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AP Language

ESL Section 3 OPR
“Airs and Graces” and “Cutting a Dash”

During the fifth and sixth chapters of *Eats, Shoots, and Leaves* by Lynne Truss, captioned “Airs and Graces” and “Cutting a Dash,” Truss identifies, compares/contrasts, criticizes, as well as exemplifies nine distinct types of punctuation, including the colon, semicolon, exclamation mark, question mark, italics, inverted comma, dashes, ellipsis, and brackets. Throughout the section, Truss employs simple, declarative sentence structure and rhetorical questions in the beginning sentences of each paragraph to syntactically offer effective transitions to different punctuation marks, as well as keeps an organized stream of ideas through a fluid combination of medium and long sentence lengths in concrete details and block quotes.

In the fifth chapter, the object of punctuation is discussed as an art, because both the apostrophe and comma are subject to universal rules and do not exhibit artistic elements; on the other hand, the colon and semicolon “allow us to coast on air, and loop-the-loop, suspending the laws of gravity” (pg. 106-107). For example, consider this excerpt taken from a play by George Bernard Shaw called *Arms and the Man*, Act II, “Captain Bluntschli. I am very glad to see you ; but you must leave this house at once. My husband has just returned with my future son-in-law ; and they know nothing. If they did, the consequences would be terrible. You are a foreigner : you do not feel our national animosities as we do” (pg. 117) As evidenced in the last sentence of this passage, Shaw advises writers to use a colon when two statements are “placed baldly in dramatic apposition,” because the second statement explains the first. Semicolons are also used as tools of restoration and order in creating detailed lists with brief side explanations, exemplified in the following, “Fares were offered to Corfu, the Greek island; Morocco; Elba, in the Mediterranean; and Paris. Margaret thought about it. She had been to Elba once and had found it dull; to Morocco, and found it too colourful” (pg. 126). By denotation, the phrase “airs and graces” signifies false ways of behaving intended to make other people feel you are important or belong to a high social class. Colons and semicolons are considered stylistic preferences, permitting the author to determine their effectiveness and infuse his/her imagination into the context of their work, which sometimes causes readers to believe the author is putting on *airs and graces*.

Furthermore, in the sixth chapter, Truss introduces “attention-seeking” punctuation, that which “cuts a dash,” or causes a sudden impression or effect, including the exclamation and question marks. First, in Victor Hugo’s simple inquiry to his publisher about how *Les Misérables* was selling, “?” received the ‘expressive’ reply “!,” which demonstrates how many times the question and exclamation marks can be self-explanatory in their own respect, as readers can narrow down the possible questions and exclamations based on the context of the conversation. Subsequently, with the use of the question mark in today’s society, Truss offers an excellent example of how it should be used in direct interrogation, “What is the capital of Belgium? Have you been there? Did you find the people very strange” (pg. 141)? The increasing number of people ignorantly adding question marks to sentences with indirect questions or forgetting the mark altogether portray how fast-paced and indifferent society is to grammatical errors such as these; they are widely present in movie titles, shop signs, social media posts with 140 limited characters, etc. In comparison with the Spanish system of punctuation for exclamation and question marks, when writing the upside-down versions, the writer is actually self-consciously adding them at the beginning and end of the sentence, which serves as a method of reinforcement so as to remember to denote if the format of the question is valid and direct and how it should be correctly punctuated; it’s a system English speakers should definitely take note of!