

MIDWESTERN BAPTIST THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

THE ELEMENTS OF STYLE

A BOOK REVIEW

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE COURSE
DR 30020 DOCTORAL COLLOQUIUM

BY

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Strunk, William Jr., E.B. White. *The Elements of Style*. Needham Heights, MA: Allyn & Bacon. 2000. \$8.95; 105 pages.

Biographical Information

William Strunk Jr. earned a bachelor's degree from the University of Cincinnati and later earned a Doctor of Philosophy from Cornell University in Ithaca, NY. Strunk later spent time studying at the University of Paris. By the end of his life Strunk had taught at three different universities, been an editor, and a writer. He spent forty-six years as an English Professor at Cornell University.¹

E.B. White crossed paths with Strunk before graduating from Cornell University in 1921. White worked as reporter for the United Press International, American Legion News Service, and Seattle Times. However, not finding a fondness for daily-journalism, he sought a job as an assistant editor and copywriter for the Frank Seaman advertising agency. While working for the advertising agency his poems were published in "The Conning Tower," a column in the *Herald Tribune*.² He later wrote as a columnist for *The New Yorker* magazine and published several works, including *Charlotte's Web*. Lastly, White received the following awards: "National Institute of Arts and Letters Gold Medal for Essays and Criticism, 1960; Presidential Medal of Freedom, 1963; Laura Ingalls Wilder Medal, 1970; National Medal for Literature, 1971."³

¹ "William Strunk, Jr." Contemporary Authors Online, Gale, 2006. Biography In Context, <http://link.galegroup.com/apps/doc/H1000096102/BIC?u=kans01120&sid=BIC&xid=169b662d>.

² The Editors of the Encyclopaedia Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Franklin-Pierce-Adams#ref212655>

³ "E. B. White." Encyclopedia of World Biography, Gale, 1998. Biography In Context, <http://link.galegroup.com/apps/doc/K1631006944/BIC?u=kans01120&sid=BIC&xid=a67c224e>.

Synopsis

“*The Elements of Style*” is a handbook designed for writers that want to untangle the extensive rules of English rhetoric and effectively use language within their own style of writing (xiii). Strunk wrote the original in 1919 to be used in the English classes he taught at Cornell University (xiii). Three revisions, two by E.B. White in 1957 and 1972, and one in 2000 have strengthened the original (xiii-xiv). White added several rules and the final chapter, “An Approach To Style” to the original work of Strunk. The fourth edition included a foreword by Roger Angell, the stepson of White,⁴ and a glossary of terms. In White’s own words, “It concentrates on fundamentals: the rules of usage and principles of composition most commonly violated” (xiv). In other words, the book is meant to help writers communicate clearly by concisely identifying often misunderstood rules of grammar, composition, words, and form.

Consisting of five short chapters, the writers identify specific mistakes often made in writing. The first three chapters consist of eleven rules each, while the fourth contains an alphabetical list of words that are often misused. Each misused word is accompanied by examples to illustrate their proper use and meaning. In the fifth chapter, White gives “advice” on how writers “use the language, reveal something of their spirits, their habits, their capacities, and their biases” (67). He then added twenty-one rules, imitating the original style of Strunk (67).

The first chapter focuses on rules of usage for elements of grammar that often entangle writers. Eleven rules address concepts like the use of the possessive form of a noun, the appropriate use of commas, when to use a colon, and the importance of using the proper case of a pronoun. Each of the rules is magnified by examples that are short and follow rule 17 regarding composition, which commands, “Omit needless words” (23).

⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roger_Angell.
<https://www.nytimes.com/2009/04/22/books/22elem.html>.

Strunk and White employ the style of a dry witted professor who is sure of his thoughts and confident his topic satisfies a need. Therefore, many of the rules are a concise “exhortation” similar to one found for rule “17. Omit needless words”. They have further explanations like this:

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 (23).

The previous quote illustrates their approach of making the rules clear and memorable. Another example of this is found in rule 16, which says, “Use definite, specific, concrete language” (21). They further explained rule 16 by adding, “Prefer the specific to the general, the definite to the vague, the concrete to the abstract” (21). Illustrations in this style are clear and concise, like the authors intend.

The rules explained in chapter two focus on the interaction of words and grammar, which compose the thoughts of the writer. The goal is to help the writer communicate clearly and the work be solid in structure and expression so the “reader’s attention” is held (21). Strunk and White reason, “A writer who has written a series of loose sentences should recast enough of them to remove the monotony” (26). In other words, if a writer applies the rules of composition well the reader is kept from distraction and the reading experience is pleasant.

By the time Strunk and White reach chapter three, they identify rules that relate to common elements of form. The elements of form support the written composition and are things like titles, margins, and headings. The authors also explain how to use colloquialisms, exclamations, hyphens, and references so writers have mastery of the necessary elements of form.

In the introduction E.B. White describes his professor: “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” (xvi). This description provides a bit of insight into the reason chapter four exists; Strunk lists numerous words and phrases that show his irritation at their misuse. The pithy explanations sound like that aforementioned professor standing on his soap box. For instance:

Farther. Further. The two words are commonly interchanged, but there is a distinction worth observing: *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*.

E.B. White adds the final chapter with a noticeable style change, though he does make an effort to retain the rule system utilized by Strunk. The contribution is excellent, as he coaches writers with great insight during his introductory remarks. He writes, “The beginner should approach style warily, realizing that it is an expression of self” (69). He encourages the reader to press into the “reminders” so they carefully develop their own style (66). Finally, White emphasizes that the writer ought to have a “pure concern for the reader,” but not at the expense or the pleasure of the writer himself (84).

Critical Evaluation

“*The Elements of Style*” is a complex work for a number of reasons. First it sets a number of rules for writers that are accurate and applicable. However, it also sets fastidious rules, especially in the changing landscape of the use of language. For instance, the use of the word “however” in the previous sentence breaks its rule set by Strunk and White as they insist it is not properly used as the first word in a sentence.

It is also a complex work because it is tedious to read and comprehend. It requires patience, re-reading, comparison, and constant analysis. Admittedly those are not bad things, yet

if they are not constantly and jointly applied the reader – writer to be – will not likely employ the rules in any future efforts. As an English professor grading paper after paper, Strunk likely developed this book from the errors he consistently corrected.

As a whole, the rules are short and accurate and will aid most writers. The rules apply most appropriately to academic and formal writing which is why the final chapter by E.B. White provides a sense of flexibility. To illustrate the importance of this chapter, imagine a balloon not yet inflated. The balloon represents the rules that Strunk outlined, boundaries, limits, and shape. White focuses on style which are like the air which expands the balloon and completes its intended purpose. In other words, style takes the lifeless elements of grammar and breathes in creativity, stretching the work as the writer accomplishes his desires through proper composition.

The authors stated, “the surest way to arouse and hold the reader’s attention is by being specific, definite, and concrete” (21). Though this thought is an excellent rule for journalism, academic work, and news, it might not be the best advice for prose, fiction, or creative writing. Some writers desire ambiguity and purposely instill areas for interpretation. Therefore, it is important that the style of writing guide the implementation of the rules. Therefore, E.B. White offers balance to “The Elements of Style” making it a beneficial work for any writer who wants to improve in skill and confidence.