

THE ELEMENTS OF STYLE



illustrated

the ELEMENTS *of* STYLE

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FOREWORD by Roger Angell	viii
INTRODUCTION to the 3 rd edition by E. B. White	xii

I. ELEMENTARY RULES OF USAGE	1
1. Form the possessive singular of nouns by adding 's.	1
2. In a series of three or more terms with a single conjunction, use a comma after each term except the last.	3
3. Enclose parenthetic expressions between commas.	3
4. Place a comma before a conjunction introducing an independent clause.	11
5. Do not join independent clauses with a comma.	11
6. Do not break sentences in two.	12
7. Use a colon after an independent clause to introduce a list of particulars, an appositive, an amplification, or an illustrative quotation.	15
8. Use a dash to set off an abrupt break or interruption and to announce a long appositive or summary.	16
9. The number of the subject determines the number the verb.	18
10. Use the proper case of pronoun.	21
11. A participial phrase at the beginning of a sentence must refer to the grammatical subject.	24

II. ELEMENTARY PRINCIPLES OF COMPOSITION

12. Choose a suitable design and hold to it. 31
13. Make the paragraph the unit of composition. 31
14. Use the active voice. 31
15. Put statements in positive form. 31
16. Use definite, specific, concrete language. 31
17. Omit needless words. 31
18. Avoid a succession of loose sentences. 31
19. Express coordinate ideas in similar form. 31
20. Keep related words together. 31
21. In summaries, keep to one tense. 31
22. Place the emphatic words of a sentence at the end. 31

III. A FEW MATTERS OF FORM 55

IV. WORDS AND EXPRESSIONS COMMONLY MISUSED 63

V. AN APPROACH TO STYLE (with a List of Reminders) 97

1. Place yourself in the background. 100
2. Write in a way that comes naturally. 101
3. Work from a suitable design. 101
4. Write with nouns and verbs. 105
5. Revise and rewrite. 105
6. Do not overwrite. 105
7. Do not overstate. 106
8. Avoid the use of qualifiers. 106
9. Do not affect a breezy manner. 106
10. Use orthodox spelling. 108
11. Do not explain too much. 109

12. Do not construct awkward adverbs.	109
13. Make sure the reader knows who is speaking.	111
14. Avoid fancy words.	111
15. Do not use dialect unless your ear is good.	113
16. Be clear.	113
17. Do not inject opinion.	114
18. Use figures of speech sparingly.	115
19. Do not take shortcuts at the cost of clarity.	115
20. Avoid foreign languages.	115
21. Prefer the standard to the offbeat.	115

VI. SPELLING (from the first edition)	122
---	-----

GLOSSARY	125
----------------	-----

INDEX	134
-------------	-----

BACKWORD	147
----------------	-----

COPYRIGHT PAGE	153
----------------------	-----

2. In a series of three or more terms with a single conjunction, use a comma after each term except the last.

Thus write,

red, white, and blue

gold, silver, or copper

He opened the letter, read it, and made a note of its contents.

This comma is often referred to as the "serial" comma.

In the names of business firms the last comma is usually omitted. Follow the usage of the individual firm.

Little, Brown and Company

Donaldson, Lufkin & Jenrette

3. Enclose parenthetical expressions between commas.

The best way to see a country, unless you are pressed for time, is to travel on foot.

This rule is difficult to apply; it is frequently hard to decide whether a single word, such as *however*, or a brief phrase is or is not parenthetical. If the interruption to the flow of the sentence is but slight, the writer may safely omit the commas. But whether the interruption is slight or considerable, never omit one comma and leave the other. There is no defense for such punctuation as

Marjorie's husband, Colonel Nelson paid us a visit yesterday.

or

My brother you will be pleased to hear, is now in perfect health.

Dates usually contain parenthetical words or figures. Punctuate as follows:

February to July, 1992

April 6, 1986

Wednesday, November 14, 1990

Note that it is customary to omit the comma in

6 April 1988

The last form is an excellent way to write a date; the figures are separated by a word and are, for that reason, quickly grasped.

A name or a title in direct address is parenthetic.

If, Sir, you refuse, I cannot predict what will happen.

Well, Susan, this is a fine mess you are in.

The abbreviations *etc.*, *i.e.*, and *e.g.*, the abbreviations for academic degrees, and titles that follow a name are parenthetic and should be punctuated accordingly.

Letters, packages, etc., should go here.

Horace Fulsome, Ph.D., presided.

Rachel Simonds, Attorney

The Reverend Harry Lang, S.J.

No comma, however, should separate a noun from a restrictive term of identification.

Billy the Kid

The novelist Jane Austen

William the Conqueror

The poet Sappho

Although *Junior*, with its abbreviation *Jr.*, has commonly been regarded as parenthetic, logic suggests that it is, in fact, restrictive and therefore not in need of a comma.

James Wright Jr.

Nonrestrictive relative clauses are parenthetic, as are similar clauses introduced by conjunctions indicating time or place. Commas are therefore needed. A nonrestrictive clause is one that does not serve to identify or define the antecedent noun.

The audience, which had at first been indifferent, became more and more interested.

In 1769, when Napoleon was born, Corsica had but recently been acquired by France.

Nether Stowey, where Coleridge wrote *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, is a few miles from Bridgewater.

In these sentences, the clauses introduced by *which*, *when*, and *where* are nonrestrictive; they do not limit or define, they merely add something. In the first example, the clause introduced by *which* does not serve to tell which of several possible audiences is meant; the reader presumably knows that already. The clause adds, parenthetically, a statement supplementing that in the main clause. Each of the three sentences is a combination of two statements that might have been made independently.

The audience was at first indifferent. Later it became more and more interested.

Napoleon was born in 1769. At that time Corsica had but recently been acquired by France.

Coleridge wrote *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* at Nether Stowey. Nether Stowey is a few miles from Bridgewater.

Restrictive clauses, by contrast, are not parenthetic and are not set off by commas. Thus,

People who live in glass houses shouldn't throw stones.

Here the clause introduced by *who* does serve to tell which people are meant; the sentence, unlike the sentences above, cannot be split into two independent statements. The same principle of comma use applies to participial phrases and to appositives.

People sitting in the rear couldn't hear. (*restrictive*)

Uncle Bert, being slightly deaf, moved forward. (*nonrestrictive*)

My cousin Bob is a talented harpist. (*restrictive*)

Our oldest daughter, Mary, sings. (*nonrestrictive*)

When the main clause of a sentence is preceded by a phrase or a subordinate clause, use a comma to set off these elements.

Partly by hard fighting, partly by diplomatic skill, they enlarged their dominions to the east and rose to royal rank with the possession of Sicily.

but the construction should be avoided unless the writer wishes to place unusual stress on the adverb.

to diligently inquire

to inquire diligently

For another side to the split infinitive, see Chapter V, Reminder 14.

State. Not to be used as a mere substitute for *say*, *remark*. Restrict it to the sense of "express fully or clearly": "He refused to state his objections."

Student body. Nine times out of ten a needless and awkward expression, meaning no more than the simple word *students*.

a member of the student
body

a student

popular with the student
body

liked by the students

Than. Any sentence with *than* (to express comparison) should be examined to make sure no essential words are missing.

I'm probably closer to my
mother than my father.
(Ambiguous.)

I'm probably closer to my
mother than to my father.

I'm probably closer to my
mother than my father is.

It looked more like a cor-
morant than a heron.

It looked more like a cor-
morant than like a heron.

Thanking you in advance. This sounds as if the writer meant, "It will not be worth my while to write to you again." In making your request, write "Will you please," or "I shall be obliged." Then, later, if you feel moved to do so, or if the circumstances call for it, write a letter of acknowledgment.

That. Which. *That* is the defining, or restrictive pronoun, *which* the nondefining, or nonrestrictive. (See Rule 3.)

The lawn mower that is broken is in the garage. (Tells which one.)



It looked more like a cormorant than like a heron.

The lawn mower, which is broken, is in the garage. (Adds a fact about the only mower in question.)

The use of *which* for *that* is common in written and spoken language ("Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass."). Occasionally *which* seems preferable to *that*, as in the sentence from the Bible. But it would be a convenience to all if these two pronouns were used with precision. Careful writers, watchful for small conveniences, go *which*-hunting, remove the defining *whiches*, and by so doing improve their work.

The foreseeable future. A cliché, and a fuzzy one. How much of the future is foreseeable? Ten minutes? Ten years? Any of it? By whom is it foreseeable? Seers? Experts? Everybody?

The truth is.... The fact is.... A bad beginning for a sentence. If you feel you are possessed of the truth, or of the fact, simply state it. Do not give it advance billing.