THE ELEMENTS OF *Style*

BY

WILLIAM STRUNK Jr.

With Revisions, an Introduction, and a Chapter on Writing

BY

E. B. WHITE

THIRD EDITION

MACMILLAN PUBLISHING CO., INC.
New York
COLLIER MACMILLAN PUBLISHERS
London

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.

Brown, Shipley and Co.

Merrill Lynch, Pierce, Fenner & Smith Incorporated

3. *Enclose parenthetic 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 parenthetic. 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, he must 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 parenthetic words or figures. Punctuate as follows:

February to July, 1972

April 6, 1956

Wednesday, November 13, 1929

Note that it is customary to omit the comma in

6 April 1958

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 John Fowles

William the Conqueror

Pliny the Younger

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 non-

restrictive 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 beeen 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.

4. *Place a comma before a conjunction introducing an independent clause.*

> The early records of the city have disappeared, and the story of its first years can no longer be reconstructed.

> The situation is perilous, but there is still one chance of escape.

Two-part sentences of which the second member is introduced by *as* (in the sense of "because"), *for*, *or*, *nor*, or *while* (in the sense of "and at the same time") likewise require a comma before the conjunction.

If a dependent clause, or an introductory phrase requiring to be set off by a comma, precedes the second independent clause, no comma is needed after the conjunction.

> The situation is perilous, but if we are prepared to act promptly, there is still one chance of escape.

When the subject is the same for both clauses and is expressed only once, a comma is useful if the connective is *but*. When the connective is *and*, the comma should be omitted if the relation between the two statements is close or immediate.

> I have heard his arguments, but am still unconvinced.

> He has had several years' experience and is thoroughly competent.

5. *Do not join independent clauses by a comma.*

If two or more clauses grammatically complete and not joined by a conjunction are to form a single com-

pound sentence, the proper mark of punctuation is a semicolon.

> Stevenson's romances are entertaining; they are full of exciting adventures.
>
> It is nearly half past five; we cannot reach town before dark.

It is, of course, equally correct to write each of these as two sentences, replacing the semicolons with periods.

> Stevenson's romances are entertaining. They are full of exciting adventures.
>
> It is nearly half past five. We cannot reach town before dark.

If a conjunction is inserted, the proper mark is a comma. (Rule 4.)

> Stevenson's romances are entertaining, for they are full of exciting adventures.
>
> It is nearly half past five, and we cannot reach town before dark.

A comparison of the three forms given above will show clearly the advantage of the first. It is, at least in the examples given, better than the second form because it suggests the close relationship between the two statements in a way that the second does not attempt, and better than the third because it is briefer and therefore more forcible. Indeed, this simple method of indicating relationship between statements is one of the most useful devices of composition. The relationship, as above, is commonly one of cause and consequence.

Note that if the second clause is preceded by an adverb, such as *accordingly*, *besides*, *then*, *therefore*, or *thus*, and not by a conjunction, the semicolon is still required.

> I had never been in the place before; besides, it was dark as a tomb.

An exception to the semicolon rule is worth noting here. A comma is preferable when the clauses are very

short and alike in form, or when the tone of the sentence is easy and conversational.

> Man proposes, God disposes.
>
> The gates swung apart, the bridge fell, the portcullis was drawn up.
>
> I hardly knew him, he was so changed.
>
> Here today, gone tomorrow.

6. *Do not break sentences in two.*

In other words, do not use periods for commas.

> I met them on a Cunard liner many years ago. Coming home from Liverpool to New York.
>
> He was an interesting talker. A man who had traveled all over the world and lived in half a dozen countries.

In both these examples, the first period should be replaced by a comma and the following word begun with a small letter.

It is permissible to make an emphatic word or expression serve the purpose of a sentence and to punctuate it accordingly:

> Again and again he called out. No reply.

The writer must, however, be certain that the emphasis is warranted, lest his clipped sentence seem merely a blunder in syntax or in punctuation. Generally speaking, the place for broken sentences is in dialogue, when a character happens to speak in a clipped or fragmentary way.

Rules 3, 4, 5, and 6 cover the most important principles that govern punctuation. They should be so thoroughly mastered that their application becomes second nature.

7. *Use a colon after an independent clause to introduce a list of particulars, an appositive, an amplification, or an illustrative quotation.*

A colon tells the reader that what follows is closely related to the preceding clause. The colon has more ef-

8. *Use a dash to set off an abrupt break or interruption, and to announce a long appositive or summary.*

A dash is a mark of separation stronger than a comma, less formal than a colon, and more relaxed than parentheses.

> His first thought on getting out of bed—if he had any thought at all—was to get back in again.
>
> The rear axle began to make a noise—a grinding, chattering, teeth-gritting rasp.
>
> The increasing reluctance of the sun to rise, the extra nip in the breeze, the patter of shed leaves dropping—all the evidences of fall drifting into winter were clearer each day.

Use a dash only when a more common mark of punctuation seems inadequate.

Her father's suspicions proved well-founded—it was not Edward she cared for—it was San Francisco.	Her father's suspicions proved well-founded. It was not Edward she cared for, it was San Francisco.
Violence—the kind you see on television—is not honestly violent—there lies its harm.	Violence, the kind you see on television, is not honestly violent. There lies its harm.

9. *The number of the subject determines the number of the verb.*

Words that intervene between subject and verb do not affect the number of the verb.

The bittersweet flavor of youth—its trials, its joys, its adventures, its challenges—are not soon forgotten.	The bittersweet flavor of youth—its trials, its joys, its adventures, its challenges—is not soon forgotten.

A common blunder is the use of a singular verb form in a relative clause following "one of . . ." or a similar expression when the relative is the subject.

One of the ablest men who has attacked this problem	One of the ablest men who have attacked this problem
One of those people who is never ready on time	One of those people who are never ready on time

Use a singular verb form after *each, either, everyone, everybody, neither, nobody, someone.*

> Everybody thinks he has a sense of humor.
>
> Although both clocks strike cheerfully, neither keeps good time.

With *none*, use the singular verb when the word means "no one" or "not one."

None of us are perfect.	None of us is perfect.

A plural verb is commonly used when *none* suggests more than one thing or person

> None are so fallible as those who are sure they're right.

A compound subject formed of two or more nouns joined by *and* almost always requires a plural verb.

> The walrus and the carpenter were walking close at hand.

But certain compounds, often clichés, are so inseparable they are considered a unit and so take a singular verb, as do compound subjects qualified by *each* or *every.*

> The long and the short of it is . . .
>
> Bread and butter was all she served.
>
> Give and take is essential to a happy household.
>
> Every window, picture, and mirror was smashed.

A singular subject remains singular even if other nouns are connected to it by *with, as well as, in addition to, except, together with,* and *no less than.*

> His speech as well as his manner is objectionable.

A linking verb agrees with the number of its subject.

Apart from its triteness and emptiness, the paragraph above is bad because of the structure of its sentences, with their mechanical symmetry and singsong. Compare these sentences from the chapter "What I Believe" in E. M. Forster's *Two Cheers for Democracy*:

> I believe in aristocracy, though—if that is the right word, and if a democrat may use it. Not an aristocracy of power, based upon rank and influence, but an aristocracy of the sensitive, the considerate and the plucky. Its members are to be found in all nations and classes, and all through the ages, and there is a secret understanding between them when they meet. They represent the true human tradition, the one permanent victory of our queer race over cruelty and chaos. Thousands of them perish in obscurity, a few are great names. They are sensitive for others as well as for themselves, they are considerate without being fussy, their pluck is not swankiness but the power to endure, and they can take a joke.*

If the writer finds that he has written a series of loose sentences, he should recast enough of them to remove the monotony, replacing them by simple sentences, by sentences of two clauses joined by a semicolon, by periodic sentences of two clauses, by sentences (loose or periodic) of three clauses—whichever best represent the real relations of the thought.

19. *Express coordinate ideas in similar form.*

This principle, that of parallel construction, requires that expressions similar in content and function be outwardly similar. The likeness of form enables the reader to recognize more readily the likeness of content and function. The familiar Beatitudes exemplify the virtue of parallel construction.

> Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
> Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted.
> Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth.

* From *Two Cheers for Democracy*, copyright, 1951, by E. M. Forster. Published by Harcourt, Brace and Company, Inc.

> Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled.

The unskillful writer often violates this principle, from a mistaken belief that he should constantly vary the form of his expressions. When repeating a statement to emphasize it, the writer may need to vary its form. But apart from this he should follow the principle of parallel construction.

Formerly, science was taught by the textbook method, while now the laboratory method is employed.	Formerly, science was taught by the textbook method; now it is taught by the laboratory method.

The left-hand version gives the impression that the writer is undecided or timid; he seems unable or afraid to choose one form of expression and hold to it. The right-hand version shows that the writer has at least made his choice and abided by it.

By this principle, an article or a preposition applying to all the members of a series must either be used only before the first term or else be repeated before each term.

the French, the Italians, Spanish, and Portuguese	the French, the Italians, the Spanish, and the Portuguese
in spring, summer, or in winter	in spring, summer, or winter (in spring, in summer, or in winter)

Some words require a particular preposition in certain idiomatic uses. When such words are joined in a compound construction, all the appropriate prepositions must be included, unless they are the same.

His speech was marked by disagreement and scorn for his opponent's position.	His speech was marked by disagreement with and scorn for his opponent's position.

Correlative expressions (*both, and; not, but; not only, but also; either, or; first, second, third;* and the like) should be followed by the same grammatical con-

struction. Many violations of this rule can be corrected by rearranging the sentence.

It was both a long ceremony and very tedious.	The ceremony was both long and tedious.
A time not for words but action.	A time not for words but for action.
Either you must grant his request or incur his ill will.	You must either grant his request or incur his ill will.
My objections are, first, the injustice of the measure; second, that it is unconstitutional.	My objections are, first, that the measure is unjust; second, that it is unconstitutional.

It may be asked, what if a writer needs to express a rather large number of similar ideas—say, twenty? Must he write twenty consecutive sentences of the same pattern? On closer examination he will probably find that the difficulty is imaginary—that his twenty ideas can be classified in groups, and that he need apply the principle only within each group. Otherwise he had best avoid the difficulty by putting his statements in the form of a table.

20. *Keep related words together.*

The position of the words in a sentence is the principal means of showing their relationship. Confusion and ambiguity result when words are badly placed. The writer must, therefore, bring together the words and groups of words that are related in thought and keep apart those that are not so related.

He noticed a large stain in the rug that was right in the center.	He noticed a large stain right in the center of the rug.
You can call your mother in London and tell her all about George's taking you out to dinner for just sixty cents.	For just sixty cents you can call your mother in London and tell her all about George's taking you out to dinner.

Allude. Do not confuse with *elude*. You *allude* to a book; you *elude* a pursuer. Note, too, that *allude* is not synonymous with *refer*. An allusion is an indirect mention, a reference is a specific one.

Allusion. Easily confused with *illusion*. The first means "an indirect reference"; the second means "an unreal image" or "a false impression."

Alternate. Alternative. The words are not always interchangeable as nouns or adjectives. The first means every other one in a series; the second, one of two possibilities. As the other one of a series of two, an *alternate* may stand for "a substitute," but an *alternative*, although used in a similar sense, connotes a matter of choice that is never present with *alternate*.

As the flooded road left them no alternative, they took the alternate route.

Among. Between. When more than two things or persons are involved, *among* is usually called for: "The money was divided among the four players." When, however, more than two are involved but each is considered individually, *between* is preferred: "an agreement between the six heirs."

And/or. A device, or shortcut, that damages a sentence and often leads to confusion or ambiguity.

First of all, would an honor system successfully cut down on the amount of stealing and/or cheating?	First of all, would an honor system reduce the incidence of stealing or cheating or both?

Anticipate. Use *expect* in the sense of simple expectation.

I anticipated that she would look older.	I expected that she would look older.
My brother anticipated the upturn in the market.	My brother expected the upturn in the market.

Claim (*verb*). With object-noun, means "lay claim to." May be used with a dependent clause if this sense is clearly intended: "He claimed that he was the sole heir." (But even here *claimed to be* would be better.) Not to be used as a substitute for *declare, maintain,* or *charge.*

He claimed he knew how.	He declared he knew how.

Clever. Note that the word means one thing when applied to men, another when applied to horses. A clever horse is a good-natured one, not an ingenious one.

Compare. To *compare to* is to point out or imply resemblances between objects regarded as essentially of a different order; to *compare with* is mainly to point out differences between objects regarded as essentially of the same order. Thus, life has been *compared to* a pilgrimage, *to* a drama, *to* a battle; Congress may be *compared with* the British Parliament. Paris has been *compared to* ancient Athens; it may be *compared with* modern London.

Comprise. Literally, "embrace": A zoo comprises mammals, reptiles, and birds (because it "embraces," or "includes," them). But animals do not comprise ("embrace") a zoo—they constitute a zoo.

Consider. Not followed by *as* when it means "believe to be."

I consider him as competent.	I consider him competent.

When *considered* means "examined" or "discussed," it is followed by *as:*

> The lecturer considered Eisenhower first as soldier and second as administrator.

When you use metaphor, do not mix it up. That is, don't start by calling something a swordfish and end by calling it an hourglass.

19. *Do not take shortcuts at the cost of clarity.*

Do not use initials for the names of organizations or movements unless you are certain the initials will be readily understood. Write things out. Not everyone knows that SALT means Strategic Arms Limitation Talks, and even if everyone did, there are babies being born every minute who will someday encounter the name for the first time. They deserve to see the words, not simply the initials. A good rule is to start your article by writing out names in full, and then, later, when the reader has got his bearings, to shorten them.

Many shortcuts are self-defeating; they waste the reader's time instead of conserving it. There are all sorts of rhetorical stratagems and devices that attract writers who hope to be pithy, but most of them are simply bothersome. The longest way round is usually the shortest way home, and the one truly reliable shortcut in writing is to choose words that are strong and surefooted to carry the reader on his way.

20. *Avoid foreign languages.*

The writer will occasionally find it convenient or necessary to borrow from other languages. Some writers, however, from sheer exuberance or a desire to show off, sprinkle their work liberally with foreign expressions, with no regard for the reader's comfort. It is a bad habit. Write in English.

21. *Prefer the standard to the offbeat.*

The young writer will be drawn at every turn toward eccentricities in language. He will hear the beat of new vocabularies, the exciting rhythms of special segments of his society, each speaking a language of its own. All of us come under the spell of these unsettling drums; the problem for the beginner is to listen to them, learn