



## Braving The Elements

by Alistair Reeves

**“There were a great number of dead leaves lying on the ground” is not a passive construction except in Strunk and White’s *The Elements of Style***

*The Elements of Style* is the American Bible of grammar. April 2009 saw the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the book’s publication accompanied by much celebration. However, Geoffrey K. Pullum, who is head of linguistics and English language at the University of Edinburgh, saw no cause for celebration. In an article, which is ‘a must’ read for anyone interested in grammar or who views grammarians as shrinking violets, he slates the book for giving stupid advice [1]. For him it answers that mystery of why Americans have not been able to master English grammar. The book provides just about all the instruction American students receive on grammar but its authors Strunk and his pupil White were not qualified grammarians with the result that “The book’s toxic mix of purism, atavism, and personal eccentricity is not underpinned by a proper grounding in English grammar.”

An example of their personal eccentricity is the advice that a sentence should not begin with ‘however’ used in the sense of ‘nevertheless’. There is no research to back up this advice. Indeed searches have found that good authors use the word in varying ratios at the beginning of the sentence and after the subject [Mark Twain (7:3), Henry James (1:15)]. Another example is the advice not to use ‘which’ to introduce a restrictive clause. Either ‘which’ or ‘that’ can be used and there has never been a rule to the contrary.

Pullum also gives several examples of mistakes in the book and of where the authors contravene their own advice. In particular he tackles the advice to avoid using the passive. “What concerns me” he writes “is that the bias against the passive is retailed by a pair of authors so grammatically clueless that they don’t know what is a passive construction and what isn’t”. Pullum analyses three examples given in the book, including the ‘dead leaves’ example above, and shows that they are not passive constructions. Worse still, even though Strunk and White state that writers should not totally discard the passive language, tutors and Microsoft Word’s grammar checker tend to overlook this modification insisting on a blanket prohibition against passive sentences.

The expert’s conclusion is that “English syntax... 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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#### Reference:

1. Pullum GK. 50 years of stupid grammar advice. *Chronicle of Higher Education*, *The Chronicle Review* 2009;55(32):B15. Available at: <http://chronicle.com/free/v55/i32/32b01501.htm>

Strong words indeed from Geoffrey Pullum. What a good read his article is! I can only recommend it.

I, too, have sometimes found myself uttering the word ‘stupid’ to myself when consulting *The Elements of Style*, but because I am not a respected professor of linguistics with many published works on grammar, I have never dared to criticise it in so swingeing a way. I agree with most of his criticisms—and have some more—but unlike him, never felt that the ‘rules’ and principles were quite so pernicious.

### *I have never regarded it as a key resource*

I also think that a good deal of the advice is useful to novices, as long as they are aware that much more comprehensive style guides are available, some specifically written for the life-science and medical fields. I have therefore never regarded it as a key resource.

*The Elements of Style* is not a grammar book, and if I wish to clarify a point of English grammar, I prefer to consult such a reference work, of which there are plenty (see box). I suspect that the astonishing success of the book has been due to factors largely independent of its content: it obviously filled a niche, offered the security of ‘rules’, and bears the name of an eminent author, EB White. It is short, small and cheap, was probably marketed very well—and still is evidently being marketed well, what with a ‘special’ anniversary edition and 50-year anniversary celebrations—and was probably placed on the compulsory readings lists of schools, colleges, universities and other institutions throughout the USA. Some of its contents have obviously slipped into other style guides, because they say exactly the same. Because of this, the “real damage” (G Pullum) of some of the misinformed advice it gives on grammar has been silently propagated for two generations, and not only in the USA.

### *Some students have ‘never had a grammar lesson in their life’*

I suspect that in all English-speaking countries, the USA included, grammar teaching in schools has reached an all-time low. I am often told by students (many of them PhD scientists), especially from the United Kingdom, that they ‘never had a grammar lesson in their life’ and find I have to explain the simplest concepts to them (even what the subject of a sentence is) before I can even start talking about how to improve their writing.

When training writers, I am often confronted with the lingering myths engendered by the *The Elements of Style*,

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even though most of my students are not from the USA. Throughout my career, I have seen evidence that the raised forefingers of Strunk and White have managed over the past 50 years to penetrate areas of the globe distant from the USA, no doubt accelerated more recently by Microsoft Word's grammar checker, the Internet, 'globalization', the dominant role of English in scientific documentation, and research fellowships and study periods in the USA.

Unlike Geoffrey Pullum, I am not a grammarian, nor am I an expert in linguistics (I am just a linguist with a good grounding in grammar with a passion for the way any language works), and this has prevented me from speaking out quite as radically as this eminent professor, although I have made my small contribution in these pages to exploding some of the myths about English disseminated by *The Elements of Style* and other sources. I was particularly pleased to read what Professor Pullum had to say about the ever-recurring claim: "But you should only use the active voice". Variants are "I thought you shouldn't mix the active and passive voice" or "When I was on a research fellowship in the USA, I was told you're not allowed to use the passive", and, of course, nowadays, "But it is underlined green in Microsoft Word!". I have sometimes felt very alone in defending the use of the passive voice and the mixing of the active and passive voices, because it is impossible to write sensibly, sensitively and concisely in our field without doing so. I also searched in vain for the passive voice in the examples provided by Strunk and White in *The Elements of Style*—an unforgivable error that has persisted for 50 years.

Professor Pullum states that much of the advice given in *The Elements of Style* is "useless", including *Omit needless words*, because "students who know which words are needless don't need the instruction". I disagree with him on this point. My experience is that many authors do not know which words are needless, because they are constantly seeing and hearing needless words in wordy locutions, and—without thinking—assume that the needless words are needed, or that they 'sound better'. Writers do, therefore, need instruction, with appropriate examples. I see this every day: *before surgical intervention* instead of *before surgery*, *to decrease the length of* instead of *to shorten*, *a greater length of time* instead of *longer*, *cut into two equal parts* instead of *halve*, *during the course of* instead of *during*, something *first began* instead of *started*, *period of time* instead of *period*. I have a list of hundreds of such common terms that trip off the tongue when speaking but never need to be written and I impress upon students that they should look at every sentence critically and ask themselves: *How can I make this shorter and retain the meaning?*

I am glad that Professor Pullum seizes upon the blatantly ridiculous statement "Write with nouns and verbs, not with adjectives and adverbs", which shows a poor appreciation indeed on the part of Strunk and White of my observations about good English, at least in our field. Pullum says that "the motivation of this mysterious decree remains unclear to me". A colleague from the USA obviously appreciated

the motivation: she told me that in this respect she had fully embraced the rule (*sic*) in *The Elements of Style* and "never used adjectives or adverbs". Quite how she managed to produce cogent texts is a mystery to me, because she obviously had no idea what adjectives and adverbs are.

My advice for good English in our field is 'It is more often appropriate to put the activity in your text into verbs and not nouns, and to modify these with adjectives and adverbials to give it meaning'. Professor Pullum would probably describe this as platitudinous, but such statements obviously have to be fleshed out with enough appropriate examples, e.g.:

*The diameter of the invasive tumour regressed considerably by 2 cm after drug x was instilled twice into the bladder.*

instead of

*Instillation of drug x twice into the bladder brought about considerable regression of the diameter of the invasive tumour by 2 cm.*

Neither can exist without adverbs or adjectives—nor indeed nouns or verbs—but the first is certainly better to read, although the second would probably have been preferred by Strunk and White according to their advice.

Despite their decree not to write with adjectives and adverbs, under the heading *Use definite, specific, concrete language*, Strunk and White provide an example (two long paragraphs from a novel) of "how prose is made vivid by the use of words that evoke images and sensations".

And guess what—the two paragraphs are teeming with adjectives, adverbs and adverbial phrases. This example, indeed all examples in *The Elements of Style*, definitely show that the target audience for this book were not authors in the life sciences and that it is not a reliable reference work for our field.

The actual target audience for the book is not clear. As Professor Pullum states, much of it is concerned with grammar, but it actually only covers the tip of the grammatical iceberg as far as English is concerned, and then only sketchily. The *Elementary Rules of Usage* and *Principles of Composition* sections are disorganized groupings of 22 arbitrarily chosen topics, including a small selection of simple and complex aspects of English grammar, and these are referred to as 'rules'. At best, about one quarter of them are actually what could be termed rules. All are peppered with examples that sometimes do not illustrate the point clearly, or sometimes sound stilted and outdated: who nowadays says *The culprit, it turned out, was he* or *Sandy writes better than I* (*Use the proper case of pronoun*), who would ever use the word *bedchamber* today unless writing a historical novel (*Use of the hyphen*), and, amongst English speakers born in the last 30–40 years, who can seriously claim that they still think it is important to rigidly preserve a distinction between *I shall* and *I will* (*Misused Words and Expressions: Shall/Will*)? Professor Pullum points out that some of the examples contain errors

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or do not actually illustrate the point. To this I add that examples are often not provided to illustrate important points. Because such books live from the examples given, it is alarming that *The Elements of Style* ever took such a firm hold, but as I suggested above, there must be many other reasons for this.

One of the problems with language is that people want rules. In other areas of life, they are happy to take a flagrant rules-are-there-to-be-broken attitude, but when it comes to language, they clamour for the security of rules. And this was probably where *The Elements of Style* also scored points. But this is one security that English cannot offer. We have rules, of course, but there are many exceptions and unregulated areas. Different resources often contradict one another. We have no *Duden*, like the Germans, nor do we have an '*Académie Anglaise*'.

***When it comes to language, people clamour for the security of rules***

Rule 1 in *The Elements of Style* is *Form the Possessive Singular of Nouns by Adding 's* and states "Follow this rule whatever the final consonant". The first two examples given are not nouns, but proper names (Charles's and Burns's [Burns's is highlighted as an error in the MSWord spellchecker for both 'U.K. English' and 'U.S. English']). We are then informed that Jesus' (for some strange reason) is an exception to this 'rule'. Inasmuch as this is still taught in the UK, for example, the 'rule' is that you do not add 's' to any name ending in 's', unless the terminal 's' forms part of a voiced syllable—with exceptions. White highlights 'Rule 1' in his introduction to the 1979 edition by commenting that a British newspaper headline from 1957 (Charles' tonsils out [Prince Charles had had a tonsillectomy]) got it wrong. But the newspaper was doing nothing but reflecting common British English usage in the 1950s, which I was taught and still persists today.

***Jesus' (for some strange reason) is an exception to this 'rule'***

One of the problems with Strunk and White's small selection of 'rules' is that they offer blanket statements and too little information on exceptions or do not mention that there are exceptions, or contradictory usages, which obviously led to the rules being interpreted as absolute. It is also likely that many readers will have just skimmed the section headings and text, and that the messages contained in the section headings are the ones that have stuck.

After the 'rules', except for *Write with nouns and verbs* (see above), the subsequent sections, *A Few Matters of Form, Words and Expressions Commonly Misused* and *An Approach to Style*, generally offer sensible, if sometimes superficial, advice. Even so, the sections *Write in a way that comes naturally*, *Be clear* and *Do not overwrite* do not actually tell you how to achieve any of these, despite being several paragraphs long!

A few other 'rules', some trivial, some serious, not discussed by Professor Pullum are worthy of mention:

- "The abbreviation *etc.*, even if only a single term comes before it, is always preceded by a comma". This is not a rule.
- "A participial phrase at the beginning of a sentence must refer to the grammatical subject". It is easy to find amusing and confusing examples of badly constructed sentences starting with participial phrases that do not refer to the grammatical subject (*Wondering irresolutely what to do next, the clock struck twelve* is given as an example). A more realistic and ambiguous example that occurs in our type of text is *Based on the guidelines, they issued a study report*. 'They' were not based on the guidelines. So care is certainly due. There are, however, plenty of instances in common usage where the participial phrase quite legitimately does not refer to the grammatical subject without confusion—so there is no 'must' about this. What about *Concerning your study, I feel that we should rather ...* (I am not doing any concerning), *Given the high values, we decided to change our policy* (We were not given the values), or *Generally speaking, diabetic patients are well informed about their condition* (The diabetic patients are not speaking).
- "In summaries, keep to one tense". This may be true for the literary examples given by Strunk and White or the blurb on the back of a book. For the purposes of writing in the life sciences, don't even bother to remember this 'rule'.

And there are some absolute space and time wasters:

- Do not use *hopefully* to mean *I/We hope that*: a completely lost cause that became an old chestnut tens of years ago.
- Do not use *contact* as a transitive verb: "the word is vague and self important. Do not contact people; get in touch with them, look them up, phone them, find them, or meet them". Although this *may* have been 'correct' in the distant past (according to Merriam Websters Online Dictionary, *contact* used this way was first documented in 1834), this is rubbish today. You can happily *contact* anyone you want.
- "Place the emphatic words of a sentence at the end". The emphatic words in this quotation are at the end, but that is not why they are at the end—they are there because that is where this adverbial phrase syntactically and grammatically belongs in this command. At least in our field of writing, my observation is that what you want to remain in the reader's mind should be at the beginning of your sentence, or as near to the beginning as you can position it. The careful writer has control over their sentence and puts the emphasis where they want it, sometimes by using words that emphasize, or by deliberately deviating from unstressed, expected word order.
- Do not use *they* as the pronoun for a singular subject (as in the previous sentence). *The Elements of Style* decrees that you should say 'he' instead. It is astonishing that

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this 'rule' has survived in a recently revised style guide. Whatever you feel about political correctness, using the plural to enable the use of 'they', or using 'they' as the pronoun for a singular subject, and other ways of avoiding the male pronoun 'he' have now established themselves in all fields of writing.

- Do not "press nouns into service" as verbs. This is illustrated by 5 "suspect" examples, 3 of which are normal English usage: *The candidate hosted a dinner for fifty of her workers*, *The meeting was chaired by Mr Oglethrop*, and *The theatre troupe debuted last fall*. There can be no objection to any of these three verbs—this just reflects the evolution of language. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, *host* as a transitive verb was first documented in British English in 1676, and *Merriam Websters Online Dictionary* records the date of its emergence as the 15th Century. But even if it were a neologism, the respectable use of *hosted* in this sense can easily be defended: you can *give* a dinner, but you do not necessarily need to be there in person, but if you *host* a dinner, it would be unusual if you weren't present. Also, if you *give* a dinner, this usually means that you (or your company) paid for it; if you *host* a dinner, you may not be responsible for the cost. A better 'suspect' example here would be *The paper was authored by ...*, which I still think is unnecessary, because we have the word *written*, but this has come into such common usage that it is silly to object to it. It is important to be able to distinguish between personal preferences and the realities of common, acceptable usage.

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Amongst all of this, there are some pieces of advice that, for our purposes, deserve only praise:

- "Respective/respectively: These words may usually be omitted with advantage"
- "Why say *utilize* when there is the simple unpretentious word *use*?"
- "In formal writing, *etc.* is a misfit"
- '6 April 1988' is "an excellent way to write the date" (not the opinion of the *Chicago Manual of Style*!)

In his 1979 introduction, EB White affectionately refers to *The Elements of Style* as a "dusty rule book". But, to be unaffectionate, this is, in parts, just what it is: dusty. The publisher would have done better to use its 50th anniversary to give it a good dusting off, expunging obvious errors, getting away from the concept of 'rules', taking a critical look at the examples used to illustrate different points, and bringing it into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. As it stands, it should not rank high in the reference books used by science writers, not only because of Geoffrey Pullum's and my comments, but also because much more comprehensive style guides with direct relevance to our field (see box) and comprehensive dictionaries of grammar are available.

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## Grammar books and style guides

There are, of course, countless grammar books and style guides available. Some that I refer to frequently are given below, but there are many other good resources.

### English grammar

**The Oxford Dictionary of English Grammar.** Chalker S, Weiner E. Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 1998.

**A Student's Introduction to English Grammar.** Huddleston R, Pullum GK. Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008.

### Dictionaries of collocations

**The BBI Dictionary of English Word Combinations.** Eds: Benson M, Benson E, Ilson R. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Co., 1997.

**LTP Dictionary of Selected Collocations.** Hill J, Lewis M. London: Cengage Learning, 1997.

*Both especially useful for prepositions and adverbs*

### Style guides

**Chicago Manual of Style.** Eds: University of Chicago Press Staff. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2003.

**Scientific Style and Format: The CSE Manual for Authors, Editors, And Publishers.** Eds: Council of Science Editors. Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

**American Medical Association Manual of Style. A Guide for Authors and Editors.** Eds: Iverson C (chair). New York: Oxford University Press, 2007.

**Medical English Usage and Abuse.** Schwager, E. Phoenix: Oryx Press, 1991.

**The Careful Writer. A Modern Guide to English Usage.** Bernstein TM. New York: Atheneum, 1985.

**Troublesome Words.** Bryson B. London: Penguin, 2001.

**Oxford Guide to Plain English.** Cutts M. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.

### Statistics in medicine, presentation of data

**How to Report Statistics in Medicine.** Lang TA, Secic M. Philadelphia: American College of Physicians, 2006.

**The Visual Display of Quantitative Information.** Tufte ER. Cheshire, Connecticut: Graphics Press, 1995.

**Plain Figures.** Chapman M, Wakes C. HMSO London, 1996.

**Presentation of clinical data.** Spilker B, Schoenfelder J. New York: Raven Press, 1990.