

## What's Worth Writing Is Worth Writing Well

This is a peer-reviewed journal, which means that manuscripts submitted to us for consideration to publish are vetted by external referees with competence in the subject area and, where applicable, in such specialised fields as research design and statistics. Most critical reviews call for at least some revision; the editor conveys referees' recommendations to authors and may require still other modifications before accepting the paper for publication.

Editors can be a demanding lot, at least from the author's perspective. They tend to be perfectionists, each bringing a unique set of hobbyhorses to the job, and contributors to this journal have two of them to contend with! We freely admit that we are tough, but a book we found while on holidays during the northern summer reassured us that we are not unreasonable, just sticklers for clarity and precision in English expression and other essential elements of scholarly communication. Lynne Truss, whose witty bestseller<sup>1</sup> should be required reading for everyone who commits words to paper, explains its title thus:

A panda walks into a café. He orders a sandwich, eats it, then draws a gun and fires two shots in the air.

"Why?" asks the confused waiter, as the panda makes toward the exit. The panda produces a badly punctuated wildlife manual and tosses it over his shoulder.

"I'm a panda," he says, at the door. "Look it up."

The waiter turns to the relevant entry and, sure enough, finds an explanation.

"**Panda.** Large black-and-white bear-like mammal, native to China. Eats, shoots and leaves."

"So," says Truss, "punctuation really does matter, even if it is only occasionally a matter of life and death." This was not intended as a joke, for in the Introduction, she recounts how a misspelled telegram, with its tragic ambiguity, erroneously precipitated the Jameson Raid on the Transvaal in 1896.

Punctuation, like other English usage, has evolved over time, and there are regional variations (e.g. expressing time as 7.30 in the UK *versus* 7:30 in the US), just as there are in spelling (flavour *vs.* flavor). There are, however, some common conventions that are essential to meaning: Do you mean to say, "I would rather eat my dinner than the dog's" or "I would rather eat my dinner than the dogs"?

The apostrophe is one of the most misused of all punctuation marks, and sign-writers are famous for their sins of excess and omission: CD's, book's, tomatoe's, womens apparel... "There is a rumour," asserts Truss, "that in parts of the Civil Service workers have been pragmatically instructed to omit apostrophes because no one knows how to use them anymore—and this is the kind of pragmatism, I say along with Winston Churchill, 'up with which we shall not put'."

Punctuation is just one of the linguistic issues with which we, as editors, wrestle daily. Misspelling, poor choice of words, use of the plural as singular (or nouns as verbs or *vice versa*), clumsy or misleading order of words and other abuses of the language feature to a greater or lesser extent in most of the manuscripts we receive. Sadly, incorrect usage has become so common, even among the educated (and educators) and in the media, that few people these days seem to notice when they have made a mistake. Furthermore, the popularity of e-mail as a convenient means of communication has led to such bad habits as phonetic spelling, lack of capitalisation and punctuation, and the use of *ad hoc* abbreviations and acronyms, which tend to carry over into more formal writing.

Political correctness, particularly the attempt to eschew gender-specific terms where both sexes are referred to, has spawned yet another set of problems. With the advent of equal opportunity legislation, one could not advertise a job using a term implying that one had to be a particular sex to apply (e.g. fireman, postman, waiter/waitress). The newly required gender-neutral occupational designations went through an awkward phase of replacing *man* or *-er/-ess* with *person* (yielding *fire person*, *post person*, *wait person*—what one cheeky essayist called "persongling the English language"), but this gradually gave way to the more elegant *fire fighter*, *letter carrier*, and *food server*.

Finding a gender-neutral way to use pronouns without murdering the rules of grammar still seems elusive; for example, to avoid saying, "The chiropractor has a duty to provide his patient with evidence-based care," authors tend to substitute *their* for *his*. True, the possessive pronoun does become gender-neutral, but it also fails to agree in number with the noun (patient) that it modifies. Would it not be better to convert the *whole sentence* to the plural—"Chiropractors have a duty to provide their patients with evidence-based care"? It is not always quite this easy to marry political correctness with good grammar, however it is usually possible, with imagination and intelligence, to find an acceptable way around the problem.

Paper is patient: What we allow to go into print in our name or that of our profession defines us. If the science is slipshod or the syntax is sloppy, it can come back to haunt us. It can make us appear ignorant or careless, but what is worse, it can misinform, sometimes tragically. That is why editors of peer reviewed journals like ours work so hard to ensure that what we publish is defensible and clearly expressed, hopefully with grace.

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1. Truss L. Eats, shoots and leaves. The zero tolerance approach to punctuation. U.S. printing. New York: Gotham Books, 2004.