

The Elements of Style

By William Strunk and E.B. White
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Selected Quotes:

- “Brevity is a by-product of vigor.” (p. 19)
- “Do not be tempted by a twenty-dollar word when there is a ten-center handy, ready and able.” (p. 76-77)

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Note on the structure of the book summary

For the rules there are boxes with Notes, Examples, or both, where relevant. **Distinct notes or examples within a single box are separated by a semicolon.**

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Elementary rules of usage

Rule 1: Form the possessive singular of nouns by adding 's

Notes: this is irrespective of last consonant; don't confuse with its or it's

Example: Charles's friends; Burns's poems; the witch's malice

Rule 2: In a series of three or more terms with a single conjunction, use a comma after each term except the last.

Example: red, white, and blue; he did X, did Y, and then Z.

Rule 3: Enclose parenthetical expressions between commas

Notes: write commas if interruption of flow is significant or if there is a non-restrictive relative clause (describes a noun but not crucial for meaning); write commas for: abbreviations, degrees, titles, if the main clause is preceded by a phrase or a subordinate clause, for dates (unless separated by the month)

Example: The best way to see a country, unless you are pressed for time, is to travel on foot; April 6, 1986; 6 April 1986; John Smith, Ph.D.,... ; People sitting in the rear couldn't hear (restrictive); Uncle Bert, being slightly deaf, moved forward (non-restrictive)

Rule 4: Place a comma before a conjunction introducing an independent clause

Notes: if they can be stand-alone sentences and are not connected immediately, write comma

Example: The early records of the city have disappeared, and the story of its first years can no longer be reconstructed; He has had several years' experience and is thoroughly competent.

Rule 5: Do not join independent clauses with a comma. &&

Rule 6: Do not break sentences in two.

Notes: semicolon is better than comma when the sentences are related as it is briefer and more forcible; periods abrupt the flow so if ideas are related, use semicolon; periods do not replace commas unless the goal is emphasis

Examples: Compare: Mary Shelley's works are entertaining; they are full of ideas VS Mary Shelley's works are entertaining. They are full of ideas VS Mary Shelley's works are entertaining, for they are full of ideas

Rule 7: Use a colon after an independent clause to introduce a list of particulars, an appositive, an amplification, or an illustrative quotation.

Notes: a colon has more effect than the comma, less power to separate than the semicolon, and more formality than the dash; requires a noun beforehand

Examples: Your dedicated whittler requires three props: X, Y, Z; But even so, there was a directness and dispatch about animal burial: there was no stopover in the undertaker's...

Rule 8: Use a dash to set off an abrupt break or interruption and to announce a long appositive or summary.

Notes: a dash separates stronger than a comma, is less formal than a colon, more relaxed than parentheses; don't overuse

Examples: His first thought on getting out of bed – if he had any thought at all – was to get back in again.

Rule 9: The number of the subject determines the number of the verb.

Notes: one of *plural* requires plural verb; each/either/everyone/everybody/neither/nobody/someone all require singular; the verb attached to 'none' depends on what none refers to; singular required even if the noun is connect by 'with' or 'as well as'; subjects qualified by each/every require singular

Rule 10: Use the proper case of pronoun.

Notes: Rule of thumb: is it a subject or an object- use respective pronoun (rephrase to check – some examples are rephrased) [N.B. Rule of thumb my addition, not Strunk and White's]; when who is an a subordinate clause, its case depends on its function in that clause – see examples

Examples: Give this work to whoever looks idle (whoever looks idle is a subordinate clause and whoever is the subject); Virgil Soames is the candidate whom we hope to elect [We hope to elect him.]; Sandy writes better than I (Than I write); They came to meet the Baldwins and us; Howard and you brought the lunch, I thought (I thought Howard/you...); Compare: Do you mind me asking a question? Vs Do you mind my asking a question?

Rule 11: A participial phrase at the beginning of a sentence must refer to the grammatical subject.

Examples: He saw a woman, accompanied by two children, walking slowly [confusing]; Young and inexperienced, I thought the task easy (c.f. Young and inexperienced, the task seemed easy to me).

Elementary principles of composition

Rule 12: Choose a suitable design and hold to it.

Notes: choose appropriate structure/shape of the writing.

Rule 13: Make the paragraph the unit of composition.

Notes: Paragraphs build your narrative, i.e. the logical flow of your argument.

Rule 14: Use the active voice.

Notes: Active voice makes sentences shorter, ergo brevity is a by-product of vigor.

Rule 15: Put statements in positive form.

Notes: avoid tame, colorless language; only use not where necessary (can strengthen the structure); only use auxiliaries (would, should, could, may, might, can) where there is true uncertainty not just mere hesitation

Examples: Compare: He was not very often on time vs He usually came in late; not important -> trifling; Ask not what your country can do for you – ask what you can do for your country

Rule 16: Use definite, specific, concrete language.

Notes: specific>general; definite>vague; concrete>abstract

Rule 17: Omit needless words.

Examples: the questions as to whether -> whether; he is a man who -> he; the reason why is that -> because; this is a subject that -> this subject; owing to the fact that -> since; the fact that I had arrived -> my arrival; His cousin, who is a member of the same firm -> His cousin, a member of the same firm

Rule 18: Avoid a succession of loose sentences.

Notes: especially those consisting of two clauses, the second introduced by a conjunction or relative; rule of thumb: make sure sentences are meaningful and correspond to certain logical point in an argument and are joined accordingly

Rule 19: Express coordinate ideas in similar form.

Notes: keeping the form together makes it easier for the reader so they can move to deliberating content

Examples: Compare: Formerly, science was taught by the textbook method, while now the laboratory method is employed VS Formerly, science was taught by the textbook method; now it is taught by the laboratory method; the X, the Y, and the Z; Compare: His speech was marked by disagreement and scorn for his opponent's position VS His speech was marked by disagreement with and scorn for his opponent's position; Compare: A time not for words but action VS A time not for words but for action.

Rule 20: Keep related words together.

Notes: words that relate to same thing in thought should be grouped in writing; subjects and verbs should not be separated by a phrase that can be moved; relative pronouns go immediately after its antecedent

Examples: Compare: He noticed a large stain in the rug that was right in the center VS He noticed a large stain right in the center of the rug; Compare: A dog, if you fail to discipline him, becomes a household pest VS Unless disciplined, a dog becomes a household pest; Compare: There was a stir in the audience that suggested disapproval VS A stir that suggested disapproval swept the audience; Compare: He wrote three articles about his adventures in Spain, which were published in X VS He published three articles in X about his adventures in Spain

Rule 21: In summaries, keep to one tense.

Notes: switching tenses signals insecurity and irresolution

Rule 22: Place the emphatic words of a sentence at the end.

Notes: new information or where the emphasis should go is placed at the end; any element in the sentence other than the subject becomes emphatic when placed first; this principle applies to words within sentences, sentences in a paragraph and paragraph in a composition

Examples: Compare: This steel is principally used for making razors, because of its hardness VS Because of its hardness, this steel is used principally for making razors; Deceit or treachery she could never forgive.

Words and expressions commonly misused

Do Not Use

- *'And/or'*
- *As to whether* – use whether
- *As yet* – use yet (almost always)
- *Case* – unnecessary; Compare: It has rarely been the case that any mistake has been made VS Few mistakes have been made
- *Certainly* – similar to very.
- *Each and every one*
- *Factor* – usually replace-able; Compare: Air power is becoming an increasingly important factor in deciding battles vs Air power is playing a larger and larger part in deciding battles.
- *Feature* – avoidable unless it's a term
- *Gotten* – use get instead in formal writing or avoid in 'have got'
- *Regards* – use in regard to instead
- *In the last analysis*
- *In terms of* – omit; Compare: The job was unattractive in terms of salary vs The salary made the job unattractive
- *Interesting* – instead of announcing that what you're about to say is interesting, just make it so
- *Like*
- *Along these lines*
- *Literally*
- *Offputting. Ongoing.* – generally avoid; use more specific words; test: It is possible to upset something, but to offput? To ongo?
- *-oriented.* – avoid; Compare: It was a manufacturing-oriented company vs It was a company chiefly concerned with manufacturing
- *Personalize* – avoid; Compare: a highly personalized affair vs a highly personal affair; Compare: personalize your stationary vs design a letterhead
- *Secondly, thirdly* – use first, second, third instead
- *So*
- *Sort of*
- *Student body* – use student
- *Try* – in formal writing avoid 'try and do X'; write 'try to do X' instead
- *Utilize* – prefer use
- *Very*
- *Worth while* – as a phrase avoid (e.g. books are not worth while); as an adjective it's too weak, prefer a stronger word

Do Not Use – Specific Cases Only

- *Being* – not to be used after regard ... as; Compare: He is regarded as being the best dancer in the club vs He is regarded as the best dancer in the club
- *But* – not to use after doubt or help; Compare: I have no doubt but that vs I have no doubt that
- *Can* – not to be used as a substitute for may
- *Character* – to be avoided; Compare: acts of a hostile character vs hostile acts
- *Etc* – generally avoid in formal writing
- *Facility* – jails, hospitals and schools are not facilities
- *However* – avoid starting a sentence when the meaning is 'nevertheless'
- *Nature* – avoid when used as 'character'; otherwise quite vague
- *-wise* – avoid as a pseudosuffix, e.g. taxwise, pricewise etc
- *Would* – when used to indicate habit or repeated action, avoid; prefer past tense w/o would; in narrative writing remember to demark a change from the habit/general to the specific

Words and expressions commonly misused

Spelling/Ambiguous Meaning

- *Aggravate vs Irritate*
- *Allude vs Elude*
- *Allusion vs Illusion*
- *Alternate* (every other one in a series) vs *Alternative* (one of two possibilities)
- *Anticipate* – use expect when it's a simple expectation (anticipate can be ambiguous)
- *Disinterested* (impartial) vs *Uninterested* (couldn't care less)
- *Effect* – as a noun means 'result'; as a verb means 'to bring about'; affect meant 'to influence'
- *Fortuitous* – happens by chance; not be used as fortunate or lucky
- *Gratuitous* – means unearned or unwarranted
- *Imply vs Infer*
- *Lay vs lie*
- *Nauseous* (sickening to contemplate) vs *Nauseated* (sick at the stomach)
- *Regretful vs Regrettable*
- *Than* – ambiguities can arise; Compare: I'm probably closer to my mother than my father VS I'm probably closer to my mother than to my father OR I'm probably closer to my mother than my father is
- *This* – sometimes used to refer to the preceding sentence or clause but can't always carry the load – rephrase or specify
- *Tortuous vs Torturous*
- *Unique* – cannot be ranked

Prepositions

- *Compare to and Compare with* – compare to used for things of different categories; compare with used for things of same categories: life can be compared to a dram, to a battle; British parliament can be compared with American congress
- *Consider* – not followed by as when it means believe to be but followed by as when it means examined or discussed; e.g. I consider him competent or The lecturer considered him first as soldier and second as administrator.
- *Cope* – requires 'with'
- *Relate to* - to be used intransitively to suggest rapport; Compare I related well to Janet vs Janet and I see things the same way or Janet and I have a lot in common
- *Split infinitive* – to be used only for emphasis; Compare: to diligently inquire vs to inquire diligently

Other:

- *Due to* – to be used as synonymous with attributable to
- *Loan* – use as a noun; prefer lend as a verb
- *State* – to only be used in the sense of 'express fully or clearly'
- *That. Which.* – that is defining, or restrictive; which is nondefining or nonrestrictive
- *Transpire* – to be used only carefully in the sense of 'become known'
- *While* – use carefully; do not used in doubt – be precise!; Compare: The office and sales-rooms are on the ground floor, while the rest of the building is used for manufacturing VS The office and sales-rooms are on the ground floor; the rest of the building is used for manufacturing

An approach to style

1. Place yourself in the background.

Notes: focus on sense and substance, not rhetoric; place yourself in the background (i.e. imagine yourself as another reader) and the style will emerge (my note: related to Cialdini's placing of image of a reader while writing and Pinker's classic style)

2. Write in a way that comes naturally.

Notes: write naturally, but don't be afraid to imitate in the beginning (but don't do it consciously)

3. Work from a suitable design.

Notes: have a structure to your writing and start from there, unless it's a poem or a love letter where emotions and impulse work better

4. Write with nouns and verbs.

Notes: adjectives and adverbs can't revive dead nouns and verbs

5. Revise and rewrite.

6. Do not overwrite.

Notes: word processors make it easy to write more than necessary due to the pleasure of writing; return later to your work and delete (my note: usually 1/3 can be trimmed from draft 1 without loss of meaning – Nejra)

7. Do not overstate.

Notes: do not overstate – it makes readers doubt you (but also don't hesitate)

8. Avoid the use of qualifiers.

9. Do not affect a breezy manner.

Notes: be straightforward and informative; don't be egocentric enough to think that every thought you think should be written and communicated; don't hide behind breeziness

10. Use orthodox spelling.

Notes: no 'nite' for 'night' or 'thru' for 'through' or 'pleez' for 'please'

11. Do not explain too much.

Notes: (my note: assume that the reader is not an expert, but is of average intelligence)

12. Do not construct awkward adverbs.

Notes: do not overuse -ly; if it's not common in speech, it's hard to read (e.g. tiredly)

13. Make sure the reader knows who is speaking.

14. Avoid fancy words.

Notes: "Do not be tempted by a twenty-dollar word when there is a ten-center handy, ready and able."

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

16. Be clear.

17. Do not inject opinion.

Notes: unless necessary; otherwise it's egotistic

18. Use figures of speech sparingly.

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

Notes: e.g. initials, abbreviations

20. Avoid foreign languages

Notes: especially Latin or Greek

21. Prefer the standard to the offbeat.

Notes: For example, finalize (which is offbeat) – does it mean to 'terminate' or to 'put into final form'