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## Roundtable

*Eats, Shoots & Leaves: The Zero Tolerance Approach to Punctuation* By Lynne Truss. New York, New York: Gotham Books, 2003

### Lynne Truss: Grammar-Nazi or Patron Saint?

Valerie Lynn Mickley

One of the profound things ever said about punctuation came in an old style guide of the Oxford University Press in New York. ‘If you takes hyphens seriously,’ it said, ‘you will surely go mad.’ And it’s true. Just look how the little blighter escaped all the previous categorization until I had to hunt it down on its own for this teeny-weeny, hooked-on, after-thought-y chapter. (Truss 168)

Lynne Truss’ *Eats, Shoots & Leaves: The Zero Tolerance Approach to Punctuation* raises some very important issues for today’s English teachers. Lynne Truss spends a great bit of time revealing her grammar philosophies to the audience, yet these are painlessly dispersed throughout the book, which makes the book less of a torment to people like me, who don’t read grammar handbooks for fun (don’t tell my boss, he thinks I’m a grammar guru!). She also gives the reader a user friendly guide to punctuation rules and usage. Finally, Truss does an extraordinary job relaying humor and historical tidbits to the audience. With all of this said, the following quote really sums up the heart of the issue: “Now there are no laws against imprisoning apostrophes and making them look daft. Cruelty to punctuation is quite unlegislated: you can get away with pulling the legs off semicolons; shriveling question marks in the garden path under a powerful magnifying glass; you name it” (36). Should we allow such inconsistencies to exist? Should the English teachers of the world truly unite against the tyranny of the grammatically impaired or unprepared? I *would* go mad if I spent my entire life frustrated with students, advertisers, co-workers, and friends who use improper grammar. Yet, this anarchy must not continue! After you have found your “happy place,” counted to ten (my therapists suggests counting *slowly*), or prayed for more patience, you must decide if Truss is correct in her theories. So, let’s go back to the beginning.

The first thing *all* English teachers need to ask themselves *before* they read the book is the eternal question, which burns deep in all of our hearts (be one with the dramatic music playing in the background): are you a Grammar-Nazi or a Patron Saint of grammar? Confused on the terminology? Let me break it down for you.

A Grammar-Nazi is a teacher who delights in hacking up students’ papers, with that notorious red pen, noting all of the grammar and punctuation errors; in fact, they might even own stock in the BIC Company. This teacher also sees grammar as something that needs to be drilled into students’ heads, and also spends a great deal of time frustrated that the red marks on the papers don’t seem to dissipate. Finally, this type of English teacher tends to be constantly correcting others spoken grammar, as well as getting overly irate at advertising slogans or signs with poor grammar. And yes, this type of teacher would write the company’s president to complain. This teacher has good intentions, but we all know where those lead, don’t we?

On the other hand, we have the teacher who is a Patron Saint of grammar. This teacher realizes that “punctuation has been defined many ways. Some grammarians use the anthology of stitching; punctuation as the basting that holds the fabric of language in shape. Another writer tells that punctuation marks are the traffic signals of language; they tell us to slow down, notice this, take a detour, and stop...But the best of all, I think, is the simple advice given by the style book of a national newspaper: that punctuation is ‘a courtesy designed to help readers to understand a story without stumbling’” (7). This teacher uses the red pen sparingly to denote only three or four grammatical areas the student is struggling with. They gently try to move the students onto new errors, realizing the students will *always* make grammatical errors (who doesn’t?). This teacher does notice the numerous errors in the spoken grammar of others, but they also have a firm grasp on dialectal differences; therefore, they do not see slang as an inferior form of spoken grammar. These teachers also notice the incorrect, if not blatant, grammar in advertising, but rather than write the company, the teacher uses these forms of medium to challenge and teach their students about grammar. They realize grammar rules aren’t easily memorized, nor do they force memorization of all the rules; however, these teachers do promote memorization by showing the students real-life applications of the grammar rules.

Now that we’re clear on the terminology, and hopefully you have a clear grasp on which camp you would find yourself calling home, you need to ask yourself the next undying question: into which camp does Lynne Truss fall?

Some say Lynne’s a Grammar-Nazi, others call her the Patron Saint of Grammar, and some would argue she’s a tad of both. The following reviews will help you decide Lynne’s position, and quite possibly help you reevaluate your own position. However, no matter which category you, me, or Lynne fall into, the *more* important issue becomes the value of the book itself as a teaching tool. So prepare yourself for the battle lines the reviewers have etched out regarding the book and grammar law, and glean from their wisdom.

### **Don’t Use Commas Like a Stupid Person**

*Jackie Shurmack*

“All our thoughts can be rendered with absolute clarity if we bother to put the right dots and squiggles between words in the right places” (201-02). This idea, using punctuation correctly to convey one’s thoughts, is what pushes Lynn Truss through her humorous, yet educational and useful book, Eats, Shoots & Leaves. Truss emphasizes the importance of punctuation through her intense love of the subject matter and her relevant and real examples. As teachers, this book would make a great addition to current grammar and punctuation practices within the classroom.

For any of you out there that twitch, even the slightest bit, when you see punctuation used incorrectly, there is help. For those that would like a bit of humor mixed in with actual knowledge about grammar and punctuation (because of course we *all* want to learn more about grammar) there is an answer. Lynn Truss is here to help and answer many of the questions teachers and students may have about punctuation and how to use it correctly. I loved this book and found myself laughing out loud and nodding my head in agreement with many of Truss’s examples. She takes a comical approach to informing the world of common grammar and punctuation mistakes using real life examples. She uses the history and the rules of grammar to show her readers that grammar is an important part of everyone’s life, or at least she thinks it *should* be, if it is not already.

As a future teacher of grammar myself, I would incorporate Eats, Shoots & Leaves into my own classroom. Grammar and punctuation are important to learn and teach, yet some teachers are unsure of how to go about teaching grammar, fearful that they will bore their

students to death with the mere mention of the word. Lynn Truss makes grammar interesting and actually fun to learn. Who woulda thunk?

Now, I don't suggest giving every student this book, because, let's face it, most students wouldn't even give it a second look. However, by using sections of the book, teachers can give students useful information mixed with a comical approach to punctuation. Truss tells her readers about the importance of punctuation and grammar stating, "the reason to stand up for punctuation is that without it there is no reliable way of communication" (20). Now this sounds pretty serious, but if you mix this idea with the fact that later in the book Truss tells her readers: "Don't use commas like a stupid person," (96) it creates a comical mix.

Truss explains many discussed and disputed ideas about punctuation. She puts the Jones'/Jones's debate to a rest. She explains, with examples and all, when to use Jones' and when Jones's is more appropriate. [Just for clarification, Truss tells her readers that "Current guides to punctuation...state that with modern names ending in 's', the 's' is required after the apostrophe" (55)]. Truss also explains the various ways the apostrophe can be used bringing gender to the punctuation world. While discussing the difference between the full stop (a period) and the apostrophe, Truss explains, "the full stop is the lumpen male of the punctuation world (do one job at a time; do it well; forget about it instantly). The apostrophe is the frantically multi-tasking female, dotting hither and yon, and succumbing to burnout from all the thankless effort" (46). A very detailed and accurate explanation of both punctuation marks, I believe.

Truss shares her frustrations with her readers about incorrect punctuation usage stating that improper punctuation, "rouses feelings not only of despair but of violence" (43) and goes on to say that, "you deserve to be struck by lightning, hacked up on the spot and buried in an unmarked grave" (44). She's pretty intense, huh? She talks of being able to see "dead punctuation" by people using commas, apostrophes, and other punctuation marks incorrectly. Truss feels that as a punctuation stickler, others should take more care in the punctuation used on signs in order to spare her the pain she feels when she sees such poor punctuation usage. "While [punctuation sticklers] look in horror at a badly punctuated sign, the world carries on around us, blind to our plight. We are like the little boy in *The Sixth Sense* who can see dead people, except we see dead punctuation" (3).

Because of Truss's extreme devotion to punctuation, she basically touches on all types of punctuation, not just the obvious commonly used punctuation marks like the comma and the period. Truss includes in her great list of important punctuation marks the hyphen, bracket, exclamation mark, question mark, ellipsis and numerous others. All of her examples and explanations would be great to use in the classroom as an introduction to, or even as a vital part of teaching various punctuation marks. She gives clear explanations along with history and examples that I think students would relate to and find quite funny. This woman knows the history of the bracket for crying out loud! Now tell me that is not devotion. At first, your students may be resistant to this book but as Truss herself explains:

*Eats, Shoots & Leaves* is not a book about grammar. [This should excite your students to start with]. I am not a grammarian...A degree in English language is not a prerequisite for caring about whether a bracket is preferred to a dash...If I did not believe that everyone is capable of understanding where an apostrophe goes, I would not be writing this book (32).

This explanation may help students understand that they need not become grammar *experts* in order to use grammar and punctuation correctly in their everyday life. Even Truss believes, or at least has to believe in order to remain sane, that everyone *is* capable of using basic

punctuation correctly. Punctuation is important to learn and to teach and Truss's book helps make the journey a bit more interesting.

Truss believes that, "On the page, punctuation performs its grammatical function, but in the mind of the reader it does more than that. It tells the reader how to hum the tune" (71). Truss shows that punctuation is important to learn and to teach, and her book makes the journey a bit more interesting.

## **The Grammar Mechanic**

*LaToya Hilliard*

Don't you just hate those grammarians who always have to correct someone or something? Those people who just *have* to change how people talk in the world, just because they think they have to. Well, I dislike those kinds of people, and Lynne Truss is *that* type of person. Even though I enjoyed parts of her book, for the most part it was a little boring; it seems to me that she was saying the same thing over and over again.

Lynne Truss is the type of woman that would try to correct any and everything. She is a Grammar Mechanic. It would probably drive her crazy if she did not say something about a sign or a word that she thought was wrong. Personally, I don't think that it is that serious. There are a few people in the world that are like her; therefore, they are always correcting someone. They just need to have their own little club called "The Grammar Shop." It is okay to correct people sometimes, but that can get very irritating if you do it all the time. Do they ever get tired of correcting others?

In one such example, she talks about how the signs in a grocery store says, "eight items or less" when it should be "fewer" (4). Who just goes in a grocery store and thinks about that kind of stuff? I would hate to be the cashier waiting on her in the store, because she may start talking to me about the sign, like it's my fault. I don't want her to get mad and yell and me for a sign that I did not make. I would probably tell her that I will let the manager know, but that is all that I can do. She also discussed having Aldus Manutius's baby because he printed the first semicolon, and invented the italic typeface (77). It's ridiculous to voluntarily have some man's baby that you don't even know! She seriously needs help. If she has children, I feel sorry for their papers; because I know she edits them harshly. The incident that sealed my opinion of Truss was the letter to her pen pal. Truss was hooked-up with a pen-pal at the age of 14. Most of us remember being 14, and we were all into writing notes to our friends that were all cute and fancy. Apparently Lynne Truss was not. She totally demolished this girl's letter. Truss wrote her back as if she was an adult, using all these big words that teenagers don't know; in fact, they were words that college students probably did not know. It seems that Truss' goal was to make this poor girl feel horrible. Because of the way Truss responded to the girl's letter, it seemed like Truss wanted to tell her that her writing was childish, when in reality it was not. (She must have wanted to lose a pen pal.) There is nothing wrong with writing frilly letters at the age of fourteen, because you *are* still a child. I think the author just grew up too fast, and missed out on her childhood, because she has too much time on her hands if she can't help but to constantly correct people or written advertisements. She probably did not know other students like her (correcting any and everything) growing up, so it was probably hard for her as a child, and this could be one of the reasons why she acts the way she does today. It seems like there was no one there to tell Truss to slow down and embrace her childhood. Even though her book was boring to me, there are some valuable things to glean from it.

There are a few things that I would use from her book as a teacher. I enjoyed page nine, where she had two letters written to Jack that were worded the exact same, but they were punctuated differently. I would use this section to teach my students that writing can mean two

totally different things depending on the way that you punctuate it. This could also be a cool project to give the students. They could come up with one version of a letter or advertisement and just punctuate it two different ways, in order to change the meaning. I also enjoyed when Truss talked about the history of the different punctuation marks, for example, when she asked why there is not a hyphen in tomorrow (it used to be written to-morrow) (176). I also enjoyed when she explained the history of how words used to be all squished together, for example the word "PAPER NAPKIN" instead of paper napkin (76). I would be so confused trying to read words all together like that! If teachers wanted to teach their students a little history in grammar, then this would be a good reference tool to use.

There are all types of dialects out there, so we cannot say that there is only one correct way to talk. Therefore, we should not always correct how our students speak or write, but we can teach them when those different dialects should be used. Correcting a student all the time is not always beneficial to them. We just need to let them know when their particular dialect should be used. We need to also focus on the type of grammar errors we fix in their writing, because we don't want to fix everything all at once. Try focusing on only a few of the repeated grammar errors at first, and allow the students to stop making the same old errors. Then focus on different errors. So to Lynne Truss, and you other Grammarian Mechanics: STOP CORRECTING PEOPLE ALL THE TIME! If you see a sign that you don't agree with grammatically, try to ignore it and keep going.

### **If You Never Thought You Could Laugh Out Loud About a Comma, Think Again!**

*Rachel Bennett*

Teachers of English should unite and read this book! Then, they should buy a classroom set for their 11th graders, so that the students can realize that "Hey! It's uncool to be stupid!" Reading this book, or portions of it, would be a light-hearted diversion for high school students sick of the dreary sentence diagramming that creeps into so many English classrooms. It's a quick read, it's funny, and it's incredibly informative.

How could teachers use this book in their classroom? Students might enjoy the many puns and funny references that Lynne makes with regard to incorrect punctuation. Sentences like "The convict said the judge is mad" and "Lenora walked on her head, a little lighter than usual" (97) can help show students why punctuation is important and what can happen when it is used improperly. Showing what *not* to do would be a refreshing twist from droning on about what *to* do. Students may find it fun to try and find flaws in print media like Truss does in *Eats, Shoots and Leaves*, such as in their local newspapers or popular magazines. Examples from Lynne's book, and others, can be used at the beginning of class each day to show students the power that punctuation has over a sentence's meaning.

The extent of Lynne's research on the history of different punctuation marks is a little scary, yet I find myself turning her pages as if I am trapped in a suspenseful romance novel. Who ever thought the origin of italics could be so fascinating? Should I wish to have Aldus Manutius's children, too? No—I wouldn't go that far, but the information can be helpful to those teachers who constantly are questioned about why certain marks exist and why we *have* to use them. If teachers find these sections less appealing for their students, they can have students skip over them and focus only on the punctuation aspects. However, since Lynne does a beautiful job of intertwining history lessons with punctuation lessons, separating the two may prove to be more difficult and more time-consuming than it is worth.

In her introduction, Lynne says, "You know those self-help books that give you permission to love yourself? This one gives you permission to love punctuation" (33). Not only do we as readers learn that we can love punctuation, we learn that we can stand up for it, fight for

it like it was our beloved friend. We can unite and protest movie titles, grocery store signs, and the like! We will not be alone, and we surely will not be the craziest. Lynne shares her love of punctuation through extensive knowledge on its history, a multitude of examples that show what happens when punctuation goes wrong, and insane ideas of getting back at the gules who miss-use grammar. My favorite? "If you still persist in writing [incorrectly], you deserve to be struck by lightning, hacked up on the spot and buried in an unmarked grave" (44).

Lynne's book is excellent, and I would almost have to consider her the Patron Saint of Punctuation. However, I do have one complaint, and I think that most readers would agree with me. The subtitle of this most interesting book is "The Zero Tolerance Approach To Punctuation." Now, it might just be me, but is Lynne suggesting that we tolerate unruly zeroes? Or should the correct phrase be "The Zero-tolerance Approach To Punctuation"? After all, Lynne, you said yourself that a "...long-standing friend is different from a long standing one" (171). I suppose we'll just have to wait for the Americanized version?

### **Beware of the Giant Kid!**

*Amanda Martin*

Lynne Truss—some call her a hero; others think she's a bit loony! One thing is for sure: she is without a doubt a stickler, who is quite passionate about punctuation. Truss admits to being a neurotic whose condition is characterized by a compulsion to correct or point out errors in the punctuation of printed materials. She actually talks about keeping with her a permanent marker, as well as various kinds of stickers to aid in her corrections of important punctuation marks that have publicly misused. I agree with her statement about punctuation being the "stitching of language", and therefore, will come apart without it (19); however, I think she may be taking the whole situation a little over the edge. If she keeps it up, the poor woman is going to have a heart attack one day when she sees an apostrophe out of place! We do know that punctuation is important, and there is no real reliable way of communicating without it. Punctuation herds certain words together, while keeping others out in order to help clarify the intended meaning of a written piece of text.

Some of the things I really enjoyed about this book were the examples Truss used to show how the meaning of a simple piece of text can be altered by moving, removing, or adding a particular mark of punctuation. In an attempt to explain the proper use of the apostrophe, Truss explains why everyone is staying away from the "Giant Kid's Playground" (41). Well, because they are all afraid of the Giant Kid, of-course! That one makes me giggle to myself every time I read it-- I keep imagining the Giant Kid. But this is a great example of an apostrophe that is obviously in the wrong place. Truss also provides some amazing examples in her introduction. They clearly prove that a passage can be very confusing without the correct use of punctuation, and also quite ambiguous; the intended meaning could be conveyed in more than one way. This one I thought was pretty interesting- observe the difference between these two phrases (9):

A woman, without her man, is nothing.

A woman: without her, man is nothing.

Isn't this interesting? Adjust the punctuation and we have two completely opposite meanings. Most of you who have read this book may also be familiar with the example of the "Dear Jack" letter (9), which I found to be an outstanding example of punctuation importance. It was quite intriguing that these two passages contained the exact same words in the same order; however, the placement of commas and periods altered the entire meaning of the passage. As Aldus Manutius explained, the main object of punctuation is to clarify syntax (78), which these examples have clearly showed.

Even though I agree with that statement, and do feel that punctuation is key, Lynne Truss is a bit crazy (or should I say psycho!) about the subject. In the very beginning of her introduction, she states that the sight of an improperly placed apostrophe triggers “a ghastly private emotional process similar to the stages of bereavement, though greatly accelerated” (1). Truss describes the feeling as shock which gives way to disbelief, then turns to pain, and finally anger-- the build up of which inspires a “righteous urge to perpetuate an act of criminal damage”-- with the aid of...a permanent marker (2). WOW! That’s pretty intense. I can’t say I know any normal person that would get that worked up over a misplaced apostrophe. How does she make it through life? Her true rage really comes out when she says you deserve to be “struck by lightning, hacked up on the spot and buried in an unmarked grave” if you still persist in writing “good food at it’s best”(44). This is obviously because getting your “itses” mixed up is the “greatest solecism in the world of punctuation” (44). How dramatic.

One more thing that made me think this woman was a bit nutty was the discussion about her pen pal at the age of fourteen. Truss states that she was “absolutely appalled” by the girl’s big bubbly handwriting on pink paper, complete with carefree spelling errors. She knew she couldn’t expect perfection from an eighth grader from Detroit, (what’s that supposed to mean anyway?) but for goodness sake, what good use to her was this “vapid mousey moron parading a pigmentational handicap?” (401). That was a little extreme, don’t you think? It also made me wonder how much fun Truss could have possibly had during her teenage years if she was that concerned about professional letter writing and proper usage of grammar-- poor thing.

These are the types of things that made me think of Truss as more of a grammar-Nazi; however, her book was an amusing, comical, and creative way of getting her point across as well as explaining the basic rules of punctuation [I learned from one of the chapters that I just used an Oxford comma (84) in that sentence-- after “comical”]. Despite the fact that Lynne Truss is a bit extreme, Eats, Shoots and Leaves is a pleasant mix of sarcasm and grammatical facts, complete with a touch of punctuation history.