

Eats, Shoots & Leaves:

**The Zero Tolerance Approach to
Punctuation**

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Dear Stickler,

For all the optimistic talk in this book about ladders, balaclavas, marker pens, stencils and paint, I have always known that the true answer to a stickler's prayer would be a little book of stick-on apostrophes. "How about stick-on apostrophes, then?" I have asked audiences on several continents, and always this light-hearted suggestion has been met with heavy groans of desire. How many times have you seen "Valentines Day" (no apostrophe) and thought, "If only I had a set of stickers, I could set that right"? How many times have you seen "Pizza's" (with an apostrophe) and hopped up and down with frustration at not being able to reach for an obliterating sticker printed with the words "The panda says no"? Well, suffer no longer. A Punctuation Repair Kit is now within your possession and

you are free to go out and correct the world. Have fun. Do good. Advance the cause of punctuation. And above all, of course, please, please, don't get caught.

It seems to me that the key to successful, anonymous sticker-application is to create diversions. Here is a suggested plan of action:

- 1 Identify sign that requires correction.
- 2 Try not to register “aghost” emotion on face; instead, affect insouciance. Carry on walking but make mental note, slow pace, dawdle, stop. If heart is pounding, take deep breaths. Search discreetly for Punctuation Repair Kit, all the time pretending to be thinking about something else; maybe glancing at watch, or pretending to expect an imminent bus.
- 3 Secretly select right-sized punctuation mark.
- 4 Hold it carefully out of sight between thumb and middle finger.
- 5 Sidle towards sign and come to rest within arm's length.
- 6 Wait, wait, wait – and then, when the moment is right:

- 7 Shout loudly, “Look, that’s Madonna, isn’t it?”
- 8 Apply sticker and walk briskly away, ignoring questions such as “Where?” and “Madonna who?” and “Who said that?”
- 9 Wait half an hour, then walk past again to check the punctuation is now correct.
- 10 Go home and sleep happily at the thought of a job well done.

Obviously, you may get into trouble doing this. Closed-circuit television cameras are everywhere these days, and most illiterate signs are private property. Well, all I can say it, don’t come running to us, because we will disown you. On Radio 4’s *Today* programme last year, when a few people were invited to suggest new legislation, I did advance the idea that altering signs for grammatical purposes should be exempt from prosecution – but, as far as I know, rather larger concerns caught the public vote, and I did not get it onto the statute book. Personally, I have thrown caution to the wind in the past year: I now not only correct signs with a big red pen, but then add my signature underneath. However, I am obviously a special case in this regard. I am already

known as the Genghis Khan of grammar. I hope ultimately to be remembered – perhaps more fondly – as the Scarlet Pimpernel of punctuation.

I hope you enjoy the stickers. Last year, in Michigan, I met a group of students who had formed an enthusiastic Grammar Warriors brigade, complete with rankings and uniform; they brought me evidence of the light-hearted shock-and-awe tactics they had employed at local shopping malls. Let me say immediately: you don't have to go that far. But the military operation imagery is useful, because I do have one rule of engagement: please check you are in the right before, as it were, opening fire. To render a sign ungrammatical with an *Eats, Shoots & Leaves* sticker would have wide-reaching consequences. First, it would make me look silly. Second, it would further confuse those who are uncertain of the rules. And last, it would bring down unfair opprobrium on a blameless black-and-white mammal native to China – who has enough on his plate, after all, coping with near-extinction.

Happy sticking!

Lynne Truss

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Introduction – The Seventh Sense

Either this will ring bells for you, or it won't. A printed banner has appeared on the concourse of a petrol station near to where I live. "Come inside," it says, "for CD's, VIDEO's, DVD's, and BOOK's."

If this satanic sprinkling of redundant apostrophes causes no little gasp of horror or quickening of the pulse, you should probably put down this book at once. By all means congratulate yourself that you are not a pedant or even a stickler; that you are happily equipped to live in a world of plummeting punctuation standards; but just don't bother to go any further. For any true stickler, you see, the sight of the plural word "Book's" with an apostrophe in it will trigger a ghastly private emotional process similar to the stages of bereavement, though greatly accelerated. First there is shock.

Within seconds, shock gives way to disbelief, disbelief to pain, and pain to anger. Finally (and this is where the analogy breaks down), anger gives way to a righteous urge to perpetrate an act of criminal damage with the aid of a permanent marker.

It's tough being a stickler for punctuation these days. One almost dare not get up in the mornings. True, one occasionally hears a marvellous punctuation-fan joke about a panda who "eats, shoots and leaves", but in general the stickler's exquisite sensibilities are assaulted from all sides, causing feelings of panic and isolation. A sign at a health club will announce, "It's party time, on Saturday 24th May we are have a disco/party night for free, it will be a ticket only evening." Advertisements offer decorative services to "wall's – ceiling's – door's ect". Meanwhile a newspaper placard announces "FAN'S FURY AT STADIUM INQUIRY", which sounds quite interesting until you look inside the paper and discover that the story concerns a quite large mob of fans, actually – not just the lone hopping-mad fan so promisingly indicated by the punctuation.

Everywhere one looks, there are signs of ignorance and indifference. What about that film *Two*

Weeks Notice? Guaranteed to give sticklers a very nasty turn, that was – its posters slung along the sides of buses in letters four feet tall, with no apostrophe in sight. I remember, at the start of the *Two Weeks Notice* publicity campaign in the spring of 2003, emerging cheerfully from Victoria Station (was I whistling?) and stopping dead in my tracks with my fingers in my mouth. Where was the apostrophe? Surely there should be an apostrophe on that bus? If it were “one month’s notice” there would be an apostrophe (I reasoned); yes, and if it were “one week’s notice” there would be an apostrophe. Therefore “two weeks’ notice” requires an apostrophe! Buses that I should have caught (the 73; two 38s) sailed off up Buckingham Palace Road while I communed thus at length with my inner stickler, unable to move or, indeed, regain any sense of perspective.

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. We are like the little boy in *The Sixth Sense* who can see dead people, except that we can see dead punctuation. Whisper it in petrified

little-boy tones: dead punctuation is invisible to everyone else – yet we see it all the time. No one understands us seventh-sense people. They regard us as freaks. When we point out illiterate mistakes we are often aggressively instructed to “get a life” by people who, interestingly, display no evidence of having lives themselves. Naturally we become timid about making our insights known, in such inhospitable conditions. Being burned as a witch is not safely enough off the agenda. A sign has gone up in a local charity-shop window which says, baldly, “Can you spare any old records” (no question mark) and I dither daily outside on the pavement. Should I go in and mention it? It does *matter* that there’s no question mark on a direct question. It is appalling ignorance. But what will I do if the elderly charity-shop lady gives me the usual disbelieving stare and then tells me to bugger off, get a life and mind my own business?

On the other hand, I’m well aware there is little profit in asking for sympathy for sticklers. We are not the easiest people to feel sorry for. We refuse to patronise any shop with checkouts for “eight items or less” (because it should be “fewer”), and we got

very worked up after 9/11 not because of Osama bin-Laden but because people on the radio kept saying “enormity” when they meant “magnitude”, and we really hate that. When we hear the construction “Mr Blair was stood” (instead of “standing”) we suck our teeth with annoyance, and when words such as “phenomena”, “media” or “cherubim” are treated as singular (“The media says it was quite a phenomena looking at those cherubims”), some of us cannot suppress actual screams. Sticklers never read a book without a pencil at hand, to correct the typographical errors. In short, we are unattractive know-all obsessives who get things out of proportion and are in continual peril of being disowned by our exasperated families.

I know precisely when my own damned stickler personality started to get the better of me. In the autumn of 2002, I was making a series of programmes about punctuation for Radio 4 called *Cutting a Dash*. My producer invited John Richards of the Apostrophe Protection Society to come and talk to us. At that time, I was quite tickled by the idea of an Apostrophe Protection Society, on whose website could be found photographic examples of ungrammatical

signs such as “The judges decision is final” and “No dog’s”. We took Mr Richards on a trip down Berwick Street Market to record his reaction to some green-grocers’ punctuation (“Potatoe’s” and so on), and then sat down for a chat about how exactly one goes about protecting a conventional printer’s mark that, through no fault of its own, seems to be terminally flailing in a welter of confusion.

What the APS does is write courteous letters, he said. A typical letter would explain the correct use of the apostrophe, and express the gentle wish that, should the offending “BOB,S PETS” sign (with a comma) be replaced one day, this well-meant guidance might be borne in mind. It was at this point that I felt a profound and unignorable stirring. It was the awakening of my Inner Stickler. “But that’s not enough!” I said. Suddenly I was a-buzz with ideas. What about issuing stickers printed with the words “This apostrophe is not necessary”? What about telling people to shin up ladders at dead of night with an apostrophe-shaped stencil and a tin of paint? Why did the Apostrophe Protection Society not have a militant wing? Could I start one? Where do you get balaclavas?



Punctuation has been defined many ways. Some grammarians use the analogy of stitching: punctuation as the basting that holds the fabric of language in shape. Another writer tells us that punctuation marks are the traffic signals of language: they tell us to slow down, notice this, take a detour, and stop. I have even seen a rather fanciful reference to the full stop and comma as “the invisible servants in fairy tales – the ones who bring glasses of water and pillows, not storms of weather or love”. But 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”.

Isn’t the analogy with good manners perfect? Truly good manners are invisible: they ease the way for others, without drawing attention to themselves. It is no accident that the word “punctilious” (“attentive to formality or etiquette”) comes from the same original root word as punctuation. As we shall see, the practice of “pointing” our writing has always been offered in a spirit of helpfulness, to underline

meaning and prevent awkward misunderstandings between writer and reader. In 1644 a schoolmaster from Southwark, Richard Hodges, wrote in his *The English Primrose* that “great care ought to be had in writing, for the due observing of points: for, the neglect thereof will pervert the sense”, and he quoted as an example, “My Son, if sinners intise [entice] thee consent thou, not refraining thy foot from their way.” Imagine the difference to the sense, he says, if you place the comma after the word “not”: “My Son, if sinners intise thee consent thou not, refraining thy foot from their way.” This was the 1644 equivalent of Ronnie Barker in *Porridge*, reading the sign-off from a fellow lag’s letter from home, “Now I must go and get on my lover”, and then pretending to notice a comma, so hastily changing it to, “Now I must go and get on, my lover.”

To be fair, many people who couldn’t punctuate their way out of a paper bag are still interested in the way punctuation can alter the sense of a string of words. It is the basis of all “I’m sorry, I’ll read that again” jokes. Instead of “What would you with the king?” you can have someone say in Marlowe’s *Edward II*, “What? Would you? With the

king?” The consequences of mispunctuation (and re-punctuation) have appealed to both great and little minds, and in the age of the fancy-that email a popular example is the comparison of two sentences:

A woman, without her man, is nothing.

A woman: without her, man is nothing.

Which, I don't know, really makes you think, doesn't it? Here is a popular “Dear Jack” letter that works in much the same fundamentally pointless way:

Dear Jack,

I want a man who knows what love is all about. You are generous, kind, thoughtful. People who are not like you admit to being useless and inferior. You have ruined me for other men. I yearn for you. I have no feelings whatsoever when we're apart. I can be forever happy – will you let me be yours?

Jill