

The Elements of Style

A Classic Manual for Hip Writing Gets an Illustrated Makeover

By Sandhya Nankani

**Do not overwrite.
Make every word tell.
Use the active voice.
Omit needless words.
Be obscure clearly!**

Who can possibly resist the simplicity of such advice, especially when it comes in a slim volume small enough to fit into your back pocket? Certainly not I!

If I'm ever in doubt about the dos and don'ts of writing, *The Elements of Style* is the one place where I can always turn.

Written by Cornell University professor William Strunk Jr. and subsequently revised by his student E. B. White (yes, the author of *Charlotte's Web!*), the handy grammar and composition guide has been revered by generations of students and writers since it was published in 1959.



The Elements of Style now has a new companion—a snazzy, bright-red hardcover sibling.

Julie Alissi/Weekly Reader

Nearly half a century after its initial publication, *The Elements of Style* has taken on a new life. Its recent incarnations include both an acclaimed illustrated edition by Maira Kalman and a musical composition.

In its new incarnation, *The Illustrated Elements of Style* is ever more an indispensable prescription for good writing and the source of the infamous mantra of all wordsmiths: “A sentence should contain no unnecessary words, a paragraph no unnecessary sentences, for the same reason that a drawing should have no unnecessary lines and a machine no unnecessary parts.”

AN IRRESISTIBLE GUIDE

I've owned a beat-up copy of the original *Elements* since my freshman year in high school. While the rest of my classmates were busy memorizing the periodic table of elements for chemistry class, the aspiring writer in me was mesmerized by Strunk and White's simple rules of prose and usage.

If you were to thumb through the dog-eared pages of my copy of *Elements*, you'd find underlined sentences, exclamation marks, and scrawled notes—especially in my favorite section, “Words and Expressions Commonly Misused.” All are markers of my personal journey toward becoming the writer and editor I am today.

THE GOOD GETS BETTER

My old copy of *The Elements of Style* now has a new friend on my desk—a snazzy, bright-red hardcover sibling. The illustrated edition is filled with whimsical watercolor paintings by artist Maira Kalman, who discovered *The Elements of Style* at a yard sale five years ago. As she started flipping through its pages, she was captivated by the sentences and images.

“I had never used the book in school,” Kalman told *Library Journal* in an interview. “[*Elements*] was written by people who embrace eccentricity. I have great



*His first thought on getting out of bed—
if he had any thought at all—
was to get back in again.*

The Elements of Style/Penguin Press. Reprinted with permission of Maira Kalman

admiration for them. ... When I started reading, I had an immediate and decisive vision of illustrating the book.”

Kalman's paintings (as seen on this issue's cover, page 9, and this page) are visual depictions of the quirky sentences that Strunk and White use to teach little lessons about the proper use of the English language. The illustrated sentence above demonstrates how to use a dash. Here are a few other examples:

- *Well, Susan, this is a fine mess you're in.*
(when to use a comma)
- *None of us is perfect.* (subject-verb agreement)
- *It's a wise dog that scratches its own fleas.* (when to use *it's* versus *its*)

THE SOUND OF GRAMMAR

While painting her illustrations, Kalman began singing the words involuntarily and dreaming of a Strunk and White opera. Rather than brush off her imaginings, she invited a family friend, a young composer named Nico Muhly, to set passages of the book to music.

Muhly, 24, is a graduate of the Julliard School. He encountered *The Elements of Style* first when he was in the seventh grade and then again when he was a junior in high school.

“I fell in love with the crazy example sentences,” he told *Writing*. “Each one seemed like it was a peek into a weird, alternate, surreal universe.”

Taking his favorite and most inspiring line from the book—“Be obscure clearly. Be wild of tongue in a way we can understand!”—Muhly created a quirky and innovative musical piece, or song cycle that featured “bizarre percussion instruments: duck calls, zippers, funnels, pillows,” and dramatic solo performances.

When Muhly's *Elements of Style* song cycle was performed at the New York Public Library, it was hailed by *The New York Times* as a “melancholy” work with “frequent moments of disarming beauty.”

I learned from Strunk and White that every rule has its exceptions, but I never expected the rules of grammar to be awash in color or bent by musical notes!

Strunk and White: Those two names have long been invisible forces ready to guide me when I don't know whether to use a comma or a period or whether the word *privilege* has a *d* or not (not). They also never cease to amaze me—and remind me that even grammar can be a creative endeavor. 📌

Sandhya Nankani is the senior editor of *Writing* and would wish never to find herself on a deserted island without a copy of *The Elements of Style*.

