

Grammar Guru 5

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I came across the following story in a delightful book by Lynne Truss:

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 walks towards 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 animal. Native to China. Eats, shoots and leaves.*

*And that is the title of the book: **Eats, Shoots & Leaves.***

Punctuation does perplex us. We are always in doubt even though we have done countless exercises in school. Thank God the computer has come to our rescue!

Wren and Martin’s *High School English Grammar and Composition* lists six principal punctuation marks: Full stop; Comma; Semicolon; Colon; Question mark; and Exclamation mark. It then goes on to discuss the not-so-principal ones: Inverted commas; Dash; Hyphen; Parentheses; and Apostrophe. Hindi has no punctuation marks except a straight line to mark the end of a sentence. There are no capital

letters in Tamil. However, our Indian languages have been ‘corrupted’ today by English punctuation.

We are often befuddled by English punctuation. We ignore capitalization; insert commas as and when we feel like it; forget quotation marks; in short, our writing often becomes unintelligible because we don’t respect punctuation – even when our grammar and vocabulary are good. We forget that punctuation is “a courtesy designed to help readers to understand a story without stumbling”, as quoted by Truss.

Let’s just look at one bee in the bonnet of sticklers for punctuation: the hyphen. Do you write *head master* or *headmaster* or *head-master*? Two words, or one word, or a hyphenated word? *Jack-of-all-trades* or *Jack of all trades*? No wonder Churchill considered hyphens to be “a blemish to be avoided wherever possible.” According to Woodrow Wilson, the hyphen was “the most un-American thing in the world.” (Don’t miss the hyphen in un-American!). One is also not sure how to distinguish between the dash and the hyphen – how much longer is the dash, or how much shorter should the hyphen be?

Does punctuation support women’s liberation? Yes it can, as this classroom classic doing the rounds on the net shows: *An English professor wrote on the blackboard: a woman without her man is*

nothing, and asked his students to punctuate it.

The boys wrote: A woman, without her man, is nothing.

The girls wrote: A woman! Without her, man is nothing!

[Editor's Note: This is part of a series of articles contributed by the author and published earlier in The Times of India, Education Times from May 2008 to May 2013. We are thankful to the author to permit us to publish those articles in our journal.]

Some useful web tools for speaking skills

English Central (<http://www.englishcentral.com/>)

English Central is a video site bringing voice to learners. It makes use of both speech recognition and text-to-speech facilities for language learning.

Online Voice Recording Tools

Audiopal (<http://www.audiopal.com>)

Vocaroo (<http://vocaroo.com/>)

Both Audiopal and Vocaroo are very simple voice recording tools. You don't need to sign up in these sites. You can record your speech and download it as an mp3 file from these sites. You can preview your recording and can email it to anyone right from these sites. Additionally, Audiopal offers some more facilities. You can record your speech by making phone calls to the numbers given in Audiopal.

Podcasting Tools

Podomatic (<http://www.podomatic.com>)

Spreaker (<http://www.spreaker.com>)

Audioboom (<https://audioboom.com>)

A podcast is an audio broadcast over the web. It is broken up into parts or episodes. Most podcasts are similar to news radio programs and deliver information on a regular basis, but they can also be comedy shows, special music broadcasts or talks. You as a teacher can set up a podcasting channel in Podomatic, Spreaker, or Audioboom.

Voki (<http://www.voki.com>)

Voki lets you create customized speaking characters. Voki can be an effective tool to practise speaking skills in literature classes. It encourages creativity and interactivity in your classes.

WhatsApp groups

Whatsapp offers another opportunity for language learners to practise their speaking skills. Teachers can create a WhatsApp group for their classes. Learners can record their speeches (up to 1 minute) and can share them in the group. This allows interactivity and peer support in your speaking skills class.

[Contributed by Dr. Xavier Pradeep Singh, Dept of English, St Joseph's College, Trichy]