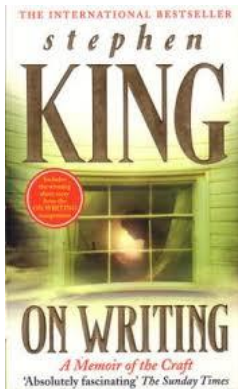


# Books on Writing – The Classics

Reviews by Larry Martin  
President, WLOV

## From March 2017 WLOV Newsletter



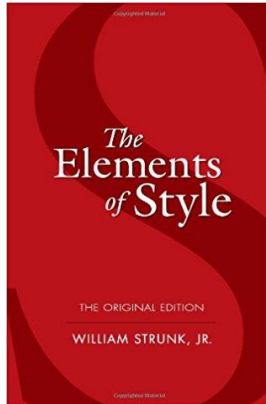
Let's say you only want to read only one How-To book on writing. Which One? There are dozens in print, of variable quality and usefulness. I've read or perused several, and if I had to recommend just one to self-published authors, it would be Stephen King's *On Writing*, which came out in 2000. It's a slim book, and much of it is memoir, written after his near fatal accident while walking on a highway in Maine.

Why is this a good how-to book? First, of course, King is one of the most successful writers on the planet. He's been there, done that. Second, his advice is common sense, something often missing in more detailed how-to books. Third, his advice is for the aspiring writer, and is something most self-published authors – many who came to fiction writing late in their career – should find useful, if not downright sobering.

There is no way to summarize this book, but a few quotes will give you a general idea of his advice.

- The adverb is not your friend...I believe the road to hell is paved with adverbs...
- You should avoid the passive tense...Two pages of the passive voice – just about any business document ever written, in other words, not to mention reams of bad fiction – make me want to scream. It's weak, it's circuitous, and it's frequently tortuous, as well.
- While it is impossible to make a competent writer out of a bad writer, and while it is equally impossible to make a great writer out of a good one, it *is* possible with lots of hard work, dedication, and timely help, to make a good writer out of a merely competent one.
- If you want to be a writer, you must do two things above all others: read a lot and write a lot. There's no way around these two things that I'm aware of, no shortcut...The more you read, the less apt you are to make a fool of yourself with your pen or word processor.
- ...one of the cardinal rules of good fiction is never tell us a thing if you can show us, instead...Well-crafted dialogue will indicate if a character is smart or dumb, honest or dishonest, amusing or an old sobersides. Good dialogue...is a delight to read; bad dialogue is deadly.
- As with all other aspects of fiction, the key to writing good dialogue is honesty. And if you are honest about the words coming out of your characters' mouths, you'll find that you've let yourself in for a fair amount of criticism. Not a week goes by that I don't receive at least one piss-off letter accusing me of being foul-mouthed, bigoted, homophobic, murderous, frivolous, or downright psychopathic...[it] relates to something in the dialogue.

## From April 2017 WLOV Newsletter



In last month's newsletter I wrote about Steven King's book *On Writing*, my favorite 'how-to' book on writing. There are many other books on writing but only a few, like King's, can fairly be called classics. One of these is without doubt Strunk and White's *The Elements of Style*. The book was originally written by William Strunk, Jr., in 1918, and privately published for use at Cornell, where he taught English. It was then published by Harcourt, in 1920. According to Wikipedia, it was comprised of eight "elementary rules of usage," ten "elementary principles of composition," "a few matters of form," a list of 49 "words and expressions commonly misused," and a list of 57 "words often misspelled." This original work, cover shown at left, is now available free on Amazon Kindle.

It was not "Strunk and White" until 1959, when E. B. White greatly enlarged and revised the book. In 2011 *Time magazine* named it one of the 100 best and most influential books written in English since 1923.

Strunk died in 1946. White had been a pupil of his in 1919, and in the 1950s, while at *The New Yorker*, became reacquainted with the manual. Macmillan subsequently commissioned White to revise *The Elements* for a 1959 edition, which was published as *The Elements of Style*, by Strunk and White. The first edition sold approximately two million copies in 1959. Since then more than 10 million copies have been sold. Below is the cover of the 4<sup>th</sup> edition (2000).



In *On Writing* (2000, p. 11), Stephen King states: "There is little or no detectable bullshit in that book. (Of course, it's short; at eighty-five pages it's much shorter than this one.) I'll tell you right now that every aspiring writer should read *The Elements of Style*. Rule 17 in the chapter titled Principles of Composition is "Omit needless words." I will try to do that here."

The 4<sup>th</sup> edition divides the contents into the same categories as 1918, plus a new one added by White when he took over: "An Approach to Style." This section is, from my perspective, the most interesting. A few quotes:

- Write with nouns and verbs, not with adjectives and adverbs.
- Revise and rewrite. Revising is part of writing. Few writers are so expert that they can produce what they are after on the first try.
- Do not overwrite. Rich, ornate prose is hard to digest, generally unwholesome, and sometimes nauseating...when writing with a computer, you must guard against wordiness...It is always a good idea to reread your writing later and ruthlessly delete the excess.
- Make sure the reader knows who is speaking.

Well, you get the point. 85 pages packed full of stuff we should all know -- and practice. If only...

