

Strunk and White and Progressive Education
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IWAC Conference 2016
June 23-25, Ann Arbor, MI

Maybe you have seen *The Open Syllabus Project*, a searchable database of over a million syllabuses from English speaking countries that shows what texts teachers across the disciplines assign students. Strunk and White's handbook *The Elements of Style* has the current distinction of being the number one most-assigned book. This at least should give us pause to wonder why this writing handbook tops the list of all texts assigned. What is its popularity all about?

What I want to share with you today is a little bit of my ongoing historiography of TEOS, how three different editions responded to innovations in the teaching of writing during two different decades. In 1934 Strunk was a seasoned professor of English at Cornell--by discipline, a philologist. In collaboration with a graduate student, Edward A. Tenney, he markedly revised his originally self-published version of *The Elements of Style* to make room for current transactional pedagogies and a more rhetorical sense of grammar. In 1972 and 79, White responded to the ways language values were changing and impacting the textbook market by resisting his publisher's suggested pedagogically relevant updates. Understanding key differences between the ways Strunk and White each approached the instability of language might help us to think about how and why we authorize academic discourse across the academy. At nearly a hundred years of age, what does *The Elements of Style* tell us about language values across time--what gets saved and passed along, what gets erased, and what new connections and reconfigurations are created?

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In June of 1971 E.B. White was commencing a revision of the 1959 first edition of *The Elements of Style* by listing words to add to the “Commonly Misused” section. He wrote to Tony English, his Macmillan editor, of “new horrors, like ‘oriented’ and ‘thrust’ and ‘relevant’ and ‘hopefully’” (*Letters* 571). He had written a year prior about his feelings toward the word “hopefully” as “beyond recall...here to stay like pollution and sex and death and taxes” (*Letters* 544). It’s a wonder, really that Macmillan ever talked White into creating a bestselling style guidebook. White’s concept of style is that learning it is “high myster[y], navigation by “stars that are disturbingly in motion” (*TEOS* 1959 66)-- an indication that he feels it is part of a certain habitus, an inheritance of style as social identity, not something that can be explicitly taught.

The second and third editions of *TEOS* arrived in 1972 and 1979, into a volatile decade in education culture, one that began in the preceding decade with vigorous questioning of such an insular language status quo for which White was the standard-bearer. With *A Nation At Risk* in 1983, the long 1970s ended and a third edition of *TEOS* was a companion to this policy-underwritten reiteration of that status quo. In 1972, just over the horizon were both the 1974 CCCC “Resolution on Students’ Right to Their Own Language” and *Newsweek*’s 1975 cover story “Why Johnny Can’t Write.” As the field of composition declared the notion of a standard American dialect a myth, the College Entrance Examination Board was clocking declining verbal SAT scores. As in other “literacy crises,” changing college populations in the era of open admissions challenged the idea of who the college student was, pressuring the white center of the academy. Speaking for that white center, White declared the genteel choreography of standard English in rule number one of his chapter “An Approach to Style”: “Place yourself in the background” (second edition 62).. With this, he also speaks for standard English in the way it addresses students from other linguistic practices. Sending some students to the background carries consequences well documented in the fields of literacy studies and composition. In

1981, linguist James Sledd put a blunt point on the stubborn truth of the class and racial entanglements of standard English when he called it simply “the linguistic prejudices, unreasoned and unreasonable of WASPS like me” (Sledd 152).

In 1971, as White was working on shoring up his notion of style, other textbooks published reflected the research of composition scholars who wanted to broaden and complicate the idea of what counts as “writing”. Much of what was published in the 1960’s and early to mid-70’s succeeded in shaking up the central academic English paradigm and its erasures by recasting language from a system of correctness to a set of tools for pluralized expression and revolt. In the journals were scholars like William Lutz who delivered “English as a Happening” as a 1969 CCCC talk inspired by Susan Sontag’s essays on New York City Happenings as staged celebrations of art and openness. Lutz brought the aesthetic of fusion and montage to composition when he called for writing based on “structure in unstructure; a random series of ordered events; order in chaos; the logical illogicality of dreams” (Lutz 35). There was direct talk of class and race and of standard English as stifling order. A 1970 CCC article by William Coles argued for the **sense of “Nonsense as a Design”** while pointing to the injustice of basic English that teaches a writing style of the “specific and concrete” selectively to (in the language of 1970) “culturally disadvantaged students.” () In 1971, as White was editing out Strunk’s choice of model prose by Willa Cather and replacing her with John Cheever, feminist Florence Howe proposed a Writing for Women course in *College English*.

In his introduction to the second edition, White noted his disdain for those other textbooks on classroom shelves, the ones with “permissive steering and automatic transitions” (*TEOS* 1972 xii). In letters to his publisher he spoke of linguists like Sledd as “little men” (*Letters* 416). For the second edition, he rejected four folders of revisions that his Macmillan editor solicited from composition scholars. He did however, accept corrections to mechanical errors from *The New Yorker* staff grammarian, Eleanor Packard Gould who had been holding on to a marked up first

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edition since 1959. Other than that, he made exceedingly minor changes to what was by 1972 a more than fifty-year-old text. To further prove his insularity, he asked Gould for a list of reference books in use at the *The New Yorker*, as he had long since retired to Maine. Most famously, in 1979, for the third edition, he fought with his editor to keep the pronoun “he” as the universal pronoun. After finally agreeing to address its bias, he added the following to the book, sounding annoyed and utterly unmoved by the changes in the culture around him:

“No one need fear to use ‘he’ if common sense supports it. The furor recently raised about he would be more impressive if there were a handy substitute for the word. Unfortunately, there isn’t--or, at least, no one has come up with one yet...” (TEOS 1979 61)

White seemed to feel that he had been trapped into defending what needed no defense. And two years after “Why Johnny Can’t Write” Macmillan was responding to a groundswell of requests from their education market for back-to-skills textbooks. By deferring to their idiosyncratic author, Macmillan capitalized on the Strunk and White brand which had a history of selling well in both academic and trade markets. As a 1959 Book-of-the-Month Club selection, *The Elements of Style’s* first edition had taken its place on an American bookshelf filled with narratives promoting Western values and a cultural stability underwritten by “the whiteness of experts” (Radway). What White protected so fiercely in the 1970s was the stability of that discourse of whiteness --a discourse that claims familiar territory when the unfamiliar looms, refuses to recognize other linguistic practices, other ways of knowing and being.

White chose to embody this tradition in his old professor, William Strunk. Both Strunk and *The Elements of Style* stood, as White saw it, “in a drafty time, erect, resolute, and assured”. In 1972 he seems to speak for the coming eruption of the status quo over threatened linguistic purity when he finds “the Strunkian attitude toward right and wrong a blessing undisguised” (second edition xiii). Catherine Prendergast has observed that in White’s introduction to *The Elements of Style*, which has moved intact across the four main editions, he recruits a memory

of Strunk that supports a primitivist view of style to hold up against 70s transgressions as a “program of moral restitution” (Predergast 16). In fact White constructs the image of Strunk to support his own disgruntled view of an embattled cultural order in which the writer’s weapons are “plainness, simplicity, orderliness, sincerity” (*TEOS* 1979 69).

But William Strunk was not the person E.B. White and Macmillan Publishing want us to think he was. Had Strunk lived to see his name associated with the most reductive and narrowly prescriptive kind of English language usage, one that refuses to acknowledge change in linguistic culture, I believe he might have objected. As an English philologist, Strunk was an out-of-fashion generalist in early 20th century academic culture. His linguistic scholarship was interdisciplinary and sociohistorical and did not mesh with liberal culture’s emphasis on New Critical literary studies that turned away from a text’s entanglements with history and society. By its philological and rhetorical inclusions, a lesser-known 1934 edition of *The Elements of Style*, one co-written by Strunk and Cornell grad student Edward A. Tenney offers a counternarrative to the Strunk White constructs.

A look at the 1934 *Elements of Style* begins two years prior in 1932 when the NCTE published Sterling Andrus Leonard’s groundbreaking usage survey showing “cultivated” (Hartung 521) language usage to be notably more liberal than usage convention in schools. With this move, the NCTE put generally accepted notions of correctness and error up for discussion, in much the same way they were in 1974 when the Resolution on Students Right to Their Own Language was proposed. Both Weeks and Leonard believed, like John Dewey and their own mentor Fred Newton Scott, in the school as agent of a socially just industrial democracy, which contained a concept of language as a way of materially engaging with the world. Weeks, like Dewey, saw schools as agents of social reform, organically involving students in the project:

[S]chools must teach students from all social classes to understand (and be able to direct) the whole industrial, economic and political life of the nation--the “correlations” among the social

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forces which shape (and would be shaped by) the students' lives
(Russell 211).

Weeks also went after school discourse itself for its class affiliations. Leonard's survey polled book publishers, and newspaper and magazine journalists on 81 different issues of usage (NCTE 5). In a Forward to the published survey, Weeks expressed the hope Leonard's survey would marginalize "arbitrary and outmoded textbooks and handbooks" (NCTE vi). With the survey, the NCTE articulated a vision of language as a tool needing to be reconfigured: from a weapon of divisive error control to an organic and unifying social medium.

The 1934 *Elements*--as other writing handbooks of the Progressive Era-- represents an attempt to meet such challenges as the Leonard survey as well as Dewey's theories of experiential learning. Strunk's 1918 text had been 43 pages long, consisting mainly of rules lists. One way the book changed was to reflect laboratory learning, a Progressive pedagogy that encouraged students to self-direct. Separate leaves of paper were sold with the book to be used along with a self-correction guide printed on the inside cover. Another change was the added section on how to write a business letter which shows an attempt to make the writing class and the writing text more practical, rhetorical and transactional. These were not innovations--Strunk and Tenney were simply bringing the text in line with what other current handbooks were doing.

Chapter two is rhetorical and given to a sixteen-page tutorial on "How to Write A Short Essay" consisting of invention strategies, which, as Laura Wilder points out, is how a rhetor goes to the heart of where a community's differences are-- seeking those instabilities as generative. There is a demonstration of how to "Limit the Subject Relentlessly" which seems to be a gentle satire of the kind of decontextualized writing students were usually asked to do. Material on the paragraph has been changed considerably from Strunk's original version by opening the chapter with some historicizing of the paragraph as a convention that "came into being not

because rhetoricians desired to complicate the art of writing but because the paragraph satisfied a need of the human mind.” (Strunk and Tenney 28). This is an inclusion that is philological in spirit, locating the paragraph at its entry into history and attaching the act of composing to some of its material contexts.

Another interesting signal of Strunk and Tenney’s more rhetorical treatment of the handbook is their list of suggested sources at the back of the book.

One book, the 1919 *Modern Punctuation* by philologist George Summey, is an argument for a rhetorical approach to punctuation as part of a larger project of rhetorical education firmly placed against current textbooks with decontextualized rules that had “... practically divorced punctuation from its relation to the larger units of composition” (Summey 4).

Strunk and Tenney added other philological texts--notably, *A New English Dictionary on Historical Principles*, the precursor to the *Oxford English Dictionary*. But I would like to end this talk with an abbreviated look at their inclusion of an *Atlantic Monthly* article “A Dissolving View of Punctuation” from 1906 by Wendell Garrison, a prominent intellectual who made a career of challenging narrow social convention. Garrison, for forty years the editor of *The Nation*, was the son of abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison and son-in-law of one of the founders of the American Anti-Slavery Society. Strunk, by the way, was a reader of *The Nation*. Quotations from its political articles appear in his teaching notes. In this popular article, Garrison pushed back at prescriptive usage conventions by illustrating historical fluctuation in punctuation and by relating the writer’s act of placing points in discourse to the rhetorical canon of style: “...his punctuation...in other words, is personal and individual--”singular, and to the humor of his irregular self.” The irony of course is that Garrison’s audience was a privileged group, though Strunk and Tenney clearly broadened the idea of the reader of that article by including it in their book. Democratic agency over discourse brought by rhetorical education--style as irregular identity---and the freedom to play with punctuation were privileges available to the few who

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could afford an elite education. This history of privilege embedded in language was what Weeks wanted to respond to and hoped to change through language education. Leonard's survey promoted, in her words, a "democratization of usage" (NCTE xvii), conceived not to eliminate all formal structures of writing but to make visible the class hierarchies of usage and to equip all students with the skills to know the arbitrary and gatekeeping from the rhetorical and practical.

Strunk and Tenney's *Elements* saw two other editions in 1935 and 36, a modest little textbook that would have been forgotten had E.B. White and Macmillan not combined talents in 1959 to produce the cultural object known as Strunk and White. It's important to think about these 1930s editions of *The Elements of Style* in the light of White's later resistance to change. Strunk and Tenney's revisions made visible for students some of the rhetorical tools of discourse that had been stripped away in the early 20th Century's decontextualized composition class. If you remember White's description of writing as high mystery and navigation by stars disturbingly in motion, rhetorical tools by contrast, equip students to draw their own map.

White's resistance to new language values and pedagogies continuously reinscribes a gendered, classed and racialized status quo with each edition of *The Elements of Style*. We are in danger of reinscribing that ideology in our courses if we don't stop to think about standard English's elements of style.