

SHRI

Strunk's Style for Business Success

Clarity principles for consultants,
founders, and their critical documents



Strunk's Style for Business Success

Clarity principles for consultants,
founders, and their critical documents

Contents

- 01 The Foundation of Plain English for Professionals
 - 02 Precision in Possessives and Punctuation Series
 - 03 Mastering Parenthetical Expressions
 - 04 Conjunctions and Independent Clauses: Joining Ideas Clearly
 - 05 Avoiding Sentence Fragments and Dangling Modifiers
 - 06 The Unitary Paragraph: One Idea Per Topic
 - 07 Active Voice and Positive Statements for Impact
 - 08 Concrete Language and Eliminating Needless Words
 - 09 Sentence Variety and Parallel Construction
 - 10 Keeping Related Words Together and Emphatic Endings
 - 11 Applying Style to Proposals: Clarity for Conversion
 - 12 Applying Style to Emails: Precision for Professionalism
 - 13 Applying Style to Reports: Structure for Impact
 - 14 Sustaining a Clear Writing Practice
-

The Foundation of Plain English for Professionals

Your clients do not read your writing the way you wrote it. They read it between meetings, on a phone, with half their attention, looking for one thing: what do you want from me, and what do I get? If the answer is buried under hedges and abstractions, they do not dig. They reply “Let’s discuss,” or they say nothing at all. A missed opportunity rarely announces itself. It just goes quiet.

This book rests on a small, durable idea. In 1918, William Strunk Jr., a professor of English at Cornell, wrote *The Elements of Style* to “give in brief space the principal requirements of plain English style.” He did not try to cover everything. He concentrated on “a few essentials, the rules of usage and principles of composition most commonly violated.” That restraint is the model for this workbook. You do not need a hundred rules. You need a handful, applied until they become habit.

Why Plain English Pays

Plain English is not simple-mindedness. It is the discipline of making the reader’s job easy. Strunk’s closing advice in his

introduction is practical rather than precious: the best writers sometimes break the rules, but only when “the reader will usually find in the sentence some compensating merit.” Unless you are certain of doing as well, “he will probably do best to follow the rules.” Learn plain English “adequate for everyday uses” first. For proposals, client emails, and reports, everyday use is the whole job.

The Principles This Book Builds On

Strunk’s principles of composition become your working toolkit across the chapters ahead. Here are the ones that matter most for business writing:

- **Use the active voice** (Rule 10). Say who does what.
- **Put statements in positive form** (Rule 11).
- **Use definite, specific, concrete language** (Rule 12). Strunk quotes Herbert Spencer: an abstract word forces the reader to “choose, from his stock of images,” and that costs delay and effort. A specific term “achieves an economy.”
- **Omit needless words** (Rule 13).
- **Avoid a succession of loose sentences** (Rule 14). A series of clauses chained with *and*, *but*, and *so* “soon becomes monotonous and tedious.”
- **Express co-ordinate ideas in similar form** (Rule 15). Parallel structure lets the reader see that parallel ideas are parallel.
- **Place the emphatic words of a sentence at the end** (Rule 18).

Notice how Strunk handles specificity. He shows two versions of one idea. The abstract one: “In proportion as the manners, customs, and amusements of a nation are cruel and barbarous, the regulations of their penal code will be severe.” The concrete one: “In proportion as men delight in battles, bull-fights, and combats of gladiators, will they punish by hanging, burning, and the rack.” You can feel the second one land.

Now see the same instinct in a consulting setting. Imagine a founder who writes: “We will leverage our expertise to facilitate improvements in your operational efficiency.” Compare: “We will cut your invoice-processing time by redesigning the approval steps.” The second tells the client what will happen.

Exercise 1: Audit Your Own Writing

Pull up a real piece of writing you sent in the last month: a proposal paragraph, an email to a client, or a section of a report. Paste or retype its first three sentences below.

Your original text:

Your answer:

Now answer honestly.

What is the one thing you wanted the reader to do or understand?

Your answer:

Does the first sentence deliver it? (Yes / No / Partly) What comes first instead?

Your answer:

Exercise 2: Make It Concrete

Rewrite each vague sentence so a reader could picture it. Invent plausible specifics where you need them; this is practice.

a. “We offer a comprehensive solution tailored to your needs.”

Your answer:

b. “Significant improvements were observed across several areas.”

Your answer:

c. “Our team brings extensive experience to the engagement.”

Your answer:

Exercise 3: Choose Your Verbs

Strunk wants you to name the actor. Rewrite each sentence in the active voice.

a. “A decision will be made by the steering committee by Friday.”

Your answer:

b. “Mistakes in the forecast were made due to outdated assumptions.”

Your answer:

Exercise 4: Chain Reaction

Strunk warns against paragraphs built of clause after clause joined by *and*, *but*, and *so*. Break up this chain by turning at least two clauses into separate or subordinate statements.

“We reviewed your systems, and we found several gaps, so we recommend a phased rollout, and the first phase would begin in March, but it depends on your approval.”

Your answer:

Exercise 5: Set Your Standard

Finish these sentences. They become your personal checklist for the rest of the book.

The writing habit most likely to cost me a client is:

Your answer:

Of the principles listed above, the one I will practice first is ___ because:

Your answer:

One document I will rewrite using this book by the end of Chapter 3:

Your answer:

Before You Move On

Strunk built his book on the belief that once past the essentials, writers “profit most by individual instruction based on the problems of their own work.” This workbook gives you that. Every exercise asks you to work on writing you actually produce.

Keep your answers from this chapter; you will return to them as your standards sharpen.

Precision in Possessives and Punctuation Series

Small marks carry large signals. A misplaced apostrophe in a proposal tells the client you don't check your work. A missing comma in a list of deliverables can change what you've promised. Strunk built his book on the belief that a few essential rules, mastered until they become second nature, cover most of what you need. This chapter takes two of them: forming possessives, and punctuating a series.

Rule 1: Form the possessive singular by adding 's

Strunk's rule is blunt: "Form the possessive singular of nouns by adding 's." He adds, "Follow this rule whatever the final consonant." So you write *Charles's friend*, *Burns's poems*, *the witch's malice*. He notes this is the usage of the United States Government Printing Office and of the Oxford University Press.

In business writing, this means a name ending in *s* still takes 's: *the Jones's account*, *Ms. Williams's budget*, *our boss's approval*. Do not stop at the apostrophe alone because the name "already has an *s*."

Strunk notes exceptions: ancient proper names in -es and -is, the possessive Jesus', and forms such as *for conscience' sake*. Even these ancient forms, he observes, are commonly replaced by an of construction: *the heel of Achilles, the laws of Moses*. You will rarely meet these in a client report, but the of construction is a handy escape when a possessive looks awkward.

One more point trips up even careful writers: **the pronominal possessives have no apostrophe**. Strunk lists *hers, its, theirs, yours, and oneself*. So: *The firm lost its largest client*. Never *it's*, which means "it is."

Exercise 1: Fix the possessives

Rewrite each sentence correctly. If it is already correct, write "Correct."

1. Please review the contract before Mr. Hughes signature is added.

Your answer:

2. The company is protecting it's reputation.

Your answer:

3. Our clients concerns were addressed in the second meeting.
(One client.)

Your answer:

4. The proposal is yours; the final decision is their's.

Your answer:

5. We will meet at James office on Tuesday.

Your answer:

Exercise 2: Your own documents

Think of three clients, colleagues, or companies whose names you write often. At least one should end in *s* if possible. Write a possessive phrase for each (for example, “[Name]’s deadline”).

Your answer (phrase 1):

Your answer (phrase 2):

Your answer (phrase 3):

Rule 2: Use a comma after each term in a series, including the one before the conjunction

Strunk’s rule: “In a series of three or more terms with a single conjunction, use a comma after each term except the last.”

His examples:

- *red, white, and blue*
- *gold, silver, or copper*
- *He opened the letter, read it, and made a note of its contents.*

This is the comma before *and* or *or* that many writers drop. Strunk says to keep it, and again cites the Government Printing Office and the Oxford University Press as following the same usage.

Why does it matter in business? Because the last comma prevents ambiguity. Consider this deliverables line: *The package includes research, strategy and implementation.* A reader can wonder whether “strategy and implementation” is one combined item or two. Write *research, strategy, and implementation* and the scope is

unmistakable. In a proposal, where scope disputes become costly, that clarity is professional protection.

There is one exception. Strunk notes that in the names of business firms the last comma is omitted, as in *Brown, Shipley & Co.* Write firm names as the firm writes them.

Exercise 3: Punctuate the series

Add the missing commas. If the sentence is already correct, write “Correct.”

1. Our services include audits, training and ongoing support.

Your answer:

2. Please send the budget, the timeline, and the staffing plan by Friday.

Your answer:

3. The report covers revenue, costs or risks, depending on your priorities.

Your answer:

4. We will contact Smith, Jones & Co. about the invoice.

Your answer:

5. I reviewed the draft, corrected the figures and sent it to the client.

Your answer:

Exercise 4: Build your own series

Write a sentence for each prompt, using a series of three or more terms and correct punctuation.

A. A sentence for a proposal listing three deliverables.

Your answer:

B. A sentence for a client email listing three action items you need from them.

Your answer:

C. A sentence for a report listing three risks.

Your answer:

Putting both rules together

Possessives and series often appear in the same sentence, especially in project summaries. Check each sentence twice: once for apostrophes, once for lists.

Exercise 5: Edit the paragraph

The paragraph below contains at least five errors in possessives and series punctuation. Rewrite it correctly.

Thank you for sending the clients feedback. Its clear that the teams priorities are timing, cost and quality. Chris draft covers the first two, but the third needs more work. Please review the scope, confirm the budget and approve the schedule by Thursday. Both documents are attached, and the final version is their's to sign.

Your answer:

Exercise 6: Audit your own work

Open a recent proposal, client email, or report you wrote. Find three places where you used a possessive and three places where you listed items in a series.

Your answer (possessives found and whether each was correct):

Your answer (series found and whether each had the final comma):

Your answer (corrections you will make):

A note on consistency

Strunk observed that the best writers sometimes break the rules, but “unless he is certain of doing as well, he will probably do best to follow the rules.” For consultants and founders, the practical advice is simpler still: choose the standard forms and use them every time. A reader who sees ‘s on every singular possessive and a final comma in every series stops noticing your punctuation at all, which is exactly the goal. Attention goes to your argument, not your errors.

Exercise 7: Write your rule card

In your own words, write a two-line reminder for each rule that you could keep beside your keyboard.

Your answer (possessives):

Your answer (series):

Answer key for Exercises 1 and 3

Exercise 1: (1) Mr. Hughes’s signature. (2) its reputation. (3) client’s concerns. (4) theirs. (5) James’s office.

Exercise 3: (1) audits, training, and ongoing support. (2) Correct. (3) revenue, costs, or risks. (4) Correct; the firm name omits the last comma. (5) reviewed the draft, corrected the figures, and sent it to the client.

Mastering Parenthetical Expressions

Every business document contains sentences that carry a main message and sentences that carry a main message plus a side note. The side note might be a name, a date, a clarification, or a qualifier. Where that side note sits, and how you mark it off, decides whether your reader glides through the sentence or stumbles over it.

Strunk's Rule 3 is short: *Enclose parenthetical expressions between commas.* His model sentence is:

The best way to see a country, unless you are pressed for time, is to travel on foot.

Remove “unless you are pressed for time” and the sentence still works. That is the test for a parenthetical expression: the sentence survives without it. The commas are a pair of brackets. They tell the reader, “This is extra; step aside for a moment, then rejoin the main line.”

The one mistake to eliminate first

Strunk is blunt about the most common error: whether the interruption is slight or considerable, “he must never insert one comma and omit the other.” His examples of the failure:

Marjorie’s husband, Colonel Nelson paid us a visit yesterday. My brother you will be pleased to hear, is now in perfect health.

Both are, in his word, “indefensible.” Each opens a bracket and never closes it (or closes one never opened). In business writing this looks like:

Our director of operations, Priya Rao will lead the engagement.

The reader hits “Priya Rao will lead” and has to re-read to find the verb. Fix it with the closing comma: *Our director of operations, Priya Rao, will lead the engagement.*

A related point: if a parenthetical expression follows a conjunction, put the first comma *before* the conjunction. Strunk’s example: “He saw us coming, and unaware that we had learned of his treachery, greeted us with a smile.”

Essential versus non-essential: the test that does the work

The hard part is deciding what is parenthetical. Strunk admits the rule “is difficult to apply” and that it is frequently hard to decide whether a single word like *however*, or a brief phrase, is

parenthetical. If the interruption is slight, you may omit both commas, but never just one.

The most useful application is the **relative clause**. Strunk contrasts two kinds:

- **Non-restrictive** (non-essential): the clause adds information about something already identified. Set it off with commas.
- **Restrictive** (essential): the clause tells the reader *which* one you mean. No commas.

His pair:

The audience, which had at first been indifferent, became more and more interested. The candidate who best meets these requirements will obtain the place.

In the first, we already know which audience; the clause is a supplement. The sentence could be split into two statements: *The audience had at first been indifferent. It became more and more interested.* In the second, the clause is what identifies the candidate, so it cannot be split off or bracketed.

Another of his pairs shows the same principle with place and time:

Nether Stowey, where Coleridge wrote The Rime of the Ancient Mariner, is a few miles from Bridgewater. The day will come when you will admit your mistake.

“Nether Stowey” is fully identified by its name, so the Coleridge clause is extra. “The day” is identified only by its clause, so the clause is essential.

The practical test: Delete the expression. Does the sentence still say what you meant, and does the reader still know *which* person, thing, or date you are talking about? If yes, it is parenthetic: use commas. If deleting it changes or blurs the meaning, it is essential: no commas.

This matters in contracts and proposals, where a misplaced comma can change who is bound. Compare:

Consultants who miss the deadline will forfeit the fee. (Only the late ones forfeit.) Consultants, who miss the deadline, will forfeit the fee. (All consultants miss it and all forfeit. Almost certainly not what you meant.)

Expressions Strunk says are *always* parenthetic

Strunk lists several items to enclose in commas every time:

1. **The year in a date, and the day of the month after the day of the week:** April 6, 1917. / Monday, November 11, 1918. In an email: “We will deliver on Friday, March 14, 2025, at the latest.” (Note the comma after the year too.)
2. **The abbreviations etc. and *jr.***
3. **Non-restrictive relative clauses**, as covered above.

Strunk also notes that phrases or dependent clauses before or after the main clause are set off by commas: “If you approve the

scope, we will begin on Monday.”

Exercises

Exercise 1: Close the bracket

Each sentence below has one comma or none where a pair is needed. Rewrite with both commas in place. If the expression is essential, write “no commas.”

1. Our lead analyst Dana Okafor will present the findings.

Your answer:

2. The invoice which is attached to this email covers phase one.

Your answer:

3. We will, as discussed on our call deliver the draft by Thursday.

Your answer:

4. The proposal that you approved last week has been revised.

Your answer:

5. Your account manager Tom is out until Monday.

Your answer:

Exercise 2: The deletion test

For each sentence, delete the underlined idea in your head (it is in brackets here), then decide: **E** (essential, no commas) or **P** (parenthetical, commas). Then punctuate.

1. The report [that the board requested] is due Friday.

E or P? Punctuated:

Your answer:

2. Our Denver office [which opened in 2020] handles the western region.

E or P? Punctuated:

Your answer:

3. Clients [who pay within ten days] receive a discount.

E or P? Punctuated:

Your answer:

4. The meeting [where we will finalize pricing] is on Tuesday.

E or P? Punctuated:

Your answer:

Exercise 3: Date and abbreviation drill

Correct the punctuation in each line.

1. The kickoff is Monday March 3 2025 at 9:00.

Your answer:

2. Please bring laptops chargers notes etc. to the workshop.

Your answer:

3. Our contract runs from January 1 2025 to December 31 2025.

Your answer:

Exercise 4: Two meanings, one sentence

Each sentence can be punctuated two ways to produce two different meanings. Write both versions and, beside each, state in one line what it tells the reader.

Sentence: My colleagues who work remotely will join by video.

Version A:

Meaning of A:

Version B:

Meaning of B:

Your answer:

Sentence: The freelancers who submitted late invoices were paid in April.

Version A:

Meaning of A:

Version B:

Meaning of B:

Your answer:

Exercise 5: Edit your own writing

Find a real client email, proposal paragraph, or report section you have written. Locate three sentences that contain a side note, qualifier, name, or date. Copy each one below, run the deletion test, and rewrite with the correct punctuation (or confirm it was already right).

Original sentence 1:

Test result (E or P):

Revised:

Original sentence 2:

Test result (E or P):

Revised:

Original sentence 3:

Test result (E or P):

Revised:

Exercise 6: Reflection

In one or two sentences, describe the pattern you noticed in your own writing: do you tend to drop the closing comma, add

commas around essential clauses, or something else?

Your answer:

Chapter checklist

Before sending any document, scan for these three things:

- ☐ Every opening comma around a side note has a matching closing comma.
- ☐ Every “which” or “who” clause has passed the deletion test (extra information gets commas, identifying information does not).
- ☐ Every full date with a year, and every etc., is enclosed in commas.

Strunk’s own advice about this rule is worth keeping in view: when the interruption is slight, you may omit the commas, but you must never insert one and leave out the other. Get the pair right, and your sentences will carry their side notes without losing the reader.

Conjunctions and Independent Clauses: Joining Ideas Clearly

Every report you write is built from clauses, and the way you join them decides whether a reader moves smoothly through your argument or stumbles. Strunk gives three rules on this point (his Rules 4, 5, and 6), and he considers them among the most important in the book. He says they “should be so thoroughly mastered that their application becomes second nature.”

An **independent clause** is a group of words with its own subject and verb that could stand alone as a sentence. *The proposal is late* is one. So is *We need a revised scope*. The question this chapter answers is simple: when you put two of them in one sentence, what goes between them?

Rule 4: Comma plus conjunction

When a conjunction such as *and*, *but*, *for*, *or*, or *nor* joins two independent clauses, place a comma before the conjunction. Strunk’s examples:

The early records of the city have disappeared, and the story of its first years can no longer be reconstructed.

The situation is perilous, but there is still one chance of escape.

A business version: The pilot reduced onboarding time, but the client wants proof from a second region.

Three refinements:

- **Same subject, expressed once.** With *but*, keep the comma: “I have heard his arguments, but am still unconvinced.” With *and*, omit the comma if the two statements are closely related: “He has had several years’ experience and is thoroughly competent.”
- **Dependent clause first.** If a dependent clause or introductory phrase precedes the second independent clause, no comma follows the conjunction: “The situation is perilous, but if we are prepared to act promptly, there is still one chance of escape.”
- **A word of caution about *and*.** Strunk notes that *and* is “the least specific of connectives.” It says a relation exists without saying what it is. When the relation is cause and result, say so: *As the early records have disappeared, the story of its first years can no longer be reconstructed.* He also warns against overdoing it, since too many sentences of the “clause, and clause” pattern grow monotonous.

Rule 5: Do not join independent clauses by a comma alone

This error is the **comma splice**. Two complete clauses with only a comma between them are not properly joined. Strunk's prescription: use a semicolon.

Stevenson's romances are entertaining; they are full of exciting adventures.

He also notes that a period is “equally correct,” and that the semicolon version beats the conjunction version (...*entertaining, for they are full of exciting adventures*) because it is briefer and “suggests the close relationship between the two statements.” The relationship, he says, is commonly one of cause or consequence.

So you have three correct options for two related statements:

1. **Semicolon:** *The audit is complete; the findings follow.*
2. **Period:** *The audit is complete. The findings follow.*
3. **Comma plus conjunction:** *The audit is complete, and the findings follow.*

The splice, *The audit is complete, the findings follow*, is the one option you do not have.

A trap worth memorizing. If the second clause opens with an adverb such as *accordingly, besides, then, therefore, or thus*, rather than a true conjunction, the semicolon is still required. Consultants splice here constantly:

- **Wrong:** *The vendor missed the deadline, therefore we are revising the schedule.*
- **Right:** *The vendor missed the deadline; therefore, we are revising the schedule.*

Therefore is not a conjunction, so it cannot carry the comma by itself.

Two exceptions. Strunk allows a comma when the clauses are very short and alike in form (“Man proposes, God disposes”). He also notes that the colloquial “I hardly knew him, he was so changed” takes a comma, but is inappropriate in writing except in dialogue or a familiar letter. In client work, treat these as rare.

A note on *so* and *yet*. Strunk calls *so* (meaning *accordingly*) “somewhat colloquial.” His fix is usually to drop it and begin the first clause with *as* or *since*:

I had never been in the place before; so I had difficulty finding my way about.

→ *As I had never been in the place before, I had difficulty finding my way about.*

Rule 6: Do not break sentences in two

The mirror-image error is using a period where a comma belongs, leaving a fragment:

I met them on a Cunard liner several years ago. Coming home from Liverpool to New York.

Replace the first period with a comma and begin the next word with a lowercase letter. Strunk allows deliberate fragments for emphasis (“Again and again he called out. No reply.”), provided the emphasis is warranted and “he will not be suspected of a mere blunder.” In an email, a fragment like *Deadline: Friday.* reads as a label. A fragment like *Which is why the budget slipped.* reads as a mistake.

Exercise 1: Diagnose the join

Label each sentence **OK**, **SPLICE** (comma alone between independent clauses), or **FRAGMENT**. Then rewrite any faulty sentence.

1. The scope changed in week three, the budget did not.

Your label: _____ Your rewrite: _____

2. We can start Monday, or we can wait for the signed agreement.

Your label: _____ Your rewrite: _____

3. The client approved the draft. Although two stakeholders still had concerns.

Your label: _____ Your rewrite: _____

4. Revenue grew in Q2, however, churn also rose.

Your label: _____ Your rewrite: _____

5. I have reviewed your comments, but am not ready to sign off.

Your label: _____ Your rewrite: _____

Exercise 2: Choose the best join

For each pair, write three versions: semicolon, period, and comma plus conjunction. Then circle the one you would send, and say why in one line.

Pair A: The interviews are complete. The synthesis begins Monday.

Semicolon: _____

Period: _____

Comma + conjunction: _____

Best, and why: _____

Pair B: Our fee is fixed. Travel is billed separately.

Semicolon: _____

Period: _____

Comma + conjunction: _____

Best, and why: _____

Exercise 3: Replace the lazy *and*

Each sentence below hides a specific relationship (cause, contrast, or sequence). Identify it, then rewrite so the relationship is explicit, using *as*, *since*, *although*, *because*, or *after*.

1. The survey response rate was low, and we extended the deadline.

Relationship: _____ Rewrite: _____

2. The pilot succeeded, and leadership remained cautious.

Relationship: _____ Rewrite: _____

3. Your team finished the data migration, and we can begin testing.

Relationship: _____ Rewrite: _____

Exercise 4: Fix the adverb trap

Repair each sentence with a semicolon, or recast it so the clause begins with a true conjunction or subordinator.

1. Our two senior analysts are unavailable in March, thus we propose an April kickoff.

Your answer:

2. The data is incomplete, besides the sample is too small to generalize.

Your answer:

3. The first phase ended early, then the second phase absorbed the extra time.

Your answer:

Exercise 5: Repair a client email

Rewrite this paragraph so that every sentence is correctly joined. Vary your methods; do not use “comma, and” every time.

Thanks for sending the revised brief, it clarifies most of our questions. The timeline still concerns us, our team is committed through May, therefore a June start is more realistic. Although we are flexible on format. We would like to propose a short call this week, so we can align on priorities.

Your answer:

Exercise 6: Audit your own writing

Pull one paragraph from a proposal, email, or report you wrote in the last month. Paste it below, then mark every place two independent clauses meet.

Original paragraph: _____

Number of clause junctions found: _____

Number that were splices or fragments: _____

Corrected paragraph: _____

Checklist: Before you send

- ☐ Every “comma + *and/but/for/or/nor*” joins two full independent clauses.
- ☐ No comma alone separates two independent clauses; each uses a semicolon, a period, or a conjunction.

- ☐ Every *therefore*, *however*, *thus*, *besides*, or *then* between clauses follows a semicolon.
- ☐ No unintended fragments remain.
- ☐ Wherever *and* hides a cause, contrast, or consequence, I have named the relationship.

Master these joins and your sentences will carry one idea into the next without a visible seam, which is exactly what a busy client wants from a document.

Avoiding Sentence Fragments and Dangling Modifiers

Two errors make a professional writer look careless faster than almost any other: a sentence that has been cut in two, and an opening phrase that points at the wrong person. Both are small. Both can change what a client thinks you mean. This chapter covers Strunk's Rule 6 (do not break sentences in two) and Rule 7 (a participial phrase at the beginning of a sentence must refer to the grammatical subject).

Rule 6: Do Not Break Sentences in Two

Strunk puts it simply: "do not use periods for commas." A fragment happens when a trailing thought, one that cannot stand alone, gets its own period. His examples:

I met them on a Cunard liner several years ago. Coming home from Liverpool to New York.

He was an interesting talker. A man who had traveled all over the world and lived in half a dozen countries.

In both, the first period should be a comma, with the next word in lowercase. In business writing the same slip looks like this: “We reviewed your Q3 pipeline. Looking at conversion by region.” The second sentence has no subject and no complete verb; it hangs off the first like a loose thread.

Strunk allows one exception. An emphatic word or phrase may serve as a sentence: “Again and again he called out. No reply.” But the writer, he warns, “must be certain that the emphasis is warranted, and that he will not be suspected of a mere blunder.” In a proposal, a deliberate fragment is a risk. A client who cannot tell whether you chose it or tripped over it will assume the worst. Use one only when you can defend it.

A quick test: Read the second sentence alone. If it lacks a subject or a finished verb, reattach it to the sentence before it.

Exercise 1: Rejoin the Broken Sentences

Each item below has been split by a stray period. Rewrite it as one sentence. Use a comma where Strunk would, and lowercase the next word.

1. We delivered the audit two weeks early. Despite losing a team member in the middle of the project.

Your answer:

2. Our firm works with early-stage founders. People who need a strategy but cannot yet afford a full-time operations lead.

Your answer:

3. Thank you for the call yesterday. Which helped me understand your hiring timeline.

Your answer:

4. The report recommends consolidating vendors. Reducing the current list of eleven to three.

Your answer:

Exercise 2: Spot the Defensible Fragment

Strunk permits a fragment only when the emphasis is warranted. Read each sentence pair. Mark each as **Blunder** (rewrite it) or

Warranted (leave it, and say why in one phrase).

1. The client asked us to launch in March. Then April. Then June.

Your verdict and reason:

2. I reviewed the contract. And noticed the termination clause was missing.

Your verdict and reason:

3. We have run this workshop forty times. Never once has a team left without a plan.

Your verdict and reason:

Rewrite any blunder here:

Rule 7: A Participial Phrase at the Beginning of a Sentence Must Refer to the Grammatical Subject

A participial phrase is a phrase built on an -ing or -ed verb form (“walking slowly down the road,” “being behind schedule”).

When one opens a sentence, the reader assumes it describes the subject that follows. If it does not, the sentence says something you never meant. Strunk’s example:

Walking slowly down the road, he saw a woman accompanied by two children.

Here *walking* belongs to “he,” the subject, not to the woman. If you want it to describe the woman, you must recast the sentence:

“He saw a woman accompanied by two children, walking slowly down the road.”

Strunk extends the rule beyond participles. Opening phrases with a conjunction or preposition, nouns in apposition, adjectives, and adjective phrases all follow it:

On arriving in Chicago, his friends met him at the station.

Better: When he arrived in Chicago, his friends met him at the station.

Young and inexperienced, the task seemed easy to me. Better:

Young and inexperienced, I thought the task easy.

And he notes that violators are “often ludicrous”:

Being in a dilapidated condition, I was able to buy the house very cheap.

In consulting prose, the same error turns up in sentences like “Having reviewed your financials, the budget appears too optimistic.” Who reviewed the financials? Not the budget. Fix it either of two ways: change the main clause so the right subject follows the comma (“Having reviewed your financials, we found the budget too optimistic”), or turn the opening phrase into a full clause (“After we reviewed your financials, the budget appeared too optimistic”).

A quick test: Take the opening phrase and ask, “Who or what is doing this?” Then check that the answer is the first noun after

the comma.

Exercise 3: Find the Subject

For each sentence, write who or what the opening phrase actually describes (by grammar), and then write who it should describe.

1. Having completed the discovery phase, the timeline can now be finalized.

Grammatical subject:

Who actually completed the phase:

2. Hoping to close the deal this quarter, the proposal was sent a week early.

Grammatical subject:

Who actually hoped:

3. Attached to this email, you will find our revised scope.

Does the phrase fit the subject? Explain in one line:

Exercise 4: Repair the Dangling Openers

Rewrite each sentence so the opening phrase refers to the grammatical subject. You may change the main clause or turn the phrase into a clause, as Strunk does.

1. After reviewing your last three invoices, the payment terms seem unclear.

Your rewrite:

2. Written in plain language, our team believes the contract will be easier to sign.

Your rewrite:

3. Without a clear owner for the project, the deadlines kept slipping.

Your rewrite:

4. On receiving the signed agreement, your onboarding packet will arrive within two days.

Your rewrite:

5. A specialist in supply chain risk, the engagement was a natural fit for me.

Your rewrite:

Apply It to Your Own Writing

Fragments and dangling openers hide best in the places you write fastest: email openings, bulleted summaries, and report introductions. Use real material for this final exercise.

Exercise 5: Audit Your Own Documents

Open a recent client email, proposal, or report. Copy two sentences that begin with an *-ing* or *-ed* phrase, and two sentences you suspect are fragments (short sentences starting with *Which*, *Because*, *Including*, *Such as*, or a lone participle are good places to look).

Sentence A (opening phrase) as written:

Does the phrase describe the subject? (Yes / No):

Corrected version, if needed:

Sentence B (opening phrase) as written:

Does the phrase describe the subject? (Yes / No):

Corrected version, if needed:

Sentence C (possible fragment) as written:

Is it complete on its own? (Yes / No):

Corrected version, if needed:

Sentence D (possible fragment) as written:

Is it complete on its own? (Yes / No):

Corrected version, if needed:

Checklist for This Chapter

Before sending any document, scan for these items:

- ☐ Every sentence has its own subject and a finished verb, unless I chose a fragment deliberately and can defend the emphasis.
- ☐ Any sentence beginning with “Which,” “Including,” “Such as,” or a lone -ing word has been reattached to the sentence before it or rewritten as a full sentence.
- ☐ Every opening phrase ending in a comma describes the first noun after that comma.

- Where it did not, I recast the main clause or turned the phrase into a full clause.

Strunk calls Rules 3 through 6 “the most important principles in the punctuation of ordinary sentences” and says they should be mastered until “their application becomes second nature.” Rule 7 asks for the same habit. Make a practice of asking “who is doing this?” about every opening phrase, and your sentences will stop saying things you never meant.

The Unitary Paragraph: One Idea Per Topic

A reader decides whether to keep reading a proposal in the first few seconds, and what they see in those seconds is paragraph shape. A solid wall of text says *this will be work*. A page of one-line fragments says *this writer has not finished thinking*. A page of well-built paragraphs says *this person knows what they want to tell me, and in what order*.

Strunk's Rule 8 gives the principle: **make the paragraph the unit of composition: one paragraph to each topic**. His reason is a reader's reason: "The beginning of each paragraph is a signal to him that a new step in the development of the subject has been reached." The paragraph break is a promise. It tells the reader that the previous point is done and the next one starts here. If you break that promise by stuffing two topics into one block, or by splitting one topic across five fragments, the reader has to do the sorting you skipped.

How much to subdivide

Strunk is practical about scale. A short subject can live in a single paragraph: “a brief description, a brief summary... the setting forth of a single idea.” His advice is to write it, then “examine it to see whether subdivision will not improve it.” Longer subjects get broken into topics, and **each topic gets its own paragraph**.

His own examples show how to plan. An historical event can be discussed under three heads: what led up to it, an account of it, and what it led up to. A novel can be treated under four: setting, plot, characters, purpose. Notice what these have in common. The heads are decided before the writing starts, and each answers a different question.

Business documents work the same way. A proposal’s “Approach” section might break into: the client’s problem as you understand it, what you will do, what the client must provide, and what the engagement will not cover. That is four topics, so four paragraphs. A status report might break into: what was finished, what slipped and why, what needs a decision. Three topics, three paragraphs.

The topic sentence

Rule 9 supplies the tool: “As a rule, begin each paragraph with a topic sentence, end it in conformity with the beginning.” Strunk describes the most useful paragraph, especially in exposition and argument, as one in which:

1. the topic sentence comes at or near the beginning;

2. the following sentences explain, establish, or develop the statement made in it;
3. the final sentence either emphasizes the topic sentence's thought or states an important consequence.

He adds a warning: “Ending with a digression, or with an unimportant detail, is particularly to be avoided.” Busy clients often read only the first sentence of each paragraph. A topic sentence that states the point lets them follow your argument in a skim. It also disciplines you: if you cannot write the topic sentence, you do not yet know what the paragraph is for.

Strunk lists several ways to build the body: restate the point in other words, define its terms, deny the contrary, give illustrations or specific instances, offer proofs, or show implications and consequences. In a proposal, specific instances and consequences usually do the most work.

Compare two versions of one paragraph from a hypothetical consulting proposal.

Before:

We have reviewed the materials you sent over and had a useful conversation with your operations lead. The onboarding process seems to involve a lot of handoffs. Our team has worked on similar projects before, and we are available to start in March. The handoffs between sales and delivery appear to be where most delays arise, and we will begin the work there. Our fees are outlined in Section 5.

After:

The delays in your onboarding process appear to start at the handoff between sales and delivery, so that is where we will begin. Based on the materials you sent and our conversation with your operations lead, the handoff is where information is re-entered and where no one owns the next step. Fixing that single transition should shorten onboarding more than any other single change, and it gives us a clear first deliverable.

The “before” paragraph holds four topics: what was reviewed, what the problem is, the firm’s availability, and the fees. The “after” keeps one idea and moves its point to the front. (Availability and fees now have homes elsewhere.)

Three ways paragraphs go wrong

The overstuffed paragraph. Several topics share one block. The fix: list the topics, then give each its own paragraph.

The orphan sentence. Strunk says: “As a rule, single sentences should not be written or printed as paragraphs.” He allows an exception for “sentences of transition, indicating the relation between the parts of an exposition or argument.” Email is a partial exception in practice, since short messages tolerate short blocks, but a report or proposal built from one-sentence paragraphs reads as a list of unrelated claims.

The drifting paragraph. It begins with a clear topic and wanders. Check the last sentence. If it introduces a new idea, either cut it or

give it its own paragraph.

A related note on transitions: if a paragraph needs to show how it connects to the one before, “a mere word or phrase (*again; therefore; for the same reason*)” in the topic sentence can do it. If you need more than one sentence of transition, Strunk advises setting those sentences apart as their own paragraph.

Exercise 1: Find the topic

Below is an overstuffed paragraph from a hypothetical project update. Read it, then answer the prompts.

The website redesign is now in its third week and the wireframes for the main pages are complete. We found that the existing blog contains over a hundred posts with broken image links, which will need to be repaired before migration. Separately, the client has asked whether we can add a members’ area, which was not in the original scope. We expect to finish visual design by the end of the month. Please let us know by Friday whether you would like a quote for the members’ area.

1a. List every distinct topic in the paragraph (one short phrase each).

Your answer:

Topic 1: _____

Topic 2: _____

Topic 3: _____

Topic 4: _____

1b. Which topics belong together, and which deserve their own paragraph? Group them.

Your answer:

Paragraph A: _____

Paragraph B: _____

Paragraph C: _____

Exercise 2: Write the topic sentences

For each paragraph you grouped above, write a topic sentence that states the point, not just the subject. (“The members’ area” is a subject; “The members’ area would add to the original scope, and we need your decision by Friday” is a point.)

Your answer:

Topic sentence A: _____

Topic sentence B: _____

Topic sentence C: _____

Exercise 3: Plan before you write

Choose a real document you must write soon: a proposal, a report, or a long client email. Strunk’s method starts with the heads, so list them first.

3a. Document and reader:

Your answer:

3b. List the topics it must cover, one per line. Aim for three to seven.

Your answer:

- A. _____
- B. _____
- C. _____
- D. _____
- E. _____

3c. Write the topic sentence for each lettered paragraph.

Your answer:

- A. _____
- B. _____
- C. _____
- D. _____
- E. _____

Exercise 4: Repair an existing paragraph

Take one paragraph from something you have already sent. Paste or copy it below.

Your answer (original): _____

4a. Underline the topic sentence. If there is none, write the one it should have:

Your answer:

4b. Does any sentence belong to a different topic? Quote its opening words and say where it should go.

Your answer:

4c. Does the last sentence reinforce the topic or state a consequence? If it digresses, rewrite it:

Your answer:

4d. Rewrite the paragraph, with the topic sentence first and off-topic material removed:

Your answer:

Revision checklist

Before sending any proposal, report, or long email, scan for these:

- ☐ Every paragraph can be summarized in one sentence, and that sentence is on the page.
- ☐ The topic sentence comes at or near the beginning.
- ☐ Every following sentence explains, establishes, or develops the topic sentence.
- ☐ The final sentence reinforces the point or states its consequence; it does not wander.
- ☐ No single-sentence paragraphs, unless the sentence is a true transition.
- ☐ No two paragraphs repeat the same topic, and no paragraph carries two.

Get the paragraph right, and the reader never has to wonder where they are.

Active Voice and Positive Statements for Impact

Read this sentence from a typical proposal: “A review of your current onboarding process will be conducted by our team, and it is expected that several inefficiencies will be identified.” Nobody is doing anything. A review “will be conducted.” Inefficiencies “will be identified.” Who conducts, who identifies, and who is responsible if they don’t? The sentence has the shape of a promise but none of the weight.

Now read it again: “We will review your onboarding process and identify its inefficiencies.” Fewer words, a named actor, a commitment the client can hold you to. That change is the subject of this chapter, and it draws on two of Strunk’s rules: Rule 10, *Use the active voice*, and Rule 11, *Put statements in positive form*.

Rule 10: Use the Active Voice

Strunk puts it plainly: “The active voice is usually more direct and vigorous than the passive.” His example is the one to remember:

I shall always remember my first visit to Boston.

My first visit to Boston will always be remembered by me.

The second version, he says, is “less direct, less bold, and less concise.” Cut “by me” to shorten it, and you get a worse problem: the sentence becomes indefinite. Is it the writer, “some person undisclosed, or the world at large” who will remember? Business writing suffers from exactly this. When the actor disappears, the reader cannot tell who owns the work, the risk, or the decision.

Strunk does not ban the passive. He calls it “frequently convenient and sometimes necessary,” and he notes that the subject you need for the paragraph can decide the voice. “The dramatists of the Restoration are little esteemed to-day” suits a paragraph about those dramatists. In business, a passive is often right when the actor is unknown or irrelevant (“The server was restarted at 2 a.m.”) or when the thing acted on is the topic of the paragraph. The fault is *habitual* passive, which Strunk contrasts with the habit of the active, which “makes for forcible writing.”

Two further patterns from Strunk deserve a watch list.

Passives stacked on passives. Strunk’s advice: “avoid making one passive depend directly upon another.” His example, “Gold was not allowed to be exported,” becomes “It was forbidden to export gold.” In a report: “The vendor was found to have been informed” is a chain of fog.

The noun that swallows the action. Strunk flags the passive whose subject is a noun expressing the whole action, leaving the verb nothing to do:

A survey of this region was made in 1900.

This region was surveyed in 1900.

Confirmation of these reports cannot be obtained.

These reports cannot be confirmed.

Business prose is full of these: “an assessment was undertaken,” “implementation of the changes was completed.” Find the noun hiding a verb (assessment → assessed, implementation → implemented) and give the verb its job back.

Strunk adds a related cure: replace flat constructions like *there is* with a verb that acts. “There were a great number of dead leaves lying on the ground” becomes “Dead leaves covered the ground.” Likewise, “The reason that he left college was that his health became impaired” becomes “Failing health compelled him to leave college.”

Exercise 7.1: Find the Actor

Each sentence below hides its actor or buries its action. Rewrite it in the active voice, supplying a plausible actor where needed (use “we,” “you,” or a role such as “the finance team”).

1. “A decision on the project scope will be made by the end of the week.”

Your answer:

2. “It is recommended that the pricing model be revisited.”

Your answer:

3. “Confirmation of the delivery date cannot be provided at this time.”

Your answer:

4. “An evaluation of three vendors was performed, and it was determined that Vendor B was the strongest.”

Your answer:

5. “There is a risk that the launch will be delayed by the integration work.”

Your answer:

Exercise 7.2: Audit Your Own Writing

Open the last proposal, client email, or report you wrote. Copy three sentences that use the passive voice.

Sentence A:

Your answer:

Sentence B:

Your answer:

Sentence C:

Your answer:

For each, decide: is the passive justified (actor unknown, irrelevant, or the paragraph's topic), or is it a habit? Then rewrite the habitual ones.

My verdict on A, B, and C (justified or habit):

Your answer:

Active rewrites:

Your answer:

Rule 11: Put Statements in Positive Form

Strunk's instruction: "Make definite assertions. Avoid tame, colorless, hesitating, non-committal language. Use the word not

as a means of denial or in antithesis, never as a means of evasion.”

His reasoning is about the reader: “the reader is dissatisfied with being told only what is not; he wishes to be told what is.”

His examples:

He was not very often on time. → He usually came late. He did not think that studying Latin was much use. → He thought the study of Latin useless.

He also supplies a compact list of swaps: not honest → dishonest; not important → trifling; did not remember → forgot; did not pay any attention to → ignored; did not have much confidence in → distrusted.

Notice what the Shakespeare example shows. A vague, negative passage (“rather weak in spots,” “does not portray Katharine as a very admirable character”) was corrected to “The women ... are unattractive. Katharine is disagreeable, Bianca insignificant.”

Strunk admits the corrected version “is simply a guess at the writer’s intention.” The original was indefinite as well as negative, so the writer must first decide what he actually thinks. That is the real work of this rule.

Strunk keeps two uses of not: denial and antithesis. “Not charity, but simple justice” is strong because it ends in a positive. And negative words other than not are usually strong (“The sun never sets upon the British flag”).

In business, the evasive not shows up as hedging: “We do not anticipate any significant delays.” “This approach is not without merit.” “The results were not unfavorable.” Each makes the

reader do the translation, and each leaves room to suspect the writer is dodging.

Exercise 7.3: Convert the Negatives

Rewrite each in positive form. Where the original is vague, decide what the writer most plausibly means and commit to it.

1. “We did not pay much attention to the competitor analysis.”

Your answer:

2. “The client was not satisfied with the draft.”

Your answer:

3. “This is not an unreasonable budget.”

Your answer:

4. “Our process does not rely on guesswork.”

Your answer:

5. “The team did not remember to send the invoice.”

Your answer:

Exercise 7.4: Keep the Good *Not*

Two of the sentences below use *not* well (denial or antithesis).

Two use it as evasion. Mark each **keep** or **fix**, and rewrite the ones to fix.

1. “We are not asking for a larger budget; we are asking for a clearer scope.”

Keep or fix? Your answer:

Rewrite (if needed): Your answer:

2. “We do not think the timeline is very realistic.”

Keep or fix? Your answer:

Rewrite (if needed): Your answer:

3. “The report does not include data from Q3.”

Keep or fix? Your answer:

Rewrite (if needed): Your answer:

4. “Our recommendation is not without risk.”

Keep or fix? Your answer:

Rewrite (if needed): Your answer:

Put Both Rules to Work

The two rules reinforce each other and reinforce what you learned in Chapter 6: a good topic sentence is almost always an active, positive assertion. Compare “It should be noted that the current system is not performing as well as might be expected” with “The current system underperforms.” The second can anchor a paragraph; the first cannot.

Exercise 7.5: Rewrite the Paragraph

Rewrite this paragraph from a hypothetical proposal. Make every sentence active where the actor matters, convert evasive negatives, and keep a clear topic sentence first.

“Your reporting workflow is not as efficient as it could be. Reports are generated manually by several people, and errors are not infrequently introduced. A new process will be proposed by us, and it is believed that the time spent will be reduced. Training will not be neglected.”

Your answer:

Exercise 7.6: A Real Email

Pick one client email you must send this week (or one you sent recently). Paste or summarize its key message below, then rewrite it so that every sentence names who does what, and every claim says what is.

Original:

Your answer:

Rewrite:

Your answer:

Chapter Checklist

Before you send a proposal, email, or report, scan for these:

- ☐ Every important action has a named actor (“we will,” “you approve,” “the finance team signs off”).
- ☐ No verb is buried inside a noun (“make a determination,” “provide assistance”) when a plain verb (“determine,” “assist”) would do.
- ☐ Passive verbs remain only where the actor is unknown, irrelevant, or deliberately de-emphasized, and you can say which.
- ☐ Each paragraph opens with a positive assertion of what is, not a denial of what isn’t.
- ☐ Every not is a deliberate denial or contrast, not a way of avoiding a commitment.
- ☐ No double negatives (“not unlikely,” “not without risk”) obscure your actual position.
- ☐ Your most important sentence in each section is both active and positive.

Run this checklist as a separate pass after you finish drafting. Drafting and editing use different habits of mind, and trying to do both at once usually means doing both poorly.

Know When to Break the Rules

Active voice and positive statements are defaults, not laws. Skilled writers break them on purpose, and you should be able to say why when you do.

Passive voice earns its place when the actor is unknown (“The server was compromised overnight”), when the actor is obvious or beside the point (“The contract was signed on Tuesday”), or when you want to soften blame in a tense situation (“The deadline was missed” invites a conversation about fixing the process, where “You missed the deadline” invites a defense). It also earns its place when the receiver of the action is your topic. A paragraph about a new policy can reasonably say “The policy was approved in March and takes effect in July,” because the policy, not the approver, is the subject of the paragraph.

Negatives earn their place when you correct a likely misunderstanding (“The audit is not a performance review”) or when a prohibition is the real content (“Do not share your password”). Deliberately paired contrasts can also work: “This project needs a decision, not more discussion.”

The test is the same each time. Ask: *Am I choosing this, or is it choosing me?* A deliberate passive or negative reads as control. An accidental one reads as fog.

Exercise 7.7: Defend Your Choices

Below are three sentences where the passive or the negative may be the better choice. For each, decide **keep** or **change**, and give one sentence of reasoning.

1. “Mistakes were made during the migration, and the data was restored from backup.”
Keep or change? Your answer:
Reasoning: Your answer:
2. “Please do not open attachments from unknown senders.”
Keep or change? Your answer:
Reasoning: Your answer:
3. “The new vendor was selected after a review of five proposals.”
Keep or change? Your answer:
Reasoning: Your answer:

Hint for sentence 1: Consider who the sentence protects and whether that is a legitimate goal or an evasion. The same words can be tactful in one context and dodgy in another, and you need to decide which applies.

Build Your Personal Edit Pass

Knowing the rules is not the same as applying them under deadline pressure. The way to make this stick is to turn the rules into a short, repeatable routine you run on every important document.

Here is a three-step pass that takes only a few minutes:

- 1. Find the verbs.** Skim your draft and underline the main verb in each sentence. Look for forms of *to be* (*is, are, was, were, been*) paired with a past participle, since that is the signature of the passive. Look for verbs that are really nouns in disguise.
- 2. Find the nots.** Search the document for *not, no, never, and n't*. For each hit, ask whether it is a real denial or an avoided commitment.
- 3. Read the first sentence of every paragraph.** If those sentences, read in sequence, do not tell your story in active, positive terms, revise them first. They carry the most weight.

Exercise 7.8: Design Your Routine

Adapt the three-step pass to your own work.

Which document type will you apply it to first (proposal, status report, client email, other)?

Your answer:

Which of your own habits is most likely to need fixing: buried actors, hidden verbs, evasive negatives, or something else? Name

it and give an example from your recent writing.

Your answer:

When in your workflow will you run the pass (after the first draft, before sending, during review)?

Your answer:

What is one signal that will remind you to run it (a calendar block, a saved search for not, a sticky note on your monitor)?

Your answer:

Chapter Summary

Active voice puts a named actor in front of a verb, so readers know who does what. Positive statements say what is rather than circling what isn't, so readers know where you stand. Together they make prose shorter, clearer, and more accountable, which is

exactly what clients, managers, and colleagues want from the person responsible for the work.

Remember the three habits to carry forward:

- **Name the actor** whenever the actor matters.
- **State what is true** rather than denying what isn't, unless the denial is the point.
- **Break the rules on purpose**, never by accident.

Final Exercise 7.9: One-Paragraph Transformation

Write a short paragraph (four to six sentences) about a current project or responsibility, using whatever habits come naturally. Then revise it using this chapter's rules.

First draft:

Your answer:

Revision:

Your answer:

What changed most, and what did the change reveal about what you actually think or plan to do?

Your answer:

That last question matters most. Often the process of naming the actor and committing to a positive claim forces you to decide something you had been leaving vague. When your sentences get sharper, your thinking usually does too.

Concrete Language and Eliminating Needless Words

Two rules from Strunk do most of the work in this chapter. Rule 12 says: *Use definite, specific, concrete language.* Rule 13 says: *Omit needless words.* Both serve a single goal. Every word should earn its place by giving the reader something to see, check, or act on.

Why concrete beats abstract

Strunk's advice is to "prefer the specific to the general, the definite to the vague, the concrete to the abstract." His own examples show the difference:

- *A period of unfavorable weather set in.* becomes *It rained every day for a week.*
- *He showed satisfaction as he took possession of his well-earned reward.* becomes *He grinned as he pocketed the coin.*

The reason is practical. Quoting Herbert Spencer, Strunk notes that we do not think in generals but in particulars. When a reader meets an abstract word, they must pick an image from their own stock to make sense of it, and that costs time and effort. A specific term supplies the image at once.

For a consultant, the stakes are higher than style. A client who reads “we will leverage best-in-class processes to optimize outcomes” must guess what you will do. A client who reads “we will interview twelve account managers and map every handoff in your renewal process” can picture the work, judge it, and approve it. Vague language also hides weak thinking, and clients notice.

Strunk adds a caution: you need not give every detail, “but all the significant details.” Choose the particulars that matter to this reader’s decision.

Why fewer words win

Strunk puts it this way: “A sentence should contain no unnecessary words, a paragraph no unnecessary sentences, for the same reason that a drawing should have no unnecessary lines and a machine no unnecessary parts.” He is explicit that this does not mean writing only short sentences or leaving out detail. It means you “make every word tell.”

Strunk lists a set of common padded expressions and their tighter replacements. Several turn up constantly in business writing:

Padded	Tight
the question as to whether	whether
there is no doubt but that	no doubt
used for fuel purposes	used for fuel
he is a man who	he
in a hasty manner	hastily
owing to the fact that	since / because
in spite of the fact that	though / although
call your attention to the fact that	remind you
the fact that he had not succeeded	his failure

He singles out *the fact that* as an expression to be “revised out of every sentence in which it occurs.” Watch also for *who* is and *which was*: “His brother, who is a member of the same firm” becomes “His brother, a member of the same firm.”

Two further moves cut words and sharpen meaning. First, prefer positive statements to negative ones: *did not remember* becomes *forgot*, and *did not pay any attention to* becomes *ignored*. Second, combine a single idea spread across several choppy sentences. Strunk shows a 51-word, six-sentence account of Macbeth reduced to one 26-word sentence with nothing lost.

Exercise 1: Cut the padding

Rewrite each phrase in fewer words, using the pattern in the table above.

1. In spite of the fact that the budget was approved, we delayed the launch.

Your answer: _____

2. I wish to call your attention to the fact that the invoice is overdue.

Your answer: _____

3. There is no doubt but that the pilot improved onboarding.

Your answer: _____

4. Our CFO, who is a member of the steering committee, approved the scope.

Your answer: _____

5. The team completed the audit in a thorough manner.

Your answer: _____

6. Please confirm the question as to whether the deadline can move.

Your answer: _____

Exercise 2: Turn negatives into positives

Rewrite each sentence so it says what is rather than what is not.

1. The client did not have much confidence in the vendor's estimate.

Your answer: _____

2. Several stakeholders did not remember the kickoff agreement.

Your answer: _____

3. The earlier report was not accurate.

Your answer: _____

4. He did not pay any attention to the risk register.

Your answer: _____

Exercise 3: Swap the vague for the concrete

Each sentence below is abstract. Rewrite it with specific details.

Where you need numbers, names, or facts you don't have, insert a clearly marked placeholder such as [number] or [client name].

The point is to practice the *structure* of a concrete sentence. Never invent facts for a real document.

1. We will deliver significant improvements to your operational efficiency.

Your answer: _____

Which question did you have to answer to make it concrete (improve what, by how much, by when)?

2. Our approach leverages a holistic, stakeholder-centric methodology.

Your answer: _____

3. The project experienced some delays due to various challenges.

Your answer: _____

4. We have extensive experience in the industry.

Your answer: _____

Exercise 4: Combine and compress

Strunk warns against presenting “a single complex idea, step by step, in a series of sentences” that could be combined. Compress this passage into one or two sentences.

The project started in March. It was meant to replace the old scheduling tool. The old tool was slow. The team found it hard to use. The new tool was chosen after a review. The review compared three options. The new tool is now live.

Your answer:

Word count before: 49. Word count after: _____

Exercise 5: Edit a real paragraph

Here is a proposal paragraph with all the faults this chapter covers. Rewrite it in the space below. Aim to cut it by at least a third while making it *more* specific. Use placeholders where facts are missing.

It is our belief that, owing to the fact that your organization is in a period of significant transition, there is a need for a comprehensive solution that will be of benefit to a wide range of stakeholders. Our team, which is comprised of experienced professionals, will not fail to deliver value in a timely manner. We will make use of a robust framework in order to ensure that the outcomes that are achieved are of high quality.

Your rewrite: _____

Word count of your rewrite: _____

Exercise 6: Audit your own writing

Choose a paragraph from a proposal, client email, or report you wrote recently. Paste it here.

Original: _____

Now mark it up. Fill in each line:

- Phrases from Strunk's list (the fact that, who is, in a ___ manner) that I found:

- Abstract words I can replace with a number, name, date, or action: _____

- Negatives I can turn positive:

- Sentences I can combine:

Revised version: _____

Words cut: _____ Specific details added: _____

The chapter checklist

Before sending any proposal, email, or report, scan for these:

- ☐ Every claim names something the reader could see, count, or verify.
- ☐ No abstract word (*solution, optimize, leverage*) stands where a plain action belongs.
- ☐ *The fact that, who is, which was, and in a ___ manner* are gone.
- ☐ Negatives have become positives wherever the positive is clearer.
- ☐ Choppy sentences about one idea have been combined.
- ☐ Every word tells. If a word can go without changing the meaning, it goes.

Concreteness gives the reader something to hold, and concision removes everything else. Together they make a sentence a client can act on.

Sentence Variety and Parallel Construction

Two rules in Strunk's short book look as if they pull in opposite directions. Rule 14 says to avoid a succession of loose sentences. Rule 15 says to express co-ordinate ideas in similar form. One tells you to vary; the other tells you to repeat. Together they give you a single working principle: **vary the structure of your sentences, but keep the form of your ideas consistent when those ideas are equals.**

Rule 14: Break the Sing-Song

A loose sentence is one that could end at several points, each time adding another clause. The type Strunk singles out consists of two co-ordinate clauses, the second introduced by a conjunction or relative: *and*, *but*, *so*, *who*, *which*, *when*, *where*, *while*. One such sentence is fine. A paragraph of them is, in his words, "monotonous and tedious," marked by "mechanical symmetry and sing-song."

Consultants fall into this pattern constantly, especially in status updates and proposal background sections:

We reviewed the client's onboarding process, and we found three delays. The first delay was in contract approval, and the second was in account setup. The third was in training, so we recommend starting there. The training team is small, but they are willing to help.

Every sentence has the same shape: clause, comma, conjunction, clause. The reader senses the rhythm before absorbing the content. Strunk's remedy is to recast enough of the sentences to remove the monotony, using whichever of these forms best represents the real relation between the thoughts:

- a simple sentence
- two clauses joined by a semicolon
- a periodic sentence of two clauses (the main point held until the end)
- a loose or periodic sentence of three clauses

Here is a recast of the paragraph above:

Our review of the onboarding process found three delays: contract approval, account setup, and training. Training is the best place to start. The team is small but willing to help.

The recast is shorter, and each sentence has a different shape. The content didn't change; the relationships between ideas finally show.

Note Strunk's final clause: choose "whichever best represent the real relations of the thought." Variety is a byproduct of clear

thinking, never an ornament added for its own sake. If two statements are cause and consequence, a semicolon (Rule 5) says so. If one fact merely qualifies another, a subordinate clause says so.

Rule 15: Parallel Construction

“Expressions of similar content and function should be outwardly similar. The likeness of form enables the reader to recognize more readily the likeness of content and function.” When you list three deliverables, three risks, or three phases, give them the same grammatical shape, and the reader sees at once that they are equals.

Strunk notes that the unskilled writer often violates this “from a mistaken belief that he should constantly vary the form of his expressions.” Hold both rules in mind: vary the sentences, but not the form of co-ordinate ideas. His example:

Formerly, science was taught by the textbook method, while now the laboratory method is employed.

Formerly, science was taught by the textbook method; now it is taught by the laboratory method.

The first version, he says, makes the writer seem “undecided or timid.” The second shows a writer who has made a choice and abided by it. That impression matters in a proposal, where the reader is deciding whether to trust you.

Articles and prepositions. One that applies to all members of a series must appear either before the first term only or before every term.

- The French, the Italians, Spanish, and Portuguese → The French, the Italians, the Spanish, and the Portuguese
- In spring, summer, or in winter → In spring, summer, or winter

Correlatives. After *both...and*, *not...but*, *not only...but also*, *either...or*, and *first, second, third*, use the same grammatical construction on each side. Strunk's corrections:

- It was both a long ceremony and very tedious. → The ceremony was both long and tedious.
- A time not for words, but action. → A time not for words, but for action.
- Either you must grant his request or incur his ill will. → You must either grant his request or incur his ill will.
- My objections are, first, the injustice of the measure; second, that it is unconstitutional. → My objections are, first, that the measure is unjust; second, that it is unconstitutional.

Long lists. If you have twenty similar ideas, Strunk says the difficulty is “probably imaginary.” Group the ideas and apply parallelism within each group. Otherwise, “put the statements in the form of a table.” That is practical advice for scope-of-work sections and requirements lists.

Exercise 1: Diagnose the Monotony

Read this paragraph from a hypothetical proposal.

Our firm has worked with logistics companies for years, and we understand the industry well. The market is changing quickly, so clients need flexible partners. Your team has strong operations, but your reporting systems are outdated. We can help with that, and we have a proven method. The method has three stages, and each stage takes about a month.

A. Underline the connective that opens the second clause of each sentence. List them here:

Your answer:

B. How many of the five sentences share the same basic shape (clause, comma, conjunction, clause)?

Your answer:

C. Rewrite the paragraph in 3–4 sentences using at least three different sentence shapes (for example: one simple sentence, one semicolon sentence, one sentence that opens with a subordinate clause). Keep every fact. Decide which ideas are cause and consequence, and let the structure show it.

Your answer:

D. Which relationship between ideas did you make visible that the original hid?

Your answer:

Exercise 2: Repair the Parallels

Rewrite each sentence so that co-ordinate ideas take the same form. Each is a hypothetical business sentence.

1. The engagement will include interviewing stakeholders, a review of existing documents, and we will deliver a final report.

Your answer:

2. Our fee covers both the research phase and also covers travel.

Your answer:

3. Clients value not only speed but also being accurate.

Your answer:

4. Please send the signed agreement, the invoice details, and the names of the people who will attend, and also to confirm the start date.

Your answer:

5. We recommend hiring in the spring, summer, or in the autumn.

Your answer:

6. My concerns are, first, the timeline is too short; second, the budget. Third, that no one owns the decision.

Your answer:

Exercise 3: Parallel Lists in Your Own Work

Choose a real document you have written: a proposal, a client email, or a report. Find one list of three or more items (deliverables, findings, next steps, risks).

A. Copy the list exactly as you wrote it.

Your answer:

B. Mark the grammatical form of each item (noun phrase, verb phrase beginning with a verb in the same form, full clause).

Your answer:

C. Rewrite the list so every item has the same form, and every article or preposition is either used once before the first item or repeated before each.

Your answer:

D. If the list has more than a handful of items, group them into two or three categories and apply parallelism within each

group, or sketch the table you would use instead.

Your answer:

Exercise 4: Vary and Align Together

Write a four-sentence status update to a client about a project that is behind schedule. It must meet all of these conditions:

1. No two consecutive sentences share the same structure.
2. At least one sentence joins two independent clauses with a semicolon, and the relationship is cause or consequence.
3. At least one sentence contains a list of three or more items in parallel form.
4. No sentence uses *the fact that* or other needless words (Rule 13).

Your answer:

Self-check. Reread your draft aloud. Do you hear the same rhythm twice in a row? Can you point to the parallel items and say why they belong together?

Your answer:

Chapter Checklist

Before you send any proposal, report, or long email, scan for these:

- ☐ No paragraph is built from three or more consecutive sentences of the pattern *clause, comma, and/but/so, clause*.
- ☐ Where two statements are closely related (especially cause and consequence), a semicolon or subordinate clause shows the relationship.
- ☐ Every list of equals has items in the same grammatical form.
- ☐ Articles and prepositions in a series appear once before the first term or before every term.
- ☐ After *both, not only, either, not, and first, second, third*, the same construction follows each term.
- ☐ Long lists are grouped, or put in a table.

Vary the sentences so the reader keeps reading. Align the equals so the reader sees at a glance what belongs together.

Keeping Related Words Together and Emphatic Endings

Strunk compresses two of his most useful rules into a few lines. The first: **keep related words together**. “The position of the words in a sentence is the principal means of showing their relationship.” In English, the reader decides what modifies what by proximity. Put a word in the wrong place and the sentence says something you didn’t mean, or leaves the reader to work out what you did mean. Clients rarely do that work. They misread, or they ask a question you could have answered in the document.

The second: **place the emphatic words of a sentence at the end**. The end of a sentence is where the reader’s attention lands before the full stop gives them a beat to absorb it. Strunk’s example is worth memorizing. He prefers “Humanity, since that time, has advanced in many other ways, but it has hardly advanced in fortitude” to the version that trails off into “...though it has advanced in many other ways.” The first version ends on its point. The second ends on a concession.

In business writing, the emphatic words are usually your result, your deadline, your price, or your request. Strunk says the position of prominence belongs to “the logical predicate, that is,

the new element in the sentence.” Ask what the reader doesn’t yet know. That goes last.

Rule 16 in practice: close the gap

Strunk’s guideline: the subject and principal verb should not, as a rule, be separated by a phrase or clause that can be moved to the beginning.

Weak: *Our team, after reviewing your Q3 pipeline data and interviewing six account managers, recommends restructuring the sales territories.*

Stronger: *After reviewing your Q3 pipeline data and interviewing six account managers, our team recommends restructuring the sales territories.*

The subject and verb now sit side by side, and the reader gets the recommendation without waiting for it.

Modifiers cause the other common failure. A modifier floats, and the reader attaches it to the wrong thing.

Weak: *We will deliver the report to your board on Friday that summarizes the audit.*

Stronger: *On Friday we will deliver to your board the report that summarizes the audit.*

In the weak version, “that summarizes the audit” seems to describe Friday. Put the modifier beside the noun it describes.

Note the connection to Chapter 5: a dangling modifier is the extreme case of separated related words. Everything here extends that discipline.

Rule 18 in practice: land the point

Strunk's second example is a good model for business prose:

“This steel is principally used for making razors, because of its hardness.” becomes “Because of its hardness, this steel is principally used in making razors.”

The reason moves forward and the use, the new information, takes the end. Compare a client email:

Weak: *I'll send the revised scope by Thursday, if that works for you.*

Stronger: *If that works for you, I'll send the revised scope by Thursday.*

Which one ends on your commitment? The second. Move the qualifier forward and the promise takes the last word.

Strunk also names the other strong position: the beginning. Anything other than the subject can become emphatic when placed first. Use the opening for contrast or orientation (“Because of its hardness...”) and the ending for the point itself. The middle of a sentence is the weakest place, so never bury your price, deadline, or ask there.

One caution: end emphasis is not a license to pile up. If every sentence ends with a flourish, none does. Use it for the sentence that carries the weight of the paragraph, which, as Chapter 6 taught, is often the last.

Exercise 1: Close the gap

Each sentence separates related words. Rewrite it so the related words sit together.

1a. Our consultants, because of the tight timeline you described and the limited access to your data room, will need to begin with a two-week discovery phase.

Your answer:

1b. The invoice is attached for the workshop that we discussed on the phone.

Your answer:

1c. I have only reviewed the first section of your draft. (*Decide what you mean: that you did nothing else with it, or that you*

reviewed no more than one section. Then place “only” accordingly.)

Your answer:

1d. The committee will review proposals submitted by the deadline that meet the budget criteria.

Your answer:

Exercise 2: Find the new element

For each sentence, underline (in your head or on paper) the new information the reader most needs. Then rewrite so it takes the final position.

2a. Payment is due within 30 days, according to the terms in section 4 of our agreement.

New element: _____

Your answer:

2b. We can start on the 12th, provided you sign and return the statement of work.

New element: _____

Your answer:

2c. The pilot reduced onboarding time significantly, which is why we recommend rolling it out company-wide.

New element: _____

Your answer:

Exercise 3: Rewrite from your own work

Open a recent proposal, client email, or report. Find three sentences where either (a) the subject and verb are separated by a long interruption, or (b) the key point is buried in the middle or trails off after a qualifier. Paste each in, then repair it.

Original sentence 1:

Your answer:

Revised:

Your answer:

Original sentence 2:

Your answer:

Revised:

Your answer:

Original sentence 3:

Your answer:

Revised:

Your answer:

Exercise 4: Fix the paragraph

The paragraph below breaks both rules. Rewrite it so that related words sit together and each sentence ends on its most important word or phrase. You may reorder clauses but not change the facts.

Our fee, if the engagement runs for the full twelve weeks, is \$48,000. We will begin, assuming the contract is signed, in March. Deliverables include a market analysis, a pricing recommendation, and an implementation roadmap, which we will present to your leadership team at the end.

Your answer:

(Note: the figures in this paragraph are invented purely for practice.)

Exercise 5: The email test

Rewrite this closing paragraph from a client email so that your request is the last thing the reader sees.

To keep the project on schedule, we'd appreciate your sign-off on the wireframes by Friday, since the development team is waiting and can't proceed otherwise, so please let us know whether you have any questions.

Your answer:

Now write one sentence explaining what you moved and why.

Your answer:

Chapter checklist

Before you send any document, scan each important sentence:

- ☐ The subject and its verb are not separated by a clause that could move to the front.
- ☐ Each modifier sits next to the word it modifies. Words like *only*, *even*, and *almost* are placed deliberately.
- ☐ Relative clauses (“that...,” “which...”) follow the noun they describe.
- ☐ The most important new information, such as the result, date, price, or request, comes last.
- ☐ Qualifiers (“if that works,” “assuming approval,” “because of X”) have moved forward, ahead of the point.
- ☐ No key point is buried in the middle of a long sentence.
- ☐ Each paragraph ends on its strongest sentence, as Strunk says the whole composition does: the principle “applies equally to the words of a sentence, to the sentences of a paragraph, and to the paragraphs of a composition.”

Your answer (note any sentence in today's work that failed one of these tests, and how you fixed it):

Applying Style to Proposals: Clarity for Conversion

A proposal has one job: to make a busy reader say yes. Your client will skim it, forward it to a colleague who wasn't in the meeting, and return to it with a pen. Every principle you have practiced so far now works at once. Strunk's introduction promises "the principal requirements of plain English style," concentrated on "a few essentials." A proposal is where those essentials earn money.

Think of the proposal as five small documents stacked together: the opening summary, the statement of the problem, the scope of work, the deliverables and timeline, and the close. Each section has a typical failure, and each failure has a Strunk rule that fixes it.

The opening summary fails by announcing instead of stating. Rule 12 asks for "definite, specific, concrete language." Compare "We are excited to present a comprehensive solution to optimize your operations" with "We will cut your order-processing steps from eleven to six by the end of March." The first could appear in any proposal sent to anyone. The second could only be yours. Strunk quotes Herbert Spencer on why: abstract words make the reader "choose, from his stock of images," and that costs force.

A specific term “at once suggests” the image, and “an economy is achieved.” Your reader’s attention is the scarcest thing you are spending.

The problem statement fails through passive, hedging prose. Rule 10 says to use the active voice; Rule 11 says to put statements in positive form. “It is believed that delays may have been experienced” tells the client nothing and commits you to nothing. “Your invoices reach customers a week late” names the problem and proves you listened.

The scope of work fails through needless words and loose structure. Rule 13 is blunt: omit needless words. Rule 14 warns against “a series of sentences” strung together with *and*, *but*, and *so*, which becomes “monotonous and tedious.” Scope sections are the worst offenders: “We will conduct interviews, and then we will analyze the results, and we will also prepare a report, which will be delivered...” Break the chain.

The deliverables and timeline fail through inconsistent form. Rule 15: “Express co-ordinate ideas in similar form.” A list of deliverables is the clearest case of co-ordinate ideas. Strunk adds a practical escape hatch: if you have too many similar items, group them, “or else... put his statements in the form of a table.” Timelines are tables.

The close fails by trailing off into politeness. Rule 18 says to place the emphatic words of a sentence at the end. A proposal should end on the next step, not on “please do not hesitate to contact us.”

Two further habits protect every section. Keep one idea per paragraph, opening with a topic sentence (Rules 8 and 9), so a skimming reader who reads only first sentences still gets your argument. And keep related words together (Rule 16), because ambiguity in a proposal becomes a dispute in a contract.

The exercises below take each section in turn. Do them in writing; revising in your head does not count.



Exercise 1: The Opening Summary (Rule 12)

Each opening below is vague. Rewrite it with specific, concrete detail. Where you lack a real number, use a bracketed placeholder such as [number] or [date]. Do not invent one; the point is to show where the specifics must go.

1a. “We are pleased to offer a robust solution that will transform your marketing performance.”

Your answer:

1b. “Our team will leverage best practices to improve your onboarding experience.”

Your answer:

1c. Now write the opening sentence of your own next proposal. Name the client’s problem, your action, and the result the client can expect.

Your answer:

Self-check: Could this sentence appear unchanged in a proposal to a different client? If yes, revise again.



Exercise 2: The Problem Statement (Rules 10 and 11)

Rewrite each sentence in the active voice and in positive form. Name the actor.

2a. “It was observed during our discovery calls that responsibilities were not clearly assigned.”

Your answer:

2b. “The current reporting process is not very efficient and does not give leadership a timely view.”

Your answer:

2c. “Mistakes are frequently made when data is entered by hand.”

Your answer:

Remember Strunk’s note on positive form: it is not about forced cheerfulness, but about saying what is. “Your reports arrive after

the decisions they inform” is both negative in feel and positive in form, because it states a fact plainly instead of hedging with “not very.”

Exercise 3: The Scope of Work (Rules 13 and 14)

Here is a scope paragraph written the way many first drafts are:

We will begin by conducting a series of interviews with your staff, and then we will take the results of those interviews and analyze them, and we will also review your existing documents, and after that we will prepare a report, which will be delivered to you at the end of the process.

3a. Cut every needless word. Then replace the chain of *ands* with a mix of simple sentences and sentences joined by a semicolon.

Keep the sequence of work intact.

Your answer:

3b. Count the words in the original and in your revision.

Original: _____ words. Revision: _____ words.

3c. Strunk says to recast loose sentences into whichever form “best represent[s] the real relations of the thought.” Which of your sentences shows a true sequence (this, then that)? Which shows two ideas that merely sit side by side?

Your answer:



Exercise 4: Deliverables and Parallel Form (Rule 15)

This deliverables list breaks parallel construction. Rewrite it so every item takes the same grammatical form.

- *A written report on current processes*
- *Interviewing your team leads*
- *You will receive a recommended roadmap*
- *Training sessions that we will run for your staff*

Your answer:

4b. Fix the correlatives. Rewrite each so the same construction follows each half.

- “The project will both reduce your costs and it will shorten delivery times.”

Your answer:

- “We recommend either hiring a coordinator or to outsource the function.”

Your answer:

4c. Your proposal lists nine milestones with dates. Following Strunk’s advice for long lists, what format should replace nine sentences?

Your answer:



Exercise 5: Related Words and Ambiguity (Rules 7 and 16)

A proposal’s ambiguity can become a billing argument. Fix each sentence.

5a. “Reviewing your current vendor contracts, the savings will be obvious.” (Who is reviewing?)

Your answer:

5b. “We will deliver the report that summarizes our findings in the second week.” (What happens in the second week: the delivery, or the findings?)

Your answer:

5c. “Our fee, subject to the terms listed below, which can be adjusted if the scope changes, is due on signing.” Rewrite as two clear sentences.

Your answer:



Exercise 6: The Close (Rule 18)

Rewrite this closing so that the emphatic words, the next step and the date, come at the end of each sentence.

“Should you wish to proceed, please do not hesitate to reach out to us at your earliest convenience, and we would be glad to schedule a kickoff call, ideally before the end of the month.”

Your answer:



Exercise 7: Full Section Rewrite

Choose a real section from a proposal you have written, or from a template you reuse. Paste it below, then revise it using the checklist.

Original section:

Your answer:

Revised section:

Your answer:

Proposal Revision Checklist

- ☐ The opening names a specific problem, action, and result (Rule 12).
- ☐ Every sentence has a named actor and a verb in the active voice (Rule 10).
- ☐ Hedges and “not” constructions are replaced by direct statements (Rule 11).
- ☐ Each paragraph treats one topic, and its first sentence says what the topic is (Rules 8 and 9).
- ☐ No strings of *and/but/so* clauses; sentence shapes vary (Rule 14).
- ☐ Deliverables and lists share one grammatical form (Rule 15).
- ☐ Modifiers sit beside what they modify; no dangling openers (Rules 7 and 16).
- ☐ Each sentence ends on its most important words (Rule 18).
- ☐ Needless words are cut (Rule 13).



Reflection

Which rule did you break most often in your original section?

Your answer:

What is the one habit you will check before sending your next proposal?

Your answer:

Strunk wrote that once past the essentials, students “profit most by individual instruction based on the problems of their own work.” This chapter is that individual work. Keep your revised section: it is the first page of your next proposal template.

Applying Style to Emails: Precision for Professionalism

A client email is read in the gaps of someone's day: between meetings, on a phone, with half their attention. Whatever a proposal can get away with, an email cannot. If the reader must work to find the point, the request, or the deadline, the likely result is a delayed reply, a wrong reply, or none.

Everything you have practised so far applies here. This chapter shows how the pieces combine into one habit: **write the email so the reader can act on it without writing back to ask what you meant.**

Four Rules at Work in Every Email

Begin with the topic sentence (Rule 9). Strunk advises that, as a rule, each paragraph begin with a topic sentence. In an email, the first sentence is the topic sentence for the whole message. State the purpose there: what you are sending, asking, or deciding.

Weak: I hope you're well. I was reviewing our last call and thinking about some of the items we discussed, and I wanted to follow up on a few things.

Stronger: Please confirm by Friday which of the two scope options you prefer.

Make the paragraph the unit (Rule 8). One paragraph to each topic. An email that needs three decisions from the client gets three short paragraphs, or a numbered list, never one block of text.

Use the active voice and omit needless words (Rules 10 and 13).

Active verbs name who must do what. Compare “It would be appreciated if the signed agreement could be returned” with “Please return the signed agreement.”

Put the emphatic words at the end (Rule 18). Strunk places the words that deserve emphasis at the end of the sentence. In an email, that means the deadline, the action, or the consequence goes last, where it lingers: “Please send the access credentials by Wednesday.”

Subject Lines and Opening Lines

The subject line is the first thing the reader sees and, in a crowded inbox, may be the only thing. Apply the same standard you applied to concrete language: definite, specific, concrete.

Vague	Specific
Quick question	Decision needed: Phase 2 start date
Follow - up	Revised proposal attached; approval needed by Friday
Update	Report draft ready for your comments

Two habits help. First, put the action in the subject when you need one. Second, if the email changes topic mid-thread, change the subject line too. A reader who files messages by subject will thank you.

Where Email Writers Commonly Go Wrong

Strunk's rules on sentence construction show up in email mistakes every day. Watch for these.

Dangling openers (Rule 7). Participial phrases at the start of a sentence must refer to the grammatical subject. Emails invite this error because they are written fast.

Having reviewed the budget, the timeline seems too tight.
Better: *Having reviewed the budget, I think the timeline is too tight.*

Fragments used for speed (Rule 6). “Attached, the revised scope. Also the new invoice.” Strunk permits an emphatic fragment when the emphasis is warranted and the writer will not be suspected of a blunder. In a client email, the fragment usually reads as hurry. Write the full sentence.

Comma splices (Rule 5). “The draft is ready, I will send it tomorrow” joins two independent clauses with a comma. Use a period, a semicolon, or a conjunction: “The draft is ready; I will send it tomorrow.”

Unparallel lists (Rule 15). Requests in a list should share a grammatical form.

Please send the budget, confirm the start date, and the contact for legal.

Better: Please send the budget, confirm the start date, and name your legal contact.

Separated related words (Rule 16). Keep subject and verb together, and keep a modifier next to the word it modifies. “We will, if you agree to the revised schedule that we discussed on Tuesday, begin on Monday” buries the verb. Move the condition to the front: “If you agree to the revised schedule, we will begin on Monday.”

Mixed tenses in summaries (Rule 17). When you recap a meeting or a document, choose one tense and keep to it. “In the call, you said the budget was fixed, and then you tell me the scope can grow” slips between past and present for no reason.

Three Common Email Scenarios

1. The request. Lead with the ask, give the reason in one sentence, state the deadline last.

Please send the Q3 sales data by Thursday. We need it to finish the forecast model before Monday's review.

2. The bad news. Do not bury it, and do not hide behind passive constructions. State the problem, the cause if it helps, and your next step. Strunk's Rule 11 (put statements in positive form) helps here: say what you will do rather than only what went wrong.

Weak: Unfortunately, the delivery will not be made on the originally agreed date as a result of unforeseen issues.

Stronger: The report will arrive on the 18th, not the 14th. The data vendor sent corrected figures late, and we are re-running the analysis. I will send you the draft on the 18th by noon.

3. The follow-up with no reply. Keep it short, restate the one thing you need, and make it easy to answer.

I'm following up on my message of Tuesday. Could you confirm whether Option A or Option B suits you? A one-word reply is enough.

Exercises

Exercise 1: Rewrite the Subject Line

Rewrite each subject line so a busy reader knows the content and the action required.

1. Subject: Hello

Your answer:

2. Subject: Re: Re: Re: Fwd: Project (the email now asks the client to approve the final invoice)

Your answer:

3. Subject: Checking in (you need the client's feedback on a draft by Monday)

Your answer:

Exercise 2: Find the Topic Sentence

The email below buries its purpose. Identify the sentence that states what the writer actually wants, then rewrite the opening so that sentence comes first.

Hi Dana, I hope your week is going well. We have been making good progress on the audit, and the team has been working hard to review the documents you shared. There have been a few gaps in the material, though, which we noticed while going through the folders. We will need the 2022 vendor contracts before we can complete the review.

The sentence that states the purpose:

Your answer:

Your rewritten opening (two sentences at most):

Your answer:

Exercise 3: Repair the Sentences

Each sentence breaks a rule from earlier chapters. Name the rule, then rewrite.

1. Looking at the contract, the payment terms seem unclear.

Rule broken: _____

Your rewrite:

2. The kickoff call went well. Although we ran short on time.

Rule broken: _____

Your rewrite:

3. I reviewed your comments, I will revise the draft tonight.

Rule broken: _____

Your rewrite:

4. Please review the attached proposal, sign the agreement, and the invoice should be paid.

Rule broken: _____

Your rewrite:

Exercise 4: Cut and Strengthen

Cut this email to no more than three sentences. Use the active voice, put the key action last in each sentence, and keep the deadline.

I just wanted to reach out to let you know that it has come to our attention that the files that were sent over last week by your team were not able to be opened by us due to a formatting issue, and so it would be greatly appreciated if the files could possibly be resent in PDF format at your earliest convenience, ideally before the end of the day on Wednesday if that is at all possible.

Your answer:

Exercise 5: Deliver Bad News

Imagine you are a consultant who will miss a delivery date by four days because of a late data feed from a third party. Write a short email (four sentences or fewer) that states the new date first, gives the cause in one sentence, and names what you will do next. Do not use the passive voice to avoid responsibility.

Subject line:

Your answer:

Body:

Your answer:

Exercise 6: Audit Your Own Sent Mail

Open your last three client emails. For each, answer the questions below.

Question	Email 1	Email 2	Email 3
Does the first sentence state the purpose?			
Does the subject line name the content and the action?			
Is there one paragraph per topic?			
Does the action or deadline come last in its sentence?			
Could you cut a third of the words?			

The change you will make first, based on what you found:

Your answer:

Email Checklist

Before you send, run through this list.

- ☐ The subject line names the content and, where needed, the action.
- ☐ The first sentence states the purpose.
- ☐ Each paragraph treats one topic.

- ☐ The verbs are active; the reader knows who does what.
- ☐ Needless words are gone.
- ☐ The deadline or action sits at the end of its sentence.
- ☐ Lists of requests are parallel.
- ☐ No comma splices, fragments, or dangling openers.
- ☐ The reader can act without writing back to ask what you meant.

Strunk observed that the best writers sometimes disregard the rules but that, unless a writer is certain of doing as well, he will probably do best to follow them. Email is where that advice pays off fastest. Follow the rules, send the message, and see what comes back.

Applying Style to Reports: Structure for Impact

A report is a decision tool. Your reader opens it to learn what you found, what it means, and what to do next. Everything in this chapter serves that purpose.

Strunk gives you the structural principle in one line: “Make the paragraph the unit of composition: one paragraph to each topic.” He adds the reason: “The object of treating each topic in a paragraph by itself is, of course, to aid the reader. The beginning of each paragraph is a signal to him that a new step in the development of the subject has been reached.” A report is that principle at scale. Each section is a step, and each paragraph inside it is a smaller step.

Strunk also shows that structure comes before prose. For a class report on a poem, he lists seven topics (A through G) before any writing begins. For a historical event he offers three: what led up to it, an account of it, and what it led up to. Notice that he sets the heads first and then lets each paragraph’s contents follow. Do the same with your reports. Decide the topics, then write one paragraph for each.

Three parts, three jobs

Most business reports need three working parts. Each applies rules you have already practised.

The executive summary is for the reader who will read nothing else. Strunk's Rule 9 says to begin each paragraph with a topic sentence, and in a summary that sentence should hold the conclusion. A summary that opens with background has buried its point. Because summaries restate what has already happened, Strunk's Rule 17 applies too: in summaries, keep to one tense. Pick past tense for what you did and found, and present tense for what you recommend.

The findings are the evidence. Give each finding its own paragraph, and open each paragraph with a topic sentence that states the finding in definite, specific, concrete language (Rule 12). "Customer service performance was suboptimal" says almost nothing. "Support tickets took longer to close each month" gives the reader something to check. Where you must present many similar facts, use parallel form (Rule 15). Strunk's own advice for a heavy load of similar items is to classify them in groups, or "put his statements in the form of a table."

The recommendations are what the reader acts on. Use the active voice and positive form (Rules 10 and 11), and place the emphatic word last (Rule 18). Compare "It is recommended that consideration be given to the discontinuation of the legacy tool" with "Retire the legacy tool by June." The second names the action, and the action is the last thing the reader sees.

A model skeleton

Here is a structure you can adapt. Strunk's lists work the same way: short labelled heads, each one a topic.

A. Summary (conclusion and the single most important recommendation) **B. Background** (what prompted the work, in a few lines) **C. Findings** (one paragraph per finding, strongest first) **D. Recommendations** (one paragraph per action) **E. Next steps** (who does what, and when)

Put the summary first even though you write it last. You cannot state a conclusion you have not yet reached.

Exercise 1: Build your skeleton

Choose a report you must write soon, or one you wrote recently. Following Strunk's method of listing topics before drafting, write one line for each section below. Each line must be a complete topic you could turn into a paragraph.

Report subject (one sentence):

Your answer:

A. The conclusion a busy reader must take away:

Your answer:

B. Why this work was done:

Your answer:

C. Finding 1 (strongest):

Your answer:

Finding 2:

Your answer:

Finding 3:

Your answer:

D. Recommendation 1:

Your answer:

Recommendation 2:

Your answer:

E. First next step, with owner and date:

Your answer:

Now check your list. If two findings could share a paragraph, merge them. If one finding contains two ideas, split it. One topic per paragraph.

Exercise 2: Rewrite a summary to lead with the conclusion

Weak summaries chronicle the work. Strong ones deliver the result. Study this hypothetical summary:

Over the past six weeks, we conducted interviews, reviewed documents, and analysed data from several sources. Many observations were made regarding the current onboarding process. It was found that there are a number of areas in which improvement could potentially be achieved.

Rewrite it in three sentences or fewer. Open with the conclusion, use concrete language, and stay in one tense. Invent plausible specifics for practice (a made-up number is fine here, since this is your own exercise, but do not carry it into a real document).

Your answer:

Self-check. Circle the first sentence of your rewrite. Does it state a conclusion, or does it describe activity? If it describes activity, rewrite it.

Exercise 3: Turn a finding into a topic sentence

For each vague finding, write a topic sentence that is definite and specific. Add a plausible concrete detail where needed (again, practice material only).

1. *Communication issues were identified across teams.*

Your answer:

2. *The pricing structure presents certain challenges.*

Your answer:

3. *There is room for improvement in the delivery timeline.*

Your answer:

Exercise 4: Strengthen recommendations

Rewrite each recommendation in the active voice, in positive form, with the emphatic word at the end. Add an owner or a deadline if the sentence needs one.

1. It is suggested that the weekly status meeting not be held on Fridays.

Your answer:

2. Consideration should be given to the possibility of hiring a second analyst.

Your answer:

3. The vendor contract should not be allowed to renew automatically.

Your answer:

Self-check. Underline the last word or phrase in each of your rewrites. Is it the part you most want the reader to remember? If not, move it.

Exercise 5: Make findings parallel

Parallel construction tells the reader that the items are of equal weight. Rewrite this hypothetical list so all three findings share one form:

The onboarding process is slow. Another finding was that training materials are out of date. Also, in terms of tooling, there's a lack of integration.

Your answer:

Exercise 6: Cut one section

Take your skeleton from Exercise 1. Strunk observes that a short subject may need only a single paragraph, and that subdivision should be tested after the writing is done. Apply the same test to your report. Ask of each section: if I removed it, would the reader miss it?

The section I could cut or fold into another:

Your answer:

Why it is unnecessary, or where it belongs instead:

Your answer:

Exercise 7: Draft and revise one real section

Using your skeleton, write the full executive summary for your own report in the space below. Keep it to one paragraph: topic sentence first, concrete language throughout, one tense, active voice, recommendation last.

Your answer:

Now revise it against this checklist. Mark each item when you have confirmed it.

- ☐ The first sentence states the conclusion.
- ☐ Every sentence uses definite, specific, concrete language.
- ☐ The summary keeps to one tense (or past for findings, present for recommendations).
- ☐ No sentence passes the point where it could stop.
- ☐ The recommendation sits at the end, in the active voice.
- ☐ I have removed every needless word.

What I changed in revision (list at least two edits):

Your answer:

Carry this forward

A report earns its impact before the reader reaches your sentences, through its structure. Name the topics, give each its own paragraph, open each paragraph with its point, and close

with the action you want taken. The next chapter, the last in the workbook, pulls every principle together into a practice you can keep using.

Sustaining a Clear Writing Practice

You have worked through the rules. Now comes the harder part: keeping them when a proposal is due at 5 p.m. and a client has just sent an irritated email.

Strunk makes a point worth remembering. His book “covers only a small portion of the field of English style,” and he argues that once past the essentials, writers profit most from attention to “the problems of their own work.” That is your plan for the long term. You do not need more rules. You need a practice that shows you *your* recurring errors and corrects them.

The book’s central instruction is to “make every word tell.” Strunk says the first rules, on the comma and the sentence, “should be so thoroughly mastered that their application becomes second nature.” Second nature comes from repetition on real work, not from a single reading. This chapter gives you three habits to build it: a revision routine, a personal error log, and a short review cycle.

Habit 1: Revise in Passes

Do not try to fix everything in one read. Make one pass per concern. Each pass maps to a rule you already know:

1. **Structure:** Does each paragraph hold one topic, opened by a topic sentence?
2. **Verbs and statements:** Are the verbs active and the statements positive?
3. **Words:** Can you omit needless words? Hunt for the *fact that*, *there is no doubt but that*, and *who is* or *which was*. Are the terms definite and concrete?
4. **Rhythm:** Have you strung together a succession of loose sentences joined by *and*, *but*, and *so*? Are co-ordinate ideas in parallel form?
5. **Mechanics:** Check commas, possessives, fragments, and participial phrases that open a sentence.

Exercise 1: Build your pass list.

Write the one or two questions you will ask in each pass, in your own words.

Pass 1 (structure): Your answer:

Pass 2 (verbs/statements): Your answer:

Pass 3 (words): Your answer:

Pass 4 (rhythm): Your answer:

Pass 5 (mechanics): Your answer:

Habit 2: Keep an Error Log

Most writers repeat the same few mistakes. Strunk expected this: his three comma rules and one semicolon rule exist because a few errors account for most trouble. Find yours.

Pull three pieces of your recent writing: a client email, a proposal section, and a report paragraph. Reread each and mark every violation of a rule from this book.

Exercise 2: Audit your own work.

List what you found. Name the rule each time (for example, “comma splice,” “dangling opener,” “needless words”).

Piece 1 (client email) — errors found: Your answer:

Piece 2 (proposal section) — errors found: Your answer:

Piece 3 (report paragraph) — errors found: Your answer:

Now count. Which error appears most?

My most frequent error: Your answer:

The rule that fixes it: Your answer:

One sentence of mine, rewritten to obey it:

Before: Your answer:

After: Your answer:

Keep this log open beside your drafts. Add to it whenever a colleague or client points out confusion. Within a month, patterns will be plain, and you can aim your attention at two or three habits instead of fifty.

Habit 3: Edit by Cutting, Then Test the Cut

Strunk's model is compression without loss. He reduces a 51-word account of Macbeth to 26 words by combining a chain of short statements into one sentence. He does not ask you to write short sentences or to drop detail, only to leave nothing idle.

Apply the same test to your own drafts. Choose one paragraph from a live project and cut it by a third without losing a fact.

Exercise 3: The one-third cut.

Original paragraph (paste or type): Your answer:

Cut version: Your answer:

Word count before and after: Your answer:

What did you remove, and what did the reader lose? Your answer:

If the reader lost nothing, the words were not telling.

Habit 4: Set a Review Cycle

A practice needs a schedule. Commit to a small, fixed rhythm you can keep.

Exercise 4: Write your practice plan.

Before sending any proposal, I will: Your answer:

Once a week, I will review: Your answer:

Once a month, I will reread my error log and: Your answer:

Who will read my drafts and tell me where they confused?

Your answer:

My first review date: Your answer:

A Final Check

Return to Strunk's own advice about specifics: even when dealing with general principles, "give particular instances of their application." Do the same with your commitments. A vague resolution to "write more clearly" will fade. A named habit, a dated review, and a log of your own errors will hold.

Exercise 5: One-sentence commitment.

Complete this sentence in active voice and positive form:

“Starting this week, I will _____ so that my clients _____.”

Your answer:

Keep this page. Revisit it when your next deadline arrives, and use the passes before you press send.

The Foundation of Plain English for Professionals

Your notes & answers

Precision in Possessives and Punctuation Series

Your notes & answers

Mastering Parenthetical Expressions

Your notes & answers

Conjunctions and Independent Clauses: Joining...

Your notes & answers

Avoiding Sentence Fragments and Dangling Modifiers

Your notes & answers

The Unitary Paragraph: One Idea Per Topic

Your notes & answers

Active Voice and Positive Statements for Impact

Your notes & answers

Concrete Language and Eliminating Needless Words

Your notes & answers

Sentence Variety and Parallel Construction

Your notes & answers

Keeping Related Words Together and Emphatic...

Your notes & answers

Applying Style to Proposals: Clarity for Conversion

Your notes & answers

Applying Style to Emails: Precision for Professionalism

Your notes & answers

Applying Style to Reports: Structure for Impact

Your notes & answers

WORKBOOK

Sustaining a Clear Writing Practice

Your notes & answers