

- Book review by Ron Watt (STEA)

[Editor's Note: the SIGNET Users Group (SNUG) made reference to this book in their guide, Electronic Mail, Standards and Procedures, March 24, 1995.]

The Elements of E-mail Style,
by David Angell and Brent Heslop
Addison-Wesley Publishing Co., 1994

"Strunk and White's *The Elements of Style* was a revolutionary book. It cut the vast tangle of English rhetoric down to a little book of simple, digestible rules that quickly became the writing how-to bible for its time. But times change and so do written communications. In the '90s, electronic mail (e-mail) is emerging as the mainstream form of written communication. This new medium makes different demands on writing style and has its own unique conventions."

This quote taken from the "Read Me First" section (a.k.a. the foreword) sums it up well. The main reason for reading this book is to learn how to change *your* writing style to reflect the fact that you are writing e-mail messages instead of memos, letters and telexes. "If you try to improve your e-mail writing using the traditional approach of paper-based communication," Angell and Heslop remind us, "you dilute the power of... the fast-paced e-mail environment, where turnaround

times are often measured in minutes." Clearly, how we express ourselves in writing must change to respond to e-mail's needs and conventions, its strengths and weaknesses.

The Elements of E-mail Style also provides an excellent refresher course in how to write well. Guidance on choosing the right words and eliminating redundancy, deadwood and wordiness covers a whole chapter, for example. Tone, sentences and mechanics are also full chapters. Don't be misled by the title; writing e-mail is still writing, and helping you make your writing more efficient, direct and to the point is an important goal of this book.

But don't let your kids read it. Schools used to deduct marks for starting a sentence with a conjunction or ending a sentence with a preposition. I, for one, am long out of school, but as Sir Winston Churchill said, "This is the type of arrant pedantry up with which I will not put." :-> (sarcastic smile)

To adapt your writing style to reflect e-mail's strengths and weaknesses, some of the critical changes Angell and Heslop call for include:

- Write "from the top down", newspaper-style. Cover who,

what, where, when, why and how in the first paragraph or screen-full, and develop the supporting information underneath. Not everyone can make it to the bottom of every e-mail they receive in a timely manner.

- Make responding easy. Provide enough information in your e-mail for a response, and clearly state the type of response needed, in the first paragraph or even the subject line.
- Writing compelling subject lines. Tell the reader what to do, instead of, or in addition to, what your message is about.
- Don't send attachments when a message will do. It saves work for the reader, it's more efficient on the system, and attached files are not always handled well by gateways and other e-mail systems.

For more hot tips, read the book. Witty examples, an amusing table of "smileys" (punctuation marks that convey emotions... like :- D for 'laughing'), common shorthand, and other e-mail conventions make it a fun read, too.

FYA and TTFN (that's "for your amusement," and "ta-ta for now.").

"As someone involved in the process of the PM's visit to Brazil... SIGNET/ICONDESK was, and is, truly a Godsend in arranging such complex and high profile events when instantaneous information circulation flow is essential. I really cannot envisage how we could have gotten through without e-mail and numerous megabyte attachments. SIGNET never failed us once, despite our wonderful communication lines here in Brazil, that make a phone call across the city much more complex than using our system to send messages around the world."

- William Pound (SPALO)