The Elements of International English Style

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The Elements of International English Style

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Review by Jeffrey Barlow <barlowj@pacificu.edu>


One of the recurring questions that all who read on the Internet or write for it must answer is quite a simple one: What is good writing on the World Wide Web? We have reviewed a number of works touching on this question, in search of a definitive answer. [1] We think that this work may have that answer.

We have also been present when a number of highly qualified academics, all enthusiastic writers for and users of the WWW debated whether or not an excellent electronic scholarly journal should include translations of abstracts into major languages other than English. These academics, like most Americans, took great comfort in their belief that English was now the international language of the Internet.

Edmond H. Weiss agrees with that, but he points out the critical differences between E1S (those for whom English is their first language) and E2S (those for whom it is a second language). E1S number roughly four hundred million; E2S more than another billion. [2] The two audiences are quite different, and so should the English written for them be different.

The title of this work will strike many as arrogant because it immediately brings to mind William Strunk, Jr.’s classical work, Elements of Style. [3] This work educated generations of students as to “good” style, and has been an indispensable tool for even more generations of editors. But, in our opinion, Weiss’s work is as valuable.

Like the original Elements, The Elements of International English is concise at 162 pages, straightforward, and witty. The author is generous with his citations and examples. He has advised many businesspeople and corporations as to how to function within international
The chapters are largely broken down, again like the original Elements of Style, into “Rules” now called “Tactics” which the author points out, violates one of his own rules for good international English (Chapter 3, Tactic 26): “Avoid Military and Sports Vocabulary”.

Weiss, while acknowledging the irony in his substitution of “Tactics” for “Rules” is more than protected against charges of inconsistency by his own constant discussions of the difference between writing for native speakers and for second-language learners. The audience for the book is the former, not the latter.

Many who work in international environments, whether digital or real, may think, as I did before reading this work, that the best approach was to write or speak an American version of “BBC Special English”. This, one of many systems of restricted English, spoken at what seems to a native speaker to be a g-l—a-c-i-a-l pace has taught a good percentage of the billion plus E2S to better comprehend spoken English, particularly in Asia. However, Weiss has many examples of when simplest is not necessarily the best. He opts continually for comprehension, and often this leads to writing what initially seems a rather wordy style, but in fact leads to more precision in expression. He tells us also to be generous with commas, and to avoid certain other patterns of language use.

Weiss is not a simple multiculturalist or a “diversity” trainer in any sense. He is deeply aware of the many complex issues which come forward when thinking about English in an international environment. Some of these seem, well, “philosophical,” but like all good writing guides, it is its appreciation for style and nuance that makes this work an excellent one.

His advise also extends well beyond simply writing for E2S. His suggestions as to how best to work with translators, for example, is extremely valuable, as is his discussion of contracts and documents within a variety of national environments. Much of his advise, moreover, is directly contrary to what is considered good practice within American business contexts, making the advise all the more valuable. We cannot, he repeatedly points out, go with our traditional American assumptions and beliefs and meet with success. And for Weiss, success in communications is literally the bottom line—mistakes cost time and money.

We consider this work a necessary reference, and will utilize it in preparing students both for traveling overseas and for writing for those who live there. We also think, as does Weiss, that anyone who deals with E2S in any environment should read this book. Reviewing this work at the Berglund Center may be a true service to our readers, but it is also going to be an expensive one for us; we can see ourselves giving away dozens of copies.

Greetings! Very useful advice in this particular article! It is the little changes that make the largest changes. Many thanks for sharing!

Hey I know this is off topic but I was wondering if you knew of any widgets I could add to my blog that automatically tweet my newest twitter updates. I’ve been looking for a plug-in like this for quite some time and was hoping maybe you would have some experience with something like this. Please let me know if you run into anything. I truly enjoy reading your blog and I look forward to your new updates.