you to speak at the dedication of a new cat hospital, and you hate cats, your reply, declining the invitation, does not necessarily have to cover the full range of your emotions. You must make it clear that you will not attend, but you do not have to let fly at cats. The writer of the letter asked a civil question; attack cats, then, only if you can do so with good humor, good taste, and in such a way that your answer will be courteous as well as responsive. Since you are out of sympathy with cats, you may quite properly give this as a reason for not appearing at the dedicatory ceremonies of a cat hospital. But bear in mind that your opinion of cats was not sought, only your services as a speaker. Try to keep things straight.

18. Use figures of speech sparingly.

The simile is a common device and a useful one, but similes coming in rapid fire, one right on top of another, are more distracting than illuminating. Readers need time to catch their breath; they can't be expected to compare everything with something else, and no relief in sight.

When you use metaphor, do not mix it up. That is, don't start by

calling something a swordfish and end by calling it an hourglass.

19. Do not take shortcuts at the cost of clarity.

Do not use initials for the names of organizations or movements unless you are certain the initials will be readily understood. Write things out. Not everyone knows that MADD means Mothers Against Drunk Driving, and even if everyone did, there are babies being born every minute who will someday encounter the name for the first time. They deserve to see the words, not simply the initials. A good rule is to start your article by writing out names in full, and then, later, when your readers have got their bearings, to shorten them.

Many shortcuts are self-defeating; they waste the reader's time instead of conserving it. There are all sorts of rhetorical stratagems and devices that attract writers who hope to be pithy, but most of them are simply bothersome. The longest way round is usually the shortest way home, and the one truly reliable shortcut in writing is to choose words that are strong and surefooted to carry readers on their way.

20. Avoid foreign languages.

The writer will occasionally find it convenient or necessary to borrow from other languages. Some writers, however, from sheer exuberance or a desire to show off, sprinkle their work liberally with foreign expressions, with no regard for the reader's comfort. It is a bad habit. Write in English.

21. Prefer the standard to the offbeat.

Young writers will be drawn at every turn toward eccentricities in language. They will hear the beat of new vocabularies, the exciting rhythms of special segments of their society, each speaking a language of its own. All of us come under the spell of these unsettling drums; the problem for beginners is to listen to them, learn the words, feel the vibrations, and not be carried away.

Youths invariably speak to other youths in a tongue of their own

devising: they renovate the language with a wild vigor, as they would a basement apartment. By the time this paragraph sees print, *psyched*, *nerd*, *ripoff*, *dude*, *geek*, and *funky* will be the words of yesteryear, and we will be fielding more recent ones that have come bouncing into our speech – some of them into our dictionary as well. A new word is always up for survival. Many do survive. Others grow stale and disappear. Most are, at least in their infancy, more appropriate to conversation than to composition.

Today, the language of advertising enjoys an enormous circulation. With its deliberate infractions of grammatical rules and its crossbreeding of the parts of speech, it profoundly influences the tongues and pens of children and adults. Your new kitchen range is so revolutionary it *obsoletes* all other ranges. Your counter top is beautiful because it is *accessorized* with gold-plated faucets. Your cigarette tastes good *like* a cigarette should. And, *like the man says*, you will want to try one. You will also, in all probability, want to try writing that way, using that language. You do so at your peril, for it is the language of mutilation.

Advertisers are quite understandably interested in what they call "attention getting." The man photographed must have lost an eye or grown a pink beard, or he must have three arms or be sitting wrong-end-to on a horse. This technique is proper in its place, which is the world of selling, but the young writer had best not adopt the device of mutilation in ordinary composition, whose purpose is to engage, not paralyze, the readers senses. Buy the gold-plated faucets if you will, but do not accessorize your prose. To use the language well, do not begin by hacking it to bits; accept the whole body of it, cherish its classic form, its variety, and its richness.

Another segment of society that has constructed a language of its own is business. People in business say that toner cartridges are *in short supply*, that they have *updated* the next shipment of these cartridges, and that

they will *finalize* their recommendations at the next meeting of the board. They are speaking a language familiar and dear to them. Its portentous nouns and verbs invest ordinary events with high adventure; executives walk among toner cartridges, caparisoned like knights. We should tolerate them – every person of spirit wants to ride a white horse. The only question is whether business vocabulary is helpful to ordinary prose. Usually, the same ideas can be expressed less formidably, if one makes the effort. A good many of the special words of business seem designed more to express the user's dreams than to express a precise meaning. Not all such words, of course, can be dismissed summarily; indeed, no word in the language can be dismissed offhand by anyone who has a healthy curiosity. *Update* isn't a bad word; in the right setting it is useful. In the wrong setting, though, it is destructive, and the trouble with adopting coinages too quickly is that they will bedevil one by insinuating themselves where they do not belong. This may sound like rhetorical snobbery, or plain stuffiness; but you will discover, in the course of your work, that the setting of a word is just as restrictive as the setting of a jewel. The general rule here is to prefer the standard. *Finalize*, for instance, is not standard; it is special, and it is a peculiarly fuzzy and silly word. Does it mean "terminate," or does it mean "put into final form"? One can't be sure, really, what it means, and one gets the impression that the person using it doesn't know, either, and doesn't want to know.

The special vocabularies of the law, of the military, of government are familiar to most of us. Even the world of criticism has a modest pouch of private words (*luminous, taut*), whose only virtue is that they are exceptionally nimble and can escape from the garden of meaning over the wall. Of these critical words, Wolcott Gibbs once wrote, "... they are detached from the language and inflated like little balloons." The young writer should learn to spot them – words that at first glance seem freighted

with delicious meaning but that soon burst in air, leaving nothing but a memory of bright sound.

The language is perpetually in flux: it is a living stream, shifting, changing, receiving new strength from a thousand tributaries, losing old forms in the backwaters of time. To suggest that a young writer not swim in the main stream of this turbulence would be foolish indeed, and such is not the intent of these cautionary remarks. The intent is to suggest that in choosing between the formal and the informal, the regular and the offbeat, the general and the special, the orthodox and the heretical, the beginner err on the side of conservatism, on the side of established usage. No idiom is taboo, no accent forbidden; there is simply a better chance of doing well if the writer holds a steady course, enters the stream of English quietly, and does not thrash about.

"But," you may ask, "what if it comes natural to me to experiment rather than conform? What if I am a pioneer, or even a genius?" Answer: then be one. But do not forget that what may seem like pioneering may be merely evasion, or laziness – the disinclination to submit to discipline. Writing good standard English is no cinch, and before you have managed it you will have encountered enough rough country to satisfy even the most adventurous spirit.

Style takes its final shape more from attitudes of mind than from principles of composition, for, as an elderly practitioner once remarked, "Writing is an act of faith, not a trick of grammar." This moral observation would have no place in a rule book were it not that style *is* the writer, and therefore what you are, rather than what you know, will at last determine your style. If you write, you must believe – in the truth and worth of the scrawl, in the ability of the reader to receive and decode the message. No one can write decently who is distrustful of the reader's intelligence, or whose attitude is patronizing.

Many references have been made in this book to "the reader," who has been much in the news. It is now necessary to warn you that your concern for the reader must be pure: you must sympathize with the reader's plight (most readers are in trouble about half the time) but never seek to know the reader's wants. Your whole duty as a writer is to please and satisfy yourself, and the true writer always plays to an audience of one. Start sniffing the air, or glancing at the Trend Machine, and you are as good as dead, although you may make a nice living.

Full of belief, sustained and elevated by the power of purpose, armed with the rules of grammar, you are ready for exposure. At this point, you may well pattern yourself on the fully exposed cow of Robert Louis Stevenson's rhyme. This friendly and commendable animal, you may recall, was "blown by all the winds that pass /And wet with all the showers." And so must you as a young writer be. In our modern idiom, we would say that you must get wet all over. Mr. Stevenson, working in a plainer style, said it with felicity, and suddenly one cow, out of so many, received the gift of immortality. Like the steadfast writer, she is at home in the wind and the rain; and, thanks to one moment of felicity, she will live on and on and on.

1935

Afterword

WILL STRUNK and E. B. White were unique collaborators. Unlike Gilbert and Sullivan, or Woodward and Bernstein, they worked separately and decades apart.

We have no way of knowing whether Professor Strunk took particular notice of Elwyn Brooks White, a student of his at Cornell University in 1919. Neither teacher nor pupil could have realized that their names would be linked as they now are. Nor could they have imagined that thirty-eight years after they met, White would take this little gem of a textbook that Strunk had written for his students, polish it, expand it, and transform it into a classic.

E. B. White shared Strunk's sympathy for the reader. To Strunk's do's and don'ts he added passages about the power of words and the clear expression of thoughts and feelings. To the nuts and bolts of grammar he added a rhetorical dimension.

The editors of this edition have followed in White's footsteps, once again providing fresh examples and modernizing usage where appropriate. *The Elements of Style* is still a little book, small enough and important enough to carry in your pocket, as I carry mine. It has helped me to write better. I believe it can do the same for you.

Charles Osgood