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# The Land of the Free and *The Elements of Style*

GEOFFREY K. PULLUM

William Strunk and E. B. White have a vice-like grip on educated Americans' views about grammar and usage. Yet almost everything they say on that topic is wrong.

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## Introduction

*The Elements of Style* (henceforth, *Elements*) is a slender book of advice on usage and writing, revised by the admired novelist and essayist E. B. White from a book by his former English professor. White did well to accept Macmillan's suggestion that he should revise and expand his former professor's book for commercial republication: successive editions of the revision sold over ten million copies. Many college-educated Americans revere *Elements*, swear by it, carry it around with them. It was reissued in April 2009 to a chorus of approval from famous American literary figures. One fan has published a whole book about its history (Garvey, 2009).

The title of *Elements* suggests a focus on style, but in fact much of it concerns grammar. The final chapter, 'An Approach to Style', opens by characterizing the earlier parts of the book as 'concerned with what is correct, or acceptable, in the use of English', and not with 'style in its broader meaning'; and indeed, *Elements* is frequently cited as an authority on questions of grammar.

I believe the success of *Elements* to be one of the worst things to have happened to English language education in America in the past century. The book's style advice, largely vapid and obvious ('Do not overwrite'; 'Be clear'), may do little damage; but the numerous statements about grammatical correctness are actually harmful. They are riddled with inaccuracies, uninformed by evidence, and marred by bungled analysis. *Elements* is a dogmatic bookful of bad usage advice, and the people who rely on it have no idea how badly off-beam its gram-

matical claims are. In this essay I provide some illustrations, and a review of some of the book's most striking faults.

We are in fact dealing with a number of slightly different books. Strunk's first privately published version of *Elements* was dated 1918. There followed a little-known commercial version in 1920, two radically rewritten and now forgotten editions coauthored by Edward Tenney in 1934 and 1935, and six editions of the White revision (1959, 1972, 1979, 2000, 2004, and 2009, the last being just a 50th-anniversary reissue of the 2000 edition).

I will try not to be too pedantic, and I certainly will not be exhaustive, in my comparison of the different editions; I will distinguish among them only as absolutely necessary. The 1918 original is rare, but its text can be found



GEOFFREY K. PULLUM is Professor of General Linguistics and Head of Linguistics and English Language at the University of Edinburgh. He is a Fellow of both the British Academy and the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. He co-authored 'The Cambridge Grammar of the English Language' (Huddleston and Pullum, 2002), which won the Linguistic Society of America's Leonard Bloomfield Book Award in 2004. He has published many other books and articles in linguistics, but also does popular writing about language on the Language Log site, some of which is collected in the book 'Far From the Madding Gerund' (Lieberman and Pullum, 2006). Email: pullum@gmail.com

free online at <http://www.bartleby.com/141>. I will trust this transcription; when I cite Strunk (1918) it will be without page references, and will refer to the online text.<sup>1</sup>

## Inaccuracy

I begin with a few cases in which *Elements* offers accounts of the grammatical facts about Standard English that are flatly contradicted by educated usage. And I mean the usage not just of today, but of Strunk's era, the late 19th and very early 20th century.

## Verb agreement

'The number of the subject determines the number of the verb', says the heading of §9 of the 1979 and subsequent editions, a section that White added.<sup>2</sup> The statement is certainly true (though incomplete: person is also relevant). But one of the statements in the section (p. 10) is this:

With *none*, use the singular verb when the word means 'no one' or 'not one.'

The sentence *None of us are perfect* is given as an example of incorrect grammar; *None of us is perfect* is claimed to be the correction.

The arrogance here is breathtaking. *None of us are perfect* is a line from literature. It is uttered by Canon Chasuble in the second act of Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895), possibly the greatest of all stage comedies in English. It is absurd to suggest that Wilde didn't know the rule of verb agreement, and surely false that he wanted to depict the learned Dr Chasuble as unable to speak Standard English. White is simply stipulating a rule that doesn't accord with Standard English usage, not even the usage that prevailed in his youth.

It is extremely easy to confirm this today, when hundreds of classic novels are available in readily searchable plain text at the Gutenberg Project site (<http://www.gutenberg.org>). One can just pick a random novel from about a hundred years ago and search it. I chose Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), published two years before White was born. Searching for *none of us*, *none of you*, and *none of them*, I found that there are no examples at all of singular agreement with these phrases. Wherever they occur as subjects of present-tense verbs, the agreement is plural: *none of us were surprised*; *none*

*of them were of very recent date*; *none of them are very large*.

Of course, my point is not that singular agreement is wrong. Searching literary works will bring up examples showing that some writers favour the singular. But it also brings up plenty of other plural agreement cases, from paragons of excellent English writing: for example, G. K. Chesterton, in *The Defendant* (1902) saying *none of us are really Copernicans in our actual outlook*. There is variation within Standard English on this matter. No one who looks for evidence could call the plural agreement wrong. To tell students or writers that it is wrong is to tell them an untruth. But White did not look for evidence. His dictum that *none* must be singular, even when it has a clearly plural complement like *of us*, has no justification.

As Ben Zimmer pointed out on Language Log (7 February 2008), Thomas Lounsbury had already delivered a scathing comment on this sort of pontification in a book called *The Standard of Usage in English* in 1908:

There is no harm in a man's limiting his employment of *none* to the singular in his own individual usage, if he derives any pleasure from this particular form of linguistic martyrdom. But why should he go about seeking to inflict upon others the misery which owes its origin to his own ignorance?

As we shall see, Strunk and White seek to inflict a lot more misery on their hapless readers.

## Pronoun case

White added another section to the 1979 edition, §10, headed: 'Use the proper case of pronoun.' One wants to be proper, of course; but not to sound absurd. Yet White's first block of examples includes this one:

1 *The culprit, it turned out, was he.*

Try reading that aloud. It is not normal English; the *he* is grotesquely pompous, especially in the context of the informal style suggested by the parenthetical 'it turned out'. White seems to have no ear for style at all.

This is true not just in contemporary English; it would have sounded like a ridiculous affectation in 1979 when White wrote the section, and even 60 years before that, when White was Strunk's student at Cornell. People did not say such things. In Lucy Maud Montgomery's *Anne of Avonlea*, a popular book published in the

USA in 1909, we find phrases like *if I was her*, not *if I were she*.

No one could justify teaching American undergraduates a hundred years later to write something like *The culprit was he*. It would simply expose them to mockery. Yet the example and the associated bad usage advice survives in all the subsequent editions of *Elements*.

### Connective *however*

Recent editions of *Elements* (e.g. Strunk & White 2000, pp. 48–49) say bluntly: ‘Avoid starting a sentence with *however* when the meaning is ‘nevertheless’.’ And this is not one of White’s additions. It is a survival of essentially the same instruction given in Strunk (1918):

**However.** In the meaning *nevertheless*, not to come first in its sentence or clause.

It can of course be checked in a few seconds whether this accords with the practice of good writers of Standard English. Choosing a work at random again, I found that the text of Alice’s *Adventures in Wonderland* (1865), published four years before Strunk was born (and possibly read to him when he was a child) contains 19 occurrences of *however* that are followed by a comma, and every single one begins its clause. That is not because Lewis Carroll was wrong about English; it is because Strunk and White are wrong about English.

Again, of course, there is variation. It is not an error to place *however* after the subject, or after the first auxiliary verb; it is an option. Henry James had a strong preference for that option, putting only 6% of his uses of *however* at the beginning of the clause. But on the other hand, Mark Twain placed the word initially in more than two-thirds of the instances.<sup>3</sup> In *The Importance of Being Earnest* the proportion is the same (8 instances of *however* sentence-initial, 4 later in the clause), and modern copy-edited prose is very similar (in the *Wall Street Journal* between 1987 and 1989 nearly 40% of the cases of connective *however* are sentence-initial).

Conceivably Strunk was been trying to inculcate in everyone the habit of writing like Henry James and not like Mark Twain (not the best advice for every context, surely!). But whatever his motives, telling people that good writing never uses *however* to introduce a clause is simply untruthful.

The motivation for Strunk’s policy may have been fear of what Arnold Zwicky calls ‘temporary potential ambiguity’<sup>4</sup>. Strunk acknowledges that *However you advise him, he will probably do as he thinks best* is fine. There *however* means ‘regardless of how’. He may have worried that confusion might threaten if we allowed the other *however* also to appear clause-initially as well. But if so, it was a strange worry. I have not been able to construct any convincing case of unresolvable ambiguity between the ‘regardless of how’ meaning and the ‘nevertheless’ meaning. The comma after the latter invariably disambiguates.

And even if ambiguity did occasionally arise, a blanket ban on initial placement of the word in the latter sense would not be motivated. We don’t work on improving driving skills by banning the internal combustion engine. And we shouldn’t try to improve undergraduate writing skills by imposing blanket prohibitions that were never respected in the prose of respectable authors.

### Singular *they*

Strunk was perfectly well aware that forms of the pronoun *they* were used with singular antecedents, especially quantified or indefinite ones, and that it was gaining ground even ninety years ago. Some of what he said was quite perceptive. He noted that perhaps in order to avoid clumsy *he or she* disjunctions, speakers were using the pronoun *they* with quantified antecedents like *someone*:

**They.** A common inaccuracy is the use of the plural pronoun when the antecedent is a distributive expression such as *each*, *each one*, *everybody*, *every one*, *many a man*, which, though implying more than one person, requires the pronoun to be in the singular. Similar to this, but with even less justification, is the use of the plural pronoun with the antecedent *anybody*, *any one*, *somebody*, *some one*, the intention being either to avoid the awkward ‘he or she,’ or to avoid committing oneself to either. Some bashful speakers even say, ‘A friend of mine told me that they, etc.’  
(<http://www.bartleby.com/141/strunk3.html>)

The distributive expressions he cites, when they are subjects, do require the tensed verb of the clause to be in the singular: we say *everyone is*, not *\*everyone are*. But that doesn’t determine whether such an expression can be

the antecedent for an occurrence of *they*. Pronouns in English are not deployed according to a rule that can be conflated with subject-verb agreement. As Strunk correctly noted, even back at the beginning of the 20th century some ‘bashful speakers’ were using *they* to avoid identifying the sex of someone they had mentioned.

And Oscar Wilde’s character Lady Bracknell in *The Importance of Being Earnest* is about as far from being a bashful college kid as one can imagine: she is one of the most formidably pedantic speakers in all of English literature. Yet when explaining why she wants Algernon to arrange suitable music for a social event, she says:

- 2 *It is my last reception, and one wants something that will encourage conversation, particularly at the end of the season when everyone has practically said whatever they had to say...*

The antecedent for her use of *they* is *everyone*, which takes singular agreement (note *has*), but can serve as antecedent for *they* nonetheless.

*Earnest* was very much a contemporary play for Strunk; he was 25 when it was first staged. Does Strunk really want to claim that this formidable grande dame must be dismissed as evincing a ‘common inaccuracy’?

And if so, what would he have had her say instead? On that point he does make himself clear. He says:

Use *he* with all the above words, unless the antecedent is or must be feminine.

So Strunk is recommending that Lady Bracknell should have referred to ‘the end of the season when everyone has practically said whatever he had to say’. That policy would imply that we should write sentences like these:

- 3 a. *?I have a job for any boy or girl who thinks he can handle it.*
- b. *?I am sure you would not laugh if your mother or your father had broken his leg.*
- c. *?I doubt whether any man or woman could hold his breath for that long.*

*He* in such cases is not, of course, the right choice. Using *they* (or *their*) would be much better. Yet all of the editions of White’s revision of Strunk kept his disapproving section on *they*, updating it only slightly with some mealy-mouthed discussion of avoiding purportedly sex-neutral *he* with clumsy disjunctions (*he or she*) or rephrasing in the plural

(White suggests you might ‘put all controversial nouns in the plural and avoid the choice of sex altogether, although you may find your prose sounding general and diffuse as a result’).

It should not be thought that White simply didn’t know that singular *they* is normal Standard English. He may not have noticed the many instances found in Chaucer, Shakespeare, Milton, Austen, and hundreds of other much-admired authors; but in his own novel *Charlotte’s Web* a character says: ‘But somebody taught you, didn’t they?’ (Freeman, 2005), so he can hardly claim to have been ignorant of the singular use of *they*. What he asserts in *Elements* is something he would never have accepted with respect to his own writing: that he should have written ‘But somebody taught you, didn’t he?’

The long history of *Elements* should not be forgotten in connection with its disapprobation of singular *they*: when Strunk was writing ‘Use *he* with all the above words,’ women still didn’t have the vote in America. But times have changed, and it is surely unconscionable to be dragging purportedly sex-neutral *he* into the 21st century. That is what *Elements* is still stubbornly recommending.

I have always been much amused that a reviewer for *Telephone Engineer and Management* praised the book in an unintendedly humorous sentence quoted on the back cover of the 1979 edition:

It is hard to imagine an engineer or a manager who doesn’t need to express himself in English prose as part of his job.

You might think that some woman engineer or manager would have expressed himself on the inappropriate sexism of this sentence, and done his best to convince the publisher to remove it. But apparently not: it is still there on the back of my copy of the 4th edition (2000).

## Split infinitives

The ‘split infinitive’ construction was never mentioned at all in Strunk (1918), but it was added two years later in the little-known first trade edition of 1920:

**Split Infinitive.** There is precedent from the fourteenth century downward for interposing an adverb between *to* and the infinitive which it governs, but the construction is in disfavor and is avoided by nearly all careful writers.

(Strunk, 1920: 45)

Strunk is right about the seven centuries of precedents, but wrong about the disfavor and the usage of careful writers. George O. Curme had already made this clear by amassing a large collection from literary works (see Curme, 1914, and also Curme, 1930, 458–67, esp. 461–5). Curme asserted firmly that adjuncts between *to* and the verb of an infinitival complement had been employed in English syntax throughout the history of the language; that the option is useful and effective; and that it is actually more characteristic of good writing than either conversation (where the phrase planning that leads to pre-head adjuncts is a bit less common) or the work of minor authors (who Curme suggests avoid splitting infinitives out of cowardice and insecurity, having heard that some disapprove).

White retained Strunk's 1920 paragraph, but added to it inexpertly. He states (Strunk & White, 2000: 58) that 'the construction should be avoided unless the writer wishes to place unusual stress on the adverb'. But the preverbal position does not stress the adverb. Typically the reverse is the case (as noted by Curme, 1930: 459–60). A suitable word order for emphasising the verb would have the verb as late as possible: *It would be hard to adequately express it*. The best word order to emphasise the manner adverb would have the adverb last: *It would be hard to express it adequately*.

White returns to the topic of placing adjuncts between *to* and the verb in the chapter he added on style. The 'violation' that the split infinitive represents is magnanimously dismissed as 'harmless and scarcely perceptible'; he acknowledges that for a sentence like *I cannot bring myself to really like the fellow* the alternative would be 'stiff, needlessly formal'. But he is wrong here too. The split infinitive is not a mark of informal style. It is not formality that would be increased if the order were shifted to *I cannot bring myself really to like the fellow*; it's ambiguity. *Really* would quite probably be read as modifying *bring* rather than *like*.

Curme's many examples make it quite clear that serious writing in formal style also contains split infinitives. Strunk and White were, once again, both simply ignorant of the relevant facts.

## Nouns as verbs

The section headed 'Noun used as verb' is one of White's revisions in the second edition

(1972: 48). Of such uses, he says that 'all are suspect'. The two that he exemplifies are *host* and *gift*. By the third edition (1979, p. 54) he has added *chair*, *headquarter*, and *debut*. Grumbling about noun-to-verb conversions is a staple of prescriptivist discourse, but the instances objected to are entirely arbitrary. Prescriptivists froth and fume about talk of hosting, gifting, dialoguing, contacting, and perhaps scheduling, but they never seem to object to talk of booking a room, tabling a motion, or remaindering a book. The honest way to give a general principle about using nouns as verbs is not that every case is suspect – nobody seriously maintains that; it is that you should use as verbs those words that other people use as verbs. But there's not much zip or fire to that piece of homely wisdom.

## Participles and genitives

The section inaccurately headed 'Participle for verbal noun' is one that originates in Strunk (1920). The supposed error is described wrongly: since no verb has distinct forms for what are traditionally called the 'present participle' and the 'verbal noun' or gerund, substituting one for the other would be impossible to detect. There is just only one form, called the gerund-participle in Huddleston and Pullum (2002, henceforth *CGEL*). What is at stake is the case marking of the subject in clauses with a gerund-participial verb: Strunk insists that subjects of gerund-participial clauses must be genitive.

Almost unbelievably, Strunk maintains (1920: 43) that the familiar formula in (4) is an error of grammar:

4 *Do you mind me asking a question?*

The purported correction is *my* for *me*. He gives (5) as a second example of the same fault:

5 *There was little prospect of the Senate accepting even this compromise.*

Strunk admits that the construction with the plain or accusative subject 'is occasionally found, and has its defenders'; but nonetheless, (5) 'has to do not with a prospect of the Senate, but with a prospect of accepting', so 'the construction is plainly illogical' (I confess that I cannot follow this logical accusation).

Strunk then cites two interesting examples with a rather long subject where it is clearly the genitive subject that seems unacceptable

rather than the plain case. The first is this one (Strunk, 1920: 43; Strunk & White, 2000: 56):

6 ?*In the event of a reconsideration of the whole matter's becoming necessary...*

This would be much better phrased with the subject in the plain case (*a reconsideration of the whole matter*) rather than the genitive. But Strunk's response to such cases is simply to bite the bullet: he sticks with his edict, and recommends recasting the entire sentence (using *If it should become necessary to reconsider the whole matter*). White repeats all this.

There is no recognition here of the fact that the genitive subject was the innovation, and that use of the genitive had been controversial throughout the 19th century (for an enlightening discussion with many relevant literary examples see Merriam-Webster, 1994: 753–5, or Merriam-Webster: 598–600). What Strunk asserts, and the White revision carries into the 21st century in Strunk & White (2000), is that clauses with non-genitive subjects and gerund-participial verbs are not grammatical in English. This is not helpful usage advice; it is just untrue. Literate native speakers sometimes give gerund-participial clauses genitive subjects and sometimes give them plain-case subjects (accusative in the case of pronouns). For example, the Merriam-Webster article notes that Lewis Carroll used both *in hopes of* [*his being able to join me*] and *prevented* [*any of it being heard*] on the same day (in correspondence, 11 March 1867).

White kept Strunk's examples in his 1959 revision (p. 44), and in the second edition (1972); but by 1979 he (or his editor) apparently lost faith, and found it impossible to continue pretending that *Do you mind me asking?* is ungrammatical; so the example (4) was quietly dropped, and the topic was introduced using just (5).

White had also dropped a paragraph of Strunk (1920) that acknowledged, correctly, that the plain case seems particularly acceptable after the verb *imagine* (Strunk had cited *I cannot imagine Lincoln refusing his assent*), together with a citation of Fowler & Fowler (1906) – though again Strunk had been prepared to bite the bullet, offering the opinion that there was only 'a slight loss of vividness' if the genitive was substituted, and that by sticking with the genitive case 'the writer will always be on the safe side.'

The variations between editions are signifi-

cant here because they show a trend. Strunk (1918) said nothing about genitives being required as subjects of gerund-participles. Strunk (1920) introduced the topic, but clearly recognized that the issue was debatable. White in 1959 cut some of that recognition out, and in the 1979 revision took out a particularly dubious example. Overall, the drift is toward dogmatic opposition to plain or accusative subjects of gerund-participials, no matter what the usage evidence might suggest, and downplaying of any conceivable debate.

## Vanity

White's assumption that his idiosyncratic prejudices about individual words or constructions should be laws for everyone to live by, no matter how odd and peculiar to White they might be, strikes me as a peculiar kind of vanity. If he dislikes, say, degree adjuncts qualifying the word *unique*, he just adds to the book (2000: 62) a stipulation that it is a mistake. (Strunk made no such claim.) If it's unpleasant for him, it's an error for you. He will simply bully you into agreement. I'll consider just the two worst examples of White's vanity in the next two sections.

## Modal hopefully

The paradigm example of White attempting to bully the reader into accepting one of his pet peeves is his appalling paragraph on *hopefully*. Strunk was long dead before the use of *hopefully* as a modal adjunct (or 'sentence adverb') ever started its upswing in popularity. Indeed, White missed mentioning it in 1959, because the increase in popularity did not begin until the 1960s (Merriam-Webster, 2002: 393). But since the 1972 edition the book has included this flailing, raving, undisciplined paragraph: (see e.g. Strunk & White, 2000: 48):

**Hopefully.** This once-useful adverb meaning 'with hope' has been distorted and is now widely used to mean 'I hope' or 'it is to be hoped.' Such use is not merely wrong, it is silly. To say, 'Hopefully I'll leave on the noon plane' is nonsense. Do you mean you'll leave on the noon plane in a hopeful frame of mind? Or do you mean you hope you'll leave on the noon plane? Whichever you mean, you haven't said it clearly. Although the word in its new, free-floating capacity may be pleasurable and even useful to many, it offends the ear of many

others, who do not like to see words dulled or eroded, particularly when the erosion leads to ambiguity, softness, or nonsense.

White's furious hostility to the modal adjunct use is defended with variegated spluttering. The word has been 'distorted' and 'offends the ear' (aesthetic judgments); it is 'wrong' (ungrammatical), 'silly' (unintelligent), 'non-sense' (illogical). His example about the noon plane illustrates none of these points: there is no contradiction or incoherence, but at best only a possible ambiguity (not very plausibly, because fronted manner adjuncts are very rare). And to shift the ground to ambiguity is to abandon aesthetics and intelligence and logic and turn instead to communicative efficiency.

But new charges follow: it is 'new' (therefore bad?), 'free-floating' (undisciplined?), 'pleasurable' (hedonistic?). The word has been 'dulled' (like a knife?), 'eroded' (like a river bank?) White wanders from metaphor to metaphor. And finally he starts repeating himself. He returns to the allegation of 'ambiguity', adds the new charge of 'softness' (use this word and you're a sissy!), and finally wheels back once more to 'nonsense'. He doesn't know where he is going. He cycles through a dozen different putative faults or sins, raving like a drunk. His principles – Strunk's 'Omit needless words' and his own 'Do not overwrite' – are forgotten.

It is quite astonishing that anyone concerned with good writing could admire White's undisciplined blithering about *hopefully*, and more so that readers should continue to value it today. For the issue disappeared from serious discussion a quarter of a century ago. In 1965 the popular hue and cry against the modal adjunct use had started (Follett 1966 voiced the definitive complaint, and probably inspired White); by 1975 the dispute was at its peak; and by 1985 it was basically over. Yet in *The Elements of Style* the forgotten dispute remains trapped forever like a fly in amber.

### Preposition stranding

There is more nonsense in White's brief treatment of whether prepositions can be stranded, i.e. syntactically separated from their objects, as in *What were you thinking of \_\_\_\_?* or *Whatever he puts his hand to \_\_\_\_ he does well.*

This is one of the oldest of prescriptivist chestnuts, originating in an idiosyncratic grumble by John Dryden in 1672. The topic

made no appearance in Strunk (1918). But White wanders into it, oddly, where you would never think of looking for it: a section entitled 'Avoid fancy words' (Strunk & White, 2000: V.§14, 77–8). Starting with an injunction to avoid 'fancy' Latinate words where Anglo-Saxon ones would do, White drifts into the topic of having a good ear for the distinction between fancy and plain (Strunk & White 2000, pp. 77–8):

The question of ear is vital. Only the writer whose ear is reliable is in a position to use bad grammar deliberately; this writer knows for sure when a colloquialism is better than formal phrasing and is able to sustain the work at a level of good taste. So cock your ear. Years ago, students were warned not to end a sentence with a preposition; time, of course, has softened that rigid decree. Not only is the preposition acceptable at the end, sometimes it is more effective in that spot than anywhere else. 'A claw hammer, not an ax, was the tool he murdered her with.' This is preferable to 'A claw hammer, not an ax, was the tool with which he murdered her.' Why? Because it sounds more violent, more like murder. A matter of ear.

An alleged expert in writing is telling us that stranded prepositions sound like murder: when your lover murmurs 'You're the only one that I want to tell my secrets to,' you should brace yourself for the claw hammer. (Notice that fronting the preposition in that sentence is not even possible: if your lover murmurs *\*You're the only one to that I want to tell my secrets*, you're having an affair with a foreigner.)

This advice is not just atavistic but flagrantly inaccurate. White apparently cannot tell the slight informality of preposition stranding from risky dabbling in 'bad grammar' that one would use only when depicting hideous violence in the colloquial idiom. A man with a tin ear is advising students on the importance of 'ear'.

### Inconsistency

A striking aspect of *Elements* is the degree to which its authors (and White especially) preach against alleged sins that they are privately very happy to practice. There are many passages that are self-undercutting in that the edicts enunciated are clearly and visibly not obeyed by the enunciator, even in that very section. And in some cases relevant evidence is actually concealed. I'll discuss four examples.

## Actives and passives

A section in the chapter headed 'Elementary Principles of Composition' insists you must 'Use the active voice' (Strunk & White, 2000: 18–19). This section derives from Strunk (1918). He hated the passive, and particularly deprecated the use of one passive dependent on another (as in *He has been proved to have been seen entering the building*). But note how he says what's wrong with it: 'The word properly related to the second passive is made the subject of the first.' This has a passive reduced relative (*properly related to the second passive*) in the subject, and a passive main clause (*is made the subject*).

Indeed, the very first sentence of Strunk (1918), the opening sentence of his introductory chapter, has two finite clauses, and both are passive: *This book is intended for use in English courses in which the practice of composition is combined with the study of literature*.

What are we to think of this work that makes free use of the passive construction (like all other writers down the centuries) but instructs trainee writers that they are supposed to avoid it? If the passive is wicked and improper, Strunk and White are hypocrites; if it is not, they are liars. There seems to be no other possibility.

The attempt Strunk makes to convince students of the undesirability of passives is in my view intellectually dishonest right from the outset. He points out that (7a) is more 'direct and vigorous' than (7b).

- 7 a. *I shall always remember my first visit to Boston.*  
b. *?My first visit to Boston will always be remembered by me.*

But the unacceptability of the latter example has to do with the specific content. It is a familiar fact about the passive construction that you use it when the information about the agent is new to the discourse. In answer to a question like *What happened to Kennedy?* it sounds very natural to say *He was assassinated by Oswald*. But in response to a question like *What did Oswald do to Kennedy?* it would sound completely inept to say *Kennedy was assassinated by him*, because Oswald is mentioned in the question and doesn't count as new.

Now, a first-person pronoun cannot possibly count as new information in the discourse: there always has to be an utterer, so the utterer is always old information (see CGEL, p. 1444). And the effect is even stronger with a sentence

like Strunk's (7b), involving a statement about personal memory: no one but the speaker could plausibly be the rememberer of the Boston visit, so it is the information about the visit that counts as new.

Thus Strunk chose an independently bizarre sentence which violates an information-structure constraint, and used it illicitly to cast aspersions on all instances of the construction it represents. He could hardly have been unaware that he had read and written tens of thousands of passive clauses that were nothing like as unacceptable.

White, of course, drank in the prejudice against the passive, and kept the Boston example word for word in the 1959 and later editions. Perhaps he even believed that he had learned from Strunk to expunge the passive from his prose. But look at the evidence. In the first paragraph of the the introduction to the revised edition, where White tells of how much he learned from Strunk at Cornell, he calls Strunk (1918) a *textbook required for the course* (that's a passive clause used as an adjunct in noun phrase structure). *The book was known on the campus as 'the little book'*, he tells us (that's another passive); *It had been privately printed by the author* (that's yet another). The paragraph drips with passives.

But it is not fully clear to me that either Strunk or White had a good grasp of how to tell actives and passives apart. There are some puzzling differences between the various editions that would be rather tedious to track in detail, but let me simply note the remarkable instance of either unclarity or confusion that can be found in the most widely known version, the 4th edition (2000).

Stressing that 'The habitual use of the active voice makes for forcible writing', the text continues (using a passive once again): 'Many a tame sentence of description or exposition can be made lively and emphatic by substituting a transitive in the active voice for some such perfunctory expression as *there is*, or could be heard.' To illustrate the point, these four examples are cited as in need of correction:

- 8 a. *?There were a great number of dead leaves lying on the ground.*  
b. *At dawn the crowing of a rooster could be heard.*  
c. *The reason that he left college was that his health became impaired.*  
d. *It was not long before she was very sorry that she had said what she had.*



These are the four sentences that are given as the proposed corrections:

- 9 a. *Dead leaves covered the ground.*
- b. *The cock's crow came with dawn.*
- c. *Failing health compelled him to leave college.*
- d. *She soon repented her words.*

The jaw-dropping fact is that not a single one of the pairs involves the replacement of a passive by an active transitive. In the second example the replacement verb is not transitive, and in the others the replaced sentence is not a passive. (Don't be fooled by *impaired* in (8c): *become* doesn't allow passives – \**A letter became written by the bank* is not grammatical.)

It is possible that the words 'some such perfunctory expression as *there is*, or *could be heard*' was supposed to broaden the topic beyond passives to some wider class of constructions. But there can be no excuse for talking about 'substituting a transitive in the active voice' and giving an illustrative example that doesn't do it. It was White who introduced the example *The cock's crow came with dawn*, and once again he made it clear that he is not to be trusted on syntax.

Educated Americans continue to harbor a vague prejudice that the passive voice is bad or devious or unacceptable. Small wonder, with Strunk and White as their guide to grammar and style. The mixture of dishonesty, obscurity, incompetence, and inconsistency that *Elements* offers must surely contribute to the frequency of such blunders.

### Togetherhness and relatedness

Strunk (1918) has a section (III.§16) headed 'Keep related words together' that begins thus:

The position of the words in a sentence is the principal means of showing their relationship. The writer must therefore, so far as possible, bring together the words, and groups of words, that are related in thought, and keep apart those which are not so related.

The subject of a sentence and the principal verb should not, as a rule, be separated by a phrase or clause that can be transferred to the beginning.

Here Strunk is saying that the subject and the lexical ('principal') verb should be adjacent. And he says it with a sentence in which not just a modal (*must*) but also a connective adjunct (*therefore*) and a supplement (*so far as possi-*

*ble*) separates the subject (*the writer*) from the lexical verb (*bring*).

He continues with a sentence in which the subject and lexical verb are separated not only by a modal (*should*), a negator (*not*), and the copula (for yes, he has once more used a passive), but also a parenthetically interpolated phrase (*as a rule*) that could easily have been preposed.

He also separates a head noun (*words*) from the relative clause modifying it (*that are related in thought*) with a supplemental and-coordinate (*and groups of words*).

It is almost as if he had struggled to find prose that would illustrate the way he is telling us not to write! The text of the section violates the rules in 27% of its sentences.<sup>4</sup>

White's revision expands and rewrites the section somewhat, but does not eliminate the self-refuting character. He suggests that 'Toni Morrison, in *Beloved*, writes about...' should be changed to 'In *Beloved*, Toni Morrison writes about' (Strunk & White, 2000: 29), and adds:

Interposing a phrase or clause, as in the lefthand examples above, interrupts the flow of the main clause. This interruption, however, is not usually bothersome.

Both of his sentences have supplements between subject and verb phrase, violating the rule he presents. One can only speculate about whether he failed to notice, or noticed but thought they would get away with it, or noticed but simply didn't care.

### Adjectives and adverbs

White's added chapter 'An approach to style' offers a third case. 'Write with nouns and verbs, not with adjectives and adverbs', he says firmly (§4, p. 71). And then in the very next sentence (which, incidentally, has a passive negative main clause, contrary to II.§14, 'Use the active voice', and II.§15, 'Put statements in positive form'), he says that a 'weak or inaccurate noun' cannot be pulled out of a 'tight place' by an adjective – and uses three adjectives to say it.

The sentence after that admits that adjectives and adverbs are 'indispensable parts of speech': indispensable indeed, since he has to say it with an adjective. And the sentence after that begins with an adverb.

Looking elsewhere, the first line of White's introduction to the book has an attributive

adjective and so does the fourth. The first two chapters of the main part of the book both have titles that begin with an attributive adjective.

And it was White who added a section in chapter II (§16) headed 'Use definite, specific, concrete language' – three attributive adjectives in five words.

And so it goes on. White's own prose shows us that he doesn't take his own section heading seriously. A study of his own essay writing elsewhere suggests that about 8% of the words he uses are adjectives – higher than the usual figure for most prose of roughly 6%.

How on earth can a book be taken seriously in its injunctions when it tells the reader to write without adjectives and adverbs but says so in prose that is replete with them?

### **That and Which**

I offer one more example, and it strikes me as the worst. It relates to the most famous of all time-wasting American copy-editor bugaboos. As Strunk & White (2000) state it, the claim is:

*That* is the defining, or restrictive, pronoun, *which* the nondefining, or nonrestrictive.

This statement was introduced by White in 1959, and in factual terms, it is quite wrong. The word *that* is not a relative pronoun at all, and *which* has always been used to introduce restrictive relative clauses (as White is immediately forced to acknowledge, because he can hardly ignore the King James version of the Bible; he quotes *Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass*). He insists nonetheless that careful writers 'improve their work' by going 'which-hunting' to get rid of restrictive *which*.

White is expounding a fictive rule that slowly emerged as a recommended practice during the 19th century, and was set forth with full defence by H. W. and F. G. Fowler in *The King's English* (Fowler & Fowler, 1906: 88–93). The Fowlers admit that they are proposing a reform: their rule is not drawn from practice. They also acknowledge that the rule would have to have several complex exceptions, and concede: 'It may seem to the reader that a rule with so many exceptions to it is not worth observing.' But the untenability of the rule is not my main focus here. My point concerns blatant inconsistency – and possibly something worse than that, dishonesty.

White may have been unaware that his own

writing ignored the alleged rule. In his own novels, such as *Charlotte's Web* and *Stuart Little*, White used restrictive *which*. There is an example on the first page of *Stuart Little*. Perhaps this is because White simply didn't notice what his own practice was. However, he certainly did notice Strunk's practice.

The Fowlers' rule had not been mentioned in Strunk (1918). White not only added it; he did something else as well. As Jan Freeman noted (2008), White rewrote Strunk's prose to eliminate all the telltale cases of restrictive relative *which*. There were quite a few. Strunk wrote 'if the favor which you have requested is granted' in the paragraph immediately before where White inserted the section on the *which* prohibition, and White rewrote that sentence completely; Strunk wrote 'keep apart those which are not related' (in the section 'Keep related words together'), and White changed it to 'keep apart those that are not related'; and so on.

White altered the sentences in the original book to avoid revealing that his mentor had never followed any rule banning restrictive *which*. This looks like deliberate concealment of evidence.

To sum up, White peddles a prohibition that originates in a quixotic 19th-century recommendation for reform that failed. It is not respected in his own writing, and his mentor Strunk did not conform to it. But to make it look plausible he silently altered Strunk's original text. I see no way to regard this as anything but outright duplicity.

### **Conclusion**

There is more to be said against *The Elements of Style* – much more than I have space for. All I hope to have done here is to begin to flesh out my judgment that *Elements* is a hopeless guide to English usage and has been deleterious to grammar education in America.

I do not think the issue is trivial. *The Elements of Style* does real and permanent harm. It encourages the waste of precious resources – time spent by teachers, students, and copy editors; money spent by English departments and publishers. Genuine faults in writing go neglected because time is spent on nonsense like *which*-hunting. And worse than that, sensible adults are wrongly persuaded that their grasp of their native tongue is imperfect and their writing is incorrect. No good purpose is

served by damaging people's self-confidence in this way.

I am no defender of the species that White once scornfully called 'the modern liberal of the English Department, the anything-goes fellow' (Guth, 2006: 416); I have no time for sloppy or ungrammatical writing. But I object to the time that is wasted in trying to teach students falsehoods about English grammar. And I think this is a linguistic issue of unusually large practical importance. Linguists should not be shy about condemning all the harm that this opinionated, influential, error-stuffed, time-wasting, unkillable zombie of a book has done. ■

### Notes

1 Thanks to Andrea Olinger for generous help in providing me with an older edition of *Elements*; to Barbara Scholz for supplying comments on earlier drafts; and to Jan Freeman and David Russinoff for both of these valuable kinds of assistance.

2 Eleanor Gould Packard assisted White in the 1979 revision. Some of the points introduced may have been her idea rather than White's.

3 Mark Liberman, 'The evolution of disornamentation', on Language Log (<http://158.130.17.5/~myl/language-log/archives/001912.html>), 21 February 2005.

4 'Once you look for temporary potential ambiguity, you'll find it everywhere', Language Log (<http://language-log.ldc.upenn.edu/nll/?p=267>) 24 June 2008.}

5 Heidi Harley noted this on Language Log (8 April 2008, <http://language-log.ldc.upenn.edu/nll/?p=4>).

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