

Eats, Shoots and Leaves: The Zero Tolerance Approach to Punctuation

Lynn Truss, Profile Books £9.99

"I rate punctuality far above punctuation" admonished the Duke of Wellington to an officer dithering over a report. In battle that would have been my position too - until I read Lynn Truss's truculent and amusing plea for us to recover from our linguistic sloppiness and punctuate our words properly and confidently.

Suggesting to publishers they try to hawk a little volume on how to use apostrophes and semi-colons sounds a hopeless proposition. The market could only be the more pedantic sort of English teacher - the sort unfortunately no longer employed in our schools - or by over eager foreign students whose diligence with commas correctly deployed is totally marred by pronunciation.

Lynn Truss manages to entertain us across 200 pages of comical misuse of the language. What is most alarming is the fact she is so often quoting journalists, senior managers and worst of all professional sign writers for not understanding the elementary use of punctuation. These are not errors derived from urgency. People apparently no longer understand the purpose of punctuation.

The philosopher Friedrich Hayek cites language as the supreme example of how humans can construct vast and elaborate systems of communication we call languages. He defined them as "the results of human action rather than design". The great sage was fairly relaxed about spelling. He saw the tensions between England's English and its American cousin language. Providing meaning is conveyed it is merely prissy to outscore someone less confident with his verb structures. How lucky we are to have no Anglo-Saxon equivalent to the Académie Française attempting to freeze the lingo into a bogus propriety. Language is fluid. The Oxford dictionary admits hundreds of new words each year. They seem to have three main sources. Some emerge from the street, from slang, some from alien languages and others from new technical needs.

What does not change is the need to be coherent. For that we need punctuation - as either the reader or the writer.

Punctuation is something different. It is more than good manners. Punctuation enhances clarity. This witty little volume is cluttered with good jokes...including the title which only makes sense if you buy the book. Lynn Truss made me chuckle on every page....no exclamation mark needed.

I felt a great affinity with Ms Truss well up inside me. I also liked her frank acknowledgement to the linguistic scholars and philologists who have explored the origins of punctuation. It has evolved with the printer's press and is now evolving at a further spurt through the net and txt msgN. Once again the rules have emerged spontaneously without the command of Bill Gates or anyone else.

The greatest pitfall for the slovenly is the apostrophe s - meant to denote the possessive but capable only of confusion in those untutored in the basic etiquette of coherence. Lynn Truss avoids the trap of ending up sounding merely curmudgeonly as most grammarians did in my school days.

My hunch is that at teacher training colleges from the early 1960s on punctuation was mocked as antique and pointless to generations of English teachers. Perhaps the destruction of the semi-colon is a cameo of a wider cultural decline.

One glorious insight that I will add to my little repertoire of dinner party nodules of nonsense is that, according to Ms Truss, the Bolshevik Revolution would never had occurred but for a strike amongst the St. Petersburg printers demanding payment for punctuation at the same rate as letters. I like the notion that the Tsar was brought down by full stops and its kindred blobs and dashes.

An old style guide by the New York office of Oxford University Press is clear headed. "If you take hyphens seriously you will surely go mad". Hyphens have an optional quality that leaves them as a free for all. They seem to be so underused. For 25+ years I have told staff that "the free market" is not hyphenated when standing alone as a noun but as soon as it becomes a modifier, as in free-market ideas, then bang in that pesky little hyphen or risk confusion. I publish free-market books rather than free books about the market. There's a big difference!

The new arrival in the punctuation game is the @. Long lost on the outer fringe of the QWERTY board it has suddenly become a star. @ says far more than merely destination. It is a badge of modernity and youth. Technical assiduity meets chic at @.

"Eats, Shoots and Leaves" is fun. Don't try to offer it to a ten year old to enhance her education. It will be more useful to a 50 year old whose competence is unravelling. It is not so much a gift for you to give to your secretary. Far better she, or he, gift wraps it for the confused executive.

For her next book I urge Lynn Truss to mount an assault on the clichés and banalities of our politicians. Dud punctuation confuses meaning. Most politicians have no meaning to punctuate.

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