THE ELEMENTS OF Style

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With Revisions, an Introduction, and a Chapter on Writing

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ALLYN AND BACON
Boston London Toronto Sydney Tokyo Singapore
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1. **Place yourself in the background.**

Write in a way that draws the reader’s attention to the sense and substance of the writing, rather than to the mood and temper of the author. If the writing is solid and good, the mood and temper of the writer will eventually be revealed and not at the expense of the work. Therefore, the first piece of advice is this: to achieve style, begin by affecting none—that is, place yourself in the background. A careful and honest writer does not need to worry about style. As you become proficient in the use of language, your style will emerge, because you yourself will emerge, and when this happens you will find it increasingly easy to break through the barriers that separate you from other minds, other hearts—which is, of course, the purpose of writing, as well as its principal reward. Fortunately, the act of composition, or creation, disciplines the mind; writing is one way to go about thinking, and the practice and habit of writing not only drain the mind but supply it, too.

2. **Write in a way that comes naturally.**

Write in a way that comes easily and naturally to you, using words and phrases that come readily to hand. But do not assume that because you have acted naturally your product is without flaw.

The use of language begins with imitation. The infant imitates the sounds made by its parents; the child imitates first the spoken language, then the stuff of books. The imitative life continues long after the writer is secure in the language, for it is almost impossible to avoid imitating what one admires. Never imitate consciously, but do not worry about being an imitator; take pains instead to admire what is good. Then when you write in a way that comes naturally, you will echo the hallos that bear repeating.

3. **Work from a suitable design.**

Before beginning to compose something, gauge the nature and extent of the enterprise and work from a suitable design. (See Chapter II, Rule 12.) Design informs even the simplest structure, whether of brick and steel or of prose. You raise a pup tent from one sort of vision, a cathedral from another. This does not mean that you must sit with a blueprint always in front of you, merely that you had best anticipate what you are getting into. To compose a laundry list, you can work directly from the pile of soiled garments, ticking them off one by one. But to write a biography, you will need at least a rough scheme; you cannot plunge in blindly and start ticking off fact after fact about your subject, lest you miss the forest for the trees and there be no end to your labors.

Sometimes, of course, impulse and emotion are more compelling than design. If you are deeply troubled and are composing a letter appealing for mercy or for love, you had best not attempt to organize your emotions; the prose will have a better chance if the emotions are left in disarray—which you'll probably have to do anyway, since feelings do not usually lend themselves to rearrangement. But even the kind of writing that is essentially adventurous and impetuous will on examination be found to have a secret plan: Columbus didn't just sail, he sailed west, and the New World took shape from this simple and, we now think, sensible design.

4. **Write with nouns and verbs.**

Write with nouns and verbs, not with adjectives and adverbs. The adjective hasn't been built that can pull a weak or inaccurate noun out of a tight place. This is not to disparage adjectives and adverbs; they are indispensable parts of speech. Occasionally they surprise us with their power, as in

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Up the airy mountain,
Down the rushy glen,
We daren't go a-hunting
For fear of little men . . .
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The nouns mountain and glen are accurate enough, but had the mountain not become airy, the glen rushy, William Allingham might never have got off the ground with his poem.