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Period A7  
November 21, 2014  
AP Language

ESL Reading Section 1 OPR  
“Preface” and “The Seventh Sense”

From the beginning of her comical yet instructive novel “Eats, Shoots & Leaves,” Lynne Truss points out her book isn’t about grammar because she isn’t a ‘grammarian,’ despite her degree in English language. Throughout the preface and in the first chapter, “Introduction – The Seventh Sense,” Truss identifies a major problem in today’s society unnoticed by most people: the ignorance and indifference demonstrated by the lack of proper punctuation marks at the correct places in words, phrases, and sentences. As a native to the English culture and language, Truss emphasizes many key differences between American and British usage in writing, such as American “parentheses” vs. British “brackets,” terminal punctuation under the closing quotation marks vs. picking and choosing, the period vs. the full stop, the exclamation ‘point’ rather than exclamation ‘mark,’ and time denoted by a colon rather than a period. Ironically, it’s difficult to conceive how British punctuation has deteriorated over time since Americans typically consider British English to hold a greater degree of formality than American English; however, through a plethora of textual examples, Truss assumes a patronizing tone toward her subject to provide her readers with a perspective on how current British punctuation has evolved, and how ignorant individuals forget to include simple grammatical embellishments they were supposed to learn in primary school to clarify their writing. While sometimes lack of punctuation may not constitute a significant difference in the meaning of a sentence as a whole, Truss indicates such a critical omission yields considerable ambiguity and loses emphasis of various terms to attentive readers. At the same time, considering Truss’s position as a “stickler” or “punctuation vigilante,” she shows just how much she loves punctuation to impart her knowledge to others.

In the preface, one of the most vivid examples of the imminence of British “illiteracy” is exemplified by the disheveled teacher’s “demoralizing” response to Truss’s book, in which she presented her interest to read it based on her miscomprehension of punctuation, which Truss viewed as “unsettling,” especially in a country consistently ranking among the world’s top ten best education systems. Through a variety of medium and long sentence lengths and rhetorical questions, Truss manages to posit her disappointments and criticisms with fluidity and humor. While holding a rather disparaging attitude toward the indifferent use of punctuation in British society, Truss identifies her overarching problem best in the following statement from the first chapter, “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” (Truss, pg. 3). Naturally, though many people may consider Truss’s “plight” as insignificant in comparison with global political and environmental issues, Truss attempts to appeal to the minority of individuals who understand the implications of how a simple apostrophe or comma can mean a world of difference in conveying thoughts clearer. Accordingly, Truss defined punctuation as “the basting that holds the fabric of language in shape” (Truss, pg. 7). Besides ignorance, Truss had attributed another cause of a lack of punctuation to the fact that for at least 25 years, punctuation and English grammar were “simply not taught in the majority of schools,” especially during the 1960’s and 70’s. Finally, after studying the prominence of the English language from earlier time periods, imagine how readers from the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries would react to modern texts, as the English struggle to preserve their “system under attack” partly because of the increasing presence of American influences in England, and partly because of a growing indolence to follow the proper rules of punctuation.