The Elements of Style Study Guide

The Elements of Style by William Strunk Jr.

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Introduction

English professor William Strunk Jr. wrote *The Elements of Style* as a guide for his students at Cornell University and had it printed privately in 1918. In 1935, Strunk issued a revised edition, titled *The Elements and Practice of Composition*, with Edward A. Tenney as coauthor. Among Strunk's students was E. B. White, who many years later wrote an article about Strunk for the New Yorker magazine. The article led Macmillan publishers to ask White to revise Strunk's original book for general publication. (Strunk died in 1946.) This first published edition of *The Elements of Style* came out in 1959 and credited Strunk and White as coauthors. To supplement his other additions and revisions, White added a fifth chapter, "An Approach to Style." White's *New Yorker* article about Strunk was revised to serve as an introduction.

White made minor changes for a second edition published in 1972 and further additions and updates for the third edition, published in 1979. A fourth edition published in 1999 includes a new introduction written by White's stepson, Roger Angell.

Since publication of the 1959 edition, *The Elements of Style* has been widely considered a necessary reference for both academic and professional writers. Generations of students, teachers, writers, and editors have known it simply as "Strunk and White."

Author Biography

William Strunk, Jr., was born July 1, 1869, in Cincinnati, Ohio. After earning a bachelor's degree at the University of Cincinnati in 1890 and a Ph.D. at Cornell University in 1896, Strunk went on to have a long career as an educator. He taught English at Cornell for forty-six years.

Strunk wrote the first edition of *The Elements of Style* for the use of his students and had it privately printed in 1918. A revised edition titled *The Elements and Practice of Composition*, with Edward A. Tenney as coauthor, was printed in 1935. The only other book Strunk wrote was *English Metres*, published locally in 1922. Better known as an editor, Strunk edited works by important authors including William Shakespeare, John Dryden, and James Fenimore Cooper.

Strunk married Olivia Emilie Locke in 1900, and they had two sons and a daughter. Strunk died in Ithaca, New York, on September 26, 1946.

Elwyn Brooks White, who used the name E. B. White, was born July 11, 1899, in Mount Vernon, New York. White was Strunk's student at Cornell, from which he earned a bachelor's degree in 1921, and went on to become a well-known writer. In 1926, White went to work for *The New Yorker*, which had been founded a year earlier and would launch the careers of some of the most respected writers of the coming decades. White was widely appreciated as an essayist and humorist, but his best-known works today are his children's books, including *Stuart Little* (1945), *Charlotte's Web* (1952; the Newbery Honor Book for 1953 and winner of several other awards), and *The Trumpet of the Swan* (1970; nominated for a National Book Award in 1971 and winner of several awards including the Children's Book Award from the William Allen White Library at Emporia State University). In addition to many other awards and honorary degrees, White was honored in 1978 with a Pulitzer Prize special citation for his body of work.

1957, Macmillan hired White to revise Strunk's "little book," as the professor had called it, for general publication. This edition of *Elements of Style*blished in 1959, became the classic that generations of college students have known as "Strunk and White."

White married Katharine Sergeant Angell, an editor at *New Yorker* 1929, and the two had a son together; Angell also had a son and daughter from a previous marriage. White died in North Brooklin, Maine, on October 1, 1985, after suffering from Alzheimer's disease.

Plot Summary

Chapter 1: Elementary Rules of Usage

This chapter sets forth eleven rules of English usage dealing with the formation of possessives; correct use of commas, colons, and dashes; nounverb agreement; pronoun cases; and participial phrases. Each rule is followed by a series of correct and incorrect examples with explanations. The chapter is not comprehensive (for example, it does not address all uses of commas); instead it addresses areas in which the authors felt errors were common at the time.

Chapter 2: Elementary Principles of Composition

Another set of eleven rules addresses structure in written work, moving from the overall structure of a piece ("Choose a suitable design and hold to it") to sentence structure ("Place the emphatic words of a sentence at the end"). Again, each rule is followed by examples and amplification. The authors use excerpts from accomplished writers including Jean Stafford and E. M. Forster as models of effective composition.

Chapter 3: A Few Matters of Form

This very brief chapter covers details of the actual presentation of written work—what it should look like on the page. Issues addressed range from margins and headings to where to place punctuation marks in relation to parentheses.

Chapter 4: Words and Expressions Commonly Misused

This long chapter, the final section of Strunk's original manuscript, is a compendium of words and phrases that writers often misuse, again followed by explanations and examples. The list begins with the words "aggravate" and "irritate," followed by an explanation that the two are not synonyms; "irritate" means "to annoy," and "aggravate" means "to add to an already annoying situation." The authors similarly clarify the meanings of "alternate" and "alternative," "among" and "between," and many other pairs.

Strunk and White consider a word misused if it has the wrong meaning for its use in the sentence or if it adds no meaning. For example, they point out that the word "character" is misused in the phrase "acts of a hostile character," which they recommend shortening to "hostile acts."

Chapter 5: An Approach to Style (With a List of Reminders)

This chapter, White's addition to the original manuscript, begins by defining what White means by "style": "Style is the sense of what is distinguished and distinguishing." White continues:

Style is an increment in writing. When we speak of [F. Scott] Fitzgerald's style, we don't mean his command of the relative pronoun, we mean the sound his words make on paper. Every writer, by the way he uses the language, reveals something of his spirit, his habits, his capacities, his bias.

White uses examples from Thomas Paine (the famed "These are the times that try men's souls") and Thomas Wolfe to demonstrate that while meaning can be conveyed equally well by any number of constructions ("Times like these try men's souls"), one particular way of expressing an idea is often more pleasing, powerful, and memorable than any of the alternatives. The ability to express an idea in a powerful way is a hallmark of style, White declares. He adds that some writers' styles are so distinctive that readers come to recognize their "voices" on paper as easily as they would learn to recognize their speaking voices. Quotations from William Faulkner, Ernest Hemingway, Robert Frost, and Walt Whitman illustrate this point.

Having shown what style is, White offers twenty- one suggestions designed to help novice writers develop their own styles. Some of these tips address technical matters, such as avoiding weak qualifiers ("rather," "very," etc.) and using standard spelling ("through," not "thru," for example). Other tips deal with more subjective issues: "Do not explain too much"; "Place yourself in the background." By the latter, White means that good writing "draws the reader's attention to the sense and substance of the writing, rather than to the mood and temper of the author."

Characters

William Faulkner

William Faulkner, the Nobel Prize-winning novelist who set his major novels in the fictional Yoknapatawpha County in Mississippi, is the only author whom Strunk and White use twice as a positive example. Faulkner is praised for the concrete details he uses to make his setting seem real and for an individual style that makes his writing immediately recognizable.

E. M. Forster

Strunk and White use an excerpt from the work of the English writer E. M. Forster as an example of laudable sentence structure. Primarily known as a novelist, Forster also wrote short stories and essays.

Robert Frost

American poet Robert Frost, who won four Pulitzer Prizes, is contrasted with Walt Whitman in a passage that discusses the importance of individual style.

Wolcott Gibbs

Wolcott Gibbs was an editor and a writer on the staff of the *New Yorker* from its early days. Gibbs is best remembered today for his short, humorous, and highly quotable comments on a variety of topics, and it is such a comment that Strunk and White quote in their book.

Ernest Hemingway

Strunk and White contrast the spare style of American author Ernest Hemingway with the detail- laden prose of William Faulkner to illustrate differences in individual style.

Abraham Lincoln

In a humorous paragraph, Strunk and White use the first line of Abraham Lincoln's famous Gettysburg Address to explore "the line between the fancy and the plain, between the atrocious and the felicitous." The authors declare that Lincoln "was flirting with disaster" with his opening line ("Four score and seven years ago") but that the president "achieved cadence while skirting the edge of fanciness." They offer several possible rephrasings of the line and explain why each is inferior to Lincoln's choice.

W. Somerset Maugham

Strunk and White use a paragraph from the English writer W. Somerset Maugham to support their argument that the pronouns "he" and "his" should be used when a writer is referring to both genders, avoiding what they consider the clumsy and unnecessary use of "he or she" and "his or her."

George Orwell

The English author George Orwell once "translated" a short passage from the King James Bible into flat, colorless contemporary prose as a way of ridiculing the latter kind of writing. Strunk and White reproduce Orwell's exercise for the same purpose.

Thomas Paine

Strunk and White take a famous line from American patriot Thomas Paine ("These are the times that try men's souls") and recast it in several ways to show why Paine's simple declarative sentence is the most powerful form in which to express his thought.

Herbert Spencer

In their only quotation from another volume on style, Strunk and White quote British philosopher Herbert Spencer in his *Philosophy of Style* on the difference between vague writing and vivid writing.

Jean Stafford

California-born writer Jean Stafford won the Pulitzer Prize in 1969 for "*The Short Stories of Jean Stafford*." Strunk and White quote her story "In the Zoo" as an example of writing made vivid through imagery.

Robert Louis Stevenson

Two lines from a poem by Scottish writer Robert Louis Stevenson provide the last example in the book of what Strunk and White consider good writing; Strunk and White credit Stevenson's "plainer style" for the enduring popularity of his poetry.

Walt Whitman

An excerpt from the work of American poet Walt Whitman is contrasted with one from Robert Frost to demonstrate the unique style of each writer.

Thomas Wolfe

Thomas Wolfe wrote four autobiographical novels of the American South before he died at an early age. Strunk and White use one sentence from Wolfe in discussing sentence structure. The authors praise Wolfe's sentence structure while hinting that he was nonetheless guilty of creating overblown prose.

Themes

Brevity

One principle that runs throughout *The Elements of Style* is that of brevity. To Strunk and White, good writing expresses thoughts economically. One of their "principles of composition" is to "omit needless words." The next rule advises to "avoid a succession of loose sentences." Later in the book, they instruct: "Do not explain too much." By way of examples, they shorten "in a hasty manner" to "hastily," "he is a man who" to "he," and so on. They make a special example of "the fact that," stating flatly, "It should be revised out of every sentence in which it occurs."

This theme of the book matched Strunk's personality and his teaching emphasis, as White remembers in his introduction to *The Elements of Style*:

"Omit needless words!" cries the author on page 23, and into that imperative Will Strunk really put his heart and soul. In the days when I was sitting in his class, he omitted so many needless words, and omitted them so forcibly and with such eagerness and obvious relish, that he often seemed in the position of having shortchanged himself—a man left with nothing more to say yet with time to fill, a radio prophet who had out-distanced the clock.

Strunk's original version of *The Elements of Style*, White writes, was "his attempt to cut the vast tangle of English rhetoric down to size and write its rules and principles on the head of a pin." Strunk said it all in forty-three pages, and White reports that it was with wicked delight that the professor always referred to his work as "the *little* book."

Clarity

Along with urging writers to be brief, the authors admonish them to be clear. In his chapter on style, White makes his case for clarity in a way that is so serious it is almost shocking:

Muddiness is not merely a disturber of prose, it is also a destroyer of life, of hope: death on the highway caused by a badly worded road sign, heartbreak among lovers caused by a misplaced phrase in a wellintentioned letter, anguish of a traveler expecting to be met at a railroad station and not being met because of a slipshod telegram.

Having made his point, White goes on to acknowledge that there are humorous possibilities, too, in unclear writing. To prove it, he reports that the staid *New York Times* once informed its readers that Nelson Rockefeller was "chairman of the Museum of Modern Art, which he entered in a fireman's raincoat during a recent fire, and founded the Museum of Primitive Art." White follows this with words that are slung together in his own distinctive style and that beg to be quoted. Referring to the quotation from the *Times*, he writes:

This we all love. But think of the tragedies that are rooted in ambiguity; think of that side, and be clear! When you say something, make sure you have said it. The chances of your having said it are only fair.

Clarity and its cousins, accuracy and precision, are the subtexts of rules presented throughout the book. "Use definite, specific, concrete language," the authors write. "Keep related words together." (The example given of a sentence that breaks this rule is, "New York's first commercial humansperm bank opened Friday with semen samples from eighteen men frozen in a stainless steel tank.") The chapter on commonly misused words serves the cause of clarity by reminding writers not to use "disinterested" when they mean "uninterested" or "enormity" when they mean "enormousness," pointing out that the word pairs are not synonymous.

Style

Authoritative Tone

Strunk wrote his original manuscript in the authoritative tone of the professor speaking from the lectern, and White, in his additions, followed Strunk's lead. While the authors acknowledge that some of their views are not universally held, they go on to present those views as representing the highest standards of written English. Virtually all of the book's rules and principles, and also much of the text that supports them, are presented in imperative sentences: "Put statements in positive form"; "express coordinate ideas in similar form" (the principle of parallel construction); "revise and rewrite." Following their own advice about not weakening sentences with vague qualifiers, Strunk and White never write "try to . . ." or "it is a good idea to . . ." or "if possible . . ." Their presentation can be summed up as follows: These are the rules. Good writers follow them. A reader of *The Elements of Style* is likely to conclude that Professor Strunk was not in the habit of asking his students, "Are there any questions?" His rules of written English are clear and neat and not open to discussion.

Humor

This authoritarian tone is made much more palatable by the abundant humor in the book. Without a heavy dose of humor, the authors would seem like cruel dictators. Their great sense of fun enlivens the text. They have a talent for making readers laugh at their own crimes against the language. Readers who know they are guilty of having written "nauseous" when they should have written "nauseated" feel corrected but not scolded when they read:

Nauseous. Nauseated. The first means "sickening to contemplate"; the second means "sick at the stomach." Do not, therefore, say "I feel nauseous," unless you are sure you have that effect on others.

Again, White's introduction credits Strunk's own sense of humor for the merry-prankster attitude that pervades the book. White reports that Strunk found the term "student body" gruesome and determined to do away with it; the professor visited the office of the *Alumni News* to suggest that the publication use "studentry" (which Strunk himself coined, after "citizenry") instead of "student body." "I am told," White writes, "that the *News* editor was so charmed by the visit, if not by the word, that he ordered the student body buried, never to rise again." White goes on to register his opinion that "studentry" is "not much of an improvement, but it does sound less cadaverous." Countless readers have been as charmed by the humor of Strunk and his coauthor as that collegiate editor was.

Scope

Reference books that become classics are often comprehensive, providing answers to every imaginable question on the topic it covers. But *The Elements of Style* is far from comprehensive. Though it is now a bigger book than the book Strunk wrote in the early 1900s, "bigger" is strictly relative, and the current edition has not outgrown Strunk's nickname for his version, "the *little book." The New York Public Library Writer's Guide to Style and Usage*, at 838 pages, is comprehensive. *The Elements of Style*, at fewer than one hundred, is idiosyncratic. It became and remains a classic because it covers issues that trip up many writers and, even more so, because it speaks to those issues in a quirky but forceful way.

Historical Context

As *The Elements of Style* has long been a classic style manual, *The New Yorker* has long been the standard-bearer of American magazine journalism. Harold Ross founded *The New Yorker* in 1925 and was its editor until his death in 1951. Ross envisioned the magazine as funny, literate, and sophisticated, and he famously said that it was not "for the old lady in Dubuque." White began writing for the magazine in its first year and continued to do so until his death in 1985. He is widely credited with creating the magazine's distinctive style. *The New Yorker* has been so influential that generations of aspiring writers have looked to it for guidance and inspiration, much as they have looked to Strunk and White's book.

The late 1950s, when *The Elements of Style* was first published, was something of a golden age in American magazine journalism. At the time, the editor of *The New Yorker* was William Shawn. The magazine had about 450,000 subscribers—a huge number for a magazine that was ostensibly written and edited for the residents of a single city—and enough advertising to make it solidly profitable. As has been true throughout its history, *The New Yorker* published some of the period's best writers, including John Updike, Jonathan Schell, and Calvin Trillin in addition to White, who had a hand in every aspect of the magazine, from writing the famous "Talk of the Town" feature to creating a painting that appeared on the cover. The magazine featured a wide variety of articles, all well-written and well-edited, from satiric commentary to innovative short stories to tough investigative journalism. Edwin Emery, in his *The Press and America*, calls *The New Yorker* "possibly the most distinctive of American magazines" and writes that it "was more than cartoons, whimsy, and curiously plotless fiction; it had its penetrating 'Profiles,' its 'Reporter at Large,' and other incisive commentaries on public affairs."

The New Yorker of the late 1950s stood at the head of a distinguished class of American magazines. *Harper's* was more than one hundred years old, having begun as a literary journal and transformed itself into a public affairs magazine. *The Saturday Evening Post*, the magazine that *was,* edited for the "old lady in Dubuque" and the rest of the heartland, had about six million subscribers nationwide who eagerly read its fiction, biographies, and current events reportage. *Esquire* was a literary magazine that published Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, John Steinbeck, Truman Capote, and many other stars in addition to new voices. *Reader's Digest* had been around since the 1920s, but began to reflect the conservative ideas and inspirational philosophies of its founder, DeWitt Wallace. It was the circulation king; between 1946 and 1970, its circulation doubled to nearly eighteen million in the United States plus ten million in sixty countries around the world. Political magazines also were having a heyday, with *National Review* in which William F. Buckley Jr. espoused the views of the right and the *Nation* and the *New Republic* which espoused views of the left.

Critical Overview

When it was first published, *The Elements of Style* was favorably reviewed in newspapers nationwide. P. F. Baum's 1960 review in the *Los Angeles Times Book Review* is representative. Baum writes:

The world would be a better place if everybody read *The Elements of Style*; if it were read not just by writers and journalists but by all who write legal briefs, job applications, love letters, or notes to the teacher; read even by those who never write anything.

Baum praises the manual as "a monument to clear thinking cleanly voiced."

Edward C. Sampson, in his article on White for the *Twayne's United States Authors Series*, calls Strunk's original work "a short, precise guide to writing, free of jargon and written with a respect for the reader's intelligence and needs." Discussing White's chapter on style, Sampson writes, "Many of his examples . . . are felicitous, and he generally manages to be precise and helpful without being dogmatic." Sampson, however, finds White's own writing style lacking. He writes: "Curiously, this chapter about style is not one of White's effective pieces. It is not always clear, it is sometimes inconsistent, and it is repetitious in a way rare for White." Sampson concludes that White "seems to be writing for himself or another artist, rather than for a freshman struggling with his weekly theme." Baum disagrees, writing, "The final chapter on writing style displays all White's own mastery of the essay form."

According to Sampson, White acknowledged that he had difficulty with his work on *The Elements of Style*, which undoubtedly came as a surprise to the many critics and readers who revered White as one of the finest essayists of his time. Sampson takes a quotation from White's book *The Points of My Compass*, in which he writes of *The Elements of Style*, "I felt uneasy posing as an expert on rhetoric, when the truth is I write by ear, always with diffi- culty and seldom with any exact notion of what is taking place under the hood."

The most scathing criticism of the book has come from a few feminist critics who find it a manual of misogyny rather than writing style. In a 1991 article for *Western Humanities Review*, Debra Fried objects not so much to Strunk and White's rules as to the examples they use to illustrate them. She objects to example sentences such as "Chloe smells good, as a pretty girl should," declaring that "What is most pernicious about [these] sentences is that they are advanced under the false colors of mere examples." They are not mere examples, Fried argues, but attempts to buttress male power and authority.

The Elements of Style has survived several decades of shifting theories about education, writing style, and gender politics. When it was published, it immediately became a popular text for college English and writing courses, and it is still widely used on college campuses today as well as in some high schools.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3
- Critical Essay #4
- Critical Essay #5
- Critical Essay #6
- Critical Essay #7

Critical Essay #1

Norvell is an independent educational writer who specializes in English and literature and who has done graduate work in religion. In this essay, Norvell defends The Elements of Style *against the arguments of feminist and other critics*.

In the past couple of decades, virtually every literary work bearing the label "classic" has been assailed as misogynistic, irrelevant, or both. Critics writing from a number of different perspectives, from postmodernist to feminist, have pointed out the myriad ways in which the writing of white males—whether they lived in ancient Greece or the twentieth-century United States—supposedly denigrates everyone else. Some of these scholars, contradicting their own rhetoric about the importance of inclusion and diversity, have argued that the traditionally accepted canon of Western literature is so pernicious that it should be thrown onto the trash heap of history.

Anyone who supposes that a slim little manual of writing style like *The Elements of Style* is too apolitical and innocuous to attract the attention of such a mob would be underestimating the fury of the critics as well as their talent for tortured reasoning. How furious are they? How tortured is their reason ing? A couple examples from an article that appeared in *Western Humanities Review* in 1991 provide a good answer. In this article, "Bewhiskered Examples in *The Elements of Style*," Debra Fried takes issue with Strunk and White for choosing Nehemiah 11:7 as their example of how to correctly use a colon to separate chapter from verse in a biblical citation. Ever alert for insidious attacks on nonwhite non-males, Fried suspected that Strunk and White must have been up to no good when they chose that particular example. She was outraged, but most likely not surprised, to find that Nehemiah 11:7 reads thus: "And these are the sons of Benjamin: Sallu the son of Meshullam, the son of Joed, the son of Pedaiah, the son of Kolaiah, the son of Maaseiah, the son of Ithiel, the son of Jesaiah." The choice of this verse to illustrate colon placement is an assault on womanhood, Fried reasons. Her sentences are not any easier to navigate than her reasoning, but only Fried's own words will do here. Therefore, here are Fried's own words:

What do the sons of Benjamin have to do with the placement of the colon? Could it be that the Nehemiah text implies that genealogy is the originating instance of the colon . . . ? Do we have here a grammarian's just-so story . . . that teaches us that patriarchy . . . marked the beginning of the categorization that the colon authorizes and makes legible? Things of the same type are those that a single patriarch has begotten; according to this logic, fathering becomes the reigning metaphor for categorizing, and the model for the relation of general to particular . . . is that of a father to his sons.

The text of the verse does not even appear in *The Elements of Style*, but Fried wants her readers to believe that Strunk and White planted the reference in hopes that theirs would look it up and thus be indoctrinated to believe (as far as this writer can figure out) that punctuation marks have gender, and colons are male, and that is bad.

Fried also objects to the sentence "As a mother of five, with another one on the way, my ironing board is always up." Strunk and White offer this as an example of a misplaced participial phrase, as the sentence, strictly read, states that the ironing board is a mother of five. Fried sees in the sentence the authors' disapproval of the woman who is speaking and, by extension, all women who have several children. Why is she sure that the authors feel this way? Well, she reasons, since Strunk and White advocate a "spare, crisp style" of writing, they obviously despise the woman for her "procreative productivity," which Fried claims is "incompatible" with concise writing and the economical use of words. Fried's thesis: If Strunk and White prefer fewer words to more words, then they must also prefer fewer children to more children. The ironing board in Strunk and White's sentence, writes Fried, is the woman's "punishment for producing too many children." She further refers to these children as "the ragged brood whose very number is a kind of raggedness no ironing will smooth."

Of course, it is not possible to cross from Strunk and White's sentence to Fried's conclusion using the bridge of logic. A logical consideration of the two works—Strunk and White's book and Fried's article—reveals that only one of them uses judgmental language. Only Fried charges that the woman has "too many" children who comprise a "ragged band." It is Fried, not Strunk and White, who denigrates the woman in the sentence and all women like her.

Fried's refrain is that the examples that Strunk and White use to illustrate their rules of usage and style consistently belittle women. A balanced reading of their book, however, finds that the examples are balanced in terms of gender. One example of proper use of the dash is "His first thought on getting out of bed—if he had any thought at all— was to get back in again." If Strunk and White had used "her" and "she" in place of "his" and "he," Fried no doubt would have lashed out at them for characterizing women as thoughtless and lazy. Since they did not use feminine pronouns, Fried seems to have disregarded the sentence. An example of subject- verb agreement is: "His speech as well as his manner is objectionable." Again, imagine Fried's outrage if the sentence had been written about "her" speech and manner. "The culprit, it turned out, was he" clearly casts a male in the role of villain, and "Will Jane or he be hired, do you think?" puts Jane on an equal footing with a male in a job-related situation. All these examples appear within a few pages, but since they do not support Fried's argument, she ignores them.

Another recent argument for setting aside *The Elements of Style* has been that its insistence on standard rules of usage and grammar is archaic. Gary and Glynis Hoffman's book *Adiós, Strunk and White: A Handbook for the New Academic Essay*, is one purveyor of this argument. The Hoffmans disagree with Strunk and White on virtually every issue. Strunk and White discuss the importance of organization to good written work; the Hoffmans begin their first chapter with the subheading "Style before Organization." While the idea that style takes precedence over structure would leave most writers (and writing teachers) scratching their heads, at least the phrase is comprehensible, which is more than can be said for what follows. The Hoffmans' highly idiosyncratic "elements of style" are listed as "flow," "pause," "fusion," "opt," and "scrub." Of course, no matter how well a reader knows English, he or she will not be able to

determine what the Hoffmans had in mind when they wrote these chapter headings or what activities or elements of the writing task the words refer to. The words as the Hoffmans use them do not communicate anything; they are just a list of words. Apparently, the authors felt free and creative when they wrote it, and freedom and creativity are what they preach and value. Putting "Style before Organization" means putting the writer's experience before the reader's understanding, and the Hoffmans' book provides a parade example.

There is nothing wrong with writing down a string of words that make the writer feel that he or she is precocious, but the end result is not necessarily an essay. It is not surprising, then, that one student who followed the Hoffmans' advice reported, in a customer review of their book on Amazon.com, "The minute I applied this technique in my classes . . . i [sic] had teachers scrawling huge question marks on my papers." This student described the Hoffmans' guide as a "right-in-yourface- conventional-inconventionalist [sic] book," so the professors' confusion is understandable.

The point is so elementary that one is almost embarrassed to have to make it: Whether the game in question is baseball or writing, rules are what make the game possible. Without rules, one or two people can toss a ball around and swing a bat at it and be entertained for a while. But they cannot really explore all the fascinating, amazing things that people can do with a ball and a bat unless they establish rules so that everybody understands what everybody else is doing, which allows the players to interact and the watchers to understand what they are watching. Rules make it possible to take a ball and a bat and a group of people and create a story—a story that, in athletic play, happens to be called a game—that all the players, and maybe millions of spectators, experience together as being exciting and enjoyable and meaningful. Just so, rules make it possible to put words on paper in such a way that they make a story that can excite and move and inspire millions of people. A series of words comprehensible only to the writers—flow, pause, fusion, opt, scrub—cannot do this.

The Hoffmans claim that the traditional rules of grammar and style are meaningless, but in fact these rules make meaning possible. Strunk and White offer no meaningless rules and no unnecessary ones. They offer just a small volume of rules, principles, and suggestions that provide a framework for clear written communication so that everybody can enjoy the game. Far from putting writers in stylistic straitjackets, they celebrate styles as diverse as those of Ernest Hemingway and William Faulkner, Robert Frost and Walt Whitman. Their sense of humor and creativity are on display on every page of *The Elements of Style*. They poke gentle fun at human beings of both genders and show disregard for none. For all these reasons, *The Elements of Style* will never go out of style.

Source: Candyce Norvell, Critical Essay on *The Elements of Style*, in *Nonfiction Classics for Students*, Gale, 2003.

Critical Essay #2

Blevins's is a poet and essayist who has taught at Hollins University, Sweet Briar College, and in the Virginia Community College system; Blevins' first full-length collection of poems, The Brass Girl Brouhaha, is forthcoming from Ausable Press in September of 2003. In this essay, Blevins argues That The Elements of Style *is potentially confusing because it sometimes confuses grammatical and mechanical competence with actual literary merit*.

The Elements of Style is, as E. B. White admits in its introduction, "a dusty rulebook." It governs everything from how to make possessive singular nouns plural to why the active voice is preferable to the passive. The majority of the book is Will Strunk's attempt, as E. B. White says in his introduction to the third edition, "to cut the vast tangle of English rhetoric down to size and write its rules and principles on the head of a pin." In so doing, *The Elements of Style* promotes a philosophy of composition whose first tenet is the idea that "good sense is the foundation of good writing," as Sir Winston Churchill has said. Because few writers would disagree with this sentiment—and because it is among the first books to promote such a commonsense philosophy—*The Elements of Style* is an important book to anyone interested in English prose style. Nevertheless because Strunk and White sometimes confuse grammatical and mechanical competence with actual literary style, the book is also potentially confusing.

Most writing teachers urge students to become grammatically and mechanically proficient because students who understand and utilize Standard English will pass through their universities and colleges with less failure and frustration than students who do not. In other words, writers who do not write clear sentences risk more than just being misunderstood. Since careless mistakes are often thought to indicate a failure of character or a failure of intelligence, writers who do not take the necessary pains to be understood imply that they do not care about their readers, and in this way risk their reputations as persons. Writers who do not add the apostrophe after a plural possessive noun—just one example of the many mistakes novice writers make—imply, in other words, that they're either lazy or incompetent.

But because readers do evaluate a writer's character *and* intelligence based on the way she writes, any serious study of style cannot assume that mere grammatical and mechanical proficiency will, even eventually, generate the necessary tools for actual literary style. Style is not the result of a writer adhering to laws and edicts. Style is, instead, the very ways in which writers *violate* laws and edicts in order to distinguish themselves from other voices.

It is impossible to find writers who would dispute the idea that style is the result of distinguishing techniques and procedures, rather than the consequence of a devotion to usage rules and regulations. In *The Modern Stylists*, the American poet Donald Hall says, "the style is the man. Again and again, the modern stylists repeat this idea." Even E. B. White admits that style is a consequence of the individual techniques a specific writer has of distinguishing herself from other writers. He says, "When we speak of

Fitzgerald's style, we don't mean his command of the relative pronoun, we mean the sound his words make on paper. Every writer, by the way he uses the language, reveals something of his spirit, his habits, his capacities, his bias."

Even a cursory investigation of the techniques of almost any significant writer in the Western literary tradition will also define literary style as the means and methods writers have of distinguishing their voices from others. Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* begins in this way:

Lolita, light of my life, fire of my loins. My sin, my soul. Lo-lee-ta: the top of the tongue taking a trip of three steps down the palate to tap, at three, on the teeth. Lo. Lee. Ta.

This passage is composed of quick-moving, almost stream-of-consciousness sentence fragments, and is extremely "egocentric"—to use White's term—in the sense that it does nothing *but* express the narrator's opinion. Because of the repetition of the consonant "l" and "t" sounds—the "t" sound inaugurates eleven words and shows up in the middle of three in this passage, while the "l" sound kicks off seven and shows up in the middle of many more—it even risks seeming overwritten. Yet is not this paragraph *beyond* memorable? Although the three fragments and free-floating syllable sounds in this passage are anything but grammatically correct, the passage conveys urgency and obsession through its display of fleeting but focused thought. Nabokov is able, in other words, to convey with his style more than he would be able to convey with content alone. This passage also says as much about its writer as its topic, and reminds us how vivid and strange experience is by surprising us with its unprecedented technique.

In *On Beauty and Being Just*, the philosopher Elaine Scary says that beauty "is unprecedented," and that we all are drawn to the beautiful—in art and nature—because the beautiful "quickens . . . adrenalines . . . makes the heart beat faster . . . life more vivid, animated, living, worth living." In this way, Scary reinforces the idea that style, which is closely linked to beauty, cannot be the consequence of conventional linguistic behavior.

Two of White's suggestions in his "Approach to Style" are especially confusing to anyone seriously interested in actual prose style (rather than grammatical and mechanical proficiency). The first one, a suggestion for the writer to place herself "in the background" [so she might] "write in a way that draws the reader's attention to the sense and substance of the writing, rather than to the mood or temper of the author," undermines everything we know about style by advocating what for the lack of a better term can be called "voicelessness."

An additional suggestion of White's advises students not to inject their opinions into their texts because "opinions scattered indiscriminately about leave the mark of egotism on a work." By doing so, he completely avoids the fact that "the essence of all good style . . . is expressiveness," as the English writer Water Pater has said. In other words, White's suggestion for writers to keep themselves in the background of their texts and to avoid expressing opinions is not advice that will help writers develop style, but is rather a recipe for cultivating the lack of style that is one of the first marks of bad writing.

Perhaps the best evidence for the book's ambiguity is the style of *The Elements of Style* itself. That is, the main thing that distinguishes *The Elements of Style* from the multitude of composition handbooks available today is the *voice* Strunk and White generate in it. In the book's introduction, White says, in fact, that Strunk sounds sometimes like a "Sergeant . . . snapping orders to his platoon." White goes to great lengths to praise his old professor's "wisdom" and "attitude toward right and wrong." This attitude, which is sometimes military, but is also playful and humorous, comes about as a consequence of both White and Strunk's unwillingness to stay in the text's background. It is, in other words, a result of the authors' unwillingness to follow their own advice.

Speaking on how necessary it is to surround "parenthetical expressions" (these are sometimes called "non-restrictive clauses and phrases" or, in more liberal handbooks, "asides" and "interjections") with commas, Strunk tells us, "there is no defense for such punctuation as [in the sentence], 'Marjorie's husband, Colonel Nelson paid us a visit today.'" In his long treaties on diction or word choice, White advises writers "never to call a stomach a tummy without good reason." And, when he advises beginning writers to avoid overwriting, he says, "Rich, ornate prose is hard to digest, generally unwholesome, and sometimes nauseating." Such tidbits are interesting not because of the information they provide, but because of the attitude they take toward their subject matter and audience. This attitude constitutes the book's style, and also counters the idea that good writers should stay in the background of their texts.

One of the more popular handbooks used in colleges and universities today is Diana Hacker's *A Writer's Reference*. On the topic of the use of commas in parenthetical expressions, Hacker says, "Expressions that are distinctly parenthetical should be set off with commas. Providing supplemental comments or information, they interrupt the flow of a sentence or appear as afterthoughts." Hacker's chapter on diction or word choice is not so much a chapter as a list of words commonly misused. In comparison, White has a lot to say about diction in his "Approach to Style." He says, for just one example, to avoid "the elaborate, the pretentious, the coy, and the cute." Is not "the coy, and the cute" coy and cute? And is it therefore not only the violation of one of the rules laid out in *The Elements of Style*, but also, and more to the point, far more *interesting* than Hacker's sentence on parenthetical expressions?

In the final chapter of *The Elements of Style*, E. B. White admits to the futility of proposing that literary merit, which he calls "a high mystery," can be achieved by strict adherence to a set of rules. He asks, "Who can confidently say what ignites a certain combination of words, causing them to explode in the mind?" In his introduction to the third edition, White admits that even Will Strunk "was quick to acknowledge the fallacy of inflexibility and the danger of doctrine." Despite these caveats, neither Strunk nor White offers students useful suggestions for cultivating actual literary style, because they mistakenly assume that grammatical and mechanical proficiency is the same as style, which even the book itself proves to be nowhere near the case.

Source: Adrian Blevins, Critical Essay on *The Elements of Style*, in *Nonfiction Classics for Students*, Gale, 2003.

Critical Essay #3

DeFrees has a bachelor's degree in English from the University of Virginia and a law degree from the University of Texas and is a published writer and an editor. In the following essay, DeFrees discusses the practicality of using a timeworn guide to grammar and style in today's literary environment.

William Strunk, a professor at Cornell in the first part of the twentieth century, wrote and self-published a slim volume titled *The Elements of Style*, which was required reading for his students, and no one else. Four decades later, E. B. White, one of Professor Strunk's former students, edited the volume for Macmillan Publishing Company for the general public. Since then, "the little book," as Strunk referred to it, has sold millions of copies, and teachers everywhere rely on it to imbue their students with confidence and precision in writing. The rules of grammar and usage and the advice on style in the book are elemental—applicable to any style of writing, even in the present age, when adherence to form is ignored and even belittled as out of date.

With today's MTV generation bored and facing an embarrassment of choices, and who quake at the sight of a line of thought that runs longer than thirty seconds, it is more important than ever to write concisely, to get to one's point as quickly as possible. But what makes a writer strong and persuasive? Clarity of thought, cleanliness of form, confident statements are elements of good style. And, of course, an understanding of the subject matter is necessary. While the authors of *The Elements of Style* could not guarantee that a writer know his subject, they did provide a guide to remedy the abuses of sloppiness, ambiguity, and lack of confidence. What Strunk published in his textbook in 1918 for White and his other students at Cornell, and what White reiterated by editing and embellishing Strunk's little manual on writing for the general public, remains vital to the task of effective writing.

Strunk and White write for the reader. Their book teaches a writer how to do the same. What else is there, the book seems to assume, except the audience? If the purpose of a written work is to remain hidden from others, then it may well be that ascribing to rules of grammar is moot; but in fact, most people write so that others may read and comprehend. Because we live in a society that survives based on our ability to communicate our feelings and needs through words, languages have naturally evolved. Language developed as human mouths and brains became more complex. Thus, it is entirely natural that rules of usage also evolved through time, as a necessary means of allowing humans to better understand one another. Why, then, should the advent of email and faxes and cellular phone text-messaging obfuscate the need for a baseline set of rules? In each medium, the rules merge, shift, revamp themselves, resurfacing as a more or less complete set of dicta to explain how to communicate—via the Internet, pager, or cellphone. However, these methods of communication are all exceptions; what remain are the rules. And those rules have seldom been more clearly set out than in Strunk and White's 5-ounce text, *The Elements of Style*. Grammatical rules and opinions exist, in abundance, that are not included in this text. But as a tiny whole, *The*

Elements of Style provides a solid background from which any writer can confi- dently begin.

The book does not pretend to be more than it is; it is a manual on writing that one of E. B. White's college professors gave out to students, which White found useful, and which, years later, a publishing company asked White to edit for mass publication. White assented, and added a good bit of his personal luster to the task. In his introduction written for the 1979 edition of the book, White wrote that the textbook as written by Strunk "seemed to me to contain rich deposits of gold." It is one man's "attempt to cut the vast tangle of English rhetoric down to size and write its rules and principles on the head of a pin." That pin was a slim volume of fortythree pages, which remains intact but for the addition of new phrases and words and the updating of a few examples. To the slim volume, White added his valuable essay, "An Approach to Style (With a List of Valuable Reminders)," which he referred to as "a mystery story, thinly disguised." He humbly allows that there is no single referendum on style, that there is "no assurance that a person who thinks clearly will be able to write clearly, no key that unlocks the door, no inflexible rule by which writers may shape their course."

In short, writing is a task that requires an enviable amount of skill. There is little or no time made for editing, and thus, knowing the rules is an ever more practical means of making a strong point. And in White's essay and Strunk's rules, a hopeful writer finds a welcome source of guidance. In the first chapters of the book are "instructions drawn from established English usage"; the chapter on style, rather, "contains advice drawn from a writer's experience of writing."

In the book's language, the audience hears resolve thickening; from the left-hand examples on each page, to those on the right, Strunk proves the power of invigorated texts, trimming the fat of phrases and sentences and fine-tuning them to be read with thoroughbred speed. For example, an anonymous writer penned the following ambiguous sentence: "Young and inexperienced, the task seemed easy to me." To whom do the adjectives "young" and "inexperienced" refer? It is not clear, but Strunk provides clarity with a rewritten sentence that lies adjacent to the unclear one: "Young and inexperienced, I thought the task easy." Likewise, White, in his essay, provides "gentle reminders" about the very personal art of style, providing a gossamer of guidance after the strong hand of Strunk's grammatical whip. "if you doubt that style is something of a mystery, try rewriting a familiar sentence and see what happens." Later in his essay, White states: "[w]rite in a way that comes easily and naturally to you, using words and phrases that come readily to hand. But do not assume that because you have acted naturally your product is without flaw." And toward the end, he writes, "[s]tyle takes its final shape more from attitudes of mind than from principles of composition, for, as an elderly practitioner once remarked, 'writing is an act of faith, not a trick of grammar.'" Through examples and fully argued points, Strunk and White impress upon their readers the vitality of good writing. In one of the book's most famous passages, Strunk writes:

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 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.

Strunk and White make their grammatical arguments vigorously. The authors are on their reader's side. The book is didactic, but also full of cheer, humor, and encouragement. In referring to how to write the date, the text declares that "[t]he last form ("6 April 1988") is an excellent way to write a date; the figures are separated by a word and are, for that reason, quickly grasped." In the section entitled "Principles of Composition," the authors note: "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 perfunc tory expression as *there is or could be heard*." And the ever-clear: "Prefer the specific to the general, the definite to the vague, the concrete to the abstract." The authors are determined to see their readers succeed, and if, for that reason, the tone of the writing is at times stern, the better for the reader. Life at the turn of this new century is pathetically forgiving of faults, doubts, and mistakes. As quickly as one may rise in western society, so may one also fall. To keep one's writing skills sharp decries laziness, and in the hubris of high-speed communication, provides a vital means of staying ahead of the game.

The Elements of Style remains as vital today as when it was first published within the confines of a single university. It has been attacked as out of date, as too brief, as narrow of mind. But critics who argue as much simply miss the point. The book does not profess to be biblical—it is effective because it displays with brevity and sincerity a way to write that is clear and steady, though not the only way. *The Elements of Style* provides a clear and succinct backdrop to English grammar, guiding the reader with verve and wit through the perils of poor punctuation and fatuous thought. In the end, what the reader arrives at is not a finishing point, but a beginning. And that is a gift, not only for those who call themselves writers, but for every man or woman who writes.

Source: Allison DeFrees, Critical Essay on *The Elements of Style*, in *Nonfiction Classics for Students*, Gale, 2003.

Critical Essay #4

In the following essay, Plotnik traces both positive and negative critical response to The Elements of Style *since its initial publication*.

Critical Essay #5

No American writing guide is more revered than the 5-ounce *Strunk & White*, a.k.a. *The Elements of Style* (Allyn & Bacon). "Timeless," "the best book of its kind we have," gush its idolaters. Yet, for all its glory, the tiny-shouldered book is also a magnet for bashers.

It is geriatric. First appearing in 1918, it underwent its fourth resuscitation in 2000. It is small and vulnerable—as pokable as the Pillsbury Doughboy for determined critics. And the coddling it enjoys from the writing establishment makes rebel blood boil. In a 1989 bashing, one alternative-press writer dubbed White "a cranky old man."

Who is correct? For every basher who attacks *Elements* as a meager, authoritarian fossil, a corps of literati hails its grace, concision and moral sense. In a review of the fourth edition, conservative columnist Andrew Ferguson called it "a book about life—about the value of custom, the necessity of roles, the corruptions of vanity, the primacy of good taste."

The controversy, however, erupted long before the latest edition.

Critical Essay #6

In the late 1950s, a war flared between liberal and conservative language authorities. The liberals took a stand against "elitist" notions of "correctness." They argued that actual widespread usage, not prescribed forms, determined the validity of language. This "descriptive" approach to standard English raised the hackles of "prescriptivists," who believed in established roles and a hierarchy of expression.

One such prescriptivist was *New Yorker* writer and master essayist E. B. White. He condemned the descriptivist view of language as an "Anything Goes" school. Encouraged by a publisher, he entered the fray by updating the stem little handbook of William Strunk Jr., his 1919 English professor at Cornell. Strunk had called his privately printed book *The Elements of Style*.

White began the new *Elements* with a paean to Strunk and to the professor's belief in "right and wrong." He added his touch to mundane points of grammar and form, then concluded with "An Approach to Style," a classic of writing advice. Here he showcased his own skills as he warned against excesses that tempt new and youthful writers.

Aside from this essay, the book treats only the most commonly violated fundamentals as the authors saw them: a few dozen issues in grammar and composition and a sampling of usage problems. Some entries support such fading niceties as the distinctions between "shall" and "will." Others simply reflect White's antiquated bugaboos—for example, the sin of using "fix" to mean "mend" in formal English.

Selective and quirky as it may be, *Strunk & White* has succored confused students and forgetful communicators for more than 40 years. As a guide to the "plain English style," the book may yet save America from choking on its jargon and obfuscations. And all writers must take seriously the perceptions of "correctness" in English. Readers sense "correct" and disciplined patterns, whether or not they favor or even understand them. Jarring this sense of order can do two things: It can lose readers by sidetracking them into concerns about wrongness. Or—as *Elements* fails to make clear—it can wake readers up and set them dancing.

Critical Essay #7

Both Strunk and White knew well that bending the rules—judiciously breaking them—can give writing its distinction, its edge, its very style. Bending them can spring writers from ruts, get them out of themselves, out of the ordinary, and into prose that comes alive, gets noticed, gets published.

"I felt uneasy at posing as an expert on rhetoric," White wrote in 1957, "when the truth is I write by ear, always with difficulty and seldom with any exact notion of what is taking place under the hood."

And Strunk himself affirmed that "the best writers sometimes disregard the rules of rhetoric. When they do so, however, the readers will usually find in the sentence some compensating merit, attained at the cost of the violation."

Writing is risk-taking. We bungee-jump from a sentence and pray the cord stops short of catastrophe. We day-trade in language, gambling that a hot image will hold up.

White described expression as "a living stream, shifting, changing, receiving new strength from a thousand tributaries," but advised "there is simply a better chance of doing well if the writer holds a steady course, enters the stream of English quietly, and does not thrash about."

Who, then, draws strength from those tributaries? Whose prose comes alive in the churning waters? Some writers who "thrash about" go under—but others make waves!

White's admonitions may apply in Composition 101, or for those with a riveting story that best tells itself. But what happens when quieted-down expression meets today's rock concert-like din of overloaded and under-stimulated brains?

White wrote in an era when the well-tempered essay found receptive minds, when readers willingly entered into quiet dialogue with an author. But the last few decades have brought New Journalism and rude, in-your-face communications media into the mainstream.

In this sometimes disparaging, sometimes liberating environment, expressiveness calls for breaka- leg performance; it wants aggressiveness, surprise, exuberance, responsiveness, intensity, rebelliousness— most of which White seems to disdain, except in his own prose.

In his essays and three unconventional children's classics, White went his own way as a writer. But in *Elements of Style*, he offered little encouragement for others to do so. Instead, he warned them against the "disinclination to submit to discipline." But how inclined to submission was White?

As a youth, he skimped through Cornell University with "anemic" interests in everything but writing. Shunning his native East Coast, he peddled roach powder in Minneapolis,

reported for the *Seattle Times* and served as messboy aboard a ship cruising the Aleutian Islands before returning East as an advertising copywriter. He called himself disciplined, but he took risks in life and in writing, including the death-defying risk of telling others how to write.

White probably never meant to advise against taking chances, against drawing on all levels of language, against demolishing any rule to get attention.

It just comes out that way.

Source: Arthur Plotnik, "E. B. Whitewashed?," in the *Writer*, Vol. 114, No. 8, August 2001, pp. 10-12.

Topics for Further Study

What do you think Professor Strunk would have to say about the writing that appears in today's newspapers, magazines, and books? Write a short essay, as if you were Strunk, critiquing the general state of written English in the United States today. As Strunk did, be sure to give examples to support your criticisms.

Choose one of Strunk and White's rules or principles with which you disagree. Write a letter to the book's publisher in which you make a case for changing or deleting that rule or principle from the book.

Research the history of *The New Yorker* from its founding to the present. Make a timeline showing the highlights of the magazine's history and the important writers who have worked there or contributed to the magazine.

Read all or part of one of White's books for children. Consider to what extent the style White extols in *The Elements of Style* is reflected in his own work and how this style affects the quality of the work.

Now that you have read *The Elements of Style*, reread a piece of your own writing. Revise the piece according to the dictates of Strunk and White, and then decide whether you think the revision has improved your writing.

Compare and Contrast

1950s: *The New Yorker* is a humorous, cosmopolitan magazine that publishes the work of literary stars, including humorists James Thurber and Ogden Nash and critic Dorothy Parker, known for her sharp wit. The magazine also is famous for its cartoons, contributed by Charles Addams and other well-known artists.

Today: *The New Yorker* still publishes the work of highly respected writers (Calvin Trillin and John McPhee, for example) and cartoonists (Roz Chast and many others).

1950s: Magazines are printed on paper, and consumers buy them at newstands or have them delivered by mail. Several months pass between the time an issue is written and the time it is delivered to readers.

Today: Most magazines that publish paper editions also publish electronic editions on the Internet. Electronic publishing technology means that online editions can be updated constantly, and an article may be written, edited, and read by consumers all in the course of a single day. In addition to traditional magazines, there are thousands of e-zines, magazines that publish only electronic editions. Their quality varies widely, from highly professional journals to newsletters produced by hobbyists.

1950s: The written word is the primary medium for the communication of news and information and is also an important entertainment medium. While television offers a limited number of news programs, most people depend on newspapers for in-depth and local news. While Americans love movies, they also look to books and magazines for humor and other forms of entertainment.

Today: Visual media have overtaken text media in the realms of both news and entertainment. Hundreds of television channels exist, and some provide news coverage twenty-four hours a day. In addition, online news sources provide constantly updated news. Consumers can watch movies and other entertainment at home any time via videocassettes, DVDs, and cable and satellite movie channels, and, increasingly, on the Internet. All in all, Americans read less and watch more than they did in the past.

What Do I Read Next?

Writings from "The New Yorker," 1925-1976 (1990), edited by Rebecca M. Dale, is a collection of some of White's contributions to the magazine.

Gary Hoffman and Glynis Hoffman, authors of *Adiós, Strunk and White: A Handbook for the New Academic Essay* (1999), urge young writers to say goodbye to traditional grammar, organization, and objectivity. Their book provides a stark contrast to the style taught by Strunk and White.

The *New York Public Library Writer's Guide to Style and Usage* (1994), edited by Andrea Sutcliffe, is as comprehensive (at 838 pages) as *The Elements of Style* is brief. It delves into issues such as special characters used in foreign languages and gender bias in language.

On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft (2000), by best-selling author Stephen King, is part autobiography and part writing textbook. King covers everything from paragraphs to plotting and even gives writing assignments. He recommends *The Elements of Style* to his readers.

Charlotte's Web (1952), a moving story of friendship, is White's most famous and enduring children's book.

Further Study

Elledge, Scott, E. B. White: A Biography, Norton, 1984.

This comprehensive biography by a Cornell University English professor covers White's personal and professional life.

Gill, Brendan, *Here at "The New Yorker,"* Random House, 1975.

Brendan Gill was a staff writer at *The New Yorker* for more than forty years. His book provides an inside glimpse of life at the magazine and the famous writers and editors who worked there, including White.

McQuade, Donald, and Robert Atwan, eds., *Popular Writing in America: The Interaction of Style and Audience*, 5th ed., Oxford University Press, 1995.

This lengthy anthology explores style in every form of writing from advertising and newspapers to classic books. In addition to written examples, it includes numerous essays by authors as diverse as White, Frederick Douglass, Maxine Hong Kingston, and Annie Dillard.

Olmstead, Robert, *Elements of the Writing Craft*, Story Press, 1997.

Novelist and short story writer Robert Olmstead provides more than 150 focused writing lessons, each beginning with a sample from an accomplished writer that illustrates the technique. Olmstead then analyzes the sample and suggests exercises aspiring writers can do in order to practice the technique.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Nonfiction Classics for Students (NCfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, NCfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on

□classic□ novels frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of NCfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of NCfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in NCfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by NCfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

NCfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Nonfiction Classics for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NCfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NCfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Nonfiction Classics for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Nonfiction Classics for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from NCfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Nonfiction Classics for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from NCfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Nonfiction Classics for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of NCfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Nonfiction Classics for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of NCfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Nonfiction Classics for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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