

## Once Upon a Column

*We die. That may be the meaning of life.  
But we do language. That may be the  
measure of our lives.*  
— Toni Morrison, Nobel Prize Lecture,  
Literature, 1993

Toni Morrison's epigraph appeared in the first column I wrote for *Science Editor*. In revisiting her memorable words in this one, I first want to assure readers that the reason the Word Hawk is laying down his pen is not that I hear footsteps closing on me from behind.

No, I'm very much in good health. But doing language—doing it well—is an exacting and time-consuming act. It requisitions the utmost from us in energy, focus, and judgment. More than qualities, these are *quiddities*—spirit beings almost—that a writer or editor must summon when addressing the printed page, a sanctum to which one must not come lightly, to paraphrase Stephen King.<sup>1</sup> Good writers don't write words, they bleed them.

People who receive bad news from a doctor often say that they feel lucky to have had some warning so that they can get their affairs in order. As I get older and things take longer, I see the point more clearly. I have a lot of tidying up to do over the next 20 or 30 years so that those who follow will not be forced to back a dump truck to my front door and take a shovel to it all. Following the disastrous 1989 San Francisco earthquake, safety officials allowed the families in the hard-hit Marina District 10 minutes to enter their homes to salvage whatever they could. They did not emerge with china, TV sets, or musical instruments; the items of first choice were photo albums—universally.

These days, we are all shackled by the same electronic handcuffs. Merely digitizing all the thousands of family photos and genealogy papers that lurk in the big black trunk in my garage will demand hundreds of hours over several years. Keeping three computer systems current, backed up, and purring away virus free exacts untold hours weekly as it is. Then there's that population of CDs and DVDs that seems to be multiplying on the back corner of my desk

faster than the broomsticks of the *Sorcerer's Apprentice*. . . .

It's not that I'm giving up writing and editing—that work continues—but the proportion of writing to editing seems to be tilting in favor of the latter. A science-writer colleague has suggested that an augmented collection of these essays might some day be in order. Maybe, but first the Word Hawk needs some time to push his grand-chicks about on trikes.

**"Strunk and White" Turns 50.** *The Elements of Style (TEOS)*, by William Strunk Jr, as updated and enlarged by E B White, first saw print on 16 April 1959.<sup>2</sup> The Word Hawk cannot let the anniversary pass into history without commenting on it and coming to the book's defense.

In 1918, William Strunk, a professor at Cornell University, distilled into print 43 pages of principles on how his students could improve their writing and had them privately printed at the press of W P Humphrey in Geneva, New York. He used the result in his English classes for years afterward. One of his (subsequently) most illustrious students was E B White, the brilliant essayist for the *New Yorker* and the author of such enduring—and endearing—literary gems as *Charlotte's Web*, *The Trumpet of the Swan*, and *Stuart Little*.

Strunk's "little book", as he liked to call it, spawned some very big writers. Search the memoirs of the most renowned American writers of the last century and time after time you'll find mention of *TEOS* and how important an influence on them it was. Still in print 50 years after E B White revised it and expanded it to 71 pages and Macmillan first published it, *TEOS* has gone through four editions over 5 decades and sold more than 10 million copies. Rereading it just now in preparation for this "swan column" reminds me again how justified its success has been. If the craft of writing had a Mount Rushmore, Strunk's face would be Washington.

It was for that reason that I was not just surprised but aghast at Professor Geoffrey K Pullum's article in the 17 April 2009 *Chronicle of Higher Education* titled "50 Years of Stupid Grammar Advice".<sup>3</sup>

Before I proceed, I should state that Geoffrey K Pullum is head of linguistics and English language at the University of Edinburgh and coauthor (with Rodney Huddleston) of *The Cambridge Grammar of the English Language (CamGr)* (Cambridge University Press, 2002). Written over 12 years with the help of 13 distinguished associate authors, *CamGr* has garnered both high praise and spirited criticism for its exhaustive (1860 pages) description of the grammar of the English language at the start of the 21st century.

Prof Pullum dismisses *TEOS*'s advice variously as "vapid", "tautologous", "useless", and a "toxic mix of purism, atavism, and personal eccentricity". He summarizes the book as "a bunch of trivial don't-do-this prescriptions" and calls Strunk and White "a pair of idiosyncratic bumlbers" and "grammatical incompetents" who have produced a collection of "limp platitudes" and "inconsistent nonsense". In a later blog entry, he referred to *TEOS* as "the book that ate America's brain".

Wow! Someone forgot to give the good professor his grouch pill that morning.

But wait a minute. Read his article and you will see that Pullum attacks *TEOS* primarily as a failed grammar text, whereas S&W intended it as a book on writing style. (What was their title again? *The Elements of . . . Grammar?*)

Prof Pullum seems to have heard a knock on the door and answered the telephone instead. Nowhere in the entire 1918 edition does Will Strunk use the word *grammar*—not once. The word *style* appears many times, of course—for that was the book's subject. The word *usage* appears several times, and you can also find *rhetoric*. *Grammar* does appear six times in the 1959 *TEOS* as amended and "slightly enlarged" by E B White, but in only one case does White call Will Strunk's 1918 principles "grammar rules", an unfortunate—and inaccurate—choice of words. White's other references in the 1959 version use the word *grammar* only in passing and not as descriptions of the rules themselves.

A careful reading will show that Will Strunk did not intend *TEOS* as a gram-

mar text—ever. Strunk did not even list a grammar text among the "further study" references in his 1918 book, the assumption being, I suppose, that he expected his students to come to Cornell with their grammars of choice in their baggage alongside their tennis racquets and raccoon coats or having already mastered the subject in—what did they call them back then?—*grammar* schools?

No, Strunk was not trying to teach them grammar; he was trying to teach them how to *write*. If the authors' work was misappropriated and misused by two generations of instructors as a grammar text, is that S&W's fault? Besides, how do we know what supporting grammar texts appeared in the syllabi of all those English and writing courses down all those years? And is it possible that the reason *TEOS* sold 10 million copies during 50 years—and no grammar book did—is that it's just plain *good* at the function it performs, that is, improving one's writing?

I *do* share a few quibbles with Prof Pullum. Here is one: Pullum waxes wroth over three of the authors' examples in Chapter 14, "Use the Active Voice". For example, Pullum is correct in insisting that *There were a great number of dead leaves lying on the ground* is not an example of passive voice. (The *there were* construction is an example of a syntactic expletive, also known as a dummy subject, not of the passive voice.) S&W suggest that the sentence be changed to read *Dead leaves covered the ground*. The authors criticize the original as an example of a "tame sentence of description". It uses a "perfunctory expression" that can be made "lively and emphatic" by invoking "a transitive [verb] in the active voice". All true.

The first *dead leaves* sentence clearly has no place in crisp writing, but not because of passive voice, and S&W should not have cited it as an example thereof. Rather, they should have placed *dead leaves* and its emended version in another chapter that they might have called "Liveliness and Emphasis". They might alternatively have folded it into the existing "Omit Needless Words". Probably the simplest

alternative would have been to retile the chapter "Use Direct Discourse". The same observations apply to the three examples that follow *dead leaves*.

What I'm saying is that S&W are to be criticized for the faulty subordination of their subject, not for their poor understanding of grammar. Will Strunk and E B White were right in their thinking, but here at least, they erred in organizing it. Geoffrey Pullum erred by reading S&W's misorganization—or that of their editors—as evidence that they did not know their grammar.

Truman Capote once reviewed an early draft of Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* and sniffed, "That's not writing; it's typing"—the point being that a successful work of English must be distinguished from its component parts, only *one* of which is grammar. To quote E B White in the 1959 *TEOS*, "Style takes its final shape more from attitudes of mind than from principles of composition, for as an elderly practitioner once remarked, 'Writing is an act of faith, not a trick of grammar.'"

It was to that point that Strunk and White addressed themselves, and it is precisely that point that Prof Pullum overlooks. Perfect grammar does not perfect writing make, although when you view the whole world of English through the lens of grammar, as Pullum appears to, perhaps it can seem that way. Judging from this article, it appears to me that he can't tell his asyndeton from his elbow.

**Chuckle of the Month.** A colleague recently asked me to submit a short summary of my life as an editor. I drafted something and decided I would sleep on it before giving it a final polish the next morning. I was jolted awake a few hours later, my brain buzzing with an off-center epitaph instead of a biography:

H · E · R · E · L · I · E · S

Robert E Johnson

Grammarian

All his life

He looked down his nose

And when it was over

He turned up his toes.

**The Hawk's Last Squawk.** Toni Morrison begins her 1993 Nobel Prize lecture with the words "Once upon a time. . . ." She then tells the story of a wise old woman who falls prey to a prank. Some bratty children knock at her door and, knowing she is blind, ask her whether the bird they hold captive in their hands is dead or alive. After an awkward silence during which the visitors grow increasingly amused, she at last responds. "I don't know," she says finally; "I don't know whether the bird you are holding is dead or alive, but what I *do* know is that it is in your hands."

Ms. Morrison goes on to analogize the bird as *language*, and the wayward children as writers. (I think editors also qualify.) At the end of their visit, and by now feeling abashed, the children reveal to the old woman that they held nothing in their hands when they came to her door.

Ms Morrison concludes her parable of the bird, the visitors, and the old woman this way: "It's quiet again when the children finish speaking, until the woman breaks into the silence. 'Finally,' she says. 'I trust you now. I trust you with the bird that is *not* in your hands, because you have truly caught it.

"Look! How lovely it is, this thing we have done—together."

I thank the subscribers to *Science Editor* for their interest in my columns over the last 5 years. Many have sent greetings, suggestions, complimentary messages, and words of encouragement, for all of which I am grateful. Special thanks are due Barbara Gastel, the editor, and Norman Grossblatt, the manuscript editor. Their patience, tact, and thoughtful guidance were crucial to any success these musings have enjoyed. Being an editor as well as a writer, I know that the role editors play in getting something

published is often never acknowledged and often underappreciated when it is.

### References

1. King S. On writing: a memoir of the craft. New York: Scribner; 2000.
2. Strunk W Jr, White EB. The elements of style. New York: Macmillan; 1959.
3. Pullum GK. 50 years of stupid grammar advice. Chron High Educ. 2009 Apr 17;55(32):B15. [Internet] [Cited 4 July 2009]. Available at: [chronicle.com/free/v55/i32/32b01501.htm](http://chronicle.com/free/v55/i32/32b01501.htm).

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CSE Annual Meeting:  
**The Changing Climate of Scientific Publishing—  
 The Heat Is On**  
 14–18 May 2010  
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