

On Style

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Style is a very ambiguous word. Asking the question, “What is Style?” is almost a philosophical endeavor, comparable with “What is Truth?” Asking the question, “What is Good Style?” is even harder. Society’s boundaries are constantly shifting to accept or banish items from the definition, in art and writing specifically. Yet there are certain elements that remain constant in all these changes, and these are the elements that style manuals try to pin down.

Before the class reading/blogging project began, I thought of style as the method a writer uses to communicate his/her ideas to the reader. I still do. If the point of writing is to communicate ideas, and the vehicle we use to transport the ideas from our brains to our readers is our STYLE, then the most important element of style is being clear.

What I have learned from reading Strunk and White's *The Elements of Style* and Joseph William's *Style Toward Clarity and Grace* is that there are a variety of ways to make writing clear. Each book has its own unique approach to the problem of establishing clear communication in print.

Strunk and White's method of attack is from the angle of the writer. The rules outlined in the book focus on the writer's image of what he is communicating. The rules are designed to help the writer sort through her own thoughts on paper, and [extract](#) the essence of what is being communicated. The theory seems to be that clearer writing begets clearer thinking.

For example, rule #14 in Strunk and white states "Use the active voice." If we compare the two sentences given in the example;

"Do not say: There were a great number of dead [leaves](#) lying on the ground.

Do say: Dead leaves covered the ground." (S&W 18)

we see how the active voice communicates more clearly than the passive. The excess words get in the way of what the writer is trying to say.

This is compounded in rule #17, "Omit needless words." The passage states that "Vigorous writing is concise." (S&W 23) This reference to vigor and other health terms is mirrored in other rules, and is a clue-in to the entire Strunk and White approach to style. Good style to them is a way of thinking, a confidence in thought that lends itself to forceful, clear statements by the writer.

Williams Style Toward Clarity and Grace carries on many of the same rules that are laid down in Strunk and White, only with a different approach.

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