

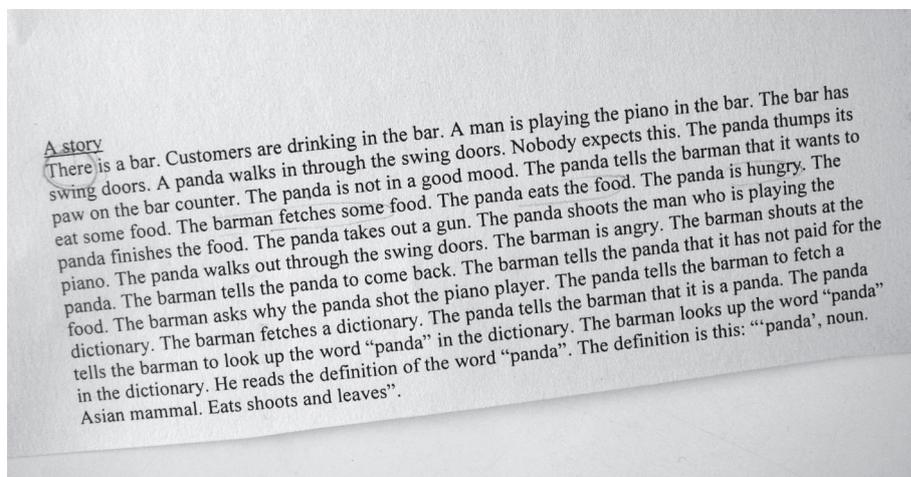


COMMA, OR NOT.

THE POWER OF PUNCTUATION MARKS AND HOW A COMMA
DECIDES ABOUT LIFE OR DEATH OF A PIANO PLAYER.

The snippet shown below is a writing task which was given to the English language students in Patricia Skorge's writing class at Bielefeld University. An unmotivatedly written, monotonous story, which is appropriately named 'A story', was to be rewritten in a more attractive and accessible narrative structure.

FIGURE 1
Patricia Skorge's writing task



The story itself is a delightful example how a single punctuation mark, a comma in this case, can decide about life and death. It tells of a panda that shoots a piano player because the dictionary says, 'Panda, noun. Asian mammal. Eats, shoots and leaves.' In this case, the mistaken comma after 'eats' causes a fatal ambiguity in meaning. It is not only errors or variations in grammar that can have such a big influence; errors or variations in typography can as well.

The question that evolved from this, is whether typography can reflect these differences – provided that both grammar and typography are tools used to express meaning. Do they offer equal possibilities? Can typography too abrogate such ambiguity and support several meanings?

'Eats, Shoots & Leaves' by Lynne Truss is the so-called 'Zero Tolerance approach to Punctuation'. With humour and precision, Truss provides examples that show how to use punctuation marks such as apostrophe, comma, semicolon, colon and dash and explains grammatical rules as well as stylistic options.

After having read the book, I arrived at the following options for punctuation or non-punctuation and the resulting meanings of 'eats shoots and leaves':

- | | |
|-------------------------------|--|
| (1) eatsshootsandleaves | interpretable |
| (2) eats shoots and leaves | interpretable |
| (3) Eats, shoots, and leaves. | [a] It eats; it shoots; and it leaves. |
| (4) Eats, shoots and leaves. | [a] It eats. It shoots. And it leaves. |
| (5) Eats shoots, and leaves. | [b] It eats shoots. And it leaves. |
| (6) Eats shoots and leaves. | [c] It eats shoots and leaves. |

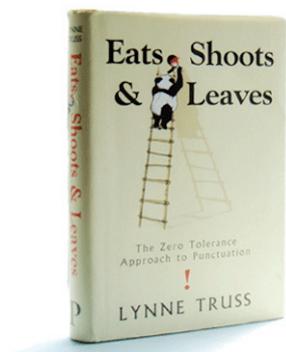


FIGURE 2
Lynne Truss' 'Eats, Shoots & Leaves'

The punctuation of example 1 and 2 is eliminated; they are interpretable in all directions. Example 3 and 4 make the panda eat, shoot and leave; they list three activities the panda does and provide the first possible meaning of the sentence. According to Truss, there is a subtle difference caused by the use of the Oxford comma (the comma after 'and'). Truss explains that 'stylistic reasons for its inclusion [can] outweigh the grammatical ones for taking it out' [Truss 85]. The comma after 'and' can decelerate a sentence and emphasize that it lists, in this case, three activities. This subtle difference is represented by the use of a semicolon or else a full stop in the explanations on the right. The semicolon, when compared to the full stop, interrupts more smoothly than a full stop would – it keeps the sentence 'up in the air'. Truss describes this effect as follows:

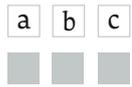
[...] colons and semicolons, [compared to the comma] – well, they are in a different league, my dear! They give such lift! Assuming a sentence rises into the air with the initial capital letter and lands with a soft-ish bump at the full stop, the humble comma can keep the sentence aloft all right, like this, UP, for hours if necessary, Up, like this, UP, sort-of bouncing, and then falling down, and then UP it goes again, assuming you have enough additional things to say, although in the end you may run out of ideas and then you have to roll along the ground with no commas at all until some sort of surface resistance takes over and you run out of steam anyway and then eventually with the help of three dots ... you stop. But the thermals that benignly waft our sentences to new altitudes – that allow us to coast on air, and loop-the-loop, suspending the laws of gravity – well, they are the colons and semicolons. [Truss 106]

Example 5 represents the second possible meaning and tells that the panda shoots and leaves after doing so. The last example, number 6, talks about what the panda actually prefers to eat.

The experiment of translating these grammatical rules into typographic ones brought two solutions. The first one (Figure 3) represents the three meanings, the second (Figure 4) one the six sample sentences.

As it can be seen in Figure 3, the comma has been simply but strictly replaced with a line break. Even though I have not tested whether readers are able to interpret the examples correctly, compared to each other and with the background of the previous discussion in mind, the arrangements are able to indicate the three meanings. The words form horizontal and vertical groups which are read in accordance with the conventional reading direction: left to right and top to bottom. The reading direction is a well-trained and familiar convention. So the

FIGURE 3



eats shoots and leaves	eats shoots and leaves	eats shoots and leaves
eats shoots and leaves	eats shoots and leaves	eats shoots and leaves

FIGURE 4



eatssho otsandl eaves		eats shoots and leaves
eats shoots and leaves	eats shoots and leaves	
eats shoots and leaves		^ v These two examples can be read in the same way as line break and space can be interpreted similarly.
		eats shoots and leaves

- | | |
|-------------------------------|--|
| (1) eatsshootsandleaves | interpretable |
| (2) eats shoots and leaves | interpretable |
| (3) Eats, shoots, and leaves. | [a] It eats; it shoots; and it leaves. |
| (4) Eats, shoots and leaves. | [a] It eats. It shoots. And it leaves. |
| (5) Eats shoots, and leaves. | [b] It eats shoots. And it leaves. |
| (6) Eats shoots and leaves. | [c] It eats shoots and leaves. |

probability that the reader will go back to it to form groups and derive meaning from it can be assumed to be fairly high. As long as the hierarchy of spaces between words and lines (space between words < space between lines) is well-balanced, it supports this process. If this is not the case, the eye gets lost.

The second range of examples, Figure 4, goes one step further to represent the subtleties of the six sentences introduced earlier and therefore uses a broader variety of typographic means. On this level it becomes difficult to anticipate how the reader will interpret the given information. One can argue for and against the success in conveying one particular meaning. But isn't it the same with the Oxford comma or the semicolon?

The experiment shows that small and almost overseen, in many cases unconsciously perceived features can have a strong impact on meaning – in grammar as well as in typography. Likewise, both disciplines provide stylistic devices that allow one to write / design on a level where personal taste, preference, the content itself and the cultural context decide about the appropriateness of a composition.

Typography is not grammar. It has another job to do. But where does grammar end and typography start? For sure they overlap. Though typography cannot entirely replace punctuation, it is beyond question that it does have the power to either enhance or corrupt the underlying intentions of a text. Both can be reasonable and required.

WORKS CITED

TRUSS, Lynne. *Eats, Shoots & Leaves, A Zero Tolerance Approach to Punctuation*. London: Profile Books LTD, 2003. Print.