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AP Language

ESL Reading Section 2 OPR  
“The Tractable Apostrophe” and “That’ll Do, Comma”

In the third and fourth chapters of *Eats, Shoots, and Leaves* by Lynne Truss, titled “The Tractable Apostrophe” and “That’ll Do, Comma,” Truss discusses a number of ways in which the uses of both the apostrophe and comma have changed over time through the use of historical and modern examples. At the same time, she describes an array of general functions served by both punctuation marks, also referred to as their respective “jobs.”

During the third chapter, Truss states the apostrophe represents eight specific functions: 1) a possessive in a singular noun, 2) time or quantity, 3) the omission of figures in dates, 4) the omission of letters, 5) strange, non-standard English, 6) features in Irish names such as O’Neill and O’Casey, 7) plurals of letters, and 8) plurals of words. According to the *Oxford Companion to English Literature*, “There was never a golden age in which the rules for the possessive apostrophe were clear-cut and known, understood and followed by most educated people.” As a result, today’s possessives serve as outliers to the normal rules of apostrophes because while some determiners and pronouns sound as though they are missing apostrophes, their special state distinguishes them from ordinary words. Subsequently, serving to exemplify how all educated adults [and teenagers for that matter] should remember the basic rules of apostrophes, Truss presents four “replacement” rules. If you can replace the word with: 1) “who is” or “who has,” then the word is who’s, 2) “they are,” then the word is they’re, 3) “there is,” then the word is there’s, 4) “you are,” then the word is you’re. These mindless abbreviation mistakes happen so frequently in today’s social media, billboards, business signs, newspapers, magazines, and even plain writing, but Truss addresses this problem concisely and effectively through four simple rules to identify the most common grammatical errors people make with apostrophes.

Furthermore, in the fourth chapter, Truss describes how the comma, more than any other mark, has the ability to draw our attention toward the mixed origins of punctuation, through the complex relationship of its two intermingled functions; 1) illuminates the grammar of a sentence, and 2) points up—rather by musical notation—such literary qualities as rhythm, direction, pitch, tone, and flow. In consideration of Richard Mulcaster’s stance on the purpose of the comma in his 1582 early English grammar work, *The First Part of the Elementarie*, the comma serves as a break in the sentence to allow the reader to breathe and speak at a reasonable and relaxed pace. Accordingly, this definition of the comma is universally observed in a multitude of situations, including when speakers use commas to signify pauses and rests within their sentences to create depth and pathetic impact, similar to how in musical composition, rests are just as important as the musical notes themselves, because inserting a rest between several groups of notes represents a brief period of silence between notes and prevents the entire piece from becoming monotonous and overpowered rather than steady and pleasant to listen.

Finally, in application of Truss’s rules of the apostrophe and comma, below is a correctly punctuated paragraph retrieved from *The New Yorker* magazine: “Not long ago, in Paris, I met a young Muslim woman named Djamila Benrehab, who, at the age of twenty, had donned not only a black head scarf, but a billowy black abaya, and under it all, a tight black bandanna to her eyebrows that left only the circle of her face exposed. Djamila is a big, apple-cheeked, and endearing person. She speaks a beautiful, lilting French, and is intelligent and quite charming. Her dream is to leave Paris and go to Brooklyn, where she has heard Muslim girls go veiled and nobody minds, and in any case, ‘It can’t be worse than here.’”