

ENG 2200 LAURA LISABETH

The Elements of Styl(in)

For several generations, Strunk and White's *The Elements of Style* has been the go-to resource for questions of "appropriate" usage of the English language when writing for a public readership--most often, a readership in an academic setting: a teacher or professor. William Strunk wrote the handbook for his own English classes at Cornell University in the early part of the 20th Century. That's where E.B. White encountered the "little book" as a freshman in 1918. His decision, over forty years later, to publish Professor Strunk's guide to style along with his own additions (he was by that time a very famous author and essayist) proved to be monumental. *The Elements of Style* has never been out of print since 1959.

In our class we are going to read and examine this iconic style guide, question it, find gold in it, challenge it, use it, re-use it, engage with its ideology and its soul. I hope that you will leave this class with an informed relationship with *The Elements of Style* and a deeper, more critical acquaintance with Strunk and White's style of Standard English usage. The standard use of the English language is part of our scholarly heritage, and the medium of our work. We have much to learn from understanding the historical and social context of English, and, in particular, the kind of English E.B. White calls "Strunkian."¹

THE ASSIGNMENT

Each group will collaborate to decide on a segment, a rule, or a pronouncement from the text of *The Elements of Style* for the purpose of inquiry. Chapter II, Elementary Principles of Composition and Chapter V, White's supplemental chapter titled "An Approach To Style," make good places for starting your dialogue with the authors and their ideas. Your task then will be:

As a group, discuss your thinking about this section of Strunk and White's guidebook to writing. As English majors, you ought to know how to think critically about the English language; it is the endlessly complex medium we work with. What do the authors seem to be saying about writers, readers and the function and purpose of language? Look closely at the language they have chosen. Are there any clues in their rhetoric of the authors' attitudes?

Find a published piece of writing that speaks to Strunk and White and the specific part of the book that you have chosen to analyze. Write a group commentary of at least 500 words that critically and rigorously engages with both your new piece of published writing and the text of *The Elements of Style*. Why did you choose the new piece? Where was it published and in what format? What do we need to know about the author? How does it create a dialogue with Strunk and White? Other questions to consider are: are there any historical, cultural or social forces

¹ Strunk, William J., White, E.B. and Kalman, Maira. *The Elements of Style* (illustrated). Penguin Books: New York. 2000. p. xvii.

foregrounded by the juxtaposition of *The Elements of Style* with your group's selection of writing? Do changes in the technology of writing, i.e. digital formats, inform your analysis of Strunk and White?

Post the excerpt from *The Elements of Style* that you are analyzing, with a citation. Post your new piece of writing, also with a citation. Post your commentary. Use any visual or other multimedia components that your group decides will add to your wiki entry. Be creative, but be substantial. You are thinking critically about the idea of a standard form of English, how it functions in our society and in our educational systems.

Class members not in your group will be commenting on your work, and you will be commenting on the work of other groups.

On the Tuesday after you post your wiki content, your group will lead a fifteen-minute class discussion based on your critical analysis and the questions raised by the rest of the class on the wiki, so this will involve a planning session by your group before that Tuesday class.