

# Writing Skills

Writing comes more easily if you have something to say.

*Sholem Asch*

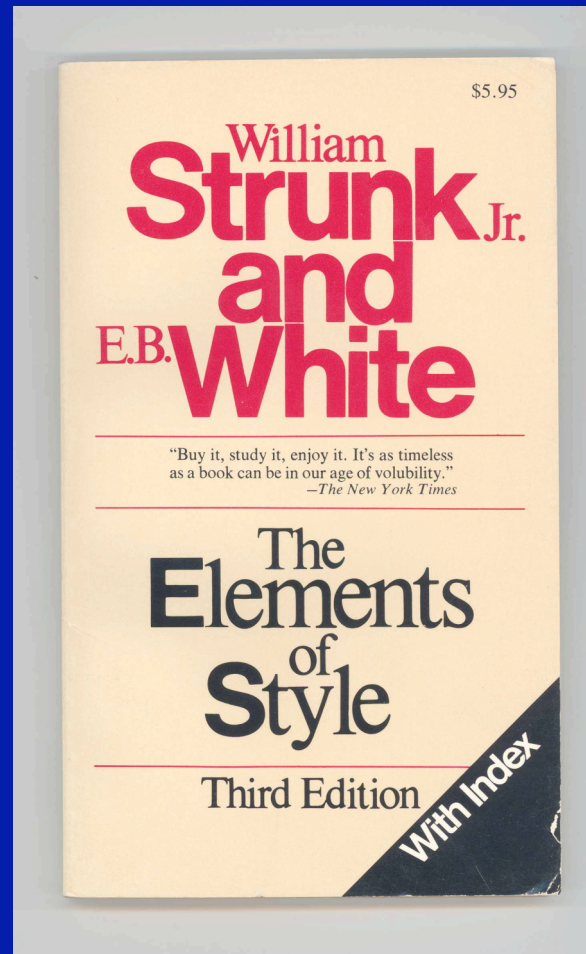
The most valuable of all talents is that of never using two words when one will do.

*Thomas Jefferson*

# Resources

- Get a good book, such as Strunk and White, The Elements of Style.
- Make an appointment at the Writing Resource Center, Bear Down Building, east side, Room 102. 9 AM-4 PM Monday-Friday
- Practice. Practice. Practice.

# A Classic Reference



# Common Mistakes

- **Disorganization.** Make an outline. Make conscious decisions about the ordering of your main points.
- **Random Thoughts.** Group closely related ideas, and only closely related ideas, into paragraphs. Make sure each paragraph has a topic sentence.
- **Repetitiveness.** Say things only once.
- **Useless Sentences.** Make sure each sentence adds something essential to your essay.

# More Common Mistakes

- **Incorrect Prepositions.** From, in, to, by, with and of have different meanings. Use the correct preposition.
- **Incorrect Verbs.** The tense and number of the verb must agree with the subject.
- **Non-words.** Keep a dictionary by you when you write. If you have doubts about a word, look it up. Do not use nouns as verbs.

# General Advice for Style

- Do not be folksy or colloquial.
- Do not be personal.
- Delete all superfluous modifiers.
- Brevity and simplicity are virtues.
- Always be as specific as possible.
- Stay on your topic. Do not wander off on tangential issues.
- Use the active voice whenever possible.

# Incorrect Prepositions

- **Bad Example:** “The black hole *from* the center of the galaxy accounts for a lot of mass.”
- **Correct Usage:** “The black hole *at* the center of the galaxy accounts for a lot of mass.”
- **Bad Example:** “The problem is illustrated *with* the fate of rhesus monkey number 6.”
- **Correct Usage:** “The problem is illustrated *by* the fate of rhesus monkey number 6.”

# Incorrect Verbs

**Bad Example:** “The study of cosmology are concerned with the distribution of galaxies.”

**Correct Usage:** “The study of cosmology is concerned with the distribution of galaxies.”

**Bad Example:** “Superstring theory is fascinating. It provided a theory for all the forces in the Universe.”

**Correct Usage:** “Superstring theory is fascinating. It provides a theory for all the forces in the Universe.”



# On Being Folksy – Don't be.

**Bad Example:** “Sure enough, the Space Shuttle blew into a billion tiny bits.”

**Better:** “The Space Shuttle blew into a billion pieces.”

**Bad Example:** “This theory seems to be kind of incorrect.”

**Better:** “This theory is incorrect.”

# On Being Personal

**Bad example:** “I feel like black holes are really cool.”

**Good example:** “It is not easy for me to pass these people without being concerned; they look so fragile and helpless, even though they always make an effort to look strong. Or, maybe they are strong, in a way that we cannot be aware of; after all, it is no easy task to live without your arms or legs....”

# Superfluous Modifiers

- **Bad Example:** “Greenhouse gases are potentially dangerous.”
- **Correct Usage:** “Greenhouse gases are dangerous.”
- **Bad Example:** “Globular clusters are a very important element of galactic structure.”
- **Correct Usage:** “Globular clusters are an important element of galactic structure.”

# Use Active Voice

## Avoid over use of the verb “to be.”

**Bad Example:** “The walls were covered with Geckos.”

**Better:** “Geckos covered the walls.”

**Bad Example:** “The reason that he dropped the course was because of poor grades.”

**Better:** “His bad grades compelled him to drop the course.”

**Bad Example:** “Several investigations that have been carried out show that dolphins will someday rule the world.”

**Better:** “Several investigations find that dolphins will someday rule the world.”

# Needless Words – Delete them.

**Bad Example:** “Owing to the fact that the sun is hot, it glows brightly.”

**Better:** “The sun glows brightly because it is hot.”

**Bad Example:** “The question as to whether she is correct, will be proved by observations.”

**Better:** “Whether she is correct will be proved by observations.”

Note: You do not have to write “Whether or not” in the sentence above.

# General Advice for Architecture

- If your argument is not clear in your head, it will not be clear on paper.
- Use the paragraph as the fundamental unit of composition.
- Decide on the order of your main points and the content of the paragraphs needed to make these points.
- Write a topic sentence for each paragraph.
- Put only necessary information in each paragraph.

# General Blunders and Other Stuff

The word “it’s” is not the possessive form of it, but is a contraction of it is.

Do not start your essay with a sentence like “This article was about the genetic modification of goats.” Or worse, “I decided to write about this subject because polar bears are adorable.”

Spell out contractions in formal documents.

# References

- You need at least 2 (see Essay description).
- The references should be fully cited at the end of the essay (Title, author, date of publication, page numbers or URL).
- Include a reference to your source directly in the text if using data, ideas or a quote that comes directly from the source.
  - There are 200 million automobiles in the USA (1).
  - According to Dr. Griffith, Titan's clouds are made of methane (2).



# Reference Examples

1. Actions form Thoughts, M. A. L. Nicoletis, *Nature*, vol 409, pp 403-407, January 18, 2001.
2. Controlling Robots with the Mind, M. A. P. Nicoletis and J. K. Chapin, *Scientific American*,  
<[http://www.sciam.com/feature\\_directory.cfm](http://www.sciam.com/feature_directory.cfm)>