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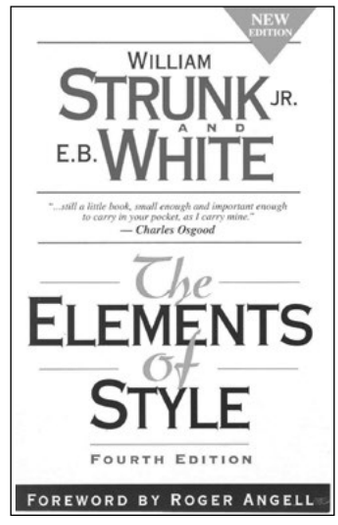
"THE ELEMENTS OF STYLE" BY WILLIAM STRUNK JR. AND E.B. WHITE

As lawyers, we cling to our rules. We love our numbered lists and procedures, and for that reason alone, *The Elements of Style* by William Strunk, Jr. and E.B. White is a perfect fit. Continuously in print for over fifty years, this thin volume remains as relevant as ever, describing the techniques good writers use to make their work interesting, beautiful, or as the case may be, persuasive. Consider No. 17.

> **17. 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. Many expressions in common use violate this principle.[1]



If you could choose to follow only one of the rules, No. 17 would be a fine choice; but there are others too. Some we know well (and often debate) - like No. 2, which suggests the use of a serial comma, as in red, white, and blue. Others are opaque. Have you ever struggled with the word "that" as opposed to "which" in a subordinate clause? If it keeps you up at night, rest assured. Strunk and White have a rule, and I won't spoil it for you. HINT: I'm still not sure I understand it.

Remember E.B. White? He wrote a novel about a pig named Wilbur who made friends with a spider named Charlotte. White possessed extraordinary gifts as a writer, but he also worked to improve the writing of others. At Cornell, he studied under Professor William Strunk, Jr., who taught English for forty-six years and was much-beloved by his students for his quirky style and his "little book" of rules, which he self-published in 1918. Approximately ten years after Strunk died, White revised and expanded the "little book" for a wider audience, and since then, millions of copies have been sold.

In its current form, *The Elements of Style* serves foremost as a reference about style, not grammar. The authors presume our ability to write grammatically correct sentences; they confront instead the qualities that make for good writing. Consider No. 22, which suggests that we end our sentences with the most powerful or meaningful word. Let's try to apply it to the sentence below.

> "Ms. Anderson's death was caused by the Defendant's failure to observe the proper speed limit as posted."

None of us would be surprised to read this sentence in a pleading. It's grammatically correct, and we understand it well enough, but if we observe rule No. 22, we move the most powerful word to the end. That word could be different depending on our objective or our client, but for this exercise, let's use death.

> "Defendant's failure to observe the posted speed limit caused the Plaintiff's death."

We've substituted death for posted, but we don't have to stop there. We could apply No. 17 ("omit needless words"), and revise it again.

> "Defendant's excessive speed caused the Plaintiff's death."

Notice that by revising the sentence according to *The Elements of Style* we have also eliminated the passive voice, changing "death . . . was caused" to "speed caused . . . death." See No. 14 ("Use the active voice") and also No. 20 ("Keep related words together").

What I love best about this book are the moments when we're confronted with Professor Strunk himself, at his most poetical: like when he recommends that "every word tell" or opines about how to use the word clever. "Note that [*clever*] means one thing when applied to people, another when applied to horses. A clever horse is a good-natured one, not an ingenious one." He also rewards us with humor. You can hear the English professor fussing at his students, see the chalk dust on his sleeve, when he writes, "*The fact that* is an especially debilitating expression. It should be revised out of every sentence in which it occurs." And personally, he strikes a little too close to my southern way of speaking when he attacks the cherished verb, *fix*.

> *Fix*. Colloquial in America for *arrange, prepare, mend*. The usage is well established. But bear in mind that this verb is from *figere:* "to make firm," "to place indefinitely." These are the preferred meanings of the word.[2]

Lawyers spend their days in many different activities, but writing - perhaps as much as reading - is a task we all share. Writing serves as the primary vehicle for presenting our clients, and ourselves, to the legal world, and whether we deserve it or not, lawyers earned a reputation for terrible writing long ago. Indeed, concise prose often distinguishes the effective advocate from his or her peers. I had never owned a copy of *The Elements of Style* until this year, but since first reading it, I've returned, each time finding something useful I hadn't seen before. It entertains as much as it informs, and I highly recommend it.

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1 William Strunk, Jr. & E.B. White, *The Elements of Style* 23 (4th ed. 2000).

2 *See also, mash.* "He mashed the button on the stove to fix his dinner." Strunk's rules are silent on the verb *mash*. But one can imagine what he might say about this usage.