These are selected essentials of Strunk & White’s style guide, typically quoted, sometimes paraphrased without note. Consider this classic writing advice.

1. **Elementary Rules of Usage**
2. **Form the possessive singular of nouns by adding *‘s*.**

Charles’s friend Burns’s poem the witch’s malice

1. **In a series of three or more terms with a single conjunction, use a comma after each term except the last.**

Red, white, and blue gold, silver, and copper

1. **Enclose parenthetic expressions between commas.**

The best way to see a country, unless you are pressed for time, is to travel on foot.

Dates as follows: February to July, 1972 April 6, 1956

1. **Place a comma before a conjunction introducing an independent clause.**

The early records of the city have disappeared, and the story of its first years can no longer be reconstructed.

1. **Do not join an independent clause by a comma.**

Stevenson’s romances are entertaining; they are full of exciting adventures.

**It is, of course, equally correct to write each of these as two sentences, replacing the semicolons with periods.**

Stevenson’s romances are entertaining. They are full of exciting adventures.

**If a conjunction is inserted, the proper mark is a comma.**

Stevenson’s romances are entertaining, for they are full of exciting adventures.

1. **Use a colon after an independent clause to introduce a list of particulars, an appositive, and amplification, or an illustrative quote.**

Your dedicated whittler requires three props: a knife, a piece of wood, and a back porch.

The squalor of the streets reminded him of a line from Oscar Wilde: “We are in the gutter, but some of us are looking at the stars.”

1. **Elementary principles of Composition**

**12. Choose a suitable design and hold to it.** Writing to be effective, must follow closely the thoughts of the writer, but not necessarily in the order in which those thoughts occur. . . The first principle of composition, therefore, is to foresee or determine the shape of what is to come and pursue that shape. [All forms of writing] have skeletons to which the writer will bring the flesh and the blood. The more clearly he perceives the shape [outlining], the better his chances of success.

**14. Use the Active Voice.**

I will always remember my first visit to Boston. *Is much better than*: My first trip to Boston will always be remembered by me.

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

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

He was not very often on time. *Is not as good as:* He usually came late.

**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. *Not as good as:* It rained every day for a week.

He showed satisfaction as he took possession of his well-earned coin. *Not as good as:* He grinned as he pocketed the coin.

**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. Not that the writer make all his sentences short, but that every word tell.

Phrases to avoid: Replace with:

the question as to whether whether

used for fuel purposes used for fuel

he is a man who he

the reason why is that because

the fact that *several options*

who is, which is *often replaced by comma*

student body *avoid, or* student

**21. In summaries, keep to one tense.** In summarizing the action of a drama, poem, story, movie, song, etc. the writer should use the **present** tense.

1. **A few Matters of Form**

**Colloquialisms**. If you use a colloquialism or a slang word or phrase, simply use it; do not put it in quotation marks. To do so is to put on airs, as though you were inviting the reader to join you in a select society of those who know better.

**Numerals**. Do not spell out dates or other serial numbers. These are correct:

August 9, 1968 Rule 3 Chapter XII 101st Airborne

1. **Words and Expressions Commonly Misused**

**Effect**. As a noun, means “result”; as a verb, means to bring about,” “to accomplish” (not to be confused with affect, which means to influence”).

**All right.** Idiomatic in familiar speech as a detached phrase in the sense “agreed,” or “go ahead,” or “O.K.” Properly written as two words, *all right*.

**Anybody**. In the sense of “any person” not to be written as two words. *Any body* means “any corpse,” or “any human form,” or “any group.” The rule holds equally for *everybody, nobody,* and *somebody*.

**Farther, Further.** The two words are commonly interchanged, but there is a distinction worth observing: *farther* serves best as a distance word, *further* as a time or quantity word. You chase a ball *farther* than the other fellow; you pursue a subject *further*.

**Fewer, Less**. *Less* refers to quantity, *fewer* to number. The express checkout line should read, “Fifteen items or *fewer*.” Use the express lane because it will take *less* time.

**Imply. Infer.** Not interchangeable. Something *implied* is something suggested or indicated, though not expressed. Something *inferred* is something deduced from evidence at hand. For example: Farming *implies* early rising. Since he was a farmer, we *inferred* that he awoke early.

**Personally and respective, respectively**. Often omit these unnecessary words.

1. **An Approach to Style**

By Style, we mean the sound the writer’s words make on the paper. Every writer, by the way he uses the language, reveals something of his spirit, his habits, his capacities, and his bias. This is inevitable as well as enjoyable. All writing is communication; creative writing is communication through revelation—it is the Self escaping into the open. No writer long remains incognito.

Strunk & White take a famous quote, “These are the times that try men’s souls,” and offer options:

Times like these try men’s souls.

How trying it is to live in these times.

These are trying times for men’s souls.

Soulwise, these are trying times.

Thomas Paine could have used any of these because no fault of grammar prevents any one, yet all in this list seem marked for oblivion.

**Revise and rewrite**. Revising is part of writing . . . This is a common occurrence in all writing, among the best writers.

**Do not overwrite**. Rich, ornate prose is hard to digest, generally unwholesome, and sometimes nauseating.

**Do not overstate**. When you overstate, the reader will be instantly on guard . . . suspect because he has lost confidence in your judgement.

**Avoid use of qualifiers**. *Rather, very, little, pretty*—these are the leeches that infest the pond of prose, sucking the blood of words.

**Do not affect a breezy manner.** The volume of writing is enormous these days, and much of it has a sort of windiness about it, almost as though the author were in a state of euphoria . . . The breezy style is often the work of an egocentric, the person who imagines that everything that pops into his head is of general interest and that inhibited prose creates high spirits and carries the day. Strunk and White recommend conventional, compact, informative, unpretentious style. Keep a tight rein on your material and stay out of the act.

**Avoid fancy words**. Avoid the elaborate, the pretentious, the coy, and the cute. Do not be tempted by a twenty dollar word when there is a ten-center handy, ready, and able. . . . The line between the fancy and the plain, between the atrocious and the felicitous, is sometimes alarmingly fine. The opening of the Gettysburg address is close to the line, by today’s standards, and Mr. Lincoln, knowingly or unknowingly, was flirting with disaster when he wrote “Four score and seven years ago.” “Eighty-seven” would have worked and would have put less strain on the listeners’ powers of multiplication. Yet, something told him to use his phrase, and by doing so, he achieved cadence while skirting the edge of fanciness. “Eighty-seven” might have been bad timing.

**Do not explain too much**. Give your reader the courtesy and credit of intelligence and deduction.