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Colons and Hyphens and Commas, Oh My! An Examination of Recreational Punctuation

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Traditionally, grammar books have been labeled “boring.” A browse through the grammar section of the bookstore, however, suggests that this label may eventually become obsolete. Perhaps it takes a “stickler” like those described in Lynne Truss’s *Eats, Shoots & Leaves* to appreciate the humor appearing throughout the section, but surely at least one of the following titles would catch the interest of a non grammarian:

Sin and Syntax: How to Craft Wickedly Effective Prose

The Deluxe Transitive Vampire: The Ultimate Handbook of Grammar for the Innocent, the Eager, and the Doomed.

Lapsing Into a Comma: A Curmudgeon’s Guide to the Many Things That Can Go Wrong in Print—and How to Avoid Them

The New Well-tempered Sentence: A Punctuation Handbook for the Innocent, the Eager, and the Doomed.

The Grammatically Correct Handbook: A Lively and Unorthodox Review of Common English, for the Linguistically Challenged

The Bride of Anguished English: A Bonanza of Bloopers, Blunders, Botches, and Boo-Boos

These are just a few of the many “recreational grammar” books available today. This review of recreational grammar focuses on punctuation resources, but recreational books can be found for most any aspect of grammar, and much of what will be said about recreational punctuation

guides is applicable to other areas of recreational grammar.

Punctuation vs. Recreational Punctuation

A traditional punctuation book contains rules accompanied by illustrative examples and explanatory prose. For example, a typical guide might contain a rule and example set such as the one below, following a prose section discussing the general use of commas for clause separation:

Use a comma before a coordinating conjunction (such as *and*, *but*, *for*, *nor*, *or*, *so*, or *yet*) separating two independent clauses:

John ordered ravioli with meat sauce, but Mary chose lasagna.

You should take a sweater, for the weather may become chilly.

Abigail went hiking on Saturday, and her sister went swimming.

The prose section would have explained a little about conjunctions and dependent and independent clauses, in addition to any comma explanation needed. The information in all sections would or should be clear, but it most likely will not be interesting to the reader for anything other than learning about where to place commas and where not to place them. Occasionally, traditional punctuation guides contain some humorous examples, such as those for missing commas:

Frank sent his mother Edna flowers. (Does Frank have another mother?)

In many respects, recreational punctuation guides are just like their traditional counterparts. Both types provide prose, rules, and examples. Unlike the examples in traditional punctuation guides, the examples in recreational guides take on a life of their own. The examples, becoming more than just a vehicle for illustrating punctuation placement, are filled with interesting, surprising, or humorous content. Consider these examples from Anne Stilman’s *Grammatically Correct*:

The twins, by the way, insist they had nothing to do with the shark turning up in the bathtub. (58)

The next-door neighbors, a pair of curmudgeonly retirees, would sit on their porch and hurl insults at passing squirrels. (75)

We found her in the washroom, angrily scrubbing the ketchup off her tiara. (70)

A new bylaw was passed to ensure that no boiled cabbage would be served within city limits. (69)

Examples taken from literature are similarly interesting (Stilman 122):

Mrs Palmer's eye was now caught by the drawings which hung round the room. She got up to examine them.

'Oh! dear, how beautiful these are! Well! how delightful! Do but look, mama, how sweet! I could look at them forever.' And then sitting down again, she very soon forgot that there were any such things in the room. (*Sense and Sensibility*, Jane Austen)

Some recreational punctuation books make the explanatory prose more lively, as the author converses with the reader:

If only we hadn't started reading quietly to ourselves. Things were so simple at the start, before grammar came along and ruined things. (Truss 71–72)

But don't let [parentheses] move in on you so that the real message ducks for cover between them rather than proudly taking its place in the out-there-for-everyone-to-see-main-street of the sentence, or you'll be accused of being coy, or annoying, or sophomoric (and we know how abhorrent that would be!). (*The New Well-Tempered Sentence*, Gordon 112)

Tactics for Creating Recreational Punctuation Guides

Recreational punctuation books achieve their liveliness in many ways. They may ascribe character to punctuation:

A comma is a delicate kink in time, a pause within a sentence, a chance to catch your breath. A curvaceous acrobat, it capers over the page. (*The New Well-Tempered Sentence*, 21)

Naturally, therefore, this is where the colon and semicolon waltz in together, to a big cheer from all the writers in the audience. Just look at those glamorous punctuation marks twirling in the lights from the glitter-ball: are they not beautiful? Are they not graceful? (Truss 105)

They may also develop characters to feature in multiple examples:

From *Eats, Shoots & Leaves*—

I pulled out the stops with Kerry-Anne: I used a semicolon. (119)

In later life, Kerry-Anne found there were three qualities she disliked in other people: Britishness; superior airs; and a feigned lack of interest in her dusting of freckles. (120)

PHILIP: Kerry-Anne! Hold still! You've got some gunk on your face!

KERRY-ANNE: They're freckles, Philip. How many more times? (121)

From *The New Well-Tempered Sentence*—

Nadia was halted and removed in a squad car; they charged her with lurking with intent to loiter, and with wearing someone else's heart up her sleeve. (60)

Nadia became [Timofey's] girlfriend when she was an eighteen-year-old rebel with painted claws. (84)

"Got time for a little dolce far niente, Timofey?" Nadia asked her paramour with eternity on his hands. (110)

Recreational punctuation guides may add liveliness by breaking some semantic conventions:

Mr. Z dodged questions left and right till one landed in his borscht. (*The New Well-Tempered Sentence*, 19)

More commonly, they achieve variety by drawing on uncommon members of the lexicon (or at least members uncommon in a traditional punctuation guide):

At one time, scientists were interested in relating endo-, ecto- and mesomorph builds to personality. (Stilman 136)

The room was the picture of order, the mahogany furniture gleamed, not an ornament on the shelves was out of place nor a painting on the wall askew—the only note of discord was the corpse draped over the back of the chesterfield. (Stilman 157)

At breakfast we consumed a reprehensible smorgasbord of assorted Nordic things. (*The New Well-Tempered Sentence* 28)

We'll have more than rhetorical and ontological questions, young lady, when we get to your whereabouts last night. (*The New Well-Tempered Sentence* 39)

Degrees of Recreationality

Recreational punctuation guides may be either strongly or only mildly recreational. Mildly recreational guides may contain amusing examples, but their prose will generally be relatively traditional. Strongly recreational guides tend to be amusing throughout; they are designed to have the readability of a novel with the information of a traditional punctuation book. Such guides may even look rather like novels, as in the case of *Eats, Shoots & Leaves*. Their authors freely share opinions with readers, all the while addressing the readers with a friendly *you* to invite them to feel involved in the discussion. Mildly recreational guides add a little variety to one's experience of looking up punctuation rules, but strongly recreational guides entice one to read them whether or not one has a particular question to be answered.

Weighing Worth the Worth of Recreational Punctuation

Recreational punctuation guides seem to sparkle on the bookshelf beside their more modest

traditional counterparts. Their titles look so interesting that it seems that they must be worth picking up. However, are they really all they claim to be? Are recreational punctuation guides really as useful as their traditional counterparts?

Suppose a befuddled writer, one Herby Morgan, grabbed a punctuation guide at random to check where to place a possessive apostrophe in a singular surname ending in *s*, such as *Jones*. What would happen if the book pulled happened to be a recreational one? Let us use Herby's experience to examine some potential advantages and disadvantages of recreational punctuation guides.

If Herby happened to grab *Eats, Shoots & Leaves*, he might turn to the table of contents first. There he would find that a whole chapter on apostrophes begins on page thirty-five. The next chapter does not begin until page sixty-eight. "Great!" thinks Herby, "I should definitely be able to find an answer somewhere in there." He might then check the index, to see if he can find a listing that more closely matches his needs. One problem: no index. So, Herby begins to flip through the apostrophe section. He finds some italicized headings listing various functions of the apostrophe, but there is still no sign of a specific answer to his problem by the time the last header appears on page forty-five. His answer appears on page fifty-five (*Jones's*), but he may not realize it until the following page (which contains promising-looking examples), since there is no descriptive header introducing the discussion about the matter (although there is a large apostrophe serving as a section break on page fifty-four). His answer is clearly illustrated with the example "Philippa Jones's book," but Herby may have become somewhat frustrated trying to find it if he had never read the book before.

Now let's suppose that Herby grabbed *The New Well-Tempered Sentence*. Once again, he might turn to the table of contents first. There he would find that the apostrophe chapter begins on page 130, and that it is just nine pages long. Again, he might try to check the index, since the apostrophe section is so close to the back of the book anyway, and again he would find the index missing. This time, the

answer to his question appears in the examples under the very first rule, but he may or may not recognize it immediately:

One of the apostrophe's most legitimate activities is showing possession.

A woman's place is on the roam.

Parvenuing into the duchess's arms were many more than one than one ringleted *valet de chambre* and an inexperienced worthless lout. (130)

There are still three more examples, but Herby's problem can be solved by analogy using the duchess example: just as that noun ending in *-s* receives an apostrophe plus *s*, so would a surname like *Jones*, yielding the same answer given in *Eats, Shoots & Leaves*, namely *Jones's*. Herby might feel a bit distracted as he wonders about the exact meaning of *parvenuing* and what sort of person the duchess is; so much so that he may not immediately notice the duchess's potential for solving his problem. Herby might become extremely frustrated, since nowhere in the nine pages of apostrophe guidance is there a section specifically addressing the historically tricky problem of dealing with adding possession to names already ending in *s*. There is an example on page 133 that includes a possessively marked name ending in *s* ("Aunt Toosla's and Uncle Ladislas's backhands"), but it appears in a section discussing a problem unrelated to Herby's.

Finally, let's suppose that Herby pulled *Grammatically Correct* from the shelf, which is only a mildly recreational guide. A table of contents check reveals that the apostrophe segment comes at the end of the punctuation section and contains about ten pages. If he checked the index, he would not only find that one was actually included, but that it had several sublistings under the "possessives" entry. If he had a bit of linguistic knowledge, he could find the precise page he needed right away, thanks to the "possessives of sibilants" entry. Otherwise, he would still have a pretty good idea of where to go, since most of the pages listed are within three or four pages of each other. Page 196 being right in the middle of the 194–198 range, he might turn there

first. At the top of the page he finds a main heading called "Special Situations" closely followed by the subheading "Sibilants." He quickly finds his answer at the top of the example list: "Ms. Jones's property"; the plural possessive form (*Joneses'*) is conveniently included beside it at the top of the second example column. This particular section of the book may not be particularly chatty or amusing, but it does a fine, quick job of answering Herby's question.

The Final Analysis

Do these potential scenarios indicate that Herby should chuck the strongly recreational punctuation guides in his collection? After all, they are not nearly as easy to search as the mildly recreational guide (which is actually fairly traditional in the section he searched), and they contain numerous distractions, from commentary (rather than strictly explanatory) prose to unusual vocabulary to scandalous characters demanding attention. If Herby has only a functional interest in punctuation, then perhaps he should chuck the strongly recreational guides; a guide like *Grammatically Correct*, accompanied by any required house style guides, would be quite sufficient.

Suppose, though, that sometime Herby is overwhelmed with a desire to just sit down and learn about punctuation. Perhaps he has numerous recurring punctuation questions and figures that the best thing to do would be to buckle down and study a punctuation guide. If that were the case, Herby would be better off having the mildly recreational *Grammatically Correct* than no recreational guides at all, since the entertaining examples throughout it provide a break from its otherwise fairly traditional prose. The book is highly informative, but it might turn out to be a bit dense for reading at long stretches (although it is excellent for quick reference). If Herby had a strongly recreational punctuation guide, however, such as *Eats, Shoots & Leaves* or *The New Well-Tempered Sentence*, he would be much more likely to learn a little about all the major aspects of punctuation, since their authors miraculously turn the stuff of grammar lectures into the stuff of recreational reading, as in this excerpt from the question mark

chapter in *The New Well-Tempered Sentence*: You may come across a question mark in the most intimate places—midsentence, for instance, with others of its kind, ganging up on some innocent situation and interrogating it to death. (12)

Will recreational punctuation guides make traditional ones become obsolete? Probably not, or at least not for quite some time; not until a recreational guide appears on the scene that has the searchability of a traditional guide in addition to its recreational traits. Meanwhile, recreational punctuation guides will continue to entertain and educate both grammar lovers and novices seeking an engaging way to study punctuation.

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