An old friend and a new old friend

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[Did you miss me? I had a one-fall wrestling match with cancer, and I won. So, I’m back to harass you and improve your writing.]

When I travel to give a short-course on technical writing, I use the flight as my last stage of preparation and get into the mood for teaching. I visit a valued, old friend: my dog-eared copy of George Gopen and Judith Swan’s 1990 article, “The Science of Scientific Writing” (American Scientist). I’ve said it before: This article is superlative. It sets a mental pattern for creating readable writing. Where other articles struggle with do-this and do-that’s, Gopen and Swan teach by grounding good writing in how people read and understand. If you want your papers read and understood, Gopen and Swan say, take our facts and weave them into your writing style. They don’t try to reduce technical writing to a paint-by-number exercise. Successful writing is not that simple. Instead, Gopen and Swan stress that successful writers know their readers. So here’s the profile on readers. Readers don’t like unnecessary complexity. Poor writers believe complex copy is part and parcel of a complex topic. Instead, it is an added layer weighing down a paper when the writer fails to address how readers read. My old friend shows that to ease this burden, writers should:

• Place the action of a sentence in the verb and the purveyor of the action in the subject.
• Place the verb as close to the subject as possible.
• Do not place information randomly, but with old information preceding new information.

Gopen and Swan is my comfortable place. Recently, my flight was delayed. I finished Gopen and Swan before getting on the plane. I needed something else to maintain good thoughts before facing outdated and outdated technical writing paradigms (in short courses, students always have strong opinions about writing; it’s interesting how many lead to unreadable writing and how staunchly they cling to their opinions). Students always ask for recommended texts, and I always bring along some show-and-tell books. Recently I augmented my collection with the 4th edition of William Strunk Jr. and E. B. White’s text, The Elements of Style (Longman Publishers). Although I have always carried Strunk and White, I must admit, I have paged it, but really not read much of it. I tell students it’s the classic—everything I read in preparing my course called it that, so I joined the bandwagon and wave of a complex topic. Instead, it is an added layer weighing down a paper when the writer fails to address how readers read. My old friend shows that to ease this burden, writers should:

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What makes Strunk and White so refreshing and useful is that after each precept they give useful examples—examples that make sense.

Unlike standard textbooks on technical writing that go on and on, Strunk and White is short on words and long on meaning. You can page it quickly; pick up the sense, without excess detail; and, for a long time, dwell on the implications. It’s really great for experienced writers looking for quick refreshment or, like me, needing a push to get in the mood. Consider that Strunk and White is nearly 100 years old, has been through only four editions, and is still considered by many a cornerstone of writing. How many texts can make such a boast? It must have something. The Elements of Style has cracked through to the foundation of writing and tells the story writers, including technical writers, need to hear.

In my opinion, this little book is a good complement to Gopen and Swan. Where the latter illuminates reading to the writer, the former illuminates writing to the writer. Gopen and Swan is my old friend. Strunk and White is my new old friend. Scanning and spot reading it is now part of my precourse ritual. Perhaps it could become your new old friend, too. 

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