

# Strunk and White's secrets for rocket-powered writing

Omit needless words. Avoid dangling modifiers. Cut 'there is.' One hundred years on, a primer still inspires writers. Here are its essential lessons.



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Introduction	2
Four essential lessons	4
Strunk and White versus AP	6
A refresher on sentence construction	9
Cutting clutter and throttling the passive voice	12
Tools, not rules	16
Parentheses and misused phrases	19

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## INTRODUCTION

*By Russell Working*

A century ago, a Cornell University student took an English class taught by a professor out of step with what even then was an age of volubility.

Professor William Strunk Jr. lived by the rule, “Omit needless words!” He had trouble filling his appointed hour, wrote then-student E.B. White, who later would revise Strunk’s brief classic [“The Elements of Style.”](#)

“In those days when I was sitting in his class,” White writes, “he omitted so many needless words, and omitted them so forcibly and with such eagerness and obvious relish, that he seemed in the position of having shortchanged himself—a man left with nothing more to say yet time to fill, a radio prophet who had outdistanced the clock.”

Strunk escaped this predicament by uttering every sentence three times, White writes. Strunk leaned forward over his desk, grasped his coat lapels, and in a husky, conspiratorial voice, said, “Rule Seventeen. Omit needless words! Omit needless words! Omit needless words!”

Few books have been as influential in American prose as the one widely known as “Strunk and White.” In the 100th anniversary of E.B. White’s rhetorical epiphany on the road to discursive Damascus, we at Ragan Communications have reacquainted ourselves with Strunk and White’s pithy work. It has been revised several times and repeatedly reprinted.

“If you have any young friends who aspire to become writers,” [Dorothy Parker once wrote](#), “the second-greatest favor you can do them is to present them with copies of ‘The Elements of Style.’ The first-greatest, of course, is to shoot them now, while they’re happy.”

True, Strunk and White have their detractors, among Geoffrey Pullum, the head of linguistics at the University of Edinburgh. As [cited by The New Yorker](#), he wrote in the Chronicle of Higher Education that English syntax “is much too important to be reduced to a bunch of trivial don’t-do-this prescriptions by a pair of idiosyncratic bumlbers who can’t even tell when they’ve broken their own misbegotten rules.”

## Strunk and White's secrets for rocket-powered writing

New Yorker writer Willing Davidson finds this too harsh. He writes that we tend to argue that language and grammar are living things; why should we be constrained by arbitrary dictates that cement us in a long-past cultural and linguistic moment?

“So we don’t look like fools, is the answer,” Davidson goes on. “There are a few writers who have great success skiing off-piste, but most of us, as Strunk wrote, ‘will probably do best to follow the rules.’”

Read on for tips on how to do that.

## FOUR ESSENTIAL LESSONS

*Consider your reader. Cut the deadwood. Be bold and colorful. Let details and anecdotes tell.*

Anyone who has edited an executive's turgid blog post or corrected student papers is likely to have an inkling about the origins of Strunk's stern precepts.

Strunk, one imagines, must have looked with dread, anger and disbelief at the term papers and essay assignments that students nervously left on his desk as they slipped out of class.

*How can they write like this?* he must have wondered. *Don't they have the slightest respect for my time?*

Just as White argued that Strunk sympathized for "the writer's victims," in the words of [The New York Times](#) writer Sam Roberts, we all must put our own readers first.

Here are some ways to do that:

### **Remember that it's all about your reader.**

Smart organizations have learned that even when you are pushing a message, the focus must be on your audience. If you can't tell a story that's meaningful to them, you are wasting your time.

"Will felt that the reader was in serious trouble most of the time," White writes, "a man floundering in a swamp, and that it was the duty of anyone attempting to write English to drain this swamp quickly and get his man up on dry ground, or at least throw him a rope."

### **Cut the deadwood.**

In my first reporting job, on a small-town Oregon newspaper, a curious phenomenon could be seen across the newsroom as deadline approached. Reporters leaned over their keyboards, poking their computer terminals and mouthing, "One, two, three, four, five..."

They were counting the words in their respective ledes. Our volatile managing editor had banned ledes of more than 20 words. Keeping sentences short was excellent discipline for a newsroom full of cocky young Faulkner wannabes, but that's not quite the message of "The Elements of Style."



# Strunk and White's secrets for rocket-powered writing

Strunk requires “not that the writer make all his sentences short, or that he avoid all detail and treat his subject only in outline, but that every word tell.”

Any writer has bugaboos—irksome **words** or **phrases** that add nothing. “Whether or not,” “the fact that,” “for all intents and purposes” (or worse, the nonsensical “all intensive purposes”)—these are the kind of deadwood the careful writer prunes.

Note that this advice is different from the tiresome cliché, “Kill your darlings.” If clutter such as “each and every” and “the fact that” are dear to your heart, you are in the wrong profession.

## Be bold, be colorful.

Strunk “scorned the tame, the colorless, the irresolute,” White fondly recalled. “He felt it was worse to be irresolute than to be wrong.”

White recalls a class in which Strunk leaned forward and croaked, “If you don’t know how to pronounce a word, say it loud! If you don’t know how to pronounce a word, say it loud!”

White finds the advice comical, and yet, “Why compound ignorance with inaudibility?”

## Details and anecdotes tell.

Among the gems in White’s introduction are his glimpses of Professor Strunk the individual, clutching his lapels and barking his principles in triplicate. Strunk’s likes and dislikes “were almost as whimsical as the choice of a necktie, yet he could make them seem utterly convincing.”

Strunk despised the expression “student body”—it seemed to carry a cadaverous whiff in his mind—and he took a trip downtown to the “Alumni News” office to suggest the substitution “studentry,” a coinage of his own.

The editor “was so charmed by the visit, if not by the word, that he ordered the student body buried, never to rise again.”

Had he carried terseness to the extreme, White would have cut these vignettes and left nothing but cold prescriptions. Yet the anecdotes enliven the work, and such “darlings” deserve a reprieve from the gallows.

## STRUNK AND WHITE VERSUS AP STYLE

*'The Elements of Style' still holds sway despite its sporadic contradictions to the AP Stylebook. Which do you follow?*

For a wordsmith returning to William Strunk Jr. and E.B. White's "The Elements of Style," I am struck by its complete assurance about controversies that have led to fisticuffs, chair-throwing and bottles broken over heads in the seedier waterfront writer dives.

In point 1 of section I, "Elementary Rules of Usage," written by Strunk, the influential sage of the page demands, "Form the possessive singular of nouns by adding 's.'"

He offers these examples:

- Charles's friend
- Burns's poems
- The witch's malice

Right off, alert hostages of "The Associated Press Stylebook," blinking out Morse Code messages during forced video statements, will note that the first two examples fly in the face of the most commonly used journalistic guidebook in the United States. The AP instructs:

"SINGULAR PROPER NAMES ENDING IN S: Use only an apostrophe: *Achilles' heel, Agnes' book, Ceres' rites, Descartes' theories, Dickens' novels, Euripides' dramas, Hercules' labors, Jesus' life, Jules' seat, Kansas' schools, Moses' law, Socrates' life, Tennessee Williams' plays, Xerxes' armies.*"

Yet the influence of Strunk and White remains undiminished.

### The comma wars

The Oxford Comma Wars have laid waste the literary landscape, poisoned wells and left the heads of writers and editors impaled on city gates. Despite the billowing smoke and clash of swords outside his office window, Strunk seems unaware that this civil war even exists. Dipping his quill, he writes:

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

# Strunk and White's secrets for rocket-powered writing

Thus write,

- red, white, and blue
- gold, silver, or copper
- He opened the letter, read it, and made a note of its contents.

I agree, Professor Strunk! And yet we at Ragan.com and PRDaily.com follow the AP Stylebook, as do most newspapers in the United States. Therefore I must drop that final, profligate comma.

Yet it is not only because we prefer the Oxford (or serial) comma that fans appreciate Strunk's doggedness. The AP Stylebook has ballooned to twice the length it was when I started my writing career in the 1980s, with chapters on searching social media for photos, and prescriptions for the use of "color blocking" and "cooking spray."

Few of us, however, cherish cozy memories of consulting AP's ever-snowballing list of demands, its incessant nudges in the ribs, its muttered instructions in our ear, from the correct spelling of *phyllo* to the use of transgender pronouns. The AP wrote its stylebook as if the internet didn't exist and no journalist possesses a dictionary. Under "parsley," the AP informs us that "[c]ommon varieties are *flat-leaf* (Italian) and *curly-leaf*." Glad that's settled!

By contrast, Strunk and White seem to engrave everything that matters about the art of writing on the head of a pin—or so one feels when under their spell.

## Pointillist wisdom

The first chapter is full of wisdom on small points that matter deeply to professionals striving to write with clarity. If you're trying to figure out whether to set off a clause with commas, "The Elements of Style" tersely differentiates restrictive and nonrestrictive clauses.

- Use commas to set off nonrestrictive clauses. They "do not limit or define, they merely add something," the authors inform us. For example:

In 1769, when Napoleon was born, Corsica had but recently been acquired by France.

The sentence is a combination of two statements that could have been made independently. (*Napoleon was born in 1769. At that time, Corsica had but recently been acquired by France.*) Therefore, the clause that begins "when" should be bracketed in commas.



## Strunk and White's secrets for rocket-powered writing

- “Restrictive clauses, by contrast, are not parenthetic and are not set off by commas.”

*People who live in glass houses shouldn't throw stones.*

The subject is not all people; it is restricted to a subset: those who don't mind wandering around the house in their skivvies and eating peanut butter out of the jar while the whole neighborhood watches.

- Another set of examples illuminates the distinction:

*People sitting in the rear couldn't hear.* (restrictive)

*Uncle Bert, being slightly deaf, moved forward.* (nonrestrictive)

The book is filled with writerly detail, clearly articulated, making it a pleasure to read. The brevity, too, seems ahead of its time.

As reader Bill Spaniel wrote us, “‘Elements of Style’ was essential reading when I studied at the Mizzou School of Journalism (BJ68). In today's SM world, it is more appropriate than ever. When I tweet, I strive to omit needless words so as to make my tweets pithy.”

Many of us have fond memories of a book we first encountered in college or early in our writing careers. “Strunk and White,” as we tend to call it, is one writing text, however neglected over the years, that will never end up in a PTA book sale donation box.

Reader Virginia Sowers writes, “Your article soon had me walking over to my bookshelf to retrieve my yellow-paged, dog-eared and highlighted third edition (1979) from a dusty lower shelf. As I leaf through, I instantly recognize the almost-forgotten underpinnings of how I edit and write till this day. With gratitude, Strunk and White.”

# Strunk and White's secrets for rocket-powered writing

## A REFRESHER ON SENTENCE CONSTRUCTION

*There are writers who find 'Elements' fusty and sexist. Still, it offers timeless tips for today's scribes.*

One pleasure of William Strunk Jr. and E.B. White's "[The Elements of Style](#)" is their willingness to address small questions and greater points alike.

For this "Elements" has long won admirers among writing professionals.

"I am a big fan," says [Gini Dietrich](#), founder and CEO of [Arment Dietrich](#), an integrated marketing communications firm. "I have an English degree with a creative writing focus, so 'The Elements of Style' has always been by my side. In fact, my grandmother gave me her copy when I graduated from college. Its copyright is 1979. Some things have changed since then, but I still keep it on my desk."

Others, however, feel the influential work has grown stale.

Explains writer and editor [Sue Horner](#), "Rereading S&W reminded me that they have a somewhat pompous tone and often use the passive voice. Also, all of the writers they writing to are male. 'But a writer may err by making his sentences too uniformly compact and periodic...' and 'According to the writer's purpose, he may...' Maybe that's why so many people have a bone to pick with S&W."

In first section, "Elementary Rules of Usage," Strunk, the Cornell University egghead, and White, the author of the beloved children's books "Charlotte's Web" and "Stuart Little," move step by step from the smallest details (apostrophes) to greater matters of sentence construction.

"Do not join independent clauses by a comma [alone]," Strunk beseeches.

### Semicolons still work

In an era that frowns upon semicolons, the book reminds us how neatly they can be used to avoid comma splices or conjunctions such as "and" or "but":

If two or more clauses, grammatically complete and not joined by a conjunction, are to form a single compound sentence, the proper mark of punctuation is a semicolon.

*Stevenson's romances are entertaining; they are full of exciting adventures.*



# Strunk and White's secrets for rocket-powered writing

*It is nearly half past five; we cannot reach town before dark.*

Nowadays, it is far more common to replace semicolons with periods or to separate such clauses with a comma and a conjunction. These options, too, are correct, as Strunk and White note:

*Stevenson's romances are entertaining. They are full of exciting adventures.*

or

*Stevenson's romances are entertaining, for they are full of exciting adventures.*

"Points five to seven I completely and wholeheartedly agree with," Dietrich says. "I can still hear my junior high school English teacher talking about dangling modifiers, so yes to all of that! Can we also talk about the Oxford comma?"

Strunk and White add a point that I had missed on previous readings: If, instead of a conjunction, the second clause is preceded by an adverb (such as "accordingly," "besides," "so," "then," "therefore," or "thus") the semicolon is still required. Consider this example:

*I had never been in the place before; so I had difficulty in finding my way about.*

Beverly Friedmann, a content manager for [ReviewingThis](#), has mixed views of "Elements," and this section in particular.

"Novice writers can take some of these pointers as a jumping-off point and learn a lot about clarity in literary communication style, but there is also a lot to take with a grain of salt," she says. "It's important to not take every point—especially the ones you have outlined [Nos. 5-8]—too literally, for lack of a better term."

## Tripping over dangling modifiers

Legions of copywriters, speechwriters and communicators would save themselves grief and readers' derision if they would refer to point No. 7:

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

*Walking slowly down the road, he saw a woman accompanied by two children.*

## Strunk and White's secrets for rocket-powered writing

The word walking refers to the subject of the sentence, not to the woman. If the writer wishes to make it refer to the woman, he must recast the sentence:

*He saw a woman, accompanied by two children, walking slowly down the road.*

On the other hand, Strunk and White offer examples of what can go wrong for those who don't follow the above rule.

This point "is one that trips up so many people," Horner says. "It's most obviously and amusingly wrong in one of the examples ('Being in a dilapidated condition, I was able to buy the house very cheap'), but often sneaks past ('On arriving in Chicago, his friends met him at the station.'). This is not so much an S&W rule like 'Omit needless words,' but a helpful reminder to pay attention to your writing."

The "Elementary Rules of Usage" chapter ends with advice that is mostly dated in today's era of writing on computers. The authors' tips about dividing words at line endings bring back images of newspapers of yore, when typesetters laid out the lines backward and printer's devils were underfoot, sweeping up fallen type.

"The Section 8 pointers are rather odd," Dietrich says. "I prefer to just move the entire word down so there isn't a widow or a weird dash, but that's a preferential/OCD thing, not a stylistic or grammar thing."



## CUTTING CLUTTER AND THROTTLING THE PASSIVE VOICE

*'Omit needless words,' and use a 'concise, comprehensive statement' to anchor descriptive paragraphs.*

If you ever head back to college to finish that master's degree, William Strunk Jr. and E.B. White's "The Elements of Style" could provide a refresher in term-paper structure.

Communicators, however, may find less interest in the college writing-type tips that start Section III. Few professional writers fret over topic sentences or providing supporting information.

Page deeper, however, and the section titled "Elementary Principles of Composition" offers a wealth of helpful tips for pros. These can come in the form of old lessons we have forgotten, along with new (to us, anyway) tips worth putting into practice.

Journalistic and web writing demand a different style with shorter paragraphs, and they often rely on inverted pyramid or news feature structure. Yet even here one can find nuggets of gold.

"In narration and description the paragraph sometimes begins with a concise, comprehensive statement serving to hold together the details that follow," Strunk and White state.

They cite a sentence from Robert Louis Stevenson's "Treasure Island." Let's look at Stevenson's entire paragraph, however, to see how such a sentence sets up what follows:

The breeze served us admirably. We skimmed before it like a bird, the coast of the island flashing by and the view changing every minute. Soon we were past the high lands and bowling beside low, sandy country, sparsely dotted with dwarf pines, and soon we were beyond that again and had turned the corner of the rocky hill that ends the island on the north.

Page through section III to point No. 11, and you'll be reminded why the slim book remains so influential among communicators, journalists and other writers.

"Use the active voice," the authors advise, "The active voice is usually more direct and vigorous than the passive."

For example, "I shall always remember my first visit to Boston" is better than, "My first visit to Boston will always be remembered by me."

# Strunk and White's secrets for rocket-powered writing

“The latter sentence is less direct, less bold, and less concise,” Strunk and White state. “If the writer tries to make it more concise by omitting ‘by me’ ... it becomes indefinite: is it the writer, or some person undisclosed, or the world at large, that will always remember this visit?”

## Cutting ‘there is.’

Most professional writers know to limit the use of the passive voice. While inveighing against its habitual use, the authors offer an example of a phrase that I always try to rewrite: “there were” (also “there is,” “there are,” “there was,” etc.). Compare the following:

*There were a great number of dead leaves lying on the ground.*

*Dead leaves covered the ground.*

A [certain hack](#) noted this years ago. For example, Bank of America’s CEO once used the phrase “there is” to deny that his firm needed to raise more money due to problems with mortgage investors.

He said, “There is no capital raise needed here,” when he meant to say, “We don’t need to raise capital.”

“Many a tame sentence of description or exposition,” Strunk and White write, “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.’”

## Doubling down on the passive

If passive can be clunky, worse still is “making one passive depend directly upon another”? It is easy—and much clearer to rewrite, “Gold was not allowed to be exported,” as, “It was forbidden to export gold” (Strunk and White’s example). Or how about omitting the passive altogether, as in, “The government banned the export of gold”?

The authors also urge the reader: “Put statements in positive form. Make definite assertions. Avoid tame, colorless, hesitating, non-committal language. Use the word ‘not’ as a means of denial or in antithesis, never as a means of evasion.”

Thus, “He was not very often on time,” becomes, “He usually came late.”



## Strunk and White's secrets for rocket-powered writing

Hence, heed the following:

**Clunky:** Not honest

**Better:** Dishonest

**Clunky:** Not important

**Better:** Trifling

**Clunky:** Did not remember

**Better:** Forgot

**Clunky:** Did not pay any attention to

**Better:** Ignored

### Cut, cut, cut.

That section also includes the following advice, perhaps Strunk and White's most famous: "Omit needless words."

When the Guardian [asked writers](#) for their tips, several mentioned pruning one's prose.

"Editing is everything," wrote Esther Freud. "Cut until you can cut no more. What is left often springs into life."

Strunk and White list phrases that should raise a red flag:

"The question as to whether" can be trimmed to "whether" or "the question whether." My bugaboo "there is" is a part of the ugly use "there no doubt but that"; use plain, old "doubtless" instead.

"He is a man who..."? No, no, no. "He is." And whatever oddball past he has, replace "his story is a strange one" with "his story is strange."

Strunk and White often serve up useful tips that even experienced writers tend to forget. "Who is, which was, and the like are often superfluous," they state. Consider these examples:

**Clunky:** *His brother, who is a member of the same firm...*

**Better:** *His brother, a member of the same firm...*

## Strunk and White's secrets for rocket-powered writing

**Clunky:** *Trafalgar, which was Nelson's last battle...*

**Better:** *Trafalgar, Nelson's last battle...*

We all can slip into thoughtlessly spouting tropes and clichés. If a century-old book can help us freshen our writing, it's worth thumbing through its lessons every so often.



## TOOLS, NOT RULES

*Avoid loose sentences. Keep related words together. And don't write your copy with beer.*

"These are tools, not rules," writing coach [Roy Peter Clark](#) once said in a lecture to journalists about writing.

That's a helpful approach to take when one is tempted to chafe against William Strunk Jr. and E.B. White's "[The Elements of Style](#)."

One can find any number of writers tearing their hair out over the pair's influence. "Strunk and White Suck (But Zinsser Is Excellent)," [cries](#) one blogger.

Whether you love it or hate it, "The Elements" can spark helpful habits as long you regard it as a set of recommendations of the right tool to use, rather than a book of Leviticus handed down from on high, to be obeyed lest one risk the wrath of Jehovah.

### 'Avoid a succession of loose sentences.'

As a writer, one often feels that shortening sentences can aid pithy prose. In their section on rules of composition, however, Strunk and White show that this can also carry the risk of choppiness.

"A common violation of conciseness is the presentation of a single complex idea, step by step, in a series of sentences which might to advantage be combined into one," the sages write.

They show how a collection of short, mostly chronological sentences can be reworked more felicitously, even at the cost of a sentence longer than those it replaces.

- **Before.** Macbeth was very ambitious. This led him to wish to become king of Scotland. The witches told him that this wish of his would come true. The king of Scotland at this time was Duncan. Encouraged by his wife, Macbeth murdered Duncan. He was thus enabled to succeed Duncan as king. (55 words.)
- **After.** Encouraged by his wife, Macbeth achieved his ambition and realized the prediction of the witches by murdering Duncan and becoming king of Scotland in his place. (26 words.)

# Strunk and White's secrets for rocket-powered writing

This leads directly to Rule No. 14, in which one can almost hear Strunk bark, “Avoid a succession of loose sentences.”

By this they particularly mean sentences consisting of two co-ordinate clauses, the second introduced by a conjunction or relative. Such a series “soon becomes monotonous and tedious.” The authors provide this example:

The third concert of the subscription series was given last evening, and a large audience was in attendance. Mr. Edward Appleton was the soloist, and the Boston Symphony Orchestra furnished the instrumental music. The former showed himself to be an artist of the first rank, while the latter proved itself fully deserving of its high reputation.

They go on, but you get the idea. “Apart from its triteness and emptiness, the paragraph above is bad because of the structure of its sentences, with their mechanical symmetry and sing-song,” they stated.

## ‘Express co-ordinate ideas in similar form.’

Echoing forms cause recognizable patterns in content and function, Strunk and White say, citing the Ten Commandments (“Thou shalt...”) and the Beatitudes (“Blessed are ... for theirs is”).

“Webster’s Dictionary of English Usage” [wickedly catches White](#) (along with Thackeray and Defoe) violating Rule No. 15 in a separate essay, but one could pick through any writer and find such inconsistencies.

“You could probably find such examples by the dozen, if you were to sharpen your eye so as to be able to depict them readily,” Webster’s says, adding, though, that these are “venial sins. ... We think you should try to avoid them in your writing. But if you slip, no one may notice.”

## ‘Keep related words together.’

“The position of the words in a sentence is the principal means of showing their relationship,” Elements advises. “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.”

**Bad:** Writing manuals, when flung at the teacher, can hurt.

**Better:** When flung at the teacher, writing manuals can hurt.



## Strunk and White's secrets for rocket-powered writing

In a piece on “[The Nuts & Bolts of Scientific Writing](#),” the Academic Pediatric Association, quotes the precept and notes that it helps avoid dangling modifiers, along with other confusion:

**Incorrect:** George came over while I was writing my paper with a six-pack of beer.

**Correct:** George came over with a six-pack of beer while I was writing my paper.

Unless the essayist was dipping his quill in a hearty stout, use the second example.

### ‘Place the emphatic words of a sentence at the end.’

Strunk and White remind us that words can carry a different impact depending on their position.

“The kangaroo boxer KO’d the clown with his clenched paw” ends the sentence with more punch than this: “With his clenched paw, the kangaroo boxer KO’d the clown.”

This tip comes with seemingly contradictory advice: “The other prominent position in the sentence is the beginning. Any element in the sentence, other than the subject, becomes emphatic when placed first.”

Example? “Deceit or treachery he could never forgive.”

Avoid getting too clever, however, or you’ll end up sounding like the Star Wars character [Yoda](#): “Powerful you have become, the dark side I sense in you.”

Either way, this flip-flopping rule underscores Clark’s words: These are, after all, tools, not rules.

## PARENTHESES AND MISUSED PHRASES

### *Considering punctuation and the perplexing persistence of purple prose.*

As we conclude our centennial appreciation of William Strunk Jr. and E.B. White, let's ponder parentheses and muse about misuses and misspellings.

In comments on my stories, many readers have recalled how the book helped clarify their prose.

Nancy Bowen Wiggins [writes](#) that she has been advocating the use of Strunk and White for years.

"I was introduced to this writing style primer by my professor Hal Barber in grad school at Trinity University," she says. "He said that I need a more straightforward method of writing to gain clarity to my presentation of thoughts. It has worked for me."

Randall Bassin [says](#) rule No. 17—"Omit needless words"—has served him well over the years. "It is the one lecture by Professor William Strunk Jr. that I wish I could have attended, if only to cheer and applaud his point," he writes. "One caveat: Purists may wish to defer to the Third Edition, as the Fourth infused examples of politically correct speech."

One shy reader who gives his name only as Bob frets that social media and the lack of grammar education have made clear prose a lost art.

"Like your appearance at an important business meeting, the first impressions of your writing ability will often determine a person's opinion of your education, intelligence and worth," Bob states.

So let's finish off chapter IV and mine grammatical gold from V and VI—the final two sections of "Elements."

### **Punctuating with parentheses**

Some writers stumble over the punctuation of parentheses, Strunk and White observe:

A sentence containing an expression in parenthesis is punctuated, outside of the marks of parenthesis, exactly as if the expression in parenthesis were absent. The expression within 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.



# Strunk and White's secrets for rocket-powered writing

The writing meisters offer these examples:

- I went to his house yesterday (my third attempt to see him), but he had left town.
- He declares (and why should we doubt his good faith?) that he is now certain of success.

(When a wholly detached expression or sentence is parenthesized, the final stop comes before the last mark of parenthesis.)

Others have drawn up further examples and rules on the topic. [GrammarBook.com](http://GrammarBook.com) assures us:

This is a rule with a lot of wiggle room. An entire sentence in parentheses is often acceptable without an enclosed period:

Example: Please read the analysis (you'll be amazed).

Sure, but, well: No. This is where one must develop an ear for language.

Our executive editor and [word czar](#), Rob Reinalda, polices our prose for parenthetical sentences subsumed into the previous sentence, as in the above example. He's right. Better to write, "Please read the analysis. (You'll be amazed.)" Best of all, in this case omit the parentheses altogether.

## Misused words and phrases

Section V of "Elements" deals with a range of issues. Take the phrase "as to whether"; Strunk and White say an unencumbered "whether" is sufficient.

"Etc." or "et cetera"—from the Latin phrase meaning "and the rest" or "and so forth"—is "[n]ot to be used of persons," they insist. (I am going to have to inform my colleagues, etc.) Amplifying this, Shundalyn Allen of [Grammarly notes](#) that it should be used only when unmentioned items in the list are of the same type as the mentioned ones. She offers this example:

- *The children should bring paper, pencils, scissors, etc.* (You can discern the category from the examples.)
- *The children should bring crayons, blankets, birth certificates, etc.* (The class is not clear. Unless you previously state the connection between the items and the rest of the list is easily imaginable, you can't use etc.)

# Strunk and White's secrets for rocket-powered writing

Strunk and White also have a keen eye for stuffy prose. Factor is “a hackneyed word; the expressions of which it forms part can usually be replaced by something more direct and idiomatic.”

Example:

**Clumsy:** His superior training was the great factor in his winning the match.

**Better:** He won the match by being better trained.

The writing sages likewise caution against using “while” as a synonym for “and,” “but” or “although.” (This is another infraction that our learned word czar catches in my own prose.)

Writers do this “either from a mere desire to vary the connective, or from uncertainty which of the two connectives is the more appropriate,” Strunk and White caution. (Untrue! We do it because we’re sleep-writing.) “In this use it is best replaced by a semicolon.”

- **Wrong:** The office and salesrooms are on the ground floor, while the rest of the building is devoted to manufacturing.
- **Correct:** The office and salesrooms are on the ground floor; the rest of the building is devoted to manufacturing.

## Letters of the law

The book’s final section lists frequently misspelled words. Perhaps knowing that the word “sacrilegious” does not contain “religious” is less relevant in an era of spellcheck.

Then again, many professional writers continue to look up “affect” and “effect” every time they use either one, afflicted by a nagging sense that they haven’t quite gotten it right. (*Editor’s note: There is nothing wrong with double-checking spellings and meanings, even if you’re “sure” about something—and especially if you’re “sure” about something.*)

Strunk and White, of course, have their own tart advice on this point:

**Effect.** As noun, means result; as verb, means to bring about, accomplish (not to be confused with affect, which means “to influence”). As noun, often loosely used in perfunctory writing about fashions, music, painting, and other arts: “an Oriental effect;” “effects in pale green;”

## Strunk and White's secrets for rocket-powered writing

“very delicate effects;” “broad effects;” “subtle effects;” “a charming effect was produced by.” The writer who has a definite meaning to express will not take refuge in such vagueness.

After all, none of us seeks an opaque effect in our prose.

For those upset by “Elements” rules, bear in mind that even White admitted breaking his and Strunk’s guidelines occasionally, as Roberts notes.

“He acknowledged that the best writers would sometimes disregard his prescriptions but explained that when they do, ‘the reader will usually find in the sentence some compensating merit, attained at the cost of the violation,’” Roberts writes.

In other words, he adds, know the rules so you can break them purposefully.