

# The Elements of Style

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*The Elements of Style* (1918), also known as **Strunk & White**, by William Strunk, Jr. and E. B. White, is a prescriptive American English writing style guide comprising eight "elementary rules of usage", ten "elementary principles of composition", "a few matters of form", a list of forty-nine "words and expressions commonly misused", and a list of fifty-seven "words often misspelled".

In 2011, *Time* magazine listed the writing style -guide as one of the 100 best and most influential books written in English since 1923.<sup>[1]</sup>

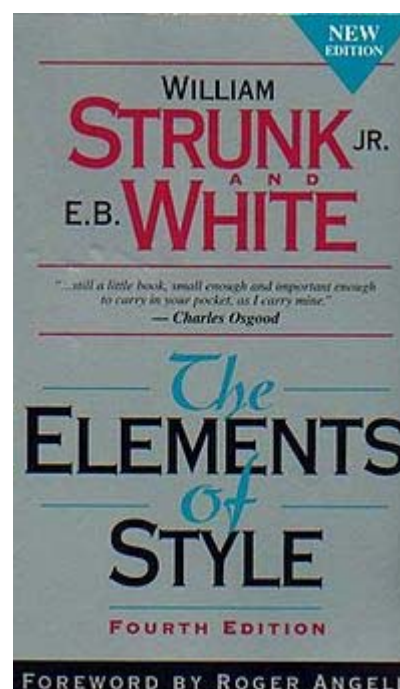
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## History

Cornell University professor of English William Strunk, Jr., wrote *The Elements of Style* in 1918, and privately published it in 1919, for in-house use at the university. Later, for publication, he and editor Edward A. Tenney revised it as *The Elements and Practice of Composition* (1935). Twenty-two years later, in 1957, at *The New Yorker* magazine, the style guide reached the attention of E. B. White, who had studied writing under Strunk in 1919, but had since forgotten "the little book" that he described as a "forty-three-page summation of the case for cleanliness, accuracy, and brevity in the use of English." Weeks later, White wrote a feature story about Professor Strunk's devotion to lucid English prose.<sup>[2]</sup>

## The Elements of Style



Cover of 4th ed. (paperback, 2000)

<b>Author(s)</b>	William Strunk, Jr., and E.B. White
<b>Country</b>	USA
<b>Language</b>	English
<b>Subject(s)</b>	Style guide
<b>Publisher</b>	Pearson Education Company
<b>Publication date</b>	1919, 1959
<b>Media type</b>	Paperback book
<b>Pages</b>	105
<b>ISBN</b>	020530902X
<b>OCLC Number</b>	45802070 ( <a href="http://worldcat.org/oclc/45802070">http://worldcat.org/oclc/45802070</a> )
<b>Dewey Decimal</b>	808/.042 21
<b>LC Classification</b>	PE1408 .S772 1999

## Style Guides

*ACS Style Guide*  
*AMA Manual of Style*  
*The Associated Press Stylebook*  
*The Chicago Manual of Style*  
*Turabian*  
*The Elements of Style*

Macmillan and Company publishers subsequently commissioned White to revise the forty-one year old text of *The Elements of Style* (1918) for a 1959 edition, because Strunk had died in 1946. White's expansion and modernization of Strunk's 1935 revised edition yielded the writing style manual informally known as ***Strunk & White***, the first edition of which sold approximately two million copies in 1959. In the ensuing four decades, more than ten million copies of three editions have been sold.<sup>[3]</sup> The history of this writing manual is told in *Stylized: A Slightly Obsessive History of Strunk & White's The Elements of Style* (2009), by Mark Garvey.<sup>[4]</sup>

*The Elements of Typographic Style*  
*ISO 690*  
*MHRA Style Guide*  
*MLA Handbook*  
*MLA Style Manual*  
*The New York Times Manual*  
*The Oxford Guide to Style/New Hart's Rules*  
*The Publication Manual of the APA*  
  
*The ASA Style Guide*

## Content

In *The Elements of Style* (1918), as a professor of English, William Strunk concentrated on specific questions of usage—and the cultivation of good writing—with the recommendation "Make every word tell"; hence, the 17th principle of composition is the simple instruction: "Omit needless words."<sup>[5]</sup> The 1959 edition features White's expansions of those sections, the "Introduction" essay (derived from his magazine feature story about Prof. Strunk), and the concluding chapter, "An Approach to Style", a broader, prescriptive guide to writing in English. He also produced the second (1972) and third (1979) editions of *The Elements of Style*, by which time the book's length had extended to eighty-five pages.

The third edition of *The Elements of Style* (1979) features 54 points: a list of common word-usage errors; 11 rules of punctuation and grammar; 11 principles of writing; 11 matters of form, and 21 reminders for a better style, in Chapter V. The final reminder, the 21st, "Prefer the standard to the offbeat", is thematically integral to the subject of *The Elements of Style*, yet does stand as a discrete essay about writing lucid prose.<sup>[2]</sup> To write well, White advises writers to have the proper mind-set, that they write to please themselves, and that they aim for "one moment of felicity", a phrase by Robert Louis Stevenson (1850–94); thus the professor's 1918 recommendation:

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.

\_\_\_<sup>[6]</sup>

The fourth edition of *The Elements of Style* (2000), published fifty-four years after the death of William Strunk Jr., omits his stylistic advice about masculine pronouns: "unless the antecedent is or must be feminine";<sup>[7]</sup> and, in its place, editor E.B. White reports: "Currently, however, many writers find the use of the generic *he* or *his* to rename indefinite antecedents limiting or offensive." In Chapter IV: Misused Words and Expressions, the re-titled entry, "They. He or She" further advises avoiding an "unintentional emphasis on the masculine".<sup>[8][9]</sup> The textual expansions to the fourth edition include a foreword by Roger Angell, stepson of E.B. White, an afterword by the American cultural commentator Charles Osgood, a glossary, and an index. Five years later, the fourth edition was re-published as *The Elements of Style Illustrated* (2005), by the designer Maira Kalman.

## Criticism

In criticizing *The Elements of Style*, Geoffrey Pullum, professor of linguistics at Edinburgh University, and co-author of *The Cambridge Grammar of the English Language* (2002), said that:

The book's toxic mix of purism, atavism, and personal eccentricity is not underpinned by a proper grounding in English grammar. It is often so misguided that the authors appear not to notice their own egregious flouting of its own rules . . . It's sad. Several generations of college students learned their grammar from the uninformed bossiness of *Strunk and White*, and the result is a nation of educated people who know they feel vaguely anxious and insecure whenever they write *however* or *than me* or *was* or *which*, but can't tell you why.<sup>[10]</sup>

Specifically, Pullum said that the authors misunderstood what constitutes the passive voice, and criticized their proscription of established popular usages, such as the split infinitive and the use of *which* in a restrictive relative clause.<sup>[10]</sup> He further criticized *The Elements of Style* in *Language Log*, a linguists' log about language usage in the popular media, for promoting linguistic prescriptivism and hypercorrection among Anglophones, and called it "the book that ate America's brain".<sup>[11][12]</sup>

The *Boston Globe*'s review described *The Elements of Style Illustrated* (2005), by Maira Kalman, as an "aging zombie of a book . . . a hodgepodge, its now-antiquated pet peeves jostling for space with 1970s taboos and 1990s computer advice".<sup>[13]</sup>

## Editions

- *The Elements of Style* (1999), 4th edition, hardcover, ISBN 0-205-31342-6
- *The Elements of Style* (2000), 4th edition, paperback, ISBN 0-205-30902-X
- *The Elements of Style: A Style Guide for Writers* (2005), by William Strunk, ISBN 0-9752298-0-X
- *The Elements of Style Illustrated* (2005), by William Strunk Jr., E.B. White and Maira Kalman (Illustrator), ISBN 1-59420-069-6
- *The Elements of Style by William Strunk Jr. & How To Speak And Write Correctly, by Joseph Devlin* (2006), BN Publishing, ISBN 956-291-263-9
- *The Elements of Style* Fiftieth Anniversary Edition (2009), hardcover, ISBN 0-205-63264-5 (contains the 4th edition text)

## Parodies

- Baker, Chris; Jacob Hansen (2011). *The Elements of F\*cking Style: A Helpful Parody* (<http://theelementsoffuckingstyle.com/>) . St Martin's Griffin. ISBN 031258377X. <http://theelementsoffuckingstyle.com/>.

## See also

- *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage*
- *The Complete Plain Words*

## References

1. ^ "Self-Help / Instructional: Elements of Style by Strunk and White" ([http://www.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,2088856\\_2089070\\_2089067,00.htm](http://www.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,2088856_2089070_2089067,00.htm))

TIME. Aug. 30, 2011.

[http://www.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,2088856\\_2089070\\_2089067,00.html](http://www.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,2088856_2089070_2089067,00.html).

2. <sup>a b</sup> Strunk, William, Jr.; White, E.B. (2009). *The Elements of Style* (5th ed. ed.). Boston: Allyn and Bacon. p. xiii. ISBN 978-0205313426.
3. <sup>a</sup> Strunk, William, Jr.; White, E.B. (2009). *The Elements of Style* (5th ed. ed.). Boston: Allyn and Bacon. p. x. ISBN 978-0205313426.
4. <sup>a</sup> *Stylized: A Slightly Obsessive History of Strunk & White's The Elements of Style*, 2009, Simon & Schuster, New York. ISBN 1-4165-9092-7
5. <sup>a</sup> Strunk, William, Jr.; White, E.B. (2009). *The Elements of Style* (5th ed. ed.). Boston: Allyn and Bacon. p. 23. ISBN 978-0205313426.
6. <sup>a</sup> William Strunk (1918). "III. Elementary Principles of Composition". *The Elements of Style*.
7. <sup>a</sup> Strunk, Jr., William; E.B. White (1972) [1918]. *The Elements of Style* (<http://books.google.com/?id=Hd5o74IehyoC&pg=PA55>) (2nd ed.). Plain Label Books. pp. 55–56. ISBN 9781603030502. <http://books.google.com/?id=Hd5o74IehyoC&pg=PA55>. Retrieved 2009-07-23.
8. <sup>a</sup> Strunk, Jr., William; E.B. White (1999) [1918]. *The Elements of Style* (<http://www.pearsonhighered.com/academic/product?ISBN=020530902X>) (4th ed.). Boston: Allyn & Bacon. p. 60. ISBN 9780205313426. OCLC 41548201 (<http://www.worldcat.org/oclc/41548201>). <http://www.pearsonhighered.com/academic/product?ISBN=020530902X>. Retrieved 2009-07-23.
9. <sup>a</sup> See the "they" entry in Chapter IV of the 1918 edition, and gender-specific pronouns.
10. <sup>a b</sup> Pullum, Geoffrey K (17 April 2009). "50 Years of Stupid Grammar Advice" (<http://chronicle.com/free/v55/i32/32b01501.htm>). *The Chronicle of Higher Education* **55** (32): B15. <http://chronicle.com/free/v55/i32/32b01501.htm>. Retrieved 2009-04-12.
11. <sup>a</sup> See "Sotomayor loves Strunk and White (<http://languagelog.ldc.upenn.edu/nll/?p=1505>) " (Geoffrey Pullum, 12 June 2009), "Drinking the Strunkian Kool-Aid (<http://languagelog.ldc.upenn.edu/nll/?p=1485>) " (Geoffrey Pullum, 6 June 2009), "Room for debate on Strunk and White (<http://languagelog.ldc.upenn.edu/nll/?p=1369>) " (Geoffrey Pullum, 25 April 2009), and other postings on the subject, tagged as prescriptivist poppycock (<http://languagelog.ldc.upenn.edu/nll/?cat=5>) (retrieved on 13 June 2009).
12. <sup>a</sup> Pullum, Geoffrey K (12 June 2009). "Sotomayor loves Strunk and White" (<http://languagelog.ldc.upenn.edu/nll/?p=1505>). *Language Log*. <http://languagelog.ldc.upenn.edu/nll/?p=1505>. Retrieved 13 June 2009.
13. <sup>a</sup> Freeman, Jan (23 October 2005). "Frankenstrunk" (<http://www.boston.com/news/globe/ideas/articles/2005/10/23/frankenstrunk/>). *The Boston Globe*. <http://www.boston.com/news/globe/ideas/articles/2005/10/23/frankenstrunk/>. Retrieved 2009-04-12.

## External links

- 1 (<http://www.crockford.com/wrrrld/style.html>) ,2 (<http://www.bartleby.com/141/>) *The Elements of Style*: Full text of Strunk's 1918 edition (visited 09 February 2010)
- *The Elements of Style* as an operatic play (<http://web.archive.org/web/20070910151358/http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/9842701/>)
- NPR radio piece (<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4985137>) discussing illustrated *Strunk & White* book and musical adaptation.
- *The Elements of Style* (<http://librivox.org/the-elements-of-style-by-william-strunk-jr/>) : The LibriVox audiobook version of Strunk's 1918 edition

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