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50 Years of Stupid Grammar Advice

By Geoffrey K. Pullum

April 16 is the 50th anniversary of the publication of a little book that is loved and admired throughout American academe.

Celebrations, readings, and toasts are being held, and a commemorative edition has been released.

I won't be celebrating.

The *Elements of Style* does not deserve the enormous esteem in which it is held by American college graduates. Its advice ranges from limp platitudes to inconsistent nonsense. Its enormous influence has not improved American students' grasp of English grammar; it has significantly degraded it.

The authors won't be hurt by these critical remarks. They are long dead. William Strunk was a professor of English at Cornell about a hundred years ago, and E.B. White, later the much-admired author of *Charlotte's Web*, took English with him in 1919, purchasing as a required text the first edition, which Strunk had published privately. After Strunk's death, White published a *New Yorker* article reminiscing about him and was asked by Macmillan to revise and expand *Elements* for commercial publication. It took off like a rocket (in 1959) and has sold millions.

This was most unfortunate for the field of English grammar, because both authors were grammatical incompetents. Strunk had very little analytical understanding of syntax, White even less. Certainly White was a fine writer, but he was not qualified as a grammarian. Despite the post-1957 explosion of theoretical linguistics, *Elements* settled in as the primary vehicle through which grammar was taught to college students and presented to the general public, and the subject was stuck in the doldrums for the rest of the 20th century.

Notice what I am objecting to is not the style advice in *Elements*, which might best be described the way *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* describes Earth: mostly harmless. Some of the

recommendations are vapid, like "Be clear" (how could one disagree?). Some are tautologous, like "Do not explain too much." (Explaining too much means explaining more than you should, so of course you shouldn't.) Many are useless, like "Omit needless words." (The students who know which words are needless don't need the instruction.) Even so, it doesn't hurt to lay such well-meant maxims before novice writers.

Even the truly silly advice, like "Do not inject opinion," doesn't really do harm. (No force on earth can prevent undergraduates from injecting opinion. And anyway, sometimes that is just what we want from them.) But despite the "Style" in the title, much in the book relates to grammar, and the advice on that topic does real damage. It is atrocious. Since today it provides just about all of the grammar instruction most Americans ever get, that is something of a tragedy. Following the platitudinous style recommendations of Elements would make your writing better if you knew how to follow them, but that is not true of the grammar stipulations.

"Use the active voice" is a typical section head. And the section in question opens with an attempt to discredit passive clauses that is either grammatically misguided or disingenuous.

We are told that the active clause "I will always remember my first trip to Boston" sounds much better than the corresponding passive "My first visit to Boston will always be remembered by me." It sure does. But that's because a passive is always a stylistic train wreck when the subject refers to something newer and less established in the discourse than the agent (the noun phrase that follows "by").

For me to report that I paid my bill by saying "The bill was paid by me," with no stress on "me," would sound inane. (I'm the utterer, and the utterer always counts as familiar and well established in the discourse.) But that is no argument against passives generally. "The bill was paid by an anonymous benefactor" sounds perfectly natural. Strunk and White are denigrating the passive by presenting an invented example of it deliberately designed to sound inept.

After this unpromising start, there is some fairly sensible style advice: The authors explicitly say they do not mean "that the writer should entirely discard the passive voice," which is "frequently convenient and sometimes necessary." They give good examples

to show that the choice between active and passive may depend on the topic under discussion.

Sadly, writing tutors tend to ignore this moderation, and simply red-circle everything that looks like a passive, just as Microsoft Word's grammar checker underlines every passive in wavy green to signal that you should try to get rid of it. That overinterpretation is part of the damage that Strunk and White have unintentionally done. But it is not what I am most concerned about here.

What concerns me is that the bias against the passive is being retailed by a pair of authors so grammatically clueless that they don't know what is a passive construction and what isn't. Of the four pairs of examples offered to show readers what to avoid and how to correct it, a staggering three out of the four are mistaken diagnoses. "At dawn the crowing of a rooster could be heard" is correctly identified as a passive clause, but the other three are all errors:

- "There were a great number of dead leaves lying on the ground" has no sign of the passive in it anywhere.
- "It was not long before she was very sorry that she had said what she had" also contains nothing that is even reminiscent of the passive construction.
- "The reason that he left college was that his health became impaired" is presumably fingered as passive because of "impaired," but that's a mistake. It's an adjective here. "Become" doesn't allow a following passive clause. (Notice, for example, that "A new edition became issued by the publishers" is not grammatical.)

These examples can be found all over the Web in study guides for freshman composition classes. (Try a Google search on "great number of dead leaves lying.") I have been told several times, by both students and linguistics-faculty members, about writing instructors who think every occurrence of "be" is to be condemned for being "passive." No wonder, if Elements is their grammar bible. It is typical for college graduates today to be unable to distinguish active from passive clauses. They often equate the grammatical notion of being passive with the semantic one of not specifying the agent of an action. (They think "a bus exploded" is passive because it doesn't say whether terrorists did it.)

The treatment of the passive is not an isolated slip. It is typical of Elements. The book's toxic mix of purism, atavism, and personal eccentricity is not underpinned by a proper grounding in English grammar. It is often so misguided that the authors appear not to notice their own egregious flouting of its own rules. They can't help it, because they don't know how to identify what they condemn.

"Put statements in positive form," they stipulate, in a section that seeks to prevent "not" from being used as "a means of evasion."

"Write with nouns and verbs, not with adjectives and adverbs," they insist. (The motivation of this mysterious decree remains unclear to me.)

And then, in the very next sentence, comes a negative passive clause containing three adjectives: "The adjective hasn't been built that can pull a weak or inaccurate noun out of a tight place."

That's actually not just three strikes, it's four, because in addition to contravening "positive form" and "active voice" and "nouns and verbs," it has a relative clause ("that can pull") removed from what it belongs with (the adjective), which violates another edict: "Keep related words together."

"Keep related words together" is further explained in these terms: "The subject of a sentence and the principal verb should not, as a rule, be separated by a phrase or clause that can be transferred to the beginning." That is a negative passive, containing an adjective, with the subject separated from the principal verb by a phrase ("as a rule") that could easily have been transferred to the beginning. Another quadruple violation.

The book's contempt for its own grammatical dictates seems almost willful, as if the authors were flaunting the fact that the rules don't apply to them. But I don't think they are. Given the evidence that they can't even tell actives from passives, my guess would be that it is sheer ignorance. They know a few terms, like "subject" and "verb" and "phrase," but they do not control them well enough to monitor and analyze the structure of what they write.

There is of course nothing wrong with writing passives and negatives and adjectives and adverbs. I'm not nitpicking the authors' writing style. White, in particular, often wrote beautifully,

and his old professor would have been proud of him. What's wrong is that the grammatical advice proffered in *Elements* is so misplaced and inaccurate that counterexamples often show up in the authors' own prose on the very same page.

Some of the claims about syntax are plainly false despite being respected by the authors. For example, Chapter IV, in an unnecessary piece of bossiness, says that the split infinitive "should be avoided unless the writer wishes to place unusual stress on the adverb." The bossiness is unnecessary because the split infinitive has always been grammatical and does not need to be avoided. (The authors actually knew that. Strunk's original version never even mentioned split infinitives. White added both the above remark and the further reference, in Chapter V, admitting that "some infinitives seem to improve on being split.") But what interests me here is the descriptive claim about stress on the adverb. It is completely wrong.

Tucking the adverb in before the verb actually de-emphasizes the adverb, so a sentence like "The dean's statements tend to completely polarize the faculty" places the stress on polarizing the faculty. The way to stress the completeness of the polarization would be to write, "The dean's statements tend to polarize the faculty completely."

This is actually implied by an earlier section of the book headed "Place the emphatic words of a sentence at the end," yet White still gets it wrong. He feels there are circumstances where the split infinitive is not quite right, but he is simply not competent to spell out his intuition correctly in grammatical terms.

An entirely separate kind of grammatical inaccuracy in *Elements* is the mismatch with readily available evidence. Simple experiments (which students could perform for themselves using downloaded classic texts from sources like <http://gutenberg.org>) show that Strunk and White preferred to base their grammar claims on intuition and prejudice rather than established literary usage.

Consider the explicit instruction: "With none, use the singular verb when the word means 'no one' or 'not one.'" Is this a rule to be trusted? Let's investigate.

- Try searching the script of Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895) for "none of us." There is one example of it as a subject: "None of us are perfect" (spoken by the learned Dr.

Chasuble). It has plural agreement.

- Download and search Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897). It contains no cases of "none of us" with singular-inflected verbs, but one that takes the plural ("I think that none of us were surprised when we were asked to see Mrs. Harker a little before the time of sunset").
- Examine the text of Lucy Maud Montgomery's popular novel *Anne of Avonlea* (1909). There are no singular examples, but one with the plural ("None of us ever do").

It seems to me that the stipulation in *Elements* is totally at variance not just with modern conversational English but also with literary usage back when Strunk was teaching and White was a boy.

Is the intelligent student supposed to believe that Stoker, Wilde, and Montgomery didn't know how to write? Did Strunk or White check even a single book to see what the evidence suggested? Did they have any evidence at all for the claim that the cases with plural agreement are errors? I don't think so.

There are many other cases of Strunk and White's being in conflict with readily verifiable facts about English. Consider the claim that a sentence should not begin with "however" in its connective adverb sense ("when the meaning is 'nevertheless'").

Searching for "however" at the beginnings of sentences and "however" elsewhere reveals that good authors alternate between placing the adverb first and placing it after the subject. The ratios vary. Mark Liberman, of the University of Pennsylvania, checked half a dozen of Mark Twain's books and found roughly seven instances of "however" at the beginning of a sentence for each three placed after the subject, whereas in five selected books by Henry James, the ratio was one to 15. In *Dracula* I found a ratio of about one to five. The evidence cannot possibly support a claim that "however" at the beginning of a sentence should be eschewed. Strunk and White are just wrong about the facts of English syntax.

The copy editor's old bugaboo about not using "which" to introduce a restrictive relative clause is also an instance of failure to look at the evidence. *Elements* as revised by White endorses that rule. But 19th-century authors whose prose was never forced

through a 20th-century prescriptive copy-editing mill generally alternated between "which" and "that." (There seems to be a subtle distinction in meaning related to whether new information is being introduced.) There was never a period in the history of English when "which" at the beginning of a restrictive relative clause was an error.

In fact, as Jan Freeman, of *The Boston Globe*, noted (in her blog, *The Word*), Strunk himself used "which" in restrictive relative clauses. White not only added the anti-"which" rule to the book but also revised away the counterexamples that were present in his old professor's original text!

It's sad. Several generations of college students learned their grammar from the uninformed bossiness of Strunk and White, and the result is a nation of educated people who know they feel vaguely anxious and insecure whenever they write "however" or "than me" or "was" or "which," but can't tell you why. The land of the free in the grip of *The Elements of Style*.

So I won't be spending the month of April toasting 50 years of the overopinionated and underinformed little book that put so many people in this unhappy state of grammatical angst. I've spent too much of my scholarly life studying English grammar in a serious way. English syntax is a deep and interesting subject. It is much too important to be reduced to a bunch of trivial don't-do-this prescriptions by a pair of idiosyncratic bumbler who can't even tell when they've broken their own misbegotten rules.

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