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Description

Lynne Truss, author of "Eats, Shoots and Leaves For Children," a grade-school guide to punctuation, demonstrates how placement of commas can alter the meaning of a sentences.

Keywords


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**APA**

**CHICAGO MANUAL OF STYLE**

**Transcript**
Why Commas Make a Difference
MATT LAUER, co-host:
When it comes to grammar, most kids understand where to put the period at the end of a sentence, but when it gets to commas it can get a little trickier. Well, in the wake of the success of her book called "Eats, Shoots & Leaves," Lynne Truss has written a book for kids called "Eats, Shoots & Leaves: Why Comma--Commas Really Do Make a Difference."
Lynne, nice to have you here. Welcome.
Ms. LYNNE TRUSS ("Eats, Shoots & Leaves"): Oh, thank you very much.
LAUER: Ten years on the job, you're the first author who's done a book about commas, so congratulations.
Ms. TRUSS: How strange is that?
LAUER: Why are they so important and misunderstood, in your mind?
Ms. TRUSS: Oh, I just think that everyone should know about punctuation, really. And I just think kids are--they learn it in a rather dull way, you know, they have to learn when to use commas in a list, you know, that kind of thing. It just seemed fun to make--to do a whole book, which is just about the difference you can make if you put a comma in.
LAUER: And it's dramatic, the difference.
Ms. TRUSS: Yes.
LAUER: You put a comma in one part of a sentence versus another and the entire meaning of the sentence changes. And what you do is you use very cute illustrations...
Ms. TRUSS: Yeah.
LAUER: ...in the book to graphically show kids--by the way, kids of what age?
Ms. TRUSS: Oh, I think six and up is what we're saying, yeah.
LAUER: OK. So let's start with an example, OK?
Ms. TRUSS: OK. Yeah.
LAUER: We've got a six-year-old looking at this, and the sentence says what?
Ms. TRUSS: Well, in this case, it says--there's a kid, you know, obviously the--has got--something terribly gone wrong here, and he's saying, "Go, get him doctors." So you put the comma...
LAUER: Right. So you would put the comma right there.
Ms. TRUSS: In there.
LAUER: And it's the instruction to these kids...
Ms. TRUSS: Yeah.
LAUER: ...to get him doctors.
Ms. TRUSS: Yeah.
LAUER: Now, graphic example of how it changes. If you take the comma and move it and say, "Go get him, doctors."
Ms. TRUSS: "Go get him, doctors."
LAUER: Comma. Now you're telling the doctors to go get him.
LAUER: Simply by one change in the position.
Ms. TRUSS: Yeah.
LAUER: All right?
Ms. TRUSS: That's right.
LAUER: The next example here, this one's a little more graphic for audience at home. "Eat here, and get gas."
Ms. TRUSS: Well, I think if you put a comma in here, you can separate the two things. You can say, `If you eat here, you can also get gas.'
LAUER: Meaning this kind of gas.
Ms. TRUSS: Meaning that kind of gas.
LAUER: Right.
Ms. TRUSS: And here...
LAUER: And if you don't put a comma in the sentence, if you leave it out entirely, "Eat here and get gas."
Ms. TRUSS: And you get gas.
LAUER: We're talking about a different kind of food here.
Ms. TRUSS: And fly you way here.
LAUER: All right.
Ms. TRUSS: I love this, it says beany.
LAUER: Beany, right.
Ms. TRUSS: Isn't that great?
LAUER: They need Beano for this meal. OK. Here's another one where the meaning dramatically shifts.
"Look at that huge hot dog."
Ms. TRUSS: Clearly a huge hot dog.
LAUER: And the picture shows we've got a huge wiener there, so to speak.
Ms. TRUSS: That's right.
LAUER: And if you take this, "Look at that huge...
Ms. TRUSS: Comma.
LAUER: ...comma...
Ms. TRUSS: Hot dog.
LAUER: ...hot dog," well, the meaning of the sentence completely changes.
Ms. TRUSS: Exactly. Exactly.
LAUER: Could kids, if you think--if they see--if they hear a sentence with the comma in it, could they draw the picture?
Ms. TRUSS: Well, we're going to try and get them to do that, actually, with some competitions and things. I think that's a really good idea, so they can--but it is a visual, I mean it's a huge visual joke, isn't it? It's lovely.
LAUER: All right. This one is another good example.
Ms. TRUSS: OK.
LAUER: "The student said the teacher is crazy." And tell me what you would do with punctuation in this one.
Ms. TRUSS: Well, in this, "The student is crazy, said the teacher." So you put the commas in there, so "The student, said the teacher, is crazy." And that's a crazy kid.
LAUER: Now, if you change this here, "The student said the teacher is crazy," and you put no commas in it...
Ms. TRUSS: No commas, no commas.
LAUER: ...now you've got...
Ms. TRUSS: We've got a really crazy teacher here.
LAUER: Holding a fish in front of the class.
Ms. TRUSS: Holding a fish, a fish in her hair, fish on her feet, fish all over the place.
LAUER: And these are the illustrations that you'll find all throughout this book. And this last one is perhaps one of the more confusing ones in the book.
Ms. TRUSS: Yeah, this is more complex. And I actually think--I think that people, when they have the book, they will, I think, look at it over time, they won't get all the things at once. I think this is more difficult, because it's "Every day, Anthony turns, slides, and swings." So those are three things he does, he turns...
LAUER: Separate actions.
Ms. TRUSS: ...turns, slides...
LAUER: Separate verbs.
Ms. TRUSS: Yeah, they're all verbs, that's right.
LAUER: OK. Right.
Ms. TRUSS: Turns, slides, and swings. And this is like "Eats, shoots and leaves," you know, it's sort of--you--if you change the punctuation, two of the things become nouns. So it's, "Every day..."
LAUER: Comma.
Ms. TRUSS: ...comma, Anthony turns the slides and the swings."
LAUER: So it's actually--he's doing this to two separate event--he's creating two separate events as opposed to three events.
Ms. TRUSS: Yeah. Yeah. Absolutely.