

Pullum on Strunk and White

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1 Inaccuracy

In the first part of the article, Pullum lists several incorrect statements made by Strunk and White on grammaticality and gives evidence that they were wrong.

1.1 Verb agreement

Strunk and White say that *none* should only have singular verb agreement.

- (1) ‘None of us are perfect.’
- (2) ‘None of us is perfect.’

Either are acceptable.

1.2 Pronoun case

- (3) ‘The culprit, it turned out, was he.’

No one uses this.

1.3 Connective *however*

- (4) **However.** In the meaning *nevertheless*, should not come first in its sentence or clause.

Actually it is optional, it is up to you as a writer.

1.4 Singular *they*

What do you do with sentences like (5)?

- (5) ‘I have a job for any boy or girl who thinks they can handle it.’

1.5 Split infinitives

Infinitives are split in SAE, both in formal and informal styles. Pullum cites Curme (1914) as evidence of this.

1.6 Nouns as verbs

Strunk and White don’t like newly formed verbs from nouns, but scheduling, booking, and tabling (a motion) are perfectly fine. Pullum’s advice is to “...use as verbs those words that other people use as verbs.” What about facebook, tweet, google, etc.? How do you feel about them?

1.7 Participles and genitives

S and W think that (6) should be (7)

(6) Do you mind *me* asking a question?

(7) Do you mind *my* asking a question?

S and W actually have the rule backwards, the possessive ('s, or my, his, etc.) was newer and controversial through the 19th century. Again, it seems to be optional.

2 Vanity

If the author of a style manual doesn't like something, it is ungrammatical.

2.1 Modal *hopefully*

White really doesn't like hopefully used as 'I hope,' how do you feel about it? Do you ever use it this way?

2.2 Preposition stranding

Shakespeare stranded prepositions, along with all other English speakers for the past 500 or so years.

3 Inconsistency

Strunk and White didn't follow their own rules in their other writing, or even the Elements of Style itself.

3.1 Actives and Passives

S and W might not have known what a passive sentence is. They gave examples like (8) below, as needing to be put into the active voice.

(8) There were a great number of dead leaves lying on the ground.

They also used lots of passives in their book! Which is fine because it is fine to use the passive.

(9) The book *was known* on the campus as the 'little book.'

3.2 Togetherness and relatedness, adjectives and adverbs

You can look at these examples on your own.

3.3 *That* and *Which*

White had to revise Strunk's old editions of Elements and change *which* to *that* in all of the restrictive relative clauses. And he also used *which* in restrictive relative clauses in Charlotte's Web and Stuart Little.