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Objective: The purpose of the following article is to have students work on utilizing the ideas in a challenging piece of writing, so that they can be able to identify the ideas presented in the article and write an effective response.

“How To Write a (Good) Sentence”

In 1919, the young E.B. White, future *New Yorker* writer and author of *Charlotte's Web*, took a class at Cornell University with a drill sergeant of an English professor named William Strunk Jr. Strunk assigned his self-published manual on composition titled "The Elements of Style," a 43-page list of rules of usage, principles of style, and commonly misused words. It was a brief for [brevity](#). "Vigorous writing is concise," Strunk wrote. "When a sentence is made stronger, it usually becomes shorter." Half a century later, when preparing his old professor's manuscript for publication, White added an essay of his own underlining the argument for concision in moral terms. "Do not overwrite," he instructed. "Rich, ornate prose is hard to digest, generally unwholesome, and sometimes nauseating." Strunk & White, as the combined work came to be known, was issued in 1959 and went on to become a defining American statement of what constituted good writing, with 10 million copies sold, and counting. Its final rule summoned the whole: "Prefer the standard to the offbeat."

Though never explicitly political, *The Elements of Style* is unmistakably a product of its time. Its calls for "vigour" and "toughness" in language, its analogy of sentences to smoothly functioning machines, its distrust of vernacular and foreign language phrases all conform to that disciplined, buttoned-down and most self-assured stretch of the American century from the armistice through the height of the Cold War. A time before race riots, feminism, and the collapse of the gold standard. It is a book full of sound advice addressed to a class of all-male Ivy-Leaguers wearing neckties and with neatly parted hair. This, of course, is part of its continuing appeal. It is spoken in the voice of unquestioned authority in a world where that no longer exists. And when it comes to an activity as variable, difficult, and ultimately ungovernable as writing sentences, the allure of rules that dictate brevity and concreteness is enduring.

(324 words)

Adapted from the article by Adam Haslett, “How to Write a (Good) Sentence” from Slate magazine

Writing Directions:

Read the passage above and write an essay responding to the ideas it presents. In your essay, be sure to summarize the passage in your own words, stating the author’s most important ideas. Develop your essay by identifying one idea in the passage that you feel is especially significant, and explain its significance. Support your claims with evidence or examples drawn from what you have read, learned in school, and/or personally experienced. Remember to review your essay and make any changes or corrections that are needed to help your reader follow your thinking. You will have 90 minutes to complete your essay.