

The Tortuous Elements of Style

By Dennis Payton Knight

Grammar is not so much learned in a classroom as it is simply by reading. The more you read, the better you use the language. Because of that, some rules are so inherent to native English speakers we don't even know we know them.

For instance, we are likely unaware there is an exact sequence when aligning a string of adjectives. The order is *opinion*, followed by *size*, *age*, *shape*, *color*, *origin*, *material*, *purpose*, and then the noun. There is nothing logical about this rule, but it is as natural and intrinsic to our language as forming sentences.

The phrase, "that lovely little, old, green, wooden box" sounds regular to our ears. Try calling it "a green, wooden, old, little, lovely box," and the listener will wonder where you hail from. While this rigid rule of order comes naturally to native speakers, newcomers to English must be taught it explicitly.

My knowledge of most rules of composition came naturally and, for the most part, I just write without concentrating on conventions. I figure I have poetic license as soon as I draw fingertips to keyboard. If a sentence sounds okay to my inner ear, it gets an A. I'll let a B-grade construction ride on the first draft, expecting to rescue it later. Lesser ones get zapped.

One task that doesn't flow so naturally, and pesters me constantly, is the formation of possessive nouns. What I learned in school, when I paid attention, is that adding an *apostrophe-s* to a noun will make it possessive, as in Chuck's hammer. But when Chuck goes by Charles, which already ends with an s, to make him a possessor, you tack an apostrophe on without another s. Where I get hung up is in pronouncing "Charles'" aloud in the possessive form. If I don't say it as "Charlesus hammer" it won't sound like a plural at all.

Today, I checked *The Elements of Style* by Strunk and White, Fourth Edition. The first elementary rule of usage is a countermanding instruction about the *apostrophe-s*, telling us to use it even if the noun ends in an s. So the possessive form of Erasmus would be spelled e-r-a-s-m-u-s-'-s, and I would pronounce it "Erasmusus". It makes the poor fellow, and me, sound like a nincompoop. Strunk and White then make an exclusion, forbidding us to add an extra s when making possessives out of ancient names, namely Moses and Jesus. No "Mosesus" for them. Instead, they suggest such workarounds as "The Laws of Moses" over "Moses's Laws."

Strunk & White also propose using fewer words, and object, in their terse manner, to overly fancy language. They declare making an adjective an adverb by adding an *-ly* is akin to putting a hat on a horse. They disdain overly, muchly, and thusly. Disgustedly.

I tangledly, diligently worked through their gray reference little booklet. When I got to split infinitives I tiredly threw it in the trash.