



Pearson New International Edition

The Elements of Style

Strunk White Angell

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# *The Elements of Style*

**14. Use the active voice.**

The active voice is usually more direct and vigorous than the passive:

I shall always remember my first visit to Boston.

This is much better than

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

The latter sentence is less direct, less bold, and less concise. If the writer tries to make it more concise by omitting "by me,"

My first visit to Boston will always be remembered,

it becomes indefinite: is it the writer or some undisclosed person or the world at large that will always remember this visit?

This rule does not, of course, mean that the writer should entirely discard the passive voice, which is frequently convenient and sometimes necessary.

The dramatists of the Restoration are little esteemed today.

Modern readers have little esteem for the dramatists of the Restoration.

The first would be the preferred form in a paragraph on the dramatists of the Restoration, the second in a paragraph on the tastes of modern readers. The need to make a particular word the subject of the sentence will often, as in these examples, determine which voice is to be used.

The habitual use of the active voice, however, makes for forcible writing. This is true not only in narrative concerned principally with action but in writing of any kind. Many a tame sentence of description or exposition can be made lively and emphatic by substituting a transitive in the active voice for some such perfunctory expression as *there is* or *could be heard*.

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

At dawn the crowing of a rooster could be heard.

The reason he left college was that his health became impaired.

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

Dead leaves covered the ground.

The cock's crow came with dawn.

Failing health compelled him to leave college.

She soon repented her words.

Note, in the examples above, that when a sentence is made stronger, it usually becomes shorter. Thus, brevity is a by-product of vigor.

### 15. *Put statements in positive form.*

Make definite assertions. Avoid tame, colorless, hesitating, noncommittal language. Use the word *not* as a means of denial or in antithesis, never as a means of evasion.

He was not very often on time.

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

*The Taming of the Shrew* is rather weak in spots. Shakespeare does not portray Katharine as a very admirable character, nor does Bianca remain long in memory as an important character in Shakespeare's works.

He usually came late.

She thought the study of Latin a waste of time.

The women in *The Taming of the Shrew* are unattractive. Katharine is disagreeable, Bianca insignificant.

The last example, before correction, is indefinite as well as negative. The corrected version, consequently, is simply a guess at the writer's intention.

All three examples show the weakness inherent in the word *not*. Consciously or unconsciously, the reader is dissatisfied with being told only what is not; the reader wishes to be told what is. Hence, as a rule, it is better to express even a negative in positive form.

not honest	dishonest
not important	trifling
did not remember	forgot
did not pay any attention to	ignored
did not have much confidence in	distrusted

Placing negative and positive in opposition makes for a stronger structure.

Not charity, but simple justice.

Not that I loved Caesar less, but that I loved Rome more.

Ask not what your country can do for you—ask what you can do for your country.

Negative words other than *not* are usually strong.

Her loveliness I never knew / Until she smiled on me.

Statements qualified with unnecessary auxiliaries or conditionals sound irresolute.

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

If you will let us know the time of your arrival, we shall be happy to arrange your transportation from the airport.

Applicants can make a good impression by being neat and punctual.

Applicants will make a good impression if they are neat and punctual.

Plath may be ranked among those modern poets who died young.

Plath was one of those modern poets who died young.

If your every sentence admits a doubt, your writing will lack authority. Save the auxiliaries *would*, *should*, *could*, *may*, *might*, and *can* for situations involving real uncertainty.

**16. Use definite, specific, concrete language.**

Prefer the specific to the general, the definite to the vague, the concrete to the abstract.

A period of unfavorable  
weather set in.

It rained every day for a  
week.

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

He grinned as he pock-  
eted the coin.

If those who have studied the art of writing are in accord on any one point, it is this: the surest way to arouse and hold the reader's attention is by being specific, definite, and concrete. The greatest writers—Homer, Dante, Shakespeare—are effective largely because they deal in particulars and report the details that matter. Their words call up pictures.

Jean Stafford, to cite a more modern author, demonstrates in her short story "In the Zoo" how prose is made vivid by the use of words that evoke images and sensations:

... Daisy and I in time found asylum in a small menagerie down by the railroad tracks. It belonged to a gentle alcoholic ne'er-do-well, who did nothing all day long but drink bathtub gin in rickeys and play solitaire and smile to himself and talk to his animals. He had a little, stunted red vixen and a deodorized skunk, a parrot from Tahiti that spoke Parisian French, a weebegone coyote, and two capuchin monkeys, so serious and humanized, so small and sad and sweet, and so religious-looking with their tonsured heads that it was impossible not to think their gibberish was really an ordered language with a grammar that someday some philologist would understand.

Gran knew about our visits to Mr. Murphy and she did not object, for it gave her keen pleasure to excoriate him when we came home. His vice was not a matter of guesswork; it was an established fact that he was half-seas over from dawn till midnight. "With the black Irish," said Gran, "the taste for drink is taken in with the mother's

milk and is never mastered. Oh, I know all about those promises to join the temperance movement and not to touch another drop. The way to Hell is paved with good intentions.”\*

If the experiences of Walter Mitty, of Molly Bloom, of Rabbit Angstrom have seemed for the moment real to countless readers, if in reading Faulkner we have almost the sense of inhabiting Yoknapatawpha County during the decline of the South, it is because the details used are definite, the terms concrete. It is not that every detail is given—that would be impossible, as well as to no purpose—but that all the significant details are given, and with such accuracy and vigor that readers, in imagination, can project themselves into the scene.

In exposition and in argument, the writer must likewise never lose hold of the concrete; and even when dealing with general principles, the writer must furnish particular instances of their application.

In his *Philosophy of Style*, Herbert Spencer gives two sentences to illustrate how the vague and general can be turned into the vivid and particular:

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

In proportion as men delight in battles, bull-fights, and combats of gladiators, will they punish by hanging, burning, and the rack.

To show what happens when strong writing is deprived of its vigor, George Orwell once took a passage from the

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Bible and drained it of its blood. On the left, below, is Orwell's translation; on the right, the verse from Ecclesiastes (King James Version).

Objective consideration of contemporary phenomena compels the conclusion that success or failure in competitive activities exhibits no tendency to be commensurate with innate capacity, but that a considerable element of the unpredictable must inevitably be taken into account.

I returned, and saw under the sun, that the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, neither yet bread to the wise, nor yet riches to men of understanding, nor yet favor to men of skill; but time and chance happeneth to them all.

### 17. *Omit needless words.*

Vigorous writing is concise. 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. This requires not that the writer make all sentences short, or avoid all detail and treat subjects only in outline, but that every word tell.

Many expressions in common use violate this principle.

the question as to  
whether

whether (the question  
whether)

there is no doubt but  
that

no doubt (doubtless)

used for fuel purposes

used for fuel

he is a man who

he

in a hasty manner

hastily

this is a subject that

this subject

Her story is a strange  
one.

Her story is strange.

the reason why is that

because