

The Elements of Style

William Strunk, Jr.

E. B. White

January 23, 2023

Contents

1	Elementary Rules of Usage	3
1.1	Form the possessive singular of nouns by adding 's.	3
1.2	In a series of 3 or more terms with a single conjunction, use a comma after each term except the last.	3
1.3	Enclose parenthetic expressions between commas.	3
1.4	Place a comma before a conjunction introducing an independent clause.	3
1.5	Do not join independent clauses with a comma.	3
1.6	Do not break sentences in 2.	3
1.7	Use a colon after an independent clause to introduce a list of particulars, an appositive, an amplification, or an illustrative quotation.	3
1.8	Use a dash to set off an abrupt break or interruption & to announce a long appositive or summary.	3
1.9	The number of the subject determines the number of the verb.	3
1.10	Use the proper case of pronoun.	3
1.11	A participial phrase at the beginning of a sentence must refer to the grammatical subject.	3
2	Elementary Principles of Composition	3
2.1	Choose a suitable design & hold to it.	3
2.2	Make the paragraph the unit of composition: 1 paragraph to each topic.	3
2.3	Use the active voice.	3
2.4	Put statements in positive form.	3
2.5	Use definite, specific, concrete language.	3
2.6	Omit needless words.	3
2.7	Avoid a succession of loose sentences.	3
2.8	Express coordinate ideas in similar form.	3
2.9	Keep related words together.	3
2.10	In summaries, keep to 1 tense.	3
2.11	Place the emphatic words of a sentence at the end.	3
3	A Few Matters of Form	3
4	Words & Expressions Commonly Misused	3
5	An Approach to Style (With a List of Reminders)	3
5.1	Place yourself in the background.	3
5.2	Write in a way that comes naturally.	4
5.3	Work from a suitable design.	4
5.4	Write with nouns & verbs.	4
5.5	Revise & rewrite.	4
5.6	Do not overwrite.	5
5.7	Do not overstate.	5
5.8	Avoid the use of qualifiers.	5
5.9	Do not affect a breezy manner.	5
5.10	Use orthodox spelling.	5
5.11	Do not explain too much.	5
5.12	Do not construct awkward adverbs.	5
5.13	Make sure the reader knows who is speaking.	5
5.14	Avoid fancy words.	5

5.15 Do not use dialect unless your ear is good.	5
5.16 Be clear.	5
5.17 Do not inject opinion.	5
5.18 Use figures of speech sparingly.	5
5.19 Do not take shortcuts at the cost of clarity.	5
5.20 Avoid foreign languages.	5
5.21 Prefer the standard to the offbeat.	5
6 Afterword	5
References	5

Foreword

Introduction

1 Elementary Rules of Usage

- 1.1 Form the possessive singular of nouns by adding 's.
- 1.2 In a series of 3 or more terms with a single conjunction, use a comma after each term except the last.
- 1.3 Enclose parenthetic expressions between commas.
- 1.4 Place a comma before a conjunction introducing an independent clause.
- 1.5 Do not join independent clauses with a comma.
- 1.6 Do not break sentences in 2.
- 1.7 Use a colon after an independent clause to introduce a list of particulars, an appositive, an amplification, or an illustrative quotation.
- 1.8 Use a dash to set off an abrupt break or interruption & to announce a long appositive or summary.
- 1.9 The number of the subject determines the number of the verb.
- 1.10 Use the proper case of pronoun.
- 1.11 A participial phrase at the beginning of a sentence must refer to the grammatical subject.

2 Elementary Principles of Composition

- 2.1 Choose a suitable design & hold to it.
- 2.2 Make the paragraph the unit of composition: 1 paragraph to each topic.
- 2.3 Use the active voice.
- 2.4 Put statements in positive form.
- 2.5 Use definite, specific, concrete language.
- 2.6 Omit needless words.
- 2.7 Avoid a succession of loose sentences.
- 2.8 Express coordinate ideas in similar form.
- 2.9 Keep related words together.
- 2.10 In summaries, keep to 1 tense.
- 2.11 Place the emphatic words of a sentence at the end.

3 A Few Matters of Form

4 Words & Expressions Commonly Misused

5 An Approach to Style (With a List of Reminders)

- 5.1 Place yourself in the background.

“Write in a way that draws the reader’s attention to the sense & substance of the writing, rather than to the mood & temper of the author. If the writing is solid & good, the mood & temper of the writer will eventually be revealed & not at the

expense of the work. Therefore, the 1st piece of advice is this: to achieve style, begin by affecting none – i.e., place yourself in the background. A careful & 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, & 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 1 way to go about thinking, & the practice & habit of writing not only drain the mind but supply it, too.” – Strunk Jr. and White, 2019, p. 78

5.2 Write in a way that comes naturally.

“Write in a way that comes easily & naturally to you, using words & 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 1st 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.” – Strunk Jr. and White, 2019, p. 79

5.3 Work from a suitable design.

“Before beginning to compose something, gauge the nature & extent of the enterprise & work from a suitable design. (See Chap. II, Rule 12.) Design informs even the simplest structure, whether of brick & steel or of prose. You raise a pup tent from 1 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 1 by 1. By to write a biography, you will need at least a rough scheme; you cannot plunge in blindly & start ticking off fact after fact about your subject, lest you miss the forest for the trees & there be no end to your labors.

Sometimes, of course, impulse & emotion are more compelling than design. If you are deeply troubled & 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 & impetuous will on examination be found to have a secret plan: Columbus didn’t just sail, he sailed west, & the New World took shape from this simple &, we now think, sensible design.” – Strunk Jr. and White, 2019, p. 80

5.4 Write with nouns & verbs.

“Write with nouns & verbs, not with adjectives & 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 & 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* & *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 this poem. In general, however, it is nouns & verbs, not their assistants, that give good writing its toughness & color.” – Strunk Jr. and White, 2019, p. 81

5.5 Revise & rewrite.

“Revising is part of writing. Few writers are so expert that they can produce what they are after on the 1st 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 & labor as you rearrange the manuscript. You can select material on your screen & 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 & 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, & among the best writers.” – Strunk Jr. and White, 2019, p. 82

5.6 Do not overwrite.

“Rich, ornate prose is hard to digest, generally unwholesome, & 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, & by writing something as meritorious as the Songs of Songs, which is Solomon’s.

When writing with a computer, you must guard against wordiness. The click & flow of a word processor can be seductive, & 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 & watching your words appear on the screen. It is always a good idea to reread your writing later & ruthlessly delete the excess.” – Strunk Jr. and White, 2019, p. 83

5.7 Do not overstate.

5.8 Avoid the use of qualifiers.

5.9 Do not affect a breezy manner.

5.10 Use orthodox spelling.

5.11 Do not explain too much.

5.12 Do not construct awkward adverbs.

5.13 Make sure the reader knows who is speaking.

5.14 Avoid fancy words.

5.15 Do not use dialect unless your ear is good.

5.16 Be clear.

5.17 Do not inject opinion.

5.18 Use figures of speech sparingly.

5.19 Do not take shortcuts at the cost of clarity.

5.20 Avoid foreign languages.

5.21 Prefer the standard to the offbeat.

6 Afterword

References

Strunk Jr., William and E. B. White (2019). *The Elements of Style*. Fourth edition, p. 110.