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PHIL 5

### The Little Book

The Elements of Style has been a classic almost since its original publication in 1920. Lovingly called “the little book” by William Strunk, the sole author of the original edition and English professor at Cornell. In its first form, this little book was just that, coming in at a whopping 52. In those pages, there were five things that the book covered. In that there were eight "elementary rules of usage", ten "elementary principles of composition", "a few matters of form", a list of 49 "words and expressions commonly misused", and a list of 57 "words often misspelled". In this book's nearly 100 year run it has seen some major changes and overhauls, probably the addition of a second author. E.B. White. A student of Strunk when he was teaching at Cornell and later a writer in his own right, in 1959 took a new look at his teacher's little book and cleaned it up. He updated the language and examples to better suit the new generation of readers, along with updating and expanding the lists previously enumerated. In addition, he added a new section called which he entitled “An Approach to Style”, about which he remarks in the introduction to his 1979 “In this, I set forth my own prejudices, my notions of error, my articles of faith”. To this day they are still cleaning and shaping new editions with more insights for the next generation of writers to come into the world.

As with anything that tries to set out the ideal for anything, this little book has its share of critics. It seems that as much as this book is loved it is hated; the attacks come from all sides. Some argue that the book is not large enough to encompass the complexities of the English

language, others say that their style is too restrictive, while still more call their advice bad saying that what they have to say about grammar is actually wrong. In the article *Against Strunk & White's 'The Elements of Style'*, from the April 21, 2015 edition of *The Washington Post*, Eugene Volokh discusses an argument by Geoffrey Pullum arguments against the little book. In this article, Volokh addresses an excerpt of Pullum's 8-page essay. It begins "I believe the success of *Elements* to be one of the worst things to have happened to English language education in America in the past century. The book's style advice, largely vapid and obvious ("Do not overwrite"; "Be clear"), may do little damage; but the numerous statements about grammatical correctness are actually harmful. They are riddled with inaccuracies, uninformed by evidence, and marred by bungled analysis." This onslaught of insults is followed up by a very detailed and quite frankly over my head discussion on why the author believes that the little book is encouraging bad grammar, by limiting the uses of certain tenses of verbs. The author, I think rightly, wants to crack down in the spread of bad rules that do not reflect the actual scholarly measures that a rulebook should be following.

The main difference in is the reverence one gives this text; are you looking at this as the iron law of writing, or are you looking at this as a useful guide full of suggestions designed to help you write better. In the first case you are I think taking this book too seriously, by taking the command structure too far and by not seeing that this is designed as a guide, not as the law. If you think back to what White said in his introduction to the 1949 edition this point becomes clear "I set forth my own prejudices, my notions of error, my articles of faith". This is a personal guide by experienced writers on how they think the English language should be written. Even in its first days, this little book was inspiring the next generation of writers. Which is exemplified

by White's later addition to the text that his professor wrote and taught out of, his "approach to style" is a very useful example of things that we as writers can very often forget to do. Such as an urge not to overwrite, or to place yourself in the background or in other words make the ideas the focal point, not the author. As for the question of the usefulness in a class that requires a good amount of writing, I would say that it is suitable as long as the teacher and the students acknowledge that the book is a large set of recommendations from a reliable source, while not being the rulebook in the truest form possible.

This little book is a very good primer for those who may not be interested in the most intricate usages of the English language, but for those who are looking for a structure to help them get their point across without having to worry about sounding a fool for saying something drastically wrong. This book itself is claiming to be a guide of style, not a list of hard and fast rules. It offers a backbone to build off of and keep relying on for the rest of your life.