

Four Lessons Learned From E.B. White

Guest Post from Zack Crockett

“There is a secret joy in discovering a blunder in the public prints. Almost every person has a little of the proofreader in him.”

Most remember E.B. White as the celebrated author of *Charlotte’s Web* – and with good reason. It would be difficult for anyone who has read the 1952 classic to forget the rambunctious piglet, Wilbur, and his unlikely guardian spider-angel.



But adorable talking animals were far from White’s most important subjects. He was a fixture at the *New Yorker* for nearly five decades, where he dryly critiqued everything from corporate greed to misprints in major publications. In the late fifties, he scrupulously updated William Strunk Jr.’s *The Elements of Style*, which has since become the most circulated grammar reference in print. His lifetime of work earned him both a Pulitzer Prize and the Presidential Medal of Freedom.

So, what can aspiring grammarians learn from E.B. White today?

1. Good grammar opens the doors to creative freedom.

“A schoolchild should be taught grammar for the same reason that a medical student should study anatomy. Having learned about the exciting mysteries of an English sentence, the child can then go forth and speak and write any damn way he pleases.”

- *Writings from The New Yorker, 1927-1976*

In his introduction to *The Elements of Style*, White admits that some of the best writers of our time “disregard the rules of rhetoric.” He then quickly admonishes that an author must first “write plain English adequate for everyday [use].” To put this simply, once the core basics of grammar and style are mastered, they can be applied creatively to no end. It is infinitely more difficult to exercise verbal freedom without an understanding of how the English language functions on a rudimentary level.

2. Your published work is a permanent reflection of who you are as a writer.

“A man who publishes his letters becomes a nudist – nothing shields him from the world’s gaze except his bare skin...a man who has written a letter is stuck with it for all time.”- Letter, June 11, 1975.

Admittedly, online publishing has changed the definition of permanency – we can now easily modify and edit our work in real-time – but White’s caveat remains relevant. Once you submit any form of writing (email, essay, blog post) to its intended audience, it sets a precedent for your writing ability. Poor grammar signifies carelessness and has the potential to detract attention from your overall message. More than a mere set of rules, grammar plays a key psychological role in how your writing is interpreted and communicated. Have you ever written a beautiful paragraph, only to be criticized for a commonplace misspelling or a dangling participle? Readers notice bad grammar; moreover, they use it as a platform to assess your published work as a whole.

3. Calculated grammar usage exudes confidence.

“Commas in The New Yorker fall with the precision of knives in a circus act, outlining the victim.” – Interview, Paris

If you think the Internet is heavily patrolled by grammar police, consider print publications. In *The New Yorker*’s office, misappropriated commas are a cause for major concern. Grammatical perfection is a standard expectation of most published writers, and is every bit as important as content. Whether you are writing something professional, academic, or artistic, sloppy syntax will detract from your credibility. E.B. White endorsed meticulous proofing, and so should you. Precise, exacted punctuation exudes confidence, and confidence is a core staple of good writing.

4. Grammatically acute writing requires time and composure.

“Never hurry and never worry!” - Charlotte’s Web

Charlotte imparts this wisdom on the piglet protagonist, regarding his plan to avoid becoming a Christmas dinner. In a similar vein, adhering to this adage can spare you from the editorial slaughter poor grammar will induce. This advice is especially applicable to emails, which often require an expedient response. The overwhelming majority of simple grammar errors can be avoided by simply taking a few extra minutes to re-read your work. Trust Charlotte: your intended recipient would much rather wait a little longer for your response than receive an unintelligible mess of words.



Zack Crockett is a San Francisco-based storyteller with extensive experience in traditional publishing and new media/journalism. In addition to being an avid grammarian, he spent a year in South America tracking traditional artisans, organized a Guinness World Record flashmob, and has been featured in The Huffington Post, Sacramento Bee, and Pricconomics. He’s also a musician and mountaineer, and has hiked through the Sierras and Patagonia with an array of stringed instruments strapped to his pack.