

### **Roundtable Review:**

Truss, Lynne. *Eats, Shoots and Leaves: The Zero Tolerance Approach to Punctuation*. New York: Gotham, 2004.

### **Letters to Lynne Truss: Perspectives on Grammar, Teaching, and Building Tolerance**

Paula Fox, Guest Editor  
Plainwell High School

Lynne Truss has created quite a commotion with her book *Eats, Shoots and Leaves*. She has been anointed a saint and a curmudgeon, all in one breath. Her work has not let anyone be without an opinion. I found myself drawn to her work due to the fact that I, too, am a *grammar stickler*, just as she anointed herself. I was so thrilled that I had a sister-in-arms that I couldn't wait to read her book. Although I was ready to laude Lynne Truss at book-discussion time, I was brought up short by others who were not like-minded in my quest of perfection in the general public. I was, quite frankly, surprised by this, due to the fact that I was surrounded by English majors. I had always imagined us *Englishophiles* as protectors of the mother tongue. I am older than the current, general university population, professors excepted, and a peer to Lynne Truss. We were raised in the generation of sentence diagrammers and grammar brow-beaters. Our beacon of light offered to society is quite different than that of, say Generation X's younger siblings. However, everyone in our group was quite steadfast in her own beliefs and was quite ready to baptize Lynne Truss either as "Grammar Guardian" or "Grammar Grouse" as is evident in the following excerpts from our roundtable authors.

Candace Blankenship, Lauren Haapala, and Stacey Huisingh, all raised during a dark time for grammar instruction, were not taught the joy of repetitive grammar exercises or the ever-popular sentence diagram. These poor souls have foundered grammar-devoid for much of their short adult life. Although they have a common lack of formal prior grammar teaching, they do have a desire to learn all they can about English. Their interest was peaked when they read this book but their opinions were quite varied. Stacy Huisingh looks at this as a helpful book, an epiphany of grammar knowledge, if you will:

I come from the generation where we did not think punctuation was important. My past had made me frightened of punctuation. One of my favorite quotes from your book is when you say: "You know those self-help books that give you permission to love yourself? This one gives you permission to love punctuation." This inspired me to not be afraid of punctuation.

Candace Blankenship fully appreciates Lynne Truss' ability to put on paper easily understandable rules of grammar, all while holding the reader's interest with her humor and anecdotal examples:

You are a saint in the world of grammar. . . All of the people who you may have offended with your sassy humor and impressive knowledge of grammar don't let them bother you. They are truly jealous of the genius that is Lynne Truss. This book should be the grammar Bible that all English teachers refer to. When confronted with a grammatical dilemma, English teachers should gather their strength from the confidence in which you enact your judgment on the world. They can proudly proclaim "I am right because Lynne Truss has said so!"

The other end of the spectrum is also represented in this small group. Lauren Haapala sees Lynne Truss as an evil specter in her life, just hovering around, simply to make those that are not grammar obsessed, miserable.

Normal, everyday people do not take time to worry about grammar the way that they should. Get over it! People are going to make mistakes; it is what we do as humans. This means that once in a while you just might run into a sign that says "Taco's \$2.00", and instead of throwing a temper-tantrum about it, you smile to yourself knowing what you know, and you move on. You can write ten thousand more books about grammar, but the fact of the matter is, those that should be reading them, won't.

Regardless of your opinion, Lynne Truss does offer an easily readable text that explains grammar in very human terms. If nothing else, the book is a handy reference tool when punctuation questions arise. This is not to say that everything she offers is perfect, but the readability of this book makes it easily accessible to answers for the always harried, research paper-toting English instructor.

In this roundtable, each of the authors of this roundtable, Stacey, Candace, and Lauren take on the personas of different characters, both named and implicit, that are seen in Lynne's text. They write from these perspectives. Stacey is one of the store owners whom Ms. Truss occasionally berates for misusing apostrophes (or should I say apostrophe's? I can never remember....) Then, Candace takes on the role of a fellow stickler, a fan of Ms. Truss' (arrgh! Should I mean to write "Truss's"? Nevermind.) Finally, Lauren writes from the perspective of 'Kerry-Anne,' a woebegone Michigander who once had the ill-fortune of being Ms. Truss' (there's that darn apostrophe again...) pen-pal during her teen years. I think you'll agree with me that the results are interesting and insightful.

***Life is Good***

Stacey Huisingh

Western Michigan University

Dear Lynne,

WOW! That is my first reaction to the book. I just want to begin to thank you for writing that wonderful book. I am so delighted that I had a chance to get my hands on this book and had time to read it.

I am a store owner in New York. In my store I only carry fruits and vegetables. You may be wondering why I would want to read your book. I am not an English major or never will be. However, I always put ads in my front window telling what is on sale that week. If it were not for your book, to this day I would be spelling tomatoes like this: tomatos. Thanks to your book I studied punctuation and realized for the past 20 years I was the person putting out those signs that you hated! I want to apologize from the bottom of my heart and I want you to know now if it were not for your book I would have never known about my silly mistake.

How did I hear about your book? Well, my store is located right next to a book store and I saw your book gleaming through the window. The wonderful pandas on the front cover caught my eye. I wondered what pandas had to do with punctuation. Anyway, I went in and talked to my friend John, he said your book was spectacular and that everyone should read it no matter who they are. So, I decided to pick up your book and once I picked it up I couldn't put it down.

I loved how you had some sense of humor in your book to keep the readers attention but you still managed to get the main point across to everyone. The point that struck me the most was when you actually listed where to put a comma, an apostrophe, or when the correct time to use a dash. I am going to use your book more as a reference when I need to know something about grammar. If I ever have a question on where to put a comma I know where I am going to turn.

When I was a child in school my teachers did not teach me punctuation. I come from the generation where we did not think punctuation was important. My past had made me frightened of punctuation. One of my favorite quotes from your book is when you say: "You know those self-help books that give you permission to love yourself? This one gives you permission to love punctuation." Your book inspired me to not hate punctuation but to love it. You taught me many aspects of punctuation and I wanted to thank you.

Thank you for writing such a wonderful book and it inspired a lot more people than you think it did. Keep on trucking with correcting signs. Hopefully you do not come across my store and see a mistake. I am sure I corrected all of them.

Sincerely,  
John Smith

***Sally McBotten Praises her Guru***  
Candace Blankenship  
Western Michigan University

Dear Lynne,

I can only attempt to explain how your book has changed my life! You are truly a revolutionary, a pioneer if you will in the art of grammar. Your book has given me the courage and the confidence to go out and right the grammatical wrongs of the world. I feel empowered knowing that I have the knowledge that you have bestowed upon me in this riveting runaway best seller. I have never realized how abused the poor apostrophe was, but I feel as if it is my duty now to take on the role of saving the apostrophe and the comma from dreaded misuse. Everyone in the world should read your book, especially we Americans who feel it is necessary to shorten and eliminate correct words and phrases from posters and signs. Had I never picked up this book, I would have been living in ignorant bliss to this very day. You are a saint in the world of grammar! I currently have collected at least 45 copies of your book, and I give worship to the shrine that I have built in your honor. All of the people who you may have offended with your sassy humor and impressive knowledge of grammar -- don't let them bother you. They are truly jealous of the genius that is Lynne Truss.

This book should be the grammar Bible that all English teachers refer to. When confronted with a grammatical dilemma, English teachers should gather their strength from the confidence in which you enact your judgment on the world. They can proudly proclaim "I am right because Lynne Truss has said so!" This should also be a requirement for any college students wanting to be successful in his or her writing. Grades will no longer be lowered due to poor punctuation and students will excel, thus creating an ever more intelligent society, who will go on and right the wrongs of the world: solve world hunger, discover a cure for cancer, end all wars...But I digress. I was wondering if perhaps you have ever thought of creating another book on the wonderful topic of grammar? Perhaps you could focus on prepositions? Or you could bring the wonderful world of modifiers and appositives to everyone's attention. That would be absolutely fantastic! Perhaps you should think about creating a series of lectures or in-services for schools. I love the wonderful way in which you make grammar so cut and dry and so simple. These concepts have been made people-friendly again. Grammar is not coming from dull grammar books that have sat on the shelf for longer than the teacher's who use them have been alive. This is the new grammar handbook.

As your book says "You know those self-help books that teach you to love yourself? Well, this one teaches you to love punctuation." This book has taught me to love life! You mention in your book "Part of one's despair, of course, is that the world cares nothing for the little shocks endured by the sensitive stickler. While we look in horror at a badly punctuated sign, the world carries on around us, blind to our plight." Nothing can be truer now. As I pass local businesses I carefully examine the signs and posters to see whether they would live up to any stickler's expectations. Nay, not just any stickler, but the greatest stickler of all: Lynne Truss!

Now, I must admit, I have overheard numerous people talking about your book in a, dare I say, negative manner. Upon overhearing this blasphemy in my local bookstore, I was overcome with emotion and immediately began to belittle the young woman and lecture her on the values of higher learning. I'm not proud to admit that I have been warned to

not come back to that bookstore, but it hardly bothers me in the least, for I was growing tired of the measly selection of grammar books and the incompetence of the young workers who wouldn't know what grammar was if it were to walk up and punch them in the nose!

I do hope that you are faring well and that the lack of grammatical use has not depressed you too much. I have been told that you will be in one of the local cities soon for a book signing. I plan to be there, first in line, ready to shake the hand of the dear Lynne Truss. Would it be presumptuous to ask for a picture with you? I have the perfect place on my *Eats, Shoots and Leaves* shrine to put it! Take care Lynne, and keep the books coming!

Your most devoted fan,

Sally McBotten

***Get over it, Lynne. With Love, Kerry-Anne***

Lauren Haapala  
Western Michigan University

Dear Ms. Truss,

I have been planning to write to you for quite some time now, but I wanted to wait until I was ready to be refined. Unfortunately, I couldn't wait that long.

Do you remember me, Kerry-Anne? Of course you do. Recently I had the pleasure of reading about our encounter that happened oh so many years ago, in your new book, *Eats, Shoots, and Leaves*. I am being facetious when I say pleasure because actually, I was quite upset. I was not upset that you wanted to include me in your book as an example, but more that you would write this book period. How it became a "runaway bestseller", I still wonder about.

Obviously, you have not changed a bit, still nit-picking over the misuses of grammar in the world. I learned this, when I picked up your book as a curious English teacher (that's right, English teacher) looking for something new to read. You are probably shaking in your shoes thinking of me as an English teacher. Probably thinking, *Kerry-Anne? With the pink stationary and hearts over the i's?* Well, it is true Ms. Truss, and actually, you were the driving influence on my choice to become an educator. You will also be happy to know that I no longer put hearts on top of my i's, though I do still use colored stationary occasionally.

Your response to my naive opening letter was a shock to me. Never had I been so humiliated by someone I had never even met! How crass you were, talking down to me as if I was some kind animal searching for bugs in my own hair! You used words (including some French) that no normal fourteen year old should know, let alone use in a

letter to a pen pal; and to top it all off, you assumed yourself better than me, solely because you knew your grammar. Well, guess what? I know my grammar now too, and I could never be so condescending towards people that I don't even know, especially, knowing that they aren't focused on it the way that I might be!

Worse even, is that you are doing what you did to me, but on a much larger scale. Normal, everyday people do not take time to worry about grammar the way that they should. Get over it! People are going to make mistakes; it is what we do as humans. This means that once in a while you just might run into a sign that says "Taco's \$2.00", and instead of throwing a temper-tantrum about it, you smile to yourself knowing what you know, and you move on. You can write ten thousand more books about grammar, but the fact of the matter is, those that should be reading them, won't.

I am so glad that you decided to grow up and become a writer; even as an adolescent you had that snobbish, "my way or the highway" kind of attitude so necessary in one. I would hate to think what would have happened had you become a teacher instead. I can just see it now: kids running screaming from your room, papers gripped tightly in their little hands, big red marks all over them. You would probably go through one red pen a week if you were in my shoes! Fortunately for my students, I am nothing like you when it comes to grammar. I think of it as supplemental to writing, and knowing that, my students are not afraid to take chances. They try things, they take risks, and best of all, they own their writing, even the mistakes. No one is perfect, especially at the tender age that my students are, or the age that I was, for that matter, when you so viciously ridiculed me.

What you have to understand, Ms. Truss, is that grammar is what we teachers like to call a *lower order concern (LOC)*. Basically, it is not the life or death matter that you seem to think it is. It is not something that should be focused on (as you do in your book), but instead be slowly worked with bit by bit. It is more important for a student to write thoughtfully and creatively, than it is a student get every comma or apostrophe in the right place. Grammar can be perfected only when there is some substance to work with.

I suspect that if you were to become an English teacher, you would be what is well known in the teaching world as the *enforcer*. Enforcers teach grammar in a strict sort of way, finding it very important that students have a firm grasp on grammar definitions. They teach grammar usually through practice sentences and handouts and expect students to become grammar experts by the time they have finished the class.

Luckily, I do not teach this way. True, I believe grammar is important, but I also believe that it must be taught in the context of writing. Therefore, the method I use with my students is mini-lessons. My students do a lot of writing, and through their writing we, as a class, both teacher and students, are able to point out problems that surface. Our grammar curriculum is personalized depending on the problems of the students. Every year, the mini-lessons are different. The group I happen to have this year is currently having problems distinguishing when to use a comma, and when to use a semi-colon.

Knowing this, I took time out of our writing schedule and led a short, twenty-minute lesson. The problem has since become non-existent.

Mini-lessons work great for those of us that are not grammar experts, because twenty-minute grammar lessons are about all my students can handle at a time. Even better, is that they get more out of these quick fixes, than out of a whole day focused on grammar!

Because of my methods of teaching grammar along side writing, I have recently been nominated for the first annual “Hype up the Grammar” award. The award goes to a teacher that has integrated grammar into their classroom in fun new ways, and has succeeded in engaging students through non-traditional grammar exercises.

The point is Lynne, that not all of us are born grammar sticklers. No matter how much you want the world to be rid of wrongly used apostrophes and abused commas, it is impossible. Still there is hope for you. I am living proof that you don’t need to be a grammar stickler in an English classroom (or even in the real world), to be a great teacher, a good person and a lover of the English language!

I wish you the best in all that you do.

Sincerely,

Kerry-Anne Smith