Rules of Usage and Composition

From *The Elements of Style*
by Oliver Strunk and E. B. White

and

*Eats, Shoots & Leaves*
by Lynne Truss
Consider This Letter:

Dear Jack,

I want a man who knows what love is all about. You are generous, kind, thoughtful. People who are not like you admit to being useless and inferior. You have ruined me for other men. I yearn for you. I have no feelings whatsoever when we’re apart. I can be forever happy – will you let me be yours?

Jill
Consider This Letter:

Dear Jack,

I want a man who knows what love is. All about you are generous, kind, thoughtful people, who are not like you. Admit to being useless and inferior. You have ruined me. For other men I yearn! For you I have no feelings whatsoever. When we’re apart I can be forever happy. Will you let me be?

Yours,

Jill
Consider This Telegram:

It is under these circumstances that we feel constrained to call upon you to come to our aid should a disturbance arise here the circumstances are so extreme that we cannot but believe that you and the men under you will not fail to come to the rescue of people who are so situated.
“The Art of Pointing”

Consider the difference between the following two interpretations of a Biblical passage (Luke 23:43):

“Verily, I say unto thee, this day thou shalt be with me in Paradise.”

“Verily I say unto thee this day, thou shalt be with me in Paradise.”
‘The Art of Pointing”

“Comfort ye my people.” vs. “Comfort ye, my people.”
Forming Possessive of Nouns

• Examples:
  – Charles's friend
  – The students’ poems
  – the witch's malice
  – one's rights
  – somebody else's umbrella
  – It's a wise dog that scratches its own fleas.
  – The dog went into its house.
Use of Commas

• Examples:
  – He opened the letter, read it, and made a note of its contents.
  – The best way to see a country, unless you are pressed for time, is to travel on foot.
  – My brother, you will be pleased to hear, is now in perfect health.
  – Well, Susan, this is a fine mess you are in.
Use of Commas

• Examples:
  – Letters, packages, etc., should go here.
  – Horace Fulsome, Ph.D., presided.
  – Rachel Simonds, Attorney
  – The Reverend Harry Lang, S.J.
Use of Commas

- Do not use commas with restrictive forms:
  - Billy the Kid
  - The novelist Jane Austen
  - William the Conqueror
  - The poet Sappho
  - James Wright Jr.
  - People who live in glass houses shouldn't throw stones.
Use of Commas

- Use a comma before “but”, but not before “and” (except when “and” connects a list):
  - I have heard the arguments, but I am still unconvinced.
  - He has several years of experience and is thoroughly competent.
Use of Semicolons

• Join independent clauses with a semicolon:
  – Mary Shelley's works are entertaining; they are full of engaging ideas.
  – It is nearly half past five; we will not reach town before dark.
Use of Semicolons

• If the clauses are joined by a conjunction, use a comma instead of a semicolon:
  – Mary Shelley's works are entertaining, for they are full of engaging ideas.
  – It is nearly half past five, but we will not reach town before dark.
Use of Semicolons

• If the second clause is preceded by an adverb, such as however, accordingly, besides, then, therefore, or thus, and not by a conjunction, use a semicolon and a comma:
  – I had never been in the place before; besides, it was as dark as a tomb.
Use of Colons

• Use a colon after an independent clause to introduce a list, an amplification, or an illustrative quotation.

  – Incorrect:
    • Your dedicated whittler requires: a knife, a piece of wood, and a back porch.

  – Correct:
    • Your dedicated whittler requires three props: a knife, a piece of wood, and a back porch.
Use of Colons

• Incorrect:
  • Understanding is that penetrating quality of knowledge that grows from: theory, practice, conviction, assertion, error, and humiliation.

• Correct:
  • Understanding is that penetrating quality of knowledge that grows from theory, practice, conviction, assertion, error, and humiliation.
Use of Colons

“Tom locked himself in the shed. England lost to Argentina.”

“Tom locked himself in the shed; England lost to Argentina.”

“Tom locked himself in the shed: England lost to Argentina.”
Use of Dashes

• Use a dash to set off an abrupt break or interruption and to announce a long appositive or summary.
  • 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.
Dashes versus Parentheses

“He was – I still can’t believe this – trying to climb in the window.”

“He was (I still can’t believe this) trying to climb in the window.”

Oliver Wendell Holmes: “One has to dismount from an idea, and get into the saddle again, at every parenthesis.”
The Ellipsis (…)

• The ellipsis is used to:
  – Indicate that a word is missing from a quoted passage
  – Trail off in an intriguing manner
Hyphenated Words

“extra-marital sex” versus “extra marital sex”

“re-formed rock band” versus “reformed rock band”

‘fine tooth-comb” versus “fine-tooth comb”

“de-ice” instead of “deice”

“He has a two- and three-year old at home” instead of “He has a two and three-year old at home”

“18\textsuperscript{th}-century novel” and “seven-o’clock train”
Verbs and Nouns

• The number of the subject determines the number of the verb.
  
  – Incorrect:
    • The bittersweet flavor of youth — its trials, its joys, its adventures, its challenges — are not soon forgotten.

  – Correct:
    • The bittersweet flavor of youth — its trials, its joys, its adventures, its challenges — is not soon forgotten.
Verbs and Nouns

• The number of the subject determines the number of the verb.
  – Incorrect:
    • One of the ablest scientists who has attacked this problem
  – Correct:
    • One of the ablest scientists who have attacked this problem
Verbs and Nouns

• The number of the subject determines the number of the verb.
  – Incorrect:
    • None of us are perfect.
  – Correct:
    • None of us is perfect.
Verbs and Nouns

• A plural verb is commonly used when *none* suggests more than one thing or person.
  – Incorrect:
    • None is so fallible as those who are sure they're right.
  – Correct:
    • None are so fallible as those who are sure they're right.
Verbs and Nouns

• 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.
Pronouns

• Examples:
  – Will Jane or he be hired, do you think?
  – The culprit, it turned out, was he.
  – We heavy eaters would rather walk than ride.
  – Who knocks?
  – Give this work to whoever looks idle.
Pronouns

• Examples:
  – The ranger offered Shirley and him some advice on campsites.
  – They came to meet the Baldwins and us.
  – Let's talk it over between us, then, you and me.
  – Whom should I ask?
Pronouns

• Incorrect:
  – Virgil Soames is the candidate whom we think will win.

• Correct:
  – Virgil Soames is the candidate who we think will win. [We think he will win.]
Pronouns

• Incorrect:
  – Virgil Soames is the candidate who we hope to elect.

• Correct:
  – Virgil Soames is the candidate whom we hope to elect. [We hope to elect him.]
Pronouns

• Incorrect:
  – Sandy writes better than me.

• Correct:
  – Sandy writes better than I. (than I write)
Pronouns

• Which is correct?
  – I think Horace admires Jessica more than me.
  – I think Horace admires Jessica more than I.

• Which is correct?
  – Polly loves cake more than me.
  – Polly loves cake more than I.
Pronouns

• Consider:
  – Do you mind me asking a question?

• This means:
  – Do you mind me (as opposed to other members of the group) asking a question?
Pronouns

• Consider:
  – Do you mind my asking a question?

• This means:
  – Do you mind a question being asked at all?
Who is the Subject?

• Revise:
  • Walking slowly down the road, he saw a woman accompanied by two children.

• Better:
  • He saw a woman, accompanied by two children, walking slowly down the road.
Who is the Subject?

• Revise:
  • On arriving in Chicago, his friends met him at the station.

• Better:
  • On arriving in Chicago, he was met at the station by his friends.
Who is the Subject?

• Revise:
  • Being in a dilapidated condition, I was able to buy the house very cheaply.

• Better:
  • I was able to buy the house very cheaply because it was in a dilapidated condition,
Who is the Subject?

• Revise:
  • Wondering irresolutely what to do next, the clock struck twelve.

• Better:
  • The clock struck twelve while he wondered irresolutely what to do next.
Use the Active Voice

• Revise:
  • My first visit to Boston will always be remembered by me.

• Better:
  • I shall always remember my first visit to Boston.
Use the Active Voice

• Revise:
  • There were a great number of dead leaves lying on the ground.

• Better:
  • Dead leaves covered the ground.
Use the Active Voice

• Revise:
  • It was not long before she was very sorry that she had said what she had.

• Better:
  • She soon repented her words.
Use the Positive Form

• Revise:
  • She did not think that studying Latin was a sensible way to use one's time.

• Better:
  • She thought studying Latin was a waste of time.
Use the Positive Form

Replace:
not honest
not important
did not remember
did not pay any attention to
did not have much confidence in

With:
dishonest
trifling
forgot
ignored
distrusted
Use the Positive Form

• Don’t weaken your sentences by using words like “would”, “should”, “could”, “may”, “might”, “can”

• Save these words for situations that are truly uncertain
Use the Positive Form

• Revise:
  • If you would let us know the time of your arrival, we would be happy to arrange your transportation from the airport.

• Better:
  • If you will let us know the time of your arrival, we shall be happy to arrange your transportation from the airport.
Be Concrete, Not Vague

• Revise:
  • A period of unfavorable weather set in.

• Better:
  • It rained every day for a week.

• Revise:
  • He showed satisfaction as he took possession of his well-earned reward.

• Better:
  • He grinned as he pocketed the coin.
Be Concrete, Not Vague

• Revise:
  • In proportion as the manners, customs, and amusements of a nation are cruel and barbarous, the regulations of its penal code will be severe.

• Better:
  • In proportion as men delight in battles, bullfights, and combats of gladiators, will they be punished by hanging, burning, and the rack.
Omit Needless Words

Replace: 
the question as to whether 
there is no doubt but that 
used for fuel purposes 
he is a man who 
in a hasty manner 
this is a subject that 

With: 
whether 
no doubt 
used for fuel 
he 
hastily 
this subject 

Her story is a strange one.
the reason why is that 

Her story is strange. 
because
Omit Needless Words

Replace:
owing to the fact that
in spite of the fact that
call your attention to the fact that
I was unaware of the fact that
the fact that he had not succeeded
the fact that I had arrived

With:
since (or because)
though (or although)
remind you (or notify you)
I was unaware that
(or I did not know)
his failure
my arrival
Use Parallel Construction

• Revise:
  • Formerly, science was taught by the textbook method, while now the laboratory method is employed.

• Better:
  • Formerly, science was taught by the textbook method; now it is taught by the laboratory method.
Use Parallel Construction

• Revise:
  
  • His speech was marked by disagreement and scorn for his opponent's position.

• Better:
  
  • His speech was marked by disagreement with and scorn for his opponent's position.
Use Parallel Construction

• Revise:
  • It was both a long ceremony and very tedious.

• Better:
  • The ceremony was both long and tedious.
Use Parallel Construction

• Revise:
  • My objections are, first, the injustice of the measure; second, that it is unconstitutional.

• Better:
  • My objections are, first, that the measure is unjust; second, that it is unconstitutional.
Keep Related Words Together

• Revise:
  • You can call your mother in London and tell her all about George's taking you out to dinner for just two dollars.

• Better:
  • For just two dollars you can call your mother in London and tell her all about George's taking you out to dinner.
Keep Related Words Together

• Revise:
  • New York's first commercial human-sperm bank opened Friday with semen samples from eighteen men frozen in a stainless steel tank.

• Better:
  • New York's first commercial human-sperm bank opened Friday when semen samples were taken from eighteen men. The samples were then frozen and stored in a stainless steel tank.
Place Emphatic Words at the End

• Revise:
  • Humanity has hardly advanced in fortitude since that time, though it has advanced in many other ways.

• Better:
  • Since that time, humanity has advanced in many ways, but it has hardly advanced in fortitude.
Place Emphatic Words at the End

• Revise:
  • This steel is principally used for making razors, because of its hardness.

• Better:
  • Because of its hardness, this steel is used principally for making razors.