

But, Should We Truss Her?  
*The Practicality of Eats, Shoots and Leaves Within the Secondary Classroom*

A Roundtable Discussion

Marc Van Soest, Editor  
ENGL  
Dr. Jon Bush

But, Should We Truss Her?  
*The Practicality of Eats, Shoots and Leaves Within the Secondary Classroom*

More so than our counterparts, we, as English teachers, are faced with precious little spare time. Besides our daily planning, committee meetings, and extracurricular activities, we can often be seen leaving the building carrying the “teacher’s bag.” Within this monogrammed bag lies several nights worth of mediocre reading, tedious grading, and redundant commenting. While our colleagues enjoy their homework free weekends, we fastidiously pour over and plow through stack after stack of our students’ work. Though we would like to be able to curl up in our favorite chair, and wrap our minds around a good book, we rarely get that opportunity. When presented with the chance, to host a roundtable discussion of Lynne Truss’ Eats, Shoots and Leaves ES &L , the first thing that popped into my mind was the chance to potentially save my colleagues some time. I saw the opportunity to provide my fellow educators with an informed, educated, and somewhat lighthearted review of the book. My hope in conducting this roundtable is to allow you, the seasoned educator, to have the informational foundation necessary to decide whether or not to take the time to read, analyze, and perhaps use this book.

How much grammar is enough? How much is too much? There are those amongst us who would have us believe that the world will not continue to rotate on its axis if we cease the diagramming of sentences; Truss labels them “Sticklers.” These teachers believe that great injustices have occurred when punctuation mistakes are allowed to appear in print. By definition, they believe that there is no such thing as a “minor” punctuation mistake. All errors are a blemish on the sacred cup of the English language which must be continually polished. They sit, red pen in hand, awaiting the opportunity to correct the errors of students, peers, and signposts everywhere.

Yet every coin has its flip side. Amongst us also lives a group of teachers who possess a cavalier, laissez faire attitude towards the teaching of grammar; the idea they exist

deplores Truss. These educators believe that students best learn writing through a careful examination of style, voice, and loosened structure. All punctuation errors are “minor, secondary concerns.” For them, grammar is something taught begrudgingly, if taught at all.

Personally, I fall somewhere in the middle. The only thing I am sure of in the teaching of grammar is that the “old way” does not work. All I have to do is read/correct the aforementioned stack of papers. So, I approached Truss’s book hoping to find the silver bullet through which I could reach my students. What I found was something other than “The Bullet.” I found a book which managed to combine a British sense of humor and a historian’s accuracy with a Sticklers outlook on the world. Truss *is* funny. But, Truss is *not* a grammar guru. Most reviews are divided on her abilities as a grammatician. While she does a nice job of selling her point to the lay person evidence: any Amazon.com review, those educated in the science of grammar i.e. the Senior Copy Editor of the New Yorker find her at fault multiple times in her own introduction.

To Truss’s credit however, she never purports to make a style guide out of her book. In her mind her purpose is something more noble: to make grammar rise to the forefront of a national, and in fact, international conversation. By looking at the *New York Times* Bestseller List where ES & L has hovered near the top since early , Truss has accomplished her goal. People are buying the book and talking about it. Since publication, Truss has appeared on the BBC, NPR, MSNBC and CNBC. She has become the spokesperson for poor grammar, a “stickler’s stickler.” But, her book is *not* an English text. For evidence on this point, carefully read the following entries pay attention to punctuation in the Roundtable. Each contributor is an accomplished future English educator who has read Lynne Truss’s book. A discerning eye will notice that Truss, in the possessive, is punctuated in no less than two different ways: “Truss” or “Truss’s.” If the purpose of the book were to educate, or if it were used for that purpose, based on these entries, one must immediately raise questions.

While ES & L answers many questions, ES & L has left many questions for its readers. Paramount among these for educators is: can I use this in *my* classroom; with *my* students. In the following pages, we attempt to answer these questions. Our goal is not to provide a definitive answer on whether or not ES & L is a great piece of literature. Likewise, it is not to “prove” whether or not ES & L is a valuable style guide. If you are looking for a

piece which comments on whether or not ES & L is even a *good* book, look elsewhere. All we are aiming to do is give the educators out there a starting point. Participants in this discussion were asked to comment on their personal beliefs about ES & L and its potential for use in the classroom. Each member has managed to find a different level of value in the book and its role within their future classrooms.

Our roundtable begins with an English Major in her last year at Western Michigan University. **Emily Hallman**, who in the past year has seen her first play “In This Room” produced as a portion of Western’s *The New Play Project*, looks forward to completing her internship in the Spring of . Her ideal job after graduation would be to develop “an English/theater/history class that focusses on the writing process of play writing as well as looking at the history of drama.” Emily approaches ES & L as a necessary tool for educators which facilitates dialogue about grammar and allows for a common starting point in discussion. For Hallman, ES & L should be taught via humorous excerpts which can highlight specific flaws in specific classes’ writings.

Continuing our discussion, is a graduate of Loy Norrix High School in Kalamazoo. **Alison Pushie** hopes to graduate from Western Michigan University within the next year and find a job teaching English at a “wonderful high school.” After having some experiences outside of Western Michigan University, she also hopes to continue her education. Alison sees Truss as a potential problem solver in the instance where students lack any sort of motivation for correcting their grammatical errors. Yet, Alison is the most removed philosophically from Truss. To her, punctuation should not get in the way of students developing writing as an artform. Perhaps, she proposes, Truss provides us with a bridge between the two philosophies.

We close our roundtable on the shoulders of **Ellen Waisanen**, a senior at Western Michigan University, majoring in Secondary Education Spanish and Secondary Education English.□ She is a member of the Lee Honors College, as well as an active member and Newsletter Director of the Golden Key International Honours Society.□In , Ellen received second place in the Honors College Freshman Essay Contest. She is currently in the process of publishing one of her essays from high school in the *Journal of Loss and Trauma* . Ellen places her emphasis on the relevancy of the book to student writing/student culture. Her major argument is that without careful discussion, Truss is meaningless to

students. Ellen recognizes the power of the written word and the potential impact which Truss strives to make. Her words are cautionary; yet, encouraging for those willing to take the risk.

*Grammar Doesn't Scare Me Anymore!*

Emily Hallman

My perception of the role of grammar in everyone's lives is now concrete after reading Lynn Truss's Eats, Shoots and Leaves. With that being said, if you have already read the book, you are most likely thinking, "Wow, Emily. You must really be serious about grammar. Impressive. Did you immediately go out after reading the book to buy the paint for the picket signs?" No. Actually, it's quite the contrary. I'm so far left of Lynn Truss that Gertrude Stein and myself are getting matching anti grammar tattoos tomorrow. Well okay, this is outrageously far from the truth. I apologize. Gertrude and I are actually getting matching t shirts. No! Although it would be easier to justify not using proper punctuation than to figure out when to appropriately use a "mediocre" dash or an "inferior" apostrophe as Stein so snobbishly refers to, that is certainly not the approach to teaching grammar in the English classroom.

So to clear up any confusion I have created: I don't carry paintbrushes in my trunk ready to strike upon grammar mistakes I may run into, but I do think everyone should understand how to properly use grammar. After reading Truss's book, I found myself happily in between Gertrude and Lynn, which is a very good place to be, in my opinion. A part of me breaks up in hysterical laughter at the vision of middle aged English teachers all dressed in black and sneaking through streets in the night, fixing random misspellings and grammatical errors on storefront signs and street postings. Can you picture it? You've got to be laughing a little bit. As funny as it is, there's a little piece of me that thinks being a part of that would be fun. Grammar, fun? I'll get back to this point soon .

Okay. Down to the reality and relevance of this book. Ladies and gentlemen, would I recommend teaching Lynn Truss's Eats, Shoots & Leaves in an English classroom? That's a very good question, and if you would like a simple answer, then, no. Yes, I may have

answered the big question and you may be wondering what the point is to read on. Although it may be tempting to flip the page or to drop this article on some pile of papers somewhere, I encourage you to press on and continue reading.

I sometimes feel if someone were to corner me in a dark alley at knifepoint and ask me when I think it's proper to use a semi colon, I fear I would die a miserable bloody death. That, I am sure of. Actually, maybe I shouldn't be admitting to such an atrocity in the English Journal. Yeah, that whole bit about not knowing how to use a semi colon was all a joke. I know how to use a semi colon; I'm even really good at it. Being a college student who is not fully confident of my own grammatical skills, approaching Truss's book was somewhat daunting. At first glance, I found nothing even potentially interesting about reading a book about grammar, because I've read books about grammar when I was in school and they made me diagram sentences. But as the saying goes, "Never judge a book by its cover." I'm going to be honest, I feel a little guilty actually using that phrase in this article. But, it rings true. My initial perceptions of what this book was going to be like were shattered when I finished the book and found it humorous and incredibly witty. Lynn Truss is one funny Brit. She delivered a very non threatening presentation of the history of grammar, common mistakes and resolutions, as well as confronted popular opinion about grammar. After reading this book I was surprised that I enjoyed it, and would even merrily recommend it. Cheers, Lynn!

As an up and coming English teacher, reading this book was refreshing. The thought of a student asking me a grammatical question I don't know the answer to, or even teaching students the wrong way to use punctuation makes me nervous. I know that I don't have to have all the answers, and I will most likely learn that first hand. This is where I think a book like Eats, Shoots & Leaves comes into play. It will definitely sit on a shelf in my future classroom, and maybe I will even pick it up and reference it on occasion. In fact, I plan on it. This book is very appropriate for English educators. It is bound to be the catalyst behind some very relevant discussion about grammar issues that we want to deal with in our classrooms. After reading this book, teachers will be talking about why it is that so many people don't understand how to use a comma or an apostrophe, how we can teach our students to use grammar efficiently without efficiently boring them to death, and the way grammar continues to change and develop in our society. And this is just the

beginning. □□

Since I plan on incorporating grammar lessons into the writing process, I wouldn't assign this book to students. That would be stupid. Really stupid. They would get lost in the chasm of history and details that they shouldn't concern themselves with. Presenting the book in its entirety would be nothing short of overwhelming for students, unless you are some grammar freak that takes pleasure in watching students squirm. Developing grammatical skill is relevant for students, and there is certainly a way to do that beyond the confinement of diagramming sentences and filling out grammar work sheets.

Personally, I can see myself using excerpts from the book when doing mini grammar lessons. Truss did a smashing good job showing rules and examples of many grammatical issues such as the use of the comma, the apostrophe, parentheses, the period or full stop to our British friends, and the question mark. These are tools of grammar that students need to learn how to properly use. In our classrooms, we can replicate the humor Truss so cleverly uses to get her point across. In the long run, I am going to remember certain rules and examples solely because her humor makes you remember what she is talking about. This is the sort of thing students will connect with, and if they don't then there is no hope. That was a joke. Seriously, as educators we can take a lesson from Truss as she uses humor and real examples from everyday life to learn and understand grammar.

□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□

□□□□□

*Somewhere in the Middle*

Alison Pushie

There is a debate going on in the schools of Anytown, USA. The question that has everyone heated is a seemingly simple one, to most outsiders: How much grammar is too much? This debate, like many, has two sides. I imagine it goes something like this:

The Grammar Outlaws start off by saying, "There ain't room in this town for the both o' us! Now, we suggest you git and leave these poor children and their poor grammar alone. The reason they have such poor grammar is your overdoin' it."

To which the Zero Tolerance Heroes reply by chanting, "Gram mar! Gram mar! Gram mar!" followed by an inspiring, "Grammar rocks! Let's hear it for punctuation!"

Exclamation points rule, dude! Commas and semicolons rock!”

Lynne Truss, author of Eats, Shoots, and Leaves: The Zero Tolerance Approach to Punctuation, would most definitely be on the side of the Zero Tolerance Heroes. I, if having to choose between the two, would place myself right in between the two.

Truss is a self-confessed stickler. There's no problem with that. Except that I'm not. Sure, I get a little annoyed when someone doesn't know how to use an apostrophe correctly or if they can't tell the difference between they're and their or your and you're, but I'm not going to write a book about it, spilling all my frustrations onto the page. But, really, it's okay to not be a stickler. It's okay not to throw a hissyfit over someone slipping up and putting “her's” when they mean “hers” or “their” when they mean “they're.”

Truss, on the other hand, would love to throw a hissyfit over these small, lower order concerns. Punctuation is important, yes, but it's not everything. What about voice? What about style? What about world peace? What about bigger concerns than punctuation? Okay, world peace is a bit too big for what we're talking about, but you get the picture, right? Punctuation is not that big of a deal, really. So someone misplaces a few commas here and there, so what? At least they realize there are such things as commas. And semicolons. And periods. Most people are not walking around oblivious to punctuation.

Students are not oblivious to punctuation, either. Truss' book would be interesting to introduce into a classroom. Would I assign the class the whole thing? No way. Each classroom is different, each has its different grammar strengths and weaknesses, so there would be no need to subject the class to the whole book when they may only need help with commas or apostrophes. I wouldn't want to spend time reading through the whole book when we could move on to things that would make their writing stronger than having them memorize only their punctuation rules. Let's face it, punctuation is great, but shouldn't be one of the biggest worries in grammar. Especially if your students can't form complete thoughts about what they would wish to write. Forget punctuation at that point, they need help in other departments. There's no need to subject a class that has a lack of style in their writing to rules about punctuation, some of which they won't even believe they can appropriately use in their wonderful essays and research papers they turn in.

What I would suggest, however, is using the wonderful tidbits of history that Truss included in as introductions in the rules of each punctuation mark. That was interesting and

could also help you about of one of those tricky questions: “Why do we use this silly looking thing?”, “Where did this stupid semicolon come from?”, or “Why can’t I use , , exclamation points in my paper like I do when I talk to my friends on Instant Messenger about that cute boy in science class?”. The history of punctuation could help students understand the reason and the usage of punctuation that may keep tripping them up.

But wait! What about rules?

Rules have their place and Truss does a great job of presenting those rules in a way that is pretty easy to understand and entertaining to read! The examples she used were entertaining and not as boring as the usual examples in books all about punctuation. So, I would, of course, bring in the fun examples Truss used to illustrate the correct and incorrect uses of all her lovely punctuation chose to be a part of her book. But. Just because they are rules does not mean they automatically have meaning and importance. Sure, just rules might work for some people. But what about for those people, like myself, who are more inclined to obey these rules if they know the reason and the rhyme, as well as a funny anecdote about a positively embarrassing misuse of these rules, to give purpose to them? Truss does a great job of combining history of punctuation marks with their rules to create a funny and meaningful idea of punctuation.

But this is not all of the book. It must have been hard for Truss to write a book about only punctuation and still make it interesting and long enough to be considered valid and not just end up being another one of those notebook look alike usage handbooks that happened to have a good sense of humor. Eats, Shoots, and Leaves does tend to drag a bit in places that not even I, a pretty big stickler, can follow and enjoy as much as the rest of the book, which is one of the main reasons why I would not assign all of the book for a class. If even I can’t enjoy all of it and feel passionate about it, why should I subject my students to it? Do I expect them, sticklers and non sticklers alike, to all enjoy all of it? Once they hit one of those parts, it would drop in priority and who’s to say they’ll actually finish the rest of it? Why, they could miss one of the most important parts to improve their writing! That would be horrible! So, I would see assigning the book as too much of a chore for students when they may only need a small bit of it when we could be spending our class time doing a lot of other things that I would see as more important for their writing and improving it.

The point I’m trying to make here is mostly this, Lynne Truss wrote a great book, but

to read it in its entirety would be tiring for anyone who was not a punctuation stickler. For students, not all of them are really going to care. If they have problems with a few punctuation marks, throw some Truss at them and I'm sure they'll say, "That Lynne Truss gal has quite a sense of humor that helps this book seem less painful than those other silly punctuation guides! Gee golly wiz!" and want to use their problem punctuation all the time. Then, you can focus on bigger and better things like run on sentences, style, appositives, forming a thesis, or parallelism.

*A Place for Pandas?*

Ellen Waisanen

The movie *Miracle*, based on the story of the U.S. Olympic Hockey team, chronicles their experiences from tryouts to gold medal victory. It's hard to imagine a more grueling training session than the day where coach Herb Brooks forces them to do skate sprints over and over, stubbornly shouting, "Again!" each time the group thought they could skate no more. He makes them continue, until he hears what he wants to hear: "My name is \_\_\_\_\_, and I play for the U.S.A."

Now stop for a moment. Replay that scene in your head, but change "skate sprints" to "grammar drills." "Again," the English teacher shouts repeatedly, until he finally hears, "My name is \_\_\_\_\_, and I know the difference between 'it's' and 'its.'" Which situation is worse? To many English teachers, being in the hockey training is much preferred to being anywhere near the same room of the grammar lesson. But unfortunately, at some point many English teachers do feel like Coach Brooks, keeping students at practice, drilling them over and over, forcing them to continue their grammar exercises until the desired effect is achieved.

When first reading *Eats, Shoots, and Leaves: The Zero Tolerance Approach to Punctuation*, by Lynne Truss, I tried to imagine using her book as the text for an English class. This, of course, is what made me think of the sprinting drills in *Miracle*. I can already hear the students moaning about the work, their exhaustion, the unfairness of it all! I swear I can already see the shivering hands of the students in the ice cold air as they try to

write.

And yet, despite the Obsessive/Compulsive Disorder, possible violent tendencies, and self proclaimed 'stickler' that I sense throughout Truss's 'gosh, or is it Truss?' book, there still remain valid points, explanations that are about as clear as possible, and even a sense of humor. Humor and grammar? Now there's a juxtaposition, especially for everyone out there who heard thunder and saw a specific teacher's face flash across her mind with thunder cracking in the background as soon as I mentioned grammar drills after the Miracle introduction. □So what can be done with this book to rid students of the slave driver vibe given off throughout its chapters?

There are some points to consider before I begin. First of all, I wouldn't recommend this class for freshmen in high school; maybe I wouldn't even recommend it for sophomores. Juniors and seniors would be the best students to read this book and actually get something out of it, because reading this book requires a more mature sense of writing than what most freshmen possess.

Second, don't even think about teaching this book all at once. I'm an English major in my senior year of college, and I can't even read more than a chapter at a time without imagining Truss and her apostrophe on a stick lurking in the shadows, jumping out at innocent people while the violins from Psycho screech in the background. Can you even imagine what this book would do to the students?

So. Now that I have the basic context established, here are my ideas for working Eats, Shoots, and Leaves into a high school English classroom. They don't all necessarily go together or build upon each other, and I certainly am not saying that these are the only ways to teach this book; they are, however, a few thoughts to get you and your students involved and maybe, just maybe, interested in grammar.

Like I said, definitely do not teach this book all at once. You might do a chapter a week, month, or marking period; you don't even have to teach the entire book. Maybe it would be most effective to focus on the major problem areas of your students: they understand how to use a semi colon, but still just cannot seem to grasp apostrophes; they haven't got a clue about where to use commas, but for some reason they completely understand how to use a dash. Alternating this book with other classroom activities will ensure that your students don't get burned out on grammar and spend the end of the

semester just dreaming about those little pandas becoming extinct in their backyard fire pit after finals. You could easily integrate each punctuation chapter into the curriculum by adjusting the evaluation of students' writing to make sure they incorporated that particular component.

So how do you make sure they get something out of the actual book, and not just fill in whatever handouts you give them? For one thing, discuss the book. Not just the grammar and whether they understood it, but all parts of the book. For example, ask them: Do they get the humor used in the book sarcasm, jokes, etc.? Do they know all the words she uses, or do they want a vocabulary list? Do they feel like Lynne Truss is at all anti American, or is she just teasing us for our differences like we tease people from the upper peninsula of Michigan for saying "Eh?" and southerners for creating the contraction "y'all"? Do they understand her explanations and examples? And so on.

The students' understanding of the examples is, however, essential to their learning from Truss' book. For instance, she discusses the meaning change of a sentence due to a comma "The people in the queue who managed to get tickets were very satisfied," vs. "The people in the queue, who managed to get tickets, were very satisfied." . Are they comprehending what each sentence implies? It may be necessary to review her explanation and examples in pairs, in small groups, or as a class. I would suggest having students create posters, or if your room has it filling a bulletin board with their own models and clarifications of the punctuation concept. Encourage them to relate it to their own lives.

Relating the concepts to the students' minds is the best way to ensure that they absorb the examples. Having them write out their own examples is one way to do this; another way might be to connect the ideas to something from their lives. □For instance, her explanation of pauses vs. desired emphasis through punctuation in "Airs and Graces" might more clearly be defined in terms of video games. In "Mortal Kombat," when a player is about to win, do they want to merely knock over the opponent with a punch this would be a comma and move on to the next battle? Personally, I bet they'd rather hear the raspy, "Finish him," as the winning player winds up to deliver the blow that doesn't just knock his enemy over, it flattens him here, this would be a period ?

Sports would be another great way to connect to the kids. There could be millions of analogies for grammatical concepts through sports plays, specific terms, or historical games

that everyone remembers. Relate music forte or fortissimo? Rushing or slowing down? or art Picasso or Monet? Photography or graphics? or trends try anything from their current world: Heavy metal or Christian rock? Ugg boots or stiletto heels? .

Overall, I think Eats, Shoots, and Leaves can be a valuable asset in the classroom, but its success in educating your students about “your” or “you're” depends greatly on whether the ideas sink in to the students as something more meaningful than a bunch of dittos to fill in. It is a weapon: it must be used responsibly and appropriately. You don't want it confiscated, and you certainly don't want it to become a point of controversy. It may, however, be a weapon that you do want your students to use against you.