



Twenty Rules To Create Great Blog Posts

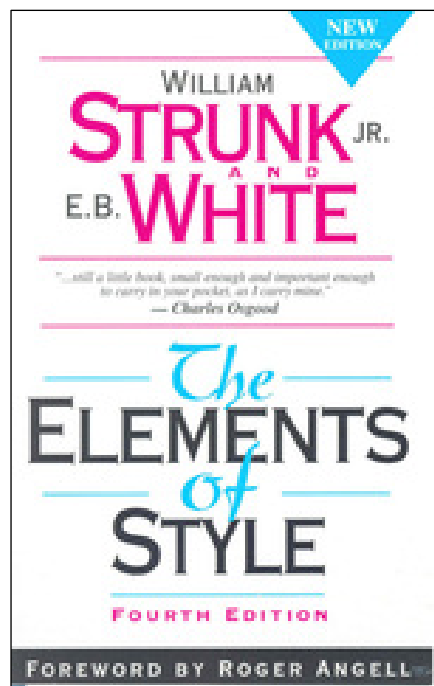
We've discussed the source of content for your blog posts, now let's look at some simple rules to improve your writing. If you apply each of these straightforward rules you will be a blogging superstar in no time!

Rule One - Eliminate unnecessary words

Or, in the immortal words of Strunk and White in *The Elements of Style*, "Omit needless words."

"A sentence should contain no unnecessary words, a paragraph no unnecessary sentences ...this requires not that the writer make all his sentences short, or that he avoid all detail and treat his subjects only in outline, but that every word tell." William Strunk Jr in *Elements of Style*

Eliminating unnecessary words places the emphasis on the key content. This rule was developed decades before the invention of the internet, but has never been more relevant. The internet, and blogging in particular, rewards a succinct approach to writing. People are often shocked when a copywriter takes a red pencil to their work, eliminates 25% of the words, and yet maintains (in fact improves) the thrust of the post. I know it's easy enough to believe there is virtue in verbosity, perhaps a feeling that it is more "impressive", but it's not true. It's just boring and a turn-off to the reader.



Some examples:

Version 1 - Yesterday I received at my office an inquiry from a client who asked about changes in the latest tax department missive that thankfully I had read already so I was able to give a quick response. Let me share that with you. (43 words)

Version 2 - I received a client inquiry about a recent Tax Department ruling. Let me share my response. (15 words)

Version 1 - It goes without saying that the regulator of legal affairs makes it difficult for lawyers to operate with any real efficiency or productivity. This is not to say that lawyers should not comply with these rules, or that lawyers should not



be properly acquainted with the policy of the regulator, and certainly lawyers should not have any intention other than to do so. (63 words)

Version 2 - Like all lawyers, we comply with the rules of the legal regulator, though they sometimes hamper productivity. (17 words)

Version 1 – Close your eyes and try to imagine what it's like to be standing in front of your house after it has burned down. Now imagine also that you have underinsured your house as well. Now also imagine what it's like to know that you could have taken minor precautions to avoid this situation. That's what we don't want to happen to our clients, and what I want to convey in this blog post. (73 words)

Version 2 - Imagine what it's like to see your house destroyed in a fire. Then to discover it's underinsured! Let's make sure it doesn't happen to you. (26 words)

Version 1 – Let me tell you about a recent trip I took, and what I learnt from it. It will help you on your next business trip, I promise you. Hopefully you will not make the same mistake I did, because truthfully I could have saved myself a very big headache if I had just prepared a little better. Things started off well enough. The taxi was on time, and I managed to leave the house at 3:30 a.m. without waking my husband. Everything continued to go well until I approached the security gate and realised I would have to put my notebook computer in one of those plastic trays they give you. That's when the trouble started, because it set off some invisible alarm. You won't believe what the problem turned out to be! Two hours later, having missed my breakfast meeting and boarded a flight, I



finally got the computer back. Now let's look at how this should not happen to you. (165 words)

Version 2 - My notebook computer set off a security alarm at the airport and delayed my departure for two hours! Make sure this doesn't happen to you. (26 words)

Rule Two - Use the active voice

If I had to choose the most important of these twenty rules, this may be it. Why isn't it the first rule? Because you first need to eliminate words that should not be there in the first place.

Every sentence you write on a blog can be improved by the use of the active voice over the passive voice. **THIS IS FUNDAMENTAL TO GOOD WRITING!** Apply this rule every time you write, no matter the form. It can have an almost magical affect on your blog posts (or any writing).

Active verbs allow for, obviously, an active voice that is crisp and professional instead of the passive, bureaucratic, or the so-called "professional voice" that alienates readers. Professionals are often perversely drawn to the passive voice.

The active voice is where the subject of a sentence performs the action described by the verb. It is:

- more direct
- more powerful; and





- engaging

To explain the difference between active and passive verbs, we need to look briefly at how a sentence fits together. There are three main parts to almost every sentence:

- a **subject** (the person, group or thing doing the action);
- a **verb** (the action itself); and
- an **object** (the person, group or thing that the action is done to)



So:

'George watched the television':

- the **subject** is George (he is doing the watching);
- the **verb** is watched; and
- the **object** is the television (it is being watched - thing that the action is done to).

Therefore the difference between active and passive is:

- **Active Voice** = the subject takes the action
- **Passive voice** = the subject is acted upon.



'George watched the television' = **Active Voice**

'The television was watched by George' = **Passive Voice**

'The PM signed the Bill' = **Active Voice**

'The Bill was signed by the PM' = **Passive Voice**

With an active verb (or voice) the three parts of the sentence appear in a particular order: **subject** then **verb** then **object**.

George (**subject**) watched (**verb**) the television (**object**).

With a passive verb, the order is reversed: **object** then **verb** then **subject**.

The television (**object**) was watched (**verb**) by George (**subject**).

'Watched' is a passive verb here. The sentence says what is being watched before it says who is doing the watching.

By making the sentence passive, we have had to introduce the words 'was' and 'by', and the sentence becomes more clumsy. As always, unnecessary words clutter the sentence.

Do you think this is complicated? If so, here's a "cheat" to determine whether your sentence is active or passive:

Find the **subject** of the sentence.

Find the **action** that the sentence identifies.



Examine the **relationship** between the subject and verb.

Ask yourself: does the subject perform the action of the verb? (If so, the sentence is **active**.) (e.g. *George (**subject**) watched (**verb**) the television (**object**).*)

Does the subject do nothing while something else performs an action on it? (If so, the sentence is **passive**.) (e.g. *The television (**object**) was watched (**verb**) by George (**subject**).*)

In the active voice:

- Sentences are shorter.
- Communications are direct.
- Writing comes alive - the subject acts and is not acted upon.
- Ambiguity is avoided (sometimes it is difficult to work out who is doing what).

Rule Number Three - Use a short, simple sentence structure

The blog reader finds short, simple sentence structures the easiest to process. Don't force your reader to pause to make sense of the blog. Be punchy. Vary your writing by mixing short sentences with longer ones, following the basic principle of sticking to one main idea in a sentence. Use contractions. Short declaratory sentences are especially effective ("Was I wrong? You bet!").

Copywriters generally agree that shorter sentences make for easier scanning, and as a generalisation readers of blogs tend to scan instead of read.





Rule Number Four - Use simple words

Yes, you know many, many big words. But resist the temptation. The goal is communication, not self-aggrandisement (yes, that's a very big word!)

Rule Number Five - Use short paragraphs

3–4 sentences per paragraph – see how newspapers handle this.

Rule Number Six - Avoid “ing” words

“ing” = ‘We were discussing the issue.’

‘We discussed the issue.’

“ing” = ‘We are aiming to create a better worklife product.’

‘We aim create a better worklife product.’

Every time you take a red pen to “ing” words you inevitably improve any type of writing. It will also force you to rearrange the sentence to make it active.

Rule Number Seven - Use lots of informative headings & vertical lists. Bold type when necessary

Vertical lists highlight a series of informative points in a visually clear way. Use vertical lists to help your reader focus on important material. Vertical lists:

- Highlight levels of importance
- Help the reader understand the order in which things happen



- Make it easy for the reader to identify all necessary steps in a process
- Use bold type to emphasise keywords. This aids scan-ability.

Rule Number Eight - Closure is important in any relationship – and it *is* a relationship

What happens when you don't get closure? You are frustrated. And so your readers will also be frustrated. Provide something to go on with – a question that can be answered in a comment; a call to action; a clear conclusion. Blogger Michael Hyatt does this very well.¹ Take a look at his posts and you will see that he ends most with a question or a proposition for the reader to ponder. While you're there, check out the structure and design of his blog, it is masterful.

Rule Number Nine - Be conversational

You can have a relaxed and conversational style and still communicate professionalism.

Your customers and clients want you to communicate difficult concepts for them – be conversational but not patronising.

¹ <http://michaelhyatt.com>



Here's part of a blog I wrote that discusses legal and financial myths that should be debunked:

Myth – “We are comprehensively insured” – but oh, the shock when you discover the damage caused by your dog is not covered (a car swerved to avoid your dog and went straight through a brick fence – car, fence and prize Azaleas destroyed).

Myth – “We don't need a will” – yes you do, unless you want to leave your loved ones in the lurch at the very time they most need their anxieties to be alleviated.

Myth – “The insurance company will take care of everything if I have a car accident” – yeah, sure, but please don't holler when you get the blame for an accident you did not cause and it costs you money.

Myth – “You don't need insurance cover for a tradesperson who comes for the day to fix a few loose roof tiles” - woops, watch out for the ladder!! See you in court.

Myth – “Sure, we all know that divorce and separation often lead to extremes of stress and trauma, but it will never happen to us” – cue Darth Vader's Imperial March theme from Star Wars (“dum. dum de dum...”)

Myth – “Debt consolidation is the magic bullet that will solve all our debt problems and we've been promised by the financial advisors that it won't leave us worse off” - wave bye bye to your house, baby. Hello rented accommodation.

Myth – “There is no way to protect our assets” - oh, yes there is.





Myth – “Buying a house is pretty straightforward” - woops again.

Myth – “There is no need to appoint a guardian for our children. After all, we would both have to die, and what are the chances of that?” - you’re right, there’s no need if you don’t care what happens to your children.

Myth – “I don’t need income protection insurance, not at my age, what are the chances that I will be severely disabled?” – sure, no need to protect your family given those chances. Don’t worry about the mortgage, or the kids’ education, or health insurance, or making up your lost wages, or...’

Myth – “We are adequately covered for home contents. I think.” - think again. Do you really know what type of cover you have? Is it replacement? Depreciated?

Myth – “I assume we’re covered if our dog injures someone or damages property – it’s part of the public liability insurance” – here’s a suggestion, keep the name of that helpful lawyer handy (see if they have a fridge magnet).

Myth – “Buying furniture with an interest-free period is not the same as borrowing” - yes it is, it’s exactly the same. That furniture store is really a credit store. The furniture is there to help you incur debt (nice décor, too).

Myth – “It’s always worth belonging to a store loyalty scheme – it’s a no-brainer” – exactly, that’s what they count on, that you don’t use your brain.

Myth – “The best way to deal with a fencing dispute is to negotiate face to face with our neighbour” – oh no, no, no. No!!!!



Rule Number Ten - Make the posts shorter

Take my advice – it’s harder to write less than more. 500 or 600 words is enough for the first draft, then remove 100 words. Others will challenge this Rule, so look around the web and see what you like. Do what is doable.

Rule Number Eleven - Provide internal links

Keep articles categorised so you can link back to them. Always link out to quoted blogs by other authors. If you use WordPress there are plugins that automatically organise your posts into a series. ²

Rule Number Twelve – When in doubt, write!

You will learn more from writing than thinking about it. You’ll know for sure within 3 months whether blogging is for you.

Rule Number Thirteen - Tighten the focus

You must have an editorial focus. A tighter focus leads to higher traffic. You can move away from your focus, but do it through the lens of your “brand”.

Rule Number Fourteen – Use your elevator speech as your bio

You have an elevator speech ³ – use it for the “bio” or “about” page of your blog. Modify as needed, but all the same rules apply.

² See our MatureMedia Guide *WordPress As Your Professional Platform*

³ If not go back to MatureMedia Guide *Your Professional Online Identity*



Rule Number Fifteen – Use metaphors & analogies

Metaphors and analogies are invaluable (“putting off your tax return is like avoiding the dentist when you have a toothache – it will be worse the longer you leave it”). Remember, intellectual understanding is overrated. This is the best way to explain difficult concepts, especially for professionals.

Rule Number Sixteen – No purple prose

"I thought about my client Margaret as I watched the blood-red disk of the sun slip majestically into the undulating sea." Ernest Hemingway you are not! The “sun set” – that’s it.

Rule Number Seventeen – Don’t overuse adjectives

"The tough, hard, local council officer gave his verdict in a gruff-sounding voice." Oh, boy. Try: "The local council officer delivered his verdict."

Rule Number Eighteen – Misplaced modifiers

Avoid silly outcomes - "Clever and original, clients will love this interpretation of the new superannuation rules." No, the clients are not “clever and original”, that description belongs to the interpretation of the superannuation rules. Rewrite it this way: "Clients will love this clever and original interpretation of the new super rules."



Rule Number Nineteen – Don't be afraid to begin a sentence with a conjunction

A silly rule you learnt in school was “don't begin a sentence with a conjunction”. But it's wrong. You can certainly begin a sentence with "and," "but," "or," and other conjunctions (e.g. “yet”, “for”, “so”). And that's just as grammatically correct. So there.

Rule Number Twenty – Proofread

Read it through once – then have a coffee. Read the newspaper with that coffee. Check out what's happening in the world, start with the sports section if you like. Then read the post again.

- Publish the post as a draft in your blogging platform. You will often catch a mistake this way (we discuss blogging platforms in our *MatureMedia Guide Your Professional Online Identity*).
- Get someone else at the office to read it, too. This is a great idea on any number of levels.

Well done. Now let's look at the most fundamental issue that we have, until now, done our best to avoid: How in the world will we get found on a search engine? Good question. Long answer.