

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 superb; 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 I needed something else to maintain good thoughts before facing outdated and outmoded technical writing paradigms (in short courses, students always have strong opinions about writing; it's interesting how many lead to unreadable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 it before the class! Having extra time, I figured I'd become a legitimate fan and give it a thorough look through. What a wonderful surprise! It is both classic and contemporary! It does not suffer from arthritis, considering it's nearly 100 years old, but it has the wisdom of a sage and seer.

Strunk and White was originally just Strunk. Actually, it was the class notes that William Strunk (1869-1946), a professor of English at Cornell, self-published for his students. It was positively accepted by his students and on campus, and it became known as simply, "the little book" with the stress on little. Elwyn Brooks White (1899-1985), a leading American essayist/writer from satire to children's fiction, took Strunk's

course in 1919. White says he forgot the book, but not the professor until the publisher, MacMillan, commissioned him to revise the book for the college market and the general trade. Explains White in the introduction to the 1979 edition, "*The Elements of Style*, when I reexamined it in 1957, seemed to me to contain rich deposits of gold. It was Will Strunk's parvum opus, 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. ... In its original form, it was a 43-page summation of the case for cleanliness, accuracy, and brevity in the use of English. Today, 52 years later, its vigor is unimpaired ... Somewhat audaciously, and in an attempt to give my publisher his money's worth, I added a chapter called 'An Approach to Style,' setting forth my own prejudices, my notions of error, my articles of faith."

Strunk and White is not limited to essayists and writers of literature, etc.; it is just as applicable for technical writing. It is a book for all writers in English. A balance to Gopen and Swan, Strunk and White deals with writers. It is really two books in one. It is Strunk's rules of grammar phrased, in White's words, "as direct orders," and it is White's approach to style.

Strunk's section is straight forward: 11 rules of usage and 11 rules of composition. White affectionately says that Strunk barks out these rules like a sergeant "snapping orders to his platoon." Strunk is quick and clean. Rule 12: Choose a suitable design and hold to it. Rule 14: Use the active voice. Rule 16: Use definite, specific, concrete language. Rule 22: Place the emphatic works of a sentence at the end. Good stuff, this! White's style is similar.

In his section, White offers 21 "Reminders" in the same, Strunkian, no-nonsense tone. Reminder 2: Write in a way that comes naturally. Reminder 4: Write with nouns and verbs. Reminder 12: Do not construct awkward adverbs. Reminder 16: Be clear.

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. **TJE**