

Portugal, Nicholas
Period A7
December 9, 2014
AP Language

ESL Section 4 OPR

“A Little Used Punctuation Mark” and “Merely Conventional Signs”

In the seventh and eighth of Lynne Truss’ *Eats, Shoots, and Leaves*, titled “A Little Used Punctuation Mark” and “Merely Conventional Signs,” Truss elucidates how to properly use the hyphen in writing with ten specific recommendations, as well as predicts the bleak longevity of punctuation in a rapidly advancing, technological world consumed by indifference to the rules of grammatical precision. At the same time, she presents the advantages of reading physical books as opposed to the multitude of electronic books and media available on the Internet, portraying society’s ignorance to most rules of punctuation developed by scholars and erudite individuals since the early Middle Ages. Throughout the section, Truss employs a rather argumentative and apologetic tone as a final mechanism of garnering readers to support her cause of reinvigorating punctuation and grammar for future generations in order to prevent global illiteracy.

During the penultimate chapter of the book, Truss provides a list of ten recommendations for legitimate uses of the hyphen, a punctuation mark most people get confused with the dash: 1) Many words need hyphens to prevent ambiguity. 2) It is important to use hyphens when spelling out numbers. 3) Use hyphens when linking nouns to other nouns. 4) When a noun phrase is used to qualify another noun, it is hyphenated. 5) Some prefixes traditionally require hyphens. 6) When words are spelled out, it is customary to use hyphens in order to indicate separate typeset enunciation. 7) Hyphens are used to prevent an unpleasant linguistic situation known as “letter collision.” 8) A hyphen can be used to indicate a word is unfinished or continuing on the next line. 9) Signs of hesitation and stammering are indicated by hyphens. 10) When hyphenated phrases come up, and it has been qualified beforehand, it is necessary to also hyphenate the modifying word or phrase. If an aspiring writer heeds all of these recommendations in writing, he/she is likely to present elevated clarity for the readers when encountering hyphens.

Finally, in the final chapter, Truss redefines her purpose of writing the book, invoking a reference to Eric Partridge’s *You Have a Point There*: “My aim is to be helpful, not dogmatic. The following examples will, if examined and pondered, supply the data from which any person of average intelligence can, without strain, assimilate an unformulated set of working rules” (pg. 177). In comparison with Truss’ introduction, while in the beginning her tone could be described as doctrinaire and disparaging, at the end, she justifies her stickler personality as a means of rousing her “fellow sticklers” to act prudently, not passively or aggressively and watch the world grow increasingly illiterate in all forms of writing and advertisement. At this point, Truss’ tone is argumentative and apologetic, because she expands her discussion beyond the importance of punctuation, but extending her point “while massive change from the printed word to the bloody electronic signal is inevitably upon us, we diehard punctuation-lovers are perhaps not as rigid as we think we are” (pg. 190) She describes how reading books for pleasure and the satisfaction of delving into the printed word and feeling a sense of ownership pride in spending money on a much-awaited book supervenes that of stagnantly scrolling down pages of linearized material, otherwise the Internet’s abounding confines of information and pages. In conclusion, her tangent on the deterioration of grammar in emails and the use of abbreviations and emoticons in text messages and larger displays, which create ambiguity and fusions between art and punctuation, shows how today’s society mindlessly rebels against punctuation standards to shed some light on what it believes to be a restrictive, uninteresting system of punctilious precision.