

THE
ELEMENTS
OF
Style

BY
WILLIAM STRUNK JR.

*With Revisions, an Introduction,
and a Chapter on Writing*

BY
E. B. WHITE

FOURTH EDITION



New York San Francisco Boston
London Toronto Sydney Tokyo Singapore Madrid
Mexico City Munich Paris Cape Town Hong Kong Montreal

Foreword

by Roger Angell

THE FIRST writer I watched at work was my stepfather, E. B. White. Each Tuesday morning, he would close his study door and sit down to write the "Notes and Comment" page for *The New Yorker*. The task was familiar to him—he was required to file a few hundred words of editorial or personal commentary on some topic in or out of the news that week—but the sounds of his typewriter from his room came in hesitant bursts, with long silences in between. Hours went by. Summoned at last for lunch, he was silent and preoccupied, and soon excused himself to get back to the job. When the copy went off at last, in the afternoon RFD pouch—we were in Maine, a day's mail away from New York—he rarely seemed satisfied. "It isn't good enough," he said sometimes. "I wish it were better."

Writing is hard, even for authors who do it all the time. Less frequent practitioners—the job applicant; the business executive with an annual report to get out; the high school senior with a Faulkner assignment; the graduate-school student with her thesis proposal; the writer of a letter of condolence—often get stuck in an awkward passage or find a muddle on their screens, and then blame themselves. What should be easy and flowing looks tangled or feeble or overblown—not what was meant at all. What's wrong with me, each one thinks. Why can't I get this right?

It was this recurring question, put to himself, that must have inspired White to revive and add to a textbook by an English professor of his, Will Strunk Jr., that he had first read in college, and to get it published. The result, this quiet book, has been in print for forty years, and has offered more than ten million writers a helping hand. White knew that a compendium of specific tips—about singular and plural verbs, parentheses, the “that”–“which” scuffle, and many others—could clear up a recalcitrant sentence or subclause when quickly reconsulted, and that the larger principles needed to be kept in plain sight, like a wall sampler.

How simple they look, set down here in White’s last chapter: “Write in a way that comes naturally,” “Revise and rewrite,” “Do not explain too much,” and the rest; above all, the cleansing, clarion “Be clear.” How often I have turned to them, in the book or in my mind, while trying to start or unblock or revise some piece of my own writing! They help—they really do. They work. They are the way.

E. B. White’s prose is celebrated for its ease and clarity—just think of *Charlotte’s Web*—but maintaining this standard required endless attention. When the new issue of *The New Yorker* turned up in Maine, I sometimes saw him reading his “Comment” piece over to himself, with only a slightly different expression than the one he’d worn on the day it went off. Well, O.K., he seemed to be saying. At least I got the elements right.

This edition has been modestly updated, with word processors and air conditioners making their first appearance among White’s references, and with a light redistribution of genders to permit a feminine pronoun or female farmer to take their places among the males who once innocently served him. Sylvia Plath has knocked Keats out of the box, and I notice that “America” has become “this country” in a sample text, to forestall a subsequent and possibly demeaning “she” in the same paragraph. What is not here is anything about E-mail—the rules-free, lower-case flow that cheerfully keeps us in touch these days. E-mail is conversation,

and it may be replacing the sweet and endless talking we once sustained (and tucked away) within the informal letter. But we are all writers and readers as well as communicators, with the need at times to please and satisfy ourselves (as White put it) with the clear and almost perfect thought.