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At the Lectern

E.B. White Could Nod Too: Thoughts Occasioned by Reading “Death of a Pig”

Erik M. Jensen

When it was time to write, and he took his pen in his hand, he never thought of consequences; he thought of style. I wonder why I ever bothered with sex, he thought; there's nothing in this breathing world so gratifying as an artfully placed semicolon.—Camille Desmoulins (by way of Hilary Mantel)¹

A few years ago I wrote an item for the *Green Bag*, the self-proclaimed “entertaining journal of law,” that was published as a footnoted letter to the editor. In “Justice Scalia Nodded,”² I reported on a horrible grammatical mistake made by Justice Antonin Scalia, a usually careful writer, in a 2000 memorial on the death of Edward Levi. The Justice was describing a scene at his home when, with distinguished guests assembled, the key to the liquor cabinet was missing: “I will never forget the image of the Attorney General [Levi], the Solicitor General [Robert Bork], and I . . . crawling around on our hands and knees on the living room Oriental rug, feeling for the missing key.”³ The image was great, but the grammatical mistake was jarring: “I will never forget the image of . . . I . . . crawling around.” And it wasn’t only the Justice who nodded with the choice of pronoun; so too did the editorial board of the *University of Chicago Law Review*, where the memorial was published.⁴

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1. HILARY MANTEL, A PLACE OF GREATER SAFETY 237 (1992), *quoted in part in* Larissa MacFarquhar, *The Dead Are Real: Hilary Mantel's Imagination*, NEW YORKER, Oct. 15, 2012, at 46, 48.
2. Erik Jensen, *Justice Scalia Nodded*, 13 GREEN BAG 2D 378 (2010). Footnotes can be off-putting, but using them makes it possible to cite authority without cluttering the text, and it provides a way to expand the discussion of particular points that readers can skip, if they wish, without losing the thread. Besides, if I find something interesting or fun, I want to share it—relevance be damned. If you don’t like footnotes, don’t read them (except this one, which you’ve presumably finished anyway).
3. Antonin Scalia, *In Memoriam: Edward H. Levi (1912-2000)*, 67 U. CHI. L. REV. 983, 987 (2000).
4. I came across the quotation in JOAN BISKUPIC, AMERICAN ORIGINAL: THE LIFE AND CONSTITUTION OF SUPREME COURT JUSTICE ANTONIN SCALIA 61 (2009), and I assumed that Biskupic had garbled the language. I checked, and she hadn’t. (She didn’t *sic* the quotation either, however; I suspect she didn’t see the grammatical atrocity.)

I'm a grumpy old man, and, like all grumpy old men, I assumed the Scalia mistake was attributable to the decline of our grammatical civilization. (Actually, I still assume that.) In the old days, when men were men and Strunk and White roamed the earth, civilized men usually got their pronouns right. Civilized women did too.

Oh, I understood that, even with the Cornell connections (Will Strunk as graduate student and professor, E.B. (Andy) White as undergraduate), and despite the wonderful writers who consider Strunk and White's *The Elements of Style* to be divinely inspired,⁵ Strunk & White isn't flawless. (I'll use "Strunk & White," with the ampersand, and *Elements* as shorthand ways to refer to the little book in its modern form.) In fact, psychologist Steven Pinker recently referred to the "tenuous grasp of grammar" reflected in Strunk & White⁶—for example, characterizing passages that don't involve the passive voice as if they did⁷ and using a clause in the passive voice to criticize use of the passive voice.⁸ And

5. See, e.g., WILLIAM ZINSSER, ON WRITING WELL 36-37 (25th anniv. ed., 2001) (characterizing White as "one of my favorite stylists" and *Elements* as "a book every writer should read at least once a year"); *By the Book*, David McCullough, N.Y. TIMES, BOOK REVIEW, May 31, 2015, at 10 (interview in which McCullough characterizes *Elements* as the book "that made [him] who [he is] today: "I read it first nearly 50 years ago and still turn to it as an ever reliable aid-to-navigation."); STEPHEN KING, ON WRITING: A MEMOIR OF THE CRAFT xvii (2002) ("[M]ost books on writing are filled with bullshit . . . One notable exception is *The Elements of Style*. . . . [E]very aspiring writer should read . . . *Elements* . . ."); Jonathan Yardley, *A 'Little Book' Bursting with the Write Ideas*, WASH. POST, Sept. 6, 2008, at C01 (stating that he has "been a Strunkaholic for almost as long as [he has] been a journalist," and that *Elements* has been his "constant companion" for fifty years); Roger Angell [White's stepson], *Foreword*, in WILLIAM STRUNK, JR. & E.B. WHITE, THE ELEMENTS OF STYLE ix, x (4th ed. 2000) (stating that White's "larger principles . . . help—they really do. They work. They are the way."); Roy Blount, Jr., *Commentary*, in MARK GARVEY, STYLIZED: A SLIGHTLY OBSESSIVE HISTORY OF STRUNK & WHITE'S *THE ELEMENTS OF STYLE* 16 (2009) ("'Omit needless words' is something I have clutched to my bosom since my tenth-grade English teacher turned me on to Strunk & White."). For an intellectual history of *Elements*, see GARVEY, *supra*.
6. STEVEN PINKER, THE SENSE OF STYLE 2 (2014). For a critique of Pinker's critique, see Nathan Heller, *Steven Pinker's Bad Grammar*, NEW YORKER, Nov. 3, 2014, <http://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/steven-pinkers-bad-grammar>.
7. "There were a great number of dead leaves lying on the ground, for instance, is not in the passive voice . . ." PINKER, *supra* note 6, at 2 (quoting STRUNK & WHITE, *supra* note 5, at 19, which gives the italicized language as an example of the passive). I'm citing the fourth edition of *Elements* because I have it handy. Neither Strunk nor White was publishing anything in 2000. (Strunk died in 1946, White in 1985.) Anyway, in parts relevant to this essay—if anything is relevant to this essay—the fourth edition is largely unchanged from earlier editions. The sentence Pinker quotes was in Strunk's privately printed version in 1918. See WILLIAM STRUNK, JR., THE ELEMENTS OF STYLE 21 (1918).
8. "Many a tame sentence . . . 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*." STRUNK & WHITE, *supra* note 5, at 18. That language too can be traced to Strunk. See STRUNK, *supra* note 7, at 21-22 (containing a nearly identical sentence, except that *verb* is used instead of *transitive* and an unnecessary comma follows *there is*). George Orwell did the same thing. See PINKER, *supra* note 6, at 2 (noting that Orwell, "without irony, . . . derided prose in which 'the passive voice is wherever possible used in preference to the active'" (quoting George Orwell, *Politics*

British critic Henry Hitchings asked, with more than a hint of condescension, "Are we really supposed to accept the imperative 'Write with nouns and verbs, not with adjectives and adverbs', when it is followed by the claim that 'The adjective hasn't been built that can pull a weak or inaccurate noun out of a tight place'—a sentence that contains three adjectives?"⁹ Hitchings gave *Elements* credit for only "two obvious virtues: brevity and a low price."¹⁰

Not one for understatement, Geoffrey Pullum wrote that "[*Elements*] is often so misguided that the authors appear not to notice their own egregious flouting of its own rules."¹¹ And piling on, as linguists, especially those of a British persuasion, are inclined to do, Pullum has complained that "William Strunk and E.B. White have a vice-like grip on educated Americans' views about grammar and usage. Yet almost everything they say on *that topic* is wrong."¹² Pullum's bottom line: "*Elements* is a hopeless guide to English usage and has been deleterious to grammar education in America."¹³

Gee, Professor Pullum. *A hopeless guide!? Almost everything they say is wrong!? Deleterious to grammar education!?* I don't begin to understand how American students would be better off if Strunk & White didn't exist. I would be delighted if the little book (or any other style manual, for that matter) really had a "vice-like" grip on anyone (other than me), much less a significant part of the "educated American population." (Better the grip of style manuals than that of reality TV.) But it's absurd to think *Elements* has had that extraordinary effect. Do linguists really think that students, those who are supposed to be in the process of becoming educated, read assigned texts?¹⁴

and the English Language, 13 HORIZON 252, 256 (Apr. 1946), reprinted in 4 THE COLLECTED ESSAYS, JOURNALISM AND LETTERS OF GEORGE ORWELL 127, 131 (1968)).

9. HENRY HITCHINGS, THE LANGUAGE WARS: A HISTORY OF PROPER ENGLISH 185-86 (2011) (quoting STRUNK & WHITE, *supra* note 5, at 71). (The quoted language seems to be White's; nothing similar appears in Strunk's original little book.) Hitchings failed to note that what he characterized as an "imperative" in Strunk & White, the simplicity of which "is really a cover for imperiousness," *id.* at 186, is followed by a not at all imperious passage: "This is not to disparage adjectives and adverbs; they are indispensable parts of speech." STRUNK & WHITE, *supra* note 5, at 71.
10. HITCHINGS, *supra* note 9, at 186.
11. Geoffrey K. Pullum, *50 Years of Stupid Grammar Advice*, CHRON. HIGHER EDUC., Apr. 17, 2009, at B15. Professor Pullum might have rewritten that sentence to limit himself to one "own."
12. Geoffrey K. Pullum, *The Land of the Free and The Elements of Style*, 26(2) ENGLISH TODAY 34, 34 (2010) (emphasis added). Maybe "grammar and usage" is singular, so "that topic" is appropriate, but I wouldn't have thought so. Even if I did think so, I would have chosen different words so that the sentence would appear to be grammatically correct.
13. *Id.* at 43. Yeah, Mr. Pullum, "grammar" and "usage" aren't the same thing, are they? See Pullum, *supra* note 12. I hope you don't gain a "vice-like grip" on grammar in the U.S.
14. Indeed, Pullum claimed that *Elements* has "degraded" "American students' grasp of English grammar." Pullum, *supra* note 11. So Strunk & White is responsible for how awful much student writing is? Pullum can't have been serious. (Oh, he probably was, but his point was preposterous.)

Despite Pullum's hyperbole, *of course* there's much to admire in Strunk & White,¹⁵ as even America's sports pages recognize.¹⁶

Taking *Elements* seriously, reading it critically, doesn't require regarding it as gospel-like. I've always thought of these graceful stylists—White in particular (Strunk is a more nebulous figure today¹⁷)—as models we should emulate. I'm not alone in that regard. The late William Zinsser, author of another terrific style guide, once wrote, "I often read E.B. White to get myself warmed up. I want to get his cadences in my ear—and also his taste, by which I mean his attitude toward language."¹⁸ High praise indeed, and deserved.

We should emulate White, but that doesn't mean he (or Strunk & White) should be immune from reasonable, un-Pullum-like criticism. As graceful a stylist as White was, he sometimes nodded, as Justice Scalia did, and we should hold both accountable for their transgressions. So let's go after Mr. White.

15. And critics overstate the "rules" aspect of *Elements*. See *supra* note 9 (noting critic's characterization of something as an imperative that wasn't imperious at all). Neither Strunk nor White ever suggested that the passive voice should be forbidden. See STRUNK, *supra* note 7, at 19 ("This rule [*Use the active voice.*] does not . . . mean that the writer should entirely discard the passive voice, which is frequently convenient and sometimes necessary."). The point in Strunk & White was that activity *generally* trumps passivity. See CHRIS BAKER & JACOB HANSEN, THE ELEMENTS OF F*CKING STYLE 26 (2011) ("As a *general* rule, . . . active voice makes it seem like you've got a pair of balls and aren't afraid to use them."); *id.* ("The positive form beats the shit out of wishy-washy writing.").
16. See, e.g., Nicholas Dawidoff, *The Obtuse Triangle*, N.Y. TIMES, June 23, 2015, sports sec., at 1, noting the similarities of Tex Winter's legendary book on basketball's triangle offense to *Elements*:

All this amounted to an insistence on efficiency, and as I read it, I heard myself murmur, "Omit needless words." What I held in my hands was not . . . Gödel, Escher, Bach or "The Winner Within." It was "The Elements of Style"—the pithy little book on lucid prose And what was the Strunk-to-White rhetorical give-and-go right there in the prefatory note describing their book? "It concentrates on fundamentals."

- Id.* at 6 (discussing TEX WINTER, THE TRIPLE-POST OFFENSE (1962), and quoting E.B. White, *Introduction*, in STRUNK & WHITE, *supra* note 5, at xiv (an essay first included in the third edition of *Elements*, published in 1979)).
17. He's known, if at all, because of Strunk & White. Strunk's other work, such as critical editions of classics, was of interest only to specialists; he had nothing on his CV like *Stuart Little* or *Charlotte's Web*. See GARVEY, *supra* note 5, at 25. Getting what we now call Strunk & White widely disseminated was White's doing, modifying materials that Strunk had, in 1918, privately printed for his Cornell students. (A commercial version of *Elements* was published in 1920, as were two later editions, little noted nor long remembered, co-authored with a Cornell English instructor. See WILLIAM STRUNK, JR. & EDWARD A. TENNEY, THE ELEMENTS OF STYLE (1934) [hereinafter STRUNK & TENNEY (1934)]; WILLIAM STRUNK, JR. & EDWARD A. TENNEY, THE ELEMENTS AND PRACTICE OF COMPOSITION (1935); Pullum, *supra* note 12, at 34 (reciting the history).) The first edition of *Elements* with White's contributions appeared in 1959, forty years after his graduation from Cornell and thirteen years after Strunk's death. See White, *supra* note 16, at xiii.
 18. WILLIAM ZINSSER, ON WRITING WELL 127 (4th ed. 1990).

Imagine my horror in reading the following passage in "Death of a Pig," an essay White published in *The Atlantic* in 1948.¹⁹ It describes, among other things, the administration of enemas (my apologies to the squeamish) to what turned out to be a fatally ill porker:

The treatment I had been giving the pig for two days was then repeated, somewhat more expertly, by the doctor, Miss Owen and I handing him things as he needed them—holding the chain that he had looped around the pig's upper jaw, holding the syringe, holding the bottle stopper, the end of the tube, all of us working in darkness and in comfort, working with the instinctive teamwork induced by emergency conditions, the pig unprotesting, the house shadowy, protecting, intimate.²⁰

That sentence does go on, doesn't it? One might describe it as, well, porcine. For present purposes, however, it wasn't the size that bothered me. It was the phrase "Miss Owen and I handing him things." Initially (the right word to use with *E.B. White*) I thought White had created a series without using a serial comma.²¹ That may be a pardonable sin,²² but it's contrary to the mandate of Strunk & White.²³ Far worse, I thought White had, like Justice

19. For those who demand a connection between this essay and the law, see *The Laws on Keeping Pigs in the 50 States of the U.S.A. and the Federal Laws from Washington D.C.*, <http://www.raising-pigs.com/wp-content/shop/pig-laws.pdf> (last visited Nov. 13, 2016).

20. E.B. White, *Death of a Pig*, *THE ATLANTIC*, Jan. 1948, at 30, 33, <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1948/01/death-pig/309203/7>), reprinted in *ESSAYS OF E.B. WHITE* 17, 22-23 (1977), and *E.B. WHITE ON DOGS* 89, 97 (Martha White ed., 2013). Zinsser saw the first sentence of "Death of a Pig" as a model for breeziness, a desirable attribute. White began:

I spent several days and nights in mid-September with an ailing pig and I feel driven to account for this stretch of time, more particularly since the pig died at last, and I lived, and things might easily have gone the other way round and none left to do the accounting.

WHITE, *supra*, at 30; *ESSAYS OF E.B. WHITE*, *supra*, at 17; *E.B. WHITE ON DOGS*, *supra*, at 89. Zinsser commented: "Nothing about [that sentence] is accidental. It's a disciplined act of writing." ZINSSER, *supra* note 5, at 232.

21. If I wrote that "my favorite breakfast foods are Wheaties, cornflakes, and Cheerios," the serial (or, in this case, cereal) comma is the second one, the one immediately before the "and."

22. Maybe it's not a sin at all; not every skilled writer uses the serial comma. This unskilled one does because it can clarify meaning, and it hardly ever confuses things. (If confusion would result, *rewrite*.) See MARY NORRIS, *BETWEEN YOU AND ME: CONFESSIONS OF A COMMA QUEEN* 95 (2015) ("[The serial comma] does sometimes prevent ambiguity and . . . I've gotten used to the way it looks. It gives starch to the prose . . ."). Norris objects to calling the serial comma the Oxford comma: "Why does Oxford get all the credit," she asked, just because it's the house style of Oxford University Press? She admits, however, that the Oxford connection gives the serial comma "a bit of class, a little snob appeal." *Id.*

23. See STRUNK & WHITE, *supra* note 5, at 2 ("In a series of three or more terms with a single conjunction, use a comma after each term except the last."). That rule came verbatim from Strunk's original text. See STRUNK, *supra* note 7, at 7.

Scalia, used *I* as the object of a preposition—for which no pardon should ever be forthcoming. That is, I read the sentence as if “the doctor, Miss Owen[,] and I” were all handing things to a talented pig, the Babe of his time, and the three of them were objects of the preposition *by*.

After a moment’s inefficient rereading, however, I realized that “Miss Owen and I handing him things” stands on its own. Only Owen and White were doing the handing—to the vet, not the pig—and the holding. That realization seemed to ease my grammatical pain.

But the relief was only temporary. I tried to figure out what function *I* was serving in the sentence, and I had no idea. I still have no idea.

Suppose only White had been handing things to the vet. Would White have written that the enema was administered “by the doctor, I handing him things”? That doesn’t work, does it? *Handing* and the several *holdings* aren’t verbs, they’re participles, and *I* therefore can’t be a subject. (If it were the subject, the nominative case—*I*—would be appropriate, but it’s not, just as *I* wasn’t a subject in the Scalia quotation.) I suppose one might find an implicit *were* in the sentence—“Miss Owen and I were handing him things”—so that *I* would be part of a compound subject. But that parenthetical clause wouldn’t connect to the rest of the sentence.

Would “Miss Owen and me handing him things” or “Miss Owen and my handing him things” work any better? I think not. *Me* would be as clunky as *I*, and, in any event, I’m not sure how to justify *me* grammatically. (Just because *I* is wrong doesn’t mean that *me* is right.) The possessive *my* would be appropriate if *handing* and *holding* were gerunds and therefore nouns,²⁴ but they’re not.²⁵ Try to diagram the sentence, as we old guys and gals are inclined to do, and neither possibility works.

What should a writer do if words don’t fit in a grammatically coherent way, or if they fit in a way that might be defensible but that’s going to seem wrong to some educated readers? Rewrite! For example, turn the passage into “by the doctor, with Miss Owen and me handing him things,” and the structure is fine—*me* as one of the objects of the preposition *with*, followed by the participial phrase “handing him things.” Or put a period after *doctor*, and start a new sentence with “Miss Owen and I were handing him things.” (That would have the added benefit of chopping an unwieldy sentence down to size.) Maybe you can suggest a better change, but White needed a modification of some sort.²⁶

24. If *handing* and *holding* were gerunds, we would then have to think about whether “Miss Owen” should become “Miss Owen’s,” the possessive.

25. They could be in other circumstances—for example, “my handing the syringe to the vet was gracefully done.”

26. One of the nice things about *New Yorker* copy editor Mary Norris’s *Between You and Me* is her description of usage discussions she has had with prominent writers, many of whom care deeply about the great issues of the day. See, e.g., NORRIS, *supra* note 22, at 104-09 (describing discussions about commas with James Salter and Richard Ford). A reader might disagree

Thinking about how words cohere is something every writer (and reader, too, for that matter) should do. One benefit of diagramming sentences, a staple of English instruction in mid-twentieth-century America, was that it forced students like me to do that thinking. As diagramming guru Kitty Burns Florey says, "When you're learning to write well, it helps to understand what the sentence is doing and why it's doing it and how you can improve it."²⁷ (Apart from the confusing overuse of *it* in that sentence, Burns Florey gets it—sorry—just right.)

Many people today would read that passage from "Death of a Pig," as well as Justice Scalia's grammatically shaky memorial to Edward Levi, without a second thought. They have come to accept, even to require, the use of nominative pronouns where the nominative case doesn't belong. The prime example is the now pervasive "between you and I" and variants thereof—what Mary Norris calls "one of the most barbaric habits of contemporary usage,"²⁸ and what a character in Walker Percy's *Love in the Ruins* long ago blamed on "chickenshit Ohioans."²⁹ Somehow the idea has gotten around that *me* is a word to be avoided, except by Tarzan, even when the pronoun is the object of a preposition or a direct object.³⁰ But, just between you and me, that wasn't

with punctuation in the magazine, but it's reassuring to know that the choices are made thoughtfully.

27. Quoted in Juana Summers, *A Picture of Language: The Fading Art of Diagramming Sentences* (Aug. 22, 2014), http://www.npr.org/sections/ed/2014/08/22/341898975/a-picture-of-language-the-fading-art-of-diagramming-sentences?utm_source=npr_newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_content=20150925&utm_campaign=npr_email_a_friend&utm_term=storyshare. Burns Florey is the author of *Sister Bernadette's Barking Dog: The Quirky History and Lost Art of Diagramming Sentences* (2006). Educational theorists condemned diagramming (just as they have condemned most other practices with educational benefits). For example, in 1985, the National Council of Teachers of English concluded that "repetitive grammar drills and exercises," including diagramming, "are a deterrent to the improvement of students' speaking and writing." Quoted in Summers, *supra*. Writing and speaking certainly have improved with the decline in diagramming, haven't they?
28. NORRIS, *supra* note 22, at 78. Sir Kingsley Amis referred to people "between-you-and-I-ing like an American college graduate." KINGSLEY AMIS, *THE KING'S ENGLISH: A GUIDE TO MODERN USAGE* 102 (1997).
29. The cantankerous Mr. Ives complained: "Did you know that there are three thousand and fifty-one TV and radio announcers in the South, of which [sic] twenty-two hundred are from Ohio, and that every last one of those twenty-two hundred says 'the difference between he and I'? In twenty years we'll all be talking like that." WALKER PERCY, *LOVE IN THE RUINS* 220 (Avon ed., 1971). Whatever the time of events in *Love in the Ruins*—around 1983, maybe—the twenty-year period has passed, and, to the consternation of this Ohioan, Ives's prediction has proved correct. (I'm not convinced the fault lies with Ohioans, but boy did I have trouble years ago—thanks for nothing, Percy!—convincing my grammatically correct spouse that a state filled with chickenshit Ohioans would be a good place to live.)
30. A mistake is most likely when the pronoun is preceded by a noun or another pronoun. Hardly anyone would say "Come with I"—yet—but many now say "Come with Jane [or Bob or Jim] and I," as if the interposition of Jane [or Bob or Jim] should change the case of the subsequent pronoun.

such a big problem in 1948, and, in any event, E.B. White knew better. (Justice Scalia knew better too.)

The passage in “Death of a Pig” is just a mistake. As I noted earlier, Steven Pinker spotted several howlers in Strunk & White, and E.B. White’s granddaughter, Martha,³¹ has pointed out violations of the principles of *Elements* in some of White’s other writings. A few years ago Martha edited *E.B. White on Dogs*,³² a collection of articles and letters about man’s best friend.³³ (That’s where I first read “Death of a Pig,” which has a tenuous canine connection.³⁴ The Whites’ dog at the time, Fred, enjoyed visiting the sick pig and lapping up soapy water intended for the enema.³⁵) Martha White insisted, to her editor’s consternation, on retaining the mistakes and inconsistencies in her grandfather’s published work.³⁶ She wanted the work to reappear in its original form, warts and all.

For example, Martha White wrote that her “editor was surprised to find that the co-author of *The Elements of Style* did not always get his *that* and *which* correct, especially in the early years.”³⁷ For those of you not up to date on this critical issue, here’s some background. Strunk & White urged writers to understand the distinction between the use of *that* and the use of *which* to begin a clause: “*That* is the defining, or restrictive, pronoun, *which* the nondefining, or nonrestrictive.”³⁸ Not everyone would consider using *which* to introduce a

31. I put commas around “Martha” because it’s my understanding that she is White’s only granddaughter. If I’m wrong about that, delete the commas. See *infra* note 45.
32. *Supra* note 20. See also *The Laws on Keeping Pigs*, *supra* note 19 (attempting to get some law into this essay).
33. I dedicate this essay to the late Maxie, the best dog ever and my best buddy.
34. The connection is tenuous, not the canine.
35. Fred was a good lap dog. See White, *supra* note 20, at 32; ESSAYS OF E.B. WHITE, *supra* note 20, at 21.
36. “Our hands-off policy nearly killed [the editor].” Martha White, *A Note to the Reader*, in E.B. WHITE ON DOGS, *supra* note 20, at xx, xxi.
37. *Id.* Granddaughter Martha has her own difficulties, however, which must not have bothered her nerdy editor. See, e.g., Martha White, *Introduction: A Chronic Perplexity*, in E.B. WHITE ON DOGS, *supra* note 20, at xi, xv (noting that “[n]either Fred nor Zimmy were [sic] fond of car rides,” an instance in which a singular verb would have been correct).
38. STRUNK & WHITE, *supra* note 5, at 59. This passage seems to be White’s work alone. Strunk’s original *Elements* did refer to “non-restrictive relative clauses” and “restrictive relative clauses,” and his example of a non-restrictive relative clause began with a “which,” consistent with the rule stated in Strunk & White. STRUNK, *supra* note 7, at 8-9. In addition, what he wrote about comma usage was consistent with such a rule. *Id.* at 10-11. But Strunk didn’t articulate the rule in the form included in Strunk & White. In the 1934 co-authored volume, STRUNK & TENNEY, *supra* note 17, the authors similarly distinguished between restrictive and non-restrictive relative clauses, without mentioning *whiches* and *thats*. *Id.* at 15. But the book has several examples where *which* is used to open a restrictive clause, suggesting that any *that-which* distinction wasn’t important. See, e.g., *id.* at 52 (“The devices to promote effective writing which follow are all forms of competition”); *id.* (“The value of writing a précis . . . resides in the demands which this type of writing makes upon the writer.”).

restrictive clause to be questionable,³⁹ but Strunk & White did. (Questionable, yes; forbidden, no.) And, even though Geoffrey Pullum has bizarrely accused White of cooking the books on this issue—rewriting Strunk’s little book to establish a rule that Strunk didn’t intend⁴⁰—it’s not as though the difference between restrictive and nonrestrictive clauses (and the corollary distinction between *that* and *which*) was something White made up.⁴¹ Nor was it a distinction peculiar to benighted Americans,⁴² although some folks seem to think so.⁴³

“The horse that is in the field eats oats” (no comma after “horse” and “field”) doesn’t mean the same thing as “the horse, which is in the field, eats oats.” “The horse that is in the field” distinguishes that particular horse from others to which the writer might have been referring, maybe the stallion in the barn and the green one (the horse of a different color) watching TV (Mr. Ed, of course) in the family room. In that respect, the clause is defining. In contrast, with “the horse, which is in the field,” we already know which horse we’re talking about. The nondefining or nonrestrictive clause (introduced by *which*

39. See, e.g., Pullum, *supra* note 11 (ridiculing the “rule”); Adam Gopnik, *Rules*, in GARVEY, *supra* note 5, at 53 (“I was educated enough by my parents to know that the Strunk stuff is based on a fallacy—the idea that there’s an inherently right way to use *that* and an inherently wrong way to use *which*, and so on. Anybody who studies language knows that’s just not true.”). Preserve us from “anybody who studies language.” If you want impenetrable prose (why would you?), try reading a linguistics text.
40. “White altered the sentences in the original book to avoid revealing that his mentor had never followed any rule banning restrictive *which*. This looks like deliberate concealment of evidence . . . I see no way to regard this as anything but outright duplicity.” Pullum, *supra* note 12, at 43. It’s bizarre to suggest co-author White had no right to modify the text, and it’s disingenuous to suggest Strunk & White bans much of anything. See *supra* notes 9 & 15.
41. See, e.g., ZINSSER, *supra* note 5, at 74-75 (treating the distinction as important).
42. See, e.g., H.W. FOWLER & F.G. FOWLER, *THE KING’S ENGLISH* 88 (3d ed. 1931) (“The few limitations on ‘that’ and ‘who’ about which every one is agreed all point to ‘that’ as the defining relative, ‘who’ or ‘which’ as the non-defining.”); *id.* at 89 (“‘That’ should never be used to introduce a nondefining clause . . .”). The Fowlers saw exceptions, to be sure, when *which* may be used as a defining relative, but the distinction rose, in their view, to the level of a principle. See also AMIS, *supra* note 28, at 226 (“When a relative pronoun is required, the rule is that defining clauses are introduced by *that*, and others, non-defining or informative ones, by *which*. If this sounds horrible, just keep repeating *This is the house that Jack built* . . ., not the one that anyone else built.”). *But cf.* H.W. FOWLER, *A DICTIONARY OF MODERN ENGLISH USAGE* 635 (1926):

[I]f writers would agree to regard *that* as the defining relative pronoun, and *which* as the non-defining, there would be much gain both in lucidity and in ease. Some there are who follow this principle now; but it would be idle to pretend that it is the practice either of most or of the best writers.

You can decide whether that last clause is consistent with what the Fowlers said in *The King’s English*, *supra*.

43. See Heller, *supra* note 6 (referring to “conventions enforced only in American English,” like the *that-which* distinction). *But see supra* note 42 (quoting Brits Fowler, Fowler, and Amis).

and set off by commas) describes where that singular horse is. The commas help with the meaning,⁴⁴ and they would also help get the phrasing right if the words were read aloud. With a comma, pause for an instant. Without a comma, don't.⁴⁵

For what it's worth, I think the distinction is valuable: It encourages the writer to get the meaning clear—and to get the punctuation right too, which helps in clarifying meaning. Following the rules—call them “guidelines” if you wish—further clarifies, and clarity is something to be valued (*passive voice alert!*) in writing and speaking,⁴⁶ or so one hopes.

44. “A *which* clause goes inside commas. A *that* clause doesn't.” PATRICIA T. O'CONNOR, *WOE IS I: THE GRAMMARPHOBE'S GUIDE TO BETTER ENGLISH IN PLAIN ENGLISH* 3 (2d ed. 2003). Commas matter. See *West Jefferson v. Cammelleri*, 2015-Ohio-2463, 2015 Ohio App. LEXIS 2365 (Oh. Ct. App. 12th Dist. 2015) (vacating a parking ticket conviction—Cammelleri left her pickup on the street for an extended time—under an ordinance making it unlawful to park “upon any street . . . in the Village, any motor vehicle camper, trailer, farm implement and/or non-motorized vehicle for a continued [sic] period of twenty-four hours”). Cammelleri's pickup would have been covered had there been a comma after “motor vehicle,” as village officials had apparently intended. But the pickup wasn't a “motor vehicle camper.” See also Erik M. Jensen, *A Comment on Commas*, GREEN BAG ALMANAC AND READER 2012, at 559 (discussing a *New York Times* book review in which a highlighted sentence had its meaning turned upside down because the commas were wrong).
45. The same point as it relates to punctuation can be made (*uh-oh, the passive voice again!*) without the *whiches* and *thats*. If Brigham Young had been careful with grammar (he wasn't), and if he had wanted to refer to his wife named Amelia (I believe there was only one, but who knows?), he might have written “my wife Amelia loves me,” with no comma after “wife” and “Amelia”—and no pause between the words. He would have been distinguishing Amelia from many other wives—*defining* Amelia. Had he had only one wife, the correct usage would have been “my wife, Amelia, loves me.” My wife—pause—Amelia—pause—loves me. (Young's arrangement was complicated by the fact that many wives shared first names—several Clarissas, Marys, Mary Anns, and Margarets among them. How to deal with that situation, grammatically and personally, is a subject way beyond the scope of this essay.)
46. See Heller, *supra* note 6 (“English is complex. To help reduce ambiguity, modern usage attaches specific words to specific functions. The restrictive-nonrestrictive division between ‘that’ and ‘which’ . . . is one attempt at clarity.”). In a foreword for the *Texas Law Review Manual of Style*, civ pro guru Charles Alan Wright provided great advice:

The rules of usage developed over the centuries are intended to produce clarity. Observance of them lends a professional polish to the product, and this in turn inspires confidence that the writer or speaker is equally professional and equally competent in the substance of what he says.

Any statement of rules necessarily appears arbitrary. There is nothing in the nature of things demanding that “which” be used to introduce nonrestrictive relative clauses while “that” is reserved for restrictive clauses. It is, however, a useful convention, and those who follow it will be more readily understood.

Quoted in Charles Alan Wright, *The President's Letter*, THE ALI REPORTER, Winter 1999, available at http://www.ali.org/ali_old/Rptr_Presltr.htm. Justice Scalia and Bryan Garner wanted the *that-which* distinction to be maintained. ANTONIN SCALIA & BRYAN A. GARNER, *READING LAW: THE INTERPRETATION OF LEGAL TEXTS* 142 (2012). But they characterized it as a grammatical principle “weaker than others.” In addition, since drafters of legal texts often don't follow

Let's get back (finally!) to the editor's concerns about the manuscript for *E.B. White on Dogs*. In the very first sentence of the first reprinted item, a *New Yorker* Talk of the Town piece from 1929, we read about a "little city-bred beagle, that had been beagling all by himself in Central Park."⁴⁷ Under the *Elements* guidelines, the comma after *beagle* is right; the clause that follows is "nondefining or nonrestrictive." But, under those guidelines, the *that* should be a *which* (or, for a good dog, maybe a *who*), and it's hard to see how the sentence was improved (*passive sirens going off!*) by using *that* instead. Another nod⁴⁸—and you can find more throughout the book.

The conventional wisdom is that Strunk was the prescriptivist—the foggy who insisted on following ancient rules of grammar, no matter how stupid—while White, recognizing the permissive direction of modernity and accepting the reality that language changes, was more forgiving. There's something to that idea: Strunk provided the rules (although with more flexibility than he's usually given credit for), and White converted the emphasis to reminders, desirable principles that might sometimes be pushed to the side (*passive again!*).

But the conventional wisdom understates the extent to which White accepted the need for hard and fast *rules*, many of which Will Strunk had set forth⁴⁹ and all of which should be followed (*another alert!*) unless there's good reason not to. (Yes, there can be good reasons in particular cases,⁵⁰ but, when in doubt, err on the side of following a rule.⁵¹) Mark Garvey has explained that, while "*The Elements of Style* was never intended to freeze English in its tracks,"

the convention, "a court would be textually justified in ignoring the grammarian's reading" in interpreting language of a statute or regulation. *Id.* at 143 (footnote omitted). Fair enough.

47. E.B. White, *Dog's Life*, *NEW YORKER*, Apr. 20, 1929, at 17, reprinted in E.B. WHITE ON DOGS, *supra* note 20, at 1, 1. (A Talk of the Town comment had no identified author at the time, but everyone knows White wrote this one.)
48. In any event, those who reject a distinction between *that* and *which* usually do so on the assumption that it's fine to use *which* to introduce a restrictive clause. See, e.g., Pullum, *supra* note 12, at 43. What White did in the quoted passage is different, however. Using *that* to introduce a nonrestrictive clause is, to this grumpy reader, grating.
49. See White, *Introduction*, *supra* note 16, at xiv ("[T]hese rules and principles are in the form of sharp commands, Sergeant Strunk snapping orders to his platoon."). In general, White didn't try "to soften [Strunk's] commands, or modify his pronouncements, or remove the special objects of his scorn." *Id.*
50. Writers must use their ears as well as their brains; sometimes the grammatically correct doesn't sound right. See, e.g., O'CONNOR, *supra* note 44. (Neither "Woe is I" nor "Woe am I" cuts it.) For that matter, Strunk didn't think his "rules" always had to be followed. See *supra* note 16 (noting that the active voice isn't always required).
51. Cf. Heller, *supra* note 6 ("If ambitious writers work at the boundaries of the written language (as they should), then they ought to do it from a path of mastery, not ignorance; broken rules carry no power if writers and readers don't notice the transgressions."). Many who break the rules are not doing so after contemplation. Indeed, they often seem to think they are following rules when they say things like "between you and I."

the changes White made from one edition to the next were far from wholesale and, more than anything else, were focused on restating the argument and its examples in a modern idiom. The glory of Strunk's *Elements*—the whole point of reissuing it at all—was that its core advice was sound.⁵²

As White himself put it in 1977, “Strunk was a fundamentalist; he believed in right and wrong, and so, in the main, do I. . . . Unless someone is willing to entertain notions of superiority, the English language disintegrates, just as a home disintegrates unless someone in the family sets standards of good taste, good conduct, and simple justice.”⁵³ Just so. And rules of grammar provide for consistency—lessening the tendency, in Nathan Heller's words, “to add complexity, ambiguity, and doubt [,][which] is a troubling feature” of at least one Strunk & White critic.⁵⁴

So let's entertain notions of superiority,⁵⁵ and criticize even the saints when they sin. Reading writers like E.B. White critically should help improve our own work, and what higher goal could there be? Oh, I realize I'm being unfair in picking out mistakes here and there. Yes, E.B. White erred on his own, and Strunk and White stumbled in *The Elements of Style* as well. But infelicities can creep into even the most learned works.⁵⁶ And White wrote so much wonderful stuff in his life—as did Justice Scalia. But mistakes should still be called out. In any event, let's not use the masters'⁵⁷ nodding as an excuse for our own. And, for sure, let's not throw out Strunk & White with the enema suds.

52. GARVEY, *supra* note 5, at 41.

53. E.B. White, *Author's Note* (1977), in *ESSAYS OF E.B. WHITE*, *supra* note 20, at 256 (note describing the reaction to White's essay *Will Strunk* (as titled in the *Essays* volume), which appeared as *Letter from the East*, *NEW YORKER*, July 27, 1957, at 35). As a result of this *New Yorker* essay, a publisher asked White to revise Strunk's *Elements* for publication. The rest, as they say, is history: the first edition of Strunk & White appeared two years later.

54. Heller, *supra* note 6 (criticizing Pinker's “rules,” *see supra* note 6 and accompanying text, which rebel against Strunk & White and other style manuals, but which “fight[] pedantry with more pedantry” and, as a result, lose the benefit of consistency).

55. As linguist John McWhorter has said, “Grammar snobbery is one of the last permissible prejudices.” *Quoted in* Georgia Wells, *How Grammar Snobs No U Ain't Mr Rite*, *WALL ST. J.*, Oct. 2, 2015, at A1, A1. Right on, professor!—even if you were being sarcastic.

56. Oh, I didn't make any mistakes here, did I?

57. Yes, the possessive. *See supra* notes 24-25 and accompanying text.