

None of Us Is Perfect

'The Elements of Style,' the classic manual for clear writing, re-emerges as a hip new tome *and* an avant-garde musical piece.



The New York Public Library

AUDIO CLIP



Cycle of Songs

- Listen to a clip of music based on the book 'The Elements of Style'

WEB EXCLUSIVE

By Andrew Cohen

Newsweek

Updated: 8:37 a.m. ET Oct. 28, 2005

Oct. 28, 2005 - Can grammar be hip? Is proper comma use cool? With the publication of Maira Kalman's smart new illustrated edition of Strunk and White's "The Elements of Style" (*Penguin*) the classic manual to good writing, it's suddenly—and unexpectedly—a question worth asking.

The manual itself has something of an illustrious history. William Strunk Jr., a Cornell professor of English, self-published the first version in 1918 for use by his students. It contained seven rules of usage (e.g., "Do not join independent clauses by a comma") and 11 timeless rules of composition, including "Omit needless words," "Use the active voice" and "Place the emphatic words of a sentence at the end."

About a dozen years after Strunk's death in 1946, one of his students, E. B. White, (yes, *that* E. B. White—the famed *New Yorker* writer and author of "Charlotte's Web" and "Stuart Little,") updated and expanded the thin, little book at a publisher's request, adding himself as coauthor. The resulting work, which has sold 10 million copies since it first appeared in 1959, has guided generations of anxiety-prone authors, from high-school students and corporate report writers to White House speechwriters and beatnik poets.

The New York Public Library

Maira Kalman, an illustrator and children's book author best known for her *New Yorker* covers, including the popular "Newyorkistan" map of few years ago, told *The New York Times* she was so taken by the colorful examples used in Strunk and White to illustrate their grammatical points that she wondered why anyone hadn't illustrated them before. Thus, her illustrations for the book contain such captions as: "Polly loves cake more than she loves me," "It was a unique eggbeater," "None of us is perfect" and "Well, Susan, this is a fine mess you are in."

Her zeal for the book has since spilled over into the musical realm. She shared her enthusiasm with family friend Nico Muhly, a Juilliard-trained composer who wrote an operatic song cycle based on the book, "The Elements of Style: Nine Songs," which had its gala premier Oct. 19 in the main reading room of the New York Public Library on Fifth Avenue.

Although lyrics like "Revise and rewrite" and "Do not use a hyphen between two words that can better be written as one word" suggest the didactic thrust of "Schoolhouse Rock," Muhly's work is more in the minimalist-modernist mold of Philip Glass and Steve Reich but with an absurdist dash of Spike Jones. At just 33_ minutes long, the work was impressively executed by soprano Abigail Fischer, tenor Matthew Hensrud, violist Nadia Sirota and banjo player Sam Amidon, all under the direction of Muhly and augmented by the Omit Needless Words Orchestra, which included noise-making amateur performers such as fashion designer Isaac Mizrahi and cartoonist Rick Meyerowitz (Kalman's "Newyorkistan" collaborator), as well as Kalman herself. Their brief mandated the making of sounds incorporating duck calls, meat grinders, bells, Slinkys, mallets, pillows, eggbeaters, megaphones, "chattering" cups and saucers, a typewriter and the slamming closed of a large book.

Unfortunately, the operatic style of the piece rendered the lyrics all but unintelligible to this listener—in ironic contrast to the simplifying ethos of "Elements"—though that may be more the fault of the acoustics of the library venue, which was, after all, designed for silence.

Not that any of this prevented the piece from garnering titters of appreciation capped by a standing ovation from the high-tone crowd in attendance. Although the piece may have violated E. B. White's advice to "Prefer the standard to the offbeat," it was more than effective in fulfilling another edict: "Be obscure clearly."

© 2005 Newsweek, Inc.