

BOOK REVIEWS

The Elements of Style

Authors: William Strunk, Jr. and E. B. White

Online version available at:

<http://www.bartleby.com/141/>

Latest edition published by Allyn and Bacon, 1999

105 pp.

ISBN 020530902X

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Eighty-three years ago, a slim volume appeared in Ithaca, New York. Written by William Strunk, Jr., *The Elements of Style* aimed to assist students in grasping the essence of plain English. People who had enough of such monstrous constructions as "He has been proved to have been seen entering the building," "this is a subject which...," "the question as to whether," and many many others saw in it proof that good writing was possible in all fields.

Four editions on, this classic of modern English nonfiction prose still fascinates readers. The latest edition by Allyn and Bacon is still only 105 pages but covers the basics of what makes English nonfiction writing concise and readable. Although both the original author and E. B. White (who added more elements as the project developed) are dead now, the book is alive: Strunk and White's *Elements* can do wonders to everyone's writing if they are looking for fresh ideas. As a university teacher of academic writing, I could not do without this collection of rules.

The Internet edition of the original publication can be found at Bartleby's site, together with other reference, verse, fiction and nonfiction texts: <http://www.bartleby.com/141/>. The latest print edition can be ordered online.

The elementary rules of usage (for example, "Enclose parenthetical expressions between commas"), of composition (such as "Put statements in positive form"), the chapter called "A Few Matters of Form," and other sections contain dozens of useful

tips written in the uncluttered language of two authors for whom clarity and simplicity meant the essence of expression.

College teachers of English writing may set up a task that involves the original edition now available online at Bartleby's and the latest printed edition (foreword by Roger Angell). After having read the text, students could do the following:

1. Using terms of the glossary of the fourth edition (prepared by Robert DiYanni), groups of students compare what is included in the two editions. Essential differences are noted and discussed.
2. Strunk and White are strong on examples, but these have changed over the years. It will be exciting to explore some of the differences between the 1918 and the 1999 versions.
3. Students choose an online journal or a magazine and do a web search of phrases the online edition or the latest edition sets as examples of bad style. When such writing is found, the sentence is copied into a word processing file (I'd call it "Bad Style Scrapbook"), together with information on where the texts were copied from.
4. Follow-up activity for 3: clips from the "Bad Style Scrapbook" are selected as raw material for email messages sent to the editors of the source journal or magazine. Students ask the editors for their opinions on the style of these quotes.
5. No rule-book can be either complete or completely acceptable. Students can do research among teachers and students on (1) whether they are familiar with Strunk and White; (2) if they are, which rules they find acceptable and which unacceptable, and why. (3) They can also ask for any areas the respondents would like to see covered.
6. Strunk and White have some very good company. What links can students discover between *The Elements of Style* and other writers and other books on writing? A simple web search will reveal loads of links that they can explore further. What do they find out about the connection between William Zinsser and *The Elements*? Where is *The Elements* a required reading now? What criticism has been published about it? Who are Gary Hoffman and Glynis Hoffman who bid adios to Strunk and White?
7. Fave lists. Which rule is best written? Which is the most useful? The teacher may select a few, say, ten, from various chapters and ask students to produce a

Top Ten Style Tips poster, which could be blue-tacked on the wall. If I were asked, I'd go for this as my number one: "Omit needless words. 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 his sentences short, or that he avoid all detail and treat his subjects only in outline, but that every word tell." I would certainly make this point a prerequisite for publication in *any* academic journal - surely a more important matter than where a period or a comma is placed in the References list.

Whether online or off, learning first a little bit and then all the bits about Strunk and White's big little book is time wisely spent. And who knows? Maybe English writing will reflect one day that the millions of readers who have ever seen this classic begin to apply some of its elements of style: in email messages, department memos, newspaper profiles, research papers and, yes, book reviews.

P. S. Here is one more tip. Students can critically read this review and send me an email message about how many elementary rules I have ignored here. My address: joe@btk.pte.hu.

P. P. S. Readers are also welcome at my web pages at <http://www.xanga.com/horvath> or at the online edition of my dissertation on Hungarian university students' writing in EFL, available at http://www.geocities.com/writing_site/thesis.
