

Hub Edits

- **William Strunk and E.B. White, *The Elements of Style*, (2000 ed.)**
- 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 sentences short or avoid all detail and treat subjects only in outline, but that every word tell
- If you violate a rule of rhetoric, the resulting sentence must have some compensating merit, but in most all cases it is advisable to follow the rules
- Have sympathy for the reader
- Most of the time the reader is in serious trouble, floundering in a swamp, and it is the duty of the writer to drain the swamp as quickly as possible and get the reader up on dry ground
- Choose a suitable design and hold to it
 - A basic structural design underlies every kind of writing
 - Writers will in part follow this design, in part deviate from it, according to their skills, their needs, and the unexpected events that accompany the act of composition
- Writing, to be effective, must follow closely the thoughts of the writer, but not necessarily in the order in which those thoughts occur
- In most cases, planning must be a deliberate prelude to writing
 - The first principle of composition, therefore, is to foresee or determine the shape of what is to come and pursue that shape
 - The more clearly the writer perceives the shape, the better are the chances of success
- Make the paragraph the unit of composition
 - As long as it holds together, a paragraph may be of any length
 - The beginning of each paragraph is a signal that a new step in the development of the subject has been reached
 - Single sentences should not be paragraphs
 - In dialogue, each speech, even if only a single word, is usually a graph by itself – a new graph begins with each change of speaker
 - This can be violated in fiction to create the impression of rapid back-and-forth
 - As a rule, begin each paragraph either with a sentence that suggests the topic or with a sentence that helps with transition
 - In narration, the paragraph sometimes begins with a concise, comprehensive statement serving to hold together the details that follow
 - But using this device, or any device, too often, turns it into a mannerism and it loses its efficacy
 - More commonly, the opening sentence simply indicates by its subject the direction the paragraph is to take
 - Enormous blocks of print look formidable to readers, therefore, breaking long paragraphs into two, even if it is not necessary to do so for sense, meaning, or logical development, is often a visual help

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- Conversely, firing off too many short paragraphs in quick succession can be distracting
 - Moderation and a sense of order should be the main considerations in paragraphing
- Use the active voice
 - It is usually more direct and vigorous (brevity is a by-product of this vigor)
 - But the habitual use of the active voice makes for forcible writing
 - The need to make a particular word the subject of the sentence will often determine which voice is used
- Put statements in positive form
 - The reader is dissatisfied with being told what is not; the reader wishes to be told what is – hence, putting things in positive form
 - E.g.: “not honest” – “dishonest” “did not pay attention to” – “ignored” “did not remember” – “forgot”
- Make definite assertions
- Avoid tame, colorless, hesitating, noncommittal language
- A strong sentence can be crafted by placing negative and positive in opposition – e.g.: not charity, but simple justice
- To avoid making a sentence irresolute, replace conditionals
 - E.g.: “applicants can make a strong impression” – “applicants will make a strong impression”
 - “Plath may be ranked as one of the greatest...” – “Plath was one of the greatest...”
 - “We would be happy to help” – “We will be happy to help”
- If every sentence admits a doubt, your writing will lack authority – save the auxiliaries would, should, could, may, might, and can for situations involving real uncertainty
- Use definite, specific, concrete language – prefer the specific to the general, the definite to the vague, the concrete to the abstract
 - “A period of unfavorable weather set in.” – “It rained every day for a week.”
- The surest way to arouse and hold the reader’s attention is by being specific, definite, and concrete
 - Deal in particulars and report details that matter – the word should call up pictures
- In effective writing, all the significant details are given, and with such accuracy and vigor that readers, in imagination, can project themselves into the scene; for example:
 - “In proportion as the manners, customs, and amusements of a nation are cruel and barbarous, the regulations of its penal code will be severe.”
 - “In proportion as men delight in battles, bullfights, and combats of gladiators, will they punish by hanging, burning, and the rack.”
- Omit needless words
 - The active voice is more concise than the passive; a positive statement more concise than a negative one
 - Kill “the fact that” wherever it occurs
 - A common way to fall into wordiness is to present a single complex idea, step-by-step, in a series of sentences that might be combined into one
 - Avoid a succession of loose sentences (particularly loose sentences with two clauses where the second is introduced by a conjunction or relative)

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- A writer may err by making sentences too compact and periodic – an occasional loose sentence prevents the style from becoming too formal and gives the reader a certain relief
 - But the danger is that there may be too many of them
- A writer who has written a series of loose sentences should resist enough of them to remove the monotony, replacing them with simple sentences, sentences of two clauses joined by a semicolon – whichever best represent the real relations of the thought
- Express coordinate ideas in similar form
 - In parallel construction, expressions similar in content and function should be outwardly similar
 - The likeness of the form enables the reader to recognize more readily the likeness of content and function
 - E.g.: formerly science was taught by the textbook method, while now the laboratory method is employed” - this can be corrected to read:
 - “formerly science was taught by the textbook method; now it is taught by the laboratory method
- Keep related words together
 - The position of words in a sentence is the principal means of showing their relationship – confusion and ambiguity result when words are badly placed
 - The writer must, therefore, bring together the words and groups of words that are related in thought and keep apart those that are not so related
 - E.g.: “He noticed a large stain in the rug that was right in the center” reads better as “He noticed a large stain right in the center of the rug”
 - Try not to interpose phrases or clauses that interrupt the flow of the main clause
 - In summarizing, keep to one tense
 - Place the emphatic words of a sentence at the end
- Think of style as the sound the words make on paper
 - Some words in the right combination explode in the mind; they move the reader deeply
 - E.g.: “These are the times that try men’s souls.”
 - These are ordinary words in a simple declarative sentence, but for some reason, this arrangement has great power where other arrangements of the words would fall short
 - Approach style warily; steer away from all devices that attempt style – mannerisms, tricks, adornments
 - The approach to style is by way of plainness, simplicity, orderliness, sincerity
 - As author, place yourself in the background – write in a way that draws the reader’s attention to the sense and substance of the writing, rather than to the mood and temper of the writer
 - If the writing is solid and good, the mood and temper of the writer will eventually be revealed and not at the expense of the work
 - To achieve style, begin by affecting none – from this, style will emerge
 - Write in a way that comes naturally, using words and phrases that come readily to hand

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- Never imitate another's style consciously, but do not worry about being an imitator – just take pains to admire what is good, thus any unintended and subconscious imitation will echo works and authors that bear repeating
- Work from a suitable design
- Before beginning to compose something, gauge the nature and extent of the enterprise and work from a suitable design
- You must not always sit with a blueprint in front of you, but merely anticipate what you are getting into
 - Sometimes, of course, impulse and emotion are more compelling than design
 - E.g.: writing an emotional letter and trying to organize it will strip it of its power
- Write with nouns and verbs, not with adjectives and adverbs
 - While adjectives and adverbs are important, it is nouns and verbs that give good writing its toughness and color
- Revise and rewrite – usually a completed work has serious flaws in need of transposition
 - Above all, do not be afraid to experiment with what you have written
 - It is no sign of weakness that a manuscript ends up in need of major revision
- DO NOT OVERWRITE
 - Rich, ornate prose is hard to digest, generally unwholesome, and sometimes nauseating
 - Guard against wordiness – **ruthlessly delete the excess**
- DO NOT OVERSTATE
 - When you overstate, readers will be instantly on guard, and everything that has preceded and will follow your overstatement will be suspect in the reader's mind because they have lost confidence in your judgments and your poise
 - A single overstatement diminishes the whole, and a single carefree superlative has the power to destroy, for readers, the object of your enthusiasm
 - As the author, you have created the world, so the reader will look to you to help them navigate through; they will look to and rely on your judgments – so do not go derelict in this duty
- Avoid the use of qualifiers (rather, very, little, pretty) – they suck the power out of words
 - Especially avoid overuse of the word “little” to indicate anything other than size
- Do not affect a breezy manner – do not write as if in a euphoric state
 - Never try and show off, or direct attention to yourself as author
 - No patronizing the reader, no attempts at humor (let it be natural)
 - Keep a tight rein on the material and stay out of the act
 - Uninhibited prose will get you in trouble
- Use orthodox spelling
- The spelling of English words is not fixed and invariable, nor does it depend on any other authority than general agreement
 - At present there is practically unanimous agreement as to the spelling of most words
 - Different spellings distract the reader
- Do not explain too much
 - It is seldom advisable to tell all

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- Be sparing in the use of adverbs after dialogue attribution, let the conversation itself disclose the speaker's manner or condition
- Do not construct awkward adverbs by always adding "ly" to the end
 - Words that are not used orally are seldom the ones to put on paper
- Make sure the reader knows who is speaking – dialogue is a total loss unless you indicate who the speaker is
 - Obscurity is an imposition on the reader
- Also, make sure that dialogue attributions do not awkwardly interrupt a spoken sentence
 - Place them where the break would come naturally in speech: where the speaker would pause or of emphasis or to take a breath
 - The best test for locating an attributive is to speak the sentence aloud
- Avoid fancy words
- Avoid the elaborate, the pretentious, the coy and the cute
- Do not be tempted by a twenty-dollar word when there is a ten-center handy, ready, and able
- Anglo-Saxon is a livelier tongue than latin, so use Anglo-Saxon words
 - In this as in so many matters of style, our ear must be our guide
 - E.g.: Gut is lustier than intestine
 - Here, matters of cadence and sound are important
 - This includes a relaxing of the precept that sentences not end in prepositions
 - The same goes for the split infinitive – some infinitives actually improve when they are split - e.g.: "I cannot bring myself to really like this fellow."
- Do not use dialect unless your ear is good
 - Do not attempt dialect unless you are a devoted student of the tongue you hope to reproduce
 - If you use dialect, be consistent – the reader will become impatient or confused upon finding two or more versions of the same word or expression
 - In dialect it is necessary to spell phonetically, or at least ingeniously, to capture unusual inflections
 - Once you pick a spelling, write it that way throughout
 - The best dialect writers, by and large, are economical of their talents; they use the minimum, not the maximum, of deviation from the norm, thus sparing their readers as well as convincing them
- Be Clear
- Since writing is communication, clarity can only be a virtue
- But clarity is not the prize in writing, nor is it always the principal mark of a good style – there are occasions when obscurity serves a literary purpose
 - Even if you are attempting obscurity (to serve a purpose) be obscure clearly – be wild of tongue in a way people can understand
- And although there is no substitute for merit in writing, clarity comes closest to being one
- Clarity, clarity, clarity
- When you become hopelessly mired in a sentence, it is best to start fresh
 - Do not try to fight through bad syntax, usually what is wrong is that the construction has become too involved at some point

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- The sentence needs to be broken apart and replaced
- When you say something, make sure you have said it because the chances of you having said it are only fair
- Do not inject opinion
 - Unless there is a good reason for its being there, do not inject opinion
 - To air one's views gratuitously, however, is to imply that the demand for them is brisk
 - Opinions scattered indiscriminately about leave the mark of egotism
 - And to raise an opinion at an improper time is in bad taste
- Use figures of speech sparingly
 - E.g.: avoid similes coming in rapid fire; do not mix metaphors
- Do not take shortcuts at the expense of clarity
 - Do not use initials in the name of organizations or anything else unless you are certain the initials will be readily understood
 - Many shortcuts are self-defeating – they waste the reader's time instead of conserving it
 - The only truly reliable shortcut in writing is to choose words that are strong and surefooted to carry the readers on their way
- Avoid foreign languages
 - On some occasions it is convenient or necessary to borrow from other languages – but never to show off
- Prefer the standard to the offbeat
- Young writers will be drawn at every turn toward eccentricities in language. They will hear the beat of new vocabularies, the exciting rhythms of special segments of their society, each speaking a language of its own. All of us come under the spell of these unsettling drums; the problem for beginners is to listen to them, learn the words, feel the vibrations, and not be carried away
- Each person, with their wild way of speaking, renovates the language with a wild vigor
 - A new word is always up for survival and in this infant stage the word is more appropriate to conversation than to composition
- You use colloquial language at your own peril, for it is language mutilation
 - The young writer had best not adopt the device of mutilation in ordinary composition – because the purpose is to engage the reader's senses, not paralyze them
 - Do not accessorize your prose
- To use language well, do not begin by hacking it to bits; accept the whole body of it, cherish its classic form, its variety, and its richness
- The beginner should always err on the side of conservatism, the side of established usage
 - Because what may seem like pioneering may be merely evasion, the disinclination to submit to discipline
- Style takes its final shape more from attitudes of mind than from principles of composition, for “writing is an act of faith, not a trick of grammar”
- Matters of Form
- Colloquialisms – if you use a colloquialism or a slang word or phrase, simply use it; do not draw attention to it by putting it in quotations

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- Do not attempt to overemphasize simple statements by using a mark of exclamation – the exclamation mark is to be reserved for use after true exclamations or commands
- When two or more words are combined to form a compound adjective, a hyphen is usually required
- A sentence containing an expression in parentheses is punctuated outside the last mark of parenthesis exactly as if the parenthetical expression were absent
 - The expression within the marks is punctuated as if it stood by itself, except that the final stop is omitted unless it is a question mark or an exclamation point
 - When a wholly detached expression or sentence is parenthesized, the final stop comes before the last mark of parenthesis
- Style is the writer, and therefore what you are, rather than what you know, will at last determine your style
- If you write, you must believe – in the truth and worth of the scrawl, in the ability of the reader to receive and decode the message
 - No one can write decently who is distrustful of the reader's intelligence, or whose attitude is patronizing
 - Your concern for the reader must be pure: you must sympathize with the reader's plight
 - (Most readers are in trouble half the time)