

CHAPTER 2

WHY YOU WON'T FIND THE ANSWER IN STRUNK AND WHITE

STRUNK AND WHITE'S *The Elements of Style* (1959, 2000) long ago attained the status of a classic. Millions of copies sold, countless accolades, including this one from the *Boston Globe*: "No book in shorter space, with fewer words, will help any writer more than this persistent little volume"; and this one from the *St. Paul Dispatch*: "This excellent book, which should go off to college with every freshman, is recognized as the best book of its kind we have." No doubt this praise is deserved if the person using the book already knows how to write; already knows, that is, what a sentence is. For then advice like "Do not join independent clauses with a comma" and "The number of the subject determines the number of the verb" will be genuinely helpful. But if you're not quite sure

what a sentence is (and isn't) and you understand the words "number," "subject," and "verb" but couldn't for the life of you explain how they go together or what an independent clause is, Strunk and White's instructions will make no sense.

In short, Strunk and White's advice assumes a level of knowledge and understanding only some of their readers will have attained; the vocabulary they confidently offer is itself in need of an analysis and explanation they do not provide. And this is true too of the other guides that promise improvement in a short time, like the guide that tells you on the first page that "a sentence is the building block of verbal and written communication" (true; but how is the building done and when does it add up to communication?), and then announces magisterially, but unhelpfully, that sentences "are built with eight different kinds of words called the parts of speech" (Joanne Kimes and Gary Robert Muschla, *Grammar Sucks: What to Do to Make Your Writing Much More Better*, 2007). The eight parts duly follow ("noun, pronoun, verb, adjective, adverb, preposition, conjunction, and interjection"), and all at once the terms the reader doesn't understand have multiplied by eight. With each part of speech comes a list of errors you can, and probably will, make while trying to deploy it; obscurity of reference (what are these things, anyway?) is joined by fear, and the goal of being comfortable with the task of writing recedes into the distance. The very thought of putting pen to paper, an anachronism I find hard to let go of, is enough to bring on an anxiety attack.

I have just reproduced one of the standard arguments against learning to write by studying forms. For decades re-

searchers have been telling us that “the teaching of formal grammar has a negligible or . . . even a harmful effect on the teaching of writing” (Richard Braddock, Richard Lloyd-Jones, Lowell Schoer, *Research in Written Composition*, 1963). I agree if by “the teaching of formal grammar” is meant memorizing the parts of speech or rehearsing the distinction between dependent and independent clauses or listing the uses of the subjunctive. That kind of rote knowledge is merely taxonomic. It explains nothing; students who acquire it have learned nothing about how to write, and it is no surprise when research demonstrates its nonutility.

The conclusion to be drawn, however, is not that focusing on forms is irrelevant to the act of composing, but that the focus one finds in the grammar books is on the wrong forms, on forms detached from the underlying (or overarching) form that must be in place before any technical terms can be meaningful or alive. That underlying form is the sentence itself, and even though it might seem to go without saying, let me say it again: If it is your goal is to write well-constructed sentences, it makes sense to begin by asking the basic and, one would have thought, obvious question “What is a sentence, anyway?” The writing guides certainly offer answers to that question; they say, variously, “a sentence is a complete thought” or “a sentence contains a subject and a predicate” or “sentences consist of one or more clauses that bear certain relationships to one another” (Anita K. Barry, *English Grammar: Language as Human Behavior*, 2002). But, far from being transparent and incisive, these declarations come wrapped in a fog; they seem to skate on their own surface and simply don’t go deep enough.

And what can I offer that will go deeper? Well, my bottom line can be summarized in two statements: (1) a sentence is an organization of items in the world; and (2) a sentence is a structure of logical relationships. The first statement is insufficiently helpful because it is overbroad: lists, dictionaries, encyclopedias, library card catalogues, bedroom bureaus, and file cabinets also organize items in the world. What is distinctive about the organization a sentence performs? The answer is given in statement (2); it is a *logical* organization, an assertion that is also overbroad, but one that can be refined and narrowed with the help of an exercise. Look around the room you are now in and pick out four or five items. Then add a verb or a modal auxiliary (would, should, could, must, may, might, shall, can, will). Finally, make a sentence out of what you have. (You will of course have to add words.) My list is "pen," "chair," "garbage can," "printer," and "shall," and my first try at a sentence is "Before using the printer I shall remove the pen from the chair and throw it in the garbage can." Other sentences might be, "I shall move the garbage can so that I can pull the chair up to the printer and have access to my pen," or "I shall set the printer on the chair and get my pen out of the garbage can."

Notice first that the number of sentences that could be made out of these components is theoretically infinite. Or, to put it another way, any number of contents (little stories or narratives) can be fashioned out of these meager materials. We shall return to the question of content—what exactly it is and what its relationship to form is—but first I want to pose an apparently simple question: What is it that we do when we make

a sentence out of a random collection of words? What is it that we add to those words that causes them to form something we recognize as a sentence? The answer can be given in a single word, and that word is "relationships." In my third sentence—"I shall set the printer on the chair and get my pen out of the garbage can"—each of the words in the original list now exists in a logical relation to the others. "Shall" is now joined to a verb, "set," to form an action; "printer" is now the object of that action, which is performed by "I"; "chair" is now part of a prepositional phrase (a phrase temporally and spatially relating objects to one another)—"upon the chair"—which names the place where the action of setting occurs. "And" introduces a sequence that is, structurally, a mirror image of what precedes it. "Pen" is the object of "shall get" and "out of the garbage can" names the place where and the manner in which the pen has been gotten. No word floats without an anchoring connection within an overall structure.

A poem by Kenneth Koch captures the exercise, its requirements, and its point:

*One day the Nouns were clustered in the street.
An Adjective walked by, with her dark beauty
The Nouns were struck, moved, changed.
The next day a Verb drove up, and created the Sentence.*

(*"Permanently,"* 1960)

Alone a word is just a word, a part of speech clustered in a category; it looks over at other words it would like to have a relationship with (it's almost a dating situation) but has no way

of connecting with them. And then a verb shows up, providing a way of linking up noun to adjective, and suddenly you have a sentence, a proposition, a little world. "Beautiful Joan sighed." "John was angry." "I am proud." "Crucial decisions await." And on and on forever.

It is important to understand that the relationships that form the sinews and relays of sentences are limited. There is the person or thing performing an action, there is the action being performed, and there is the recipient or object of the action. That's the basic logical structure of many sentences: X does Y to Z. (Sentences can also come without objects, as in "Joe walks.") "Simon bought the car." "The government raised taxes." "The corporation gives bonuses." "Heat parches lawns." The instances are infinite, although the form remains the same (this is a key point, and I shall return to it): doer, doing, done to.

It's not the number of words that renders these and millions of other sentences structurally interchangeable, but the relationships between the words. That is why "Simon drinks slowly" doesn't fit the pattern: "slowly" isn't the object of the action "drink"; rather it gives information about the act of drinking; it says how the drinking is done; it is done slowly. That is what words and phrases that don't point to a sentence's main components do; they give information about them. In the sentence "Before using the printer I shall remove the chair and throw it into the garbage can," "Before using the printer" gives information about when the action of removing occurred, and "into the garbage" gives information about where the action of throwing ends up. In the sentence "Arriv-

ing at the house, I opened the car windows," "Arriving at the house" gives information about the actor "I." Who am I? I'm the one arriving at the house. In the sentence "Determined to win, he laid down a hard body block," "Determined to win" gives information about the person who lays down the block. "Hard" gives information about the body block. What kind of body block is it? A hard body block.

Now of course you can give these words, phrases, and clauses technical names. You can call them "prepositional phrases," as I did in the previous paragraph; you can call them past or present participles; you can call them adverbs; you can call them nouns; you can call them adjectives. And you can subdivide these terms and produce ever finer distinctions. But to what end? You can know what the eight parts of speech are, and even be able to apply the labels correctly, and still not understand anything about the way a sentence works. Technical knowledge, divorced from what it is supposed to be knowledge of, yields only the illusion of understanding. It's like being able to reel off the locations on a baseball field—first base, second base, third base, home plate, left field, right field, center field, pitcher's mound—without having the slightest clue as to how they function in a game. You can talk the talk, but you can't walk the walk.

Not only is that kind of abstract knowledge unhelpful, it is often misleading, for it deceives those who possess it into thinking they know more than they do. Nine times out of ten when I ask someone to pick out the verb (the designator of the action) in the sentence "Helping old ladies cross the street prevents accidents," the first answer I will hear is "Helping"

and the second I will hear is "cross." And were I to ask what is the sentence's subject (an unhappy grammatical term because it suggests theme or content), the answer most likely would be "old ladies." People make these mistakes because they think that whenever something they recognize as a noun turns up, it must be the subject of the sentence, or that whenever they recognize a verbal form, it must be the sentence's main verb. They confuse a taxonomy of the parts of speech with an analysis of a sentence's logical structure. The two are entirely distinct. You can't tell anything about the function a word plays in a sentence by identifying it as a noun or a verb. "Old ladies" is certainly a noun (or more precisely a noun phrase), and "Helping" and "cross" are certainly verbal forms, but the subject of the sentence is whatever performs its action, and in this case it is the compound phrase "Helping old ladies cross the street"; the main verb of the sentence is whatever action is being performed, and in this case it is the action "prevents."

A little while back I observed that many people are put off writing because they fear committing one or more of the innumerable errors that seem to lie in wait for them at every step of composition. But if one understands that a sentence is a structure of logical relationships and that the number of relationships involved is finite, one understands too that there is only one error to worry about, the error of being illogical, and only one rule to follow: make sure that every component of your sentences is related to the other components in a way that is clear and unambiguous (unless ambiguity is what you are aiming at). And how do you do that? Not by learning rules, but by coming to know the limited number of rela-

tionships your words, phrases, and clauses can enter into, and becoming alert to those times when the relationships are not established or are unclear: when a phrase just dangles in space, when a connective has nothing to connect to, when a prepositional phrase is in search of a verb to complement, when a pronoun cannot be paired with a noun.

These are all errors catalogued in traditional grammar texts, but the catalogue really has only one entry marked “doesn’t link to anything” or “has too many possible links” or “is off in a corner by itself,” or “stands outside the sentence’s logic” or “undoes the sentence’s logic.” What happens when a sentence goes out of control or was never under control in the first place is that it ceases being a sentence and returns to the state when its parts made up nothing more cohesive than a random list. The exercise I introduced a few paragraphs ago—grab five items out of the air and make them into a sentence—can be reversed and is reversed whenever the components of the sentence you are trying to write seem to be independent of one another. (Hey, I’m an adjective, but I don’t have anything to modify; can anyone help me?) The achievement of organization has been undone, and what is left is (once again) just a collection of unrelated words, like the words standing isolated on a street corner at the beginning of Kenneth Koch’s poem.

How can you tell when that is happening? Just ask. Scrutinize every part of your sentence and ask, “What does it go with?” or “What does it support?” or “What information does it give about some other part?” or “What is it referring to?”—all variations of the master question, “How does it fit

into the sentence's logical structure?" If at any point you can't come up with an answer, you know you're in trouble and you know what the trouble is or at least where it is located, and you can begin to go about addressing it.

Of course this advice can be followed only if you are sensitive to the presence of a problem, if you sense that something has gone wrong. How is that sensitivity acquired? By performing exercises that hone it, like the exercise of making a sentence out of a random list of words. Everyone can do it. The hard part—and the part that will firm up your sense of the logical structure of sentences—is explaining what it is that you have done. The general answer is that you have inserted the words into a structure of relationships. But the general answer is too general to be useful. If the exercise is to be helpful beyond the moment of its performance, you have to step back reflectively and specify what role each word or phrase you have added to the list plays in the formation of a logical structure. You have to be able to say (if only to yourself) things like, "When I added this verb, I made this previously random and stand-alone word into the object of an action," or "When I added this prepositional phrase I located the action in a particular space." Turning this corner will be difficult; it's a lot easier to form sentences than to produce an analysis of your ability to do so. But after a little while and a lot of practice, you will have internalized a grammatical "sixth sense" that enables you first to sense that something has gone wrong and then to zero in on it, and finally to correct it.

As with any skill, this one develops slowly. You start small, with three-word sentences, and after you've advanced to the

point where you can rattle off their structure on demand, you go on to the next step and another exercise. Take a little sentence ("Bob collects coins" or "John hit the ball"), whose ensemble of relationships you are now able to explain in your sleep, and expand it, first into a sentence of fifteen words and then into a sentence of thirty words, and finally, into a sentence of one hundred words—all the while never losing contact with the "doer-doing-done to" structure you began with. And then—here comes the hard part again—tag every added component with an account of how it functions to extend and maintain the set of relationships that holds the sentence, however mammoth or unwieldy it becomes, together.

Here, for example, is the sentence "John hit the ball" pumped up into something unreadable but perfectly formed:

In the middle of the sixth inning of a crucial game in the pennant race, John, the league leader batting third, weakly but precisely hit on the nose the ball pitched with great velocity by the sure-to-be Hall of Fame hurler who had won his last five starts in an overwhelming fashion while going the whole nine innings and who therefore presented an intimidating image to anyone facing him, especially as the shadows lengthened over the mound, obscuring the mechanics of his delivery and rendering it difficult even to see the spheroid as it curved its sinuous way toward the plate, behind which were the umpire, ready to say "ball" or "strike," and the catcher, prepared for whatever was about to happen.

Constructing this monster is easy, and I have found that

freshman students have no trouble doing something similar with the three-word sentences of their choice. Giving an analytical account of how the construction was accomplished takes more work, and would require, for example, coming to see (and explaining) that everything following the word “ball” is a modification of it. What ball is it? It is the ball “pitched with great velocity by the sure-to-be Hall of Fame hurler who.” Everything from “who” to “anyone facing him” modifies or describes or characterizes the hurler (who, we must remember, has been brought in to further specify what ball it is that has been hit). Everything from “especially” to the end of the sentence modifies or fleshes out the intimidating image the hurler presents. And everything remains tethered to the word “ball,” the object of “hit,” the action performed by John, whose biography precedes his appearance in the sentence. Within the overall structure there are all the smaller units, like “as the shadows lengthened over the mound,” and they too have their own internal structure that must also be explicated. (A full analysis of this sentence would fill many pages.)

The more times you perform this exercise, always with different three-word sentences as the base, the easier it becomes, and the easier it becomes, the more practiced you will be in spotting the structure of relationships that gives sense and coherence even to verbal behemoths like this one.