

56 QUOTATIONS



E. B. White

(1899-1985)

E. B. White began as a student journalist at Cornell and soon became famous when he co-edited an English handbook written by one of his professors, *The Elements of Style* (1918), now commonly known as “Strunk and White.” The slender book, given wit and style by White, became an enduring standard text used in composition classes nationwide ever since—though as standards have declined in recent decades it has been rejected by Postmodern academics who write badly. The book has passed through many editions, an illustrated one was published in 2005 and it must be the only English handbook in history to become the basis of an *opera!* White began submitting witty pieces to the *New Yorker* in 1925. The literary editor recommended that he be hired by the magazine as a member of the staff. White was reluctant to come to the office for a meeting, let alone to work there. He agreed to come in on Thursdays. Even then, to avoid visitors he routinely climbed out a window and fled down the fire escape. E. B. White became the most important writer for the most important American literary magazine, he married the literary editor, he went on contributing to the *New Yorker* for about 60 years and he also wrote the very popular children’s books *Charlotte’s Web* and *Stuart Little*.

ORDER OF TOPICS: childhood, literary education, life, career, people, humor, free speech, writing, writers, literature, genius, critics, prejudice, politics, the world, the future, old age, advice:

CHILDHOOD

As a child, I was frightened but not unhappy. My parents were loving and kind.

I lacked for nothing except confidence.

When I was a child people simply looked about them and were moderately happy; today they peer beyond the seven seas, bury themselves waist deep in tidings, and by and large what they see and hear makes them unutterably sad.

LITERARY EDUCATION

It is a matter of some embarrassment to me that I have never read Joyce and a dozen other writers who have changed the face of literature.

I think of Jane Austen, a deeply humorous woman. I think of Thoreau, a man of some humor along with his bile.

LIFE

I get up every morning determined to both change the world and have one hell of a good time. Sometimes this makes planning my day difficult.

From three to four, he planned to stand perfectly still and think of what it was like to be alive.

To perceive Christmas through its wrappings becomes more difficult with every year.

Everything in life is somewhere else, and you can get there in a car.

Commuter—one who spends his life
In riding to and from his wife;
A man who shaves and takes a train
And then rides back to shave again.

CAREER

After becoming connected with the *New Yorker*, I lunched once at the Round Table but didn't care for it and was embarrassed in the presence of the great. I never was well acquainted with Benchley or Broun or Dorothy Parker or Woollcott.

PEOPLE

Luck is not something you can mention in the presence of a self-made man.

People are, if anything, more touchy about being thought silly than they are about being thought unjust.

People are animals, and the city is full of people in strange plumage, defending their territorial rights, digging for their supper.

A good farmer is nothing more or less than a handy man with a sense of humor.

HUMOR

Whatever else an American believes or disbelieves about himself, he is absolutely sure he has a sense of humor.

Analyzing humor is like dissecting a frog. Few people are interested and the frog dies of it.

FREE SPEECH

I can only assume that your editorial writer tripped over the First Amendment and thought it was the office cat.

WRITING

Be obscure clearly.

Writing is hard work and bad for the health.

Writing is an act of faith, not a trick of grammar.

Commas in the *New Yorker* fall with the precision of knives in a circus act, outlining the victim.

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.

Delay is natural to a writer. He is like a surfer—he bides his time, waits for the perfect wave on which to ride in. Delay is instinctive with him. He waits for the surge (of emotion? of strength? of courage?) that will carry him along.

English usage is sometimes more than mere taste, judgment and education—sometimes it's sheer luck, like getting across the street.

In the English classes of today, "the little book" [*The Elements of Style*] is surrounded by longer, lower textbooks—books with permissive steering and automatic transitions.

WRITERS

A writer is like a bean plant—he has his little day, and then gets stringy.

She could write 8 or 10 words, then draw her gun and shoot them down.

It is not often that someone comes along who is a true friend and a good writer.

Thurber did not write the way a surgeon operates, he wrote the way a child skips rope, or the way a mouse waltzes.

Much writing today strikes me as deprecating, destructive, and angry.

Shocking writing is like murder—the questions the jury must decide are the questions of motive and intent.

LITERATURE

I don't know which is more discouraging, literature or chickens.

All poets who, when reading from their own works, experience a choked feeling, are major. For that matter, all poets who read from their own works are major, whether they choke or not.

A poet dares to be just so clear and no clearer.... He unzips the veil from beauty, but does not remove it.

A poet utterly clear is a trifle glaring.

GENIUS

Genius is more often found in a cracked pot than a whole one.

CRITICS

The critic leaves at curtain fall to find, in starting to review it, he scarcely saw the play at all for starting to review it.

PREJUDICE

Prejudice is a great time saver. You can form opinions without having to get the facts.

The world is full of people who have never, since childhood, met an open doorway with an open mind.

POLITICS

I feel no obligation to deal with politics.

Democracy is the recurrent suspicion that more than half of the people are right more than half of the time.

The trouble with the profit system has always been that it is highly unprofitable to most people.

THE WORLD

It is easier for a man to be loyal to his club than to his planet; the bylaws are shorter, and he is personally acquainted with the other members.

The world organization debates disarmament in one room and, in the next room, moves the knights and pawns that make national arms imperative.

The terror of the atomic age is not the violence of the new power but the speed of man's adjustment to it, the speed of his acceptance.

There is nothing more likely to start disagreement among people or countries than an agreement.

One of the most time-consuming things is to have an enemy.

The time not to become a father is eighteen years before a war.

THE FUTURE

There's no limit to how complicated things can get, on account of one thing always leading to another.

The only sense that is common in the long run, is the sense of change and we all instinctively avoid it.

I am pessimistic about the human race because it is too ingenious for its own good. Our approach to nature is to beat it into submission. We would stand a better chance of survival if we accommodated ourselves to this planet and viewed it appreciatively instead of skeptically and dictatorially.

I would feel more optimistic about a bright future for man if he spent less time proving he can outwit Nature and more time tasting its sweetness and respecting her authority.

I see nothing in space as promising as the view from a Ferris wheel.

OLD AGE

Old age is a special problem for me because I've never been able to shed the mental image I have of myself—a lad of about 19.

ADVICE

We should all do what, in the long run, gives us joy, even if it is only picking grapes or sorting the laundry.

Some of these quotations are excerpted from
"E.B. White: The Art of the Essay" (1969)
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