

Elements of Style

Gemma Sapwell, a journalist with the ABC, currently studying Spanish in Mexico has discovered a sure way to identify fellow Australians. She had found clothing a fair guide: 'girls wearing brown Havaiana thongs, denim shorts, travelling in a pack, and sporting blonde highlights' were a good bet for the Down Under brigade.

In *The generation grammar forgotton* on the ABC's *The Drum* (14/01/13) she described a more reliable method. 'It's easy to spot the Aussies', she wrote, 'because they're the ones invariably wearing looks of bewildered terror every time the teacher says a word like 'infinitive' or 'conjunction'. (She meant '... a word such as...' but let's not get picky.) 'They are the ones pacing the yard at lunchtime mumbling to themselves "verb, verb, verb is a doing word".'

These Aussies are, like Miss Sapwell, 20-something to 30-something, and they are 'cursing the Australian education system'. 'What the hell were they thinking not teaching us basic grammar. I sit in class and I'm not even sure what an adjective is.'

'What, exactly, were 'they' thinking', Sapwell writes, 'when grammar was practically wiped from the curriculum in the 70s. It varies from state to state but basically the experts threw grammar out the window and replaced it with the so-called 'whole language' approach, believing it counter-productive to drill students with rules about language.'

Sapwell says she went to school in the 80s and 90s and then onto Uni for a degree in journalism and philosophy, coming 'through the entire education system without being taught how to properly structure a sentence.'

The shock came when she joined the ABC and was told she had to write articles for the ABC's website. Nightmares about people calling the ABC to complain about her English errors began to terrify her nights.

So what did she do? Bless her, she went out and bought a copy of *The Elements of Style*.

First distributed in 1919, *Elements of Style* was recently listed as one of *Time Magazine's* 100 best and most influential books of the 20th Century.

It was originally written by Cornell Professor William Strunk for use at the university and was

formally published in a revised version in 1935. One of Strunk's students, E. B. White, wrote an article about the book in the *New Yorker* in 1957 and was commissioned by the Macmillan publishing house to update a new edition, which they published in 1959 and which has since sold over 10 million copies.

Not everyone is enamored of *Strunk and White*, as the book is informally known. Dr Geoffrey Pullum, professor of linguistics at Edinburgh University and author of the *Language Log* blog, oft-quoted in this column, called it 'the book that ate America's brain'. Nor is he alone in this opinion: Stephen Dodson, in his blog *Language Hat*, called *Elements* 'the mangiest of stuffed owls'.

Many of the objections to *Elements* are to its prescriptivism regarding the use of words such as *however* and *which, shall versus will*, and the like. There's certain pedantry aplenty in *Elements*, but that's the point of grammar, isn't it? They are the rules, and until they are changed by popular agreement (that is, common usage), they are the rules.

More fundamentally though, both critics accuse *Elements* of being incorrect on some basic points, notably the use of active versus passive voice, and intransitive versus transitive verbs.

Elements certainly advises against using the passive voice, not totally but in general, and while aficionados of the passive voice might smart at the derisive tone, the advice is good advice.

'The habitual use of the active voice makes for forcible writing', *Elements* says. '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*'.

It then gives examples of a passive sentence that can be improved by converting it to active voice with a transitive verb. The raging-point for the book's critics is that the examples given are not all strictly correct. (See *Language Log* 25/04/09: *Room for debate on Strunk and White*)

For instance, the passive example of *There were a great number of dead leaves lying on the ground* is not passive. *The ground was covered by a great*

many leaves is passive. *Dead leaves covered the ground* is correctly cited as active voice.

In the same 'passive' list, *At dawn the crowing of a rooster could be heard* is not passive and the suggested active improvement, *The cock's crow came with dawn* does not have a transitive verb.

Supporters of *Elements* – and I count myself among them – take a less pedantic position, albeit with tongue well into the cheek, and suggest that Strunk and White were referring to the sentences as being 'passive-ish'.

Dodson suggested that his annoyance comes from constantly reading how great *Elements* is, with no mention of all these 'errors'. Pullum rumblings, coming from a higher Richter level, insist that these errors have misled generations of students about passive voice, among other things. Maybe, but I think it also helped a lot of them write far better.

Sapwell probably should have also purchased Professor Pullum's *Cambridge Grammar of the English Language*. She says she discovered that *Elements* hadn't provided a complete education when her teacher stated that 'objective pronouns and reflexive pronouns are placed before the conjugated verb'.

(Older PESA persons inclined to language pedantry will have garrumped that, strictly speaking, there is no such thing as a conjugated verb and that, in English at least, both objective and reflexive pronouns should be placed after, not before, the verb.)

Anyway, I do recommend *Elements* to younger PESA persons. It isn't the only book on English you should own but it's a good start and a great guide to writing, even if some of the finer points of grammar are a bit blurred.

My favourite passage is worth the price of the book in itself.

'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 his sentences short, or that he avoid all detail and treat his subjects only in outline, but that every word tell.'

Peter Purcell ■