

Secondly, why – if the Harangue column is an opportunity for contributors to flex their journalistic muscles – do you offer it to someone who has her own column in the *Newcastle Journal*? That's not flexing, that's body building!

Melissa Jo Smith, London

WORD POWER

I was interested to read Gillie Bolton's article on therapeutic writing (Issue 19). Surprisingly, even the Benefits Agency accept that – as an ME sufferer – my writing is good for me and don't penalise me for the occasional few quid I earn, despite the fact that writing does not fit neatly into their various categories. Even that little bit enhances my self-esteem no end and makes me feel that I do not exist simply as a patient. I did have one problem with the article, though. To be specific, one word. ME as a *psychosomatic* illness? To most people the meaning is still perilously close to hypochondria. It has been a long fight to establish that ME is a physical illness with physical cause and symptoms. I'm sure *Msllexia* readers can understand how much damage one misplaced word can do.

Alison Jacobs, Lincoln

Apologies both to sufferers of ME and to therapeutic writing practitioner Gillie Bolton – the word 'psychosomatic' was inserted to condense the piece, and was mis-used in describing this recognised chronic illness

INSIDE MY HEAD

I have to say Issue 19 is an inspiration! I refer particularly to Gillie Bolton's article and wholeheartedly agree that writing brings you into a deeper understanding of yourself – it's certainly been a revelation as to what really goes on in my head. I laughed out loud at Bekki Hill's wise advice on dealing with our gremlins, although I was rather concerned that I could relate to all five examples of negative comments. I also didn't get a mention with regard to the Asham shortlist. Perhaps we can form an Asham-*Msllexia* Subscribers group?!

Anne Brooke, Surrey

Other neglected *Msllexia*-Asham folk include Caroline Gilfillan and Patricia Debney

SHORT CHANGED

With regard to Christala Rosina's letter in Issue 19, I would like to point out that it is not just poetry that editors mutilate. I was thrilled when I received a call from a well-known woman's magazine regarding a short story. To my astonishment the editor said this: 'Hi. Enjoyed your story. Want to include it in our magazine, but could you make a few adjustments? Firstly loose 700 words. And change the names and occupations of your characters – posh ones won't appeal to our readers.' The story was about a vet but they wanted me to change her to a vet's receptionist. When I am rich and famous I will be able to stamp my foot, but until then I will grit my teeth and smile when I bank my cheque.

Beverly Holland, Bolton



HARANGUE

...it's the way that you say it. Pippa Kelly tells us why she's a stickler for proper punctuation

Apostrophe's – don't you just love 'em? Yes – I know. Mine's in the wrong place. Who gives a damn? Life's too short to worry about a little squiggle, and you all know what I mean.

Actually, I care. Very much. And I don't know whether I'm more irritated by my own anally retentive fixation on bad punctuation or the wicked deed itself. What does a misplaced comma matter when my meaning's clear?

But consider this. A friend of mine wrote a letter to her local newspaper in which she said: 'I should like to plead with some of those women who now feel ashamed, to say they're feminists.'

When her letter was published, the sentence read: 'I should like to plead

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with some of those women who now feel ashamed to say they're feminists.'

My friend who, unlike me, isn't the pedantic type, had every reason to fume. The omission of one tiny comma had ruined her message. If we can't put across our thoughts correctly, we can't communicate properly.

Those are extreme ends of the punctuation spectrum. My friend's comma matters; my apostrophe doesn't – unless you're me. Why?

It all comes down to meaning. Language is an agreed system of grunts (spoken word) and signs (written word). Inflexion, body language and, above all, an immediate response (dialogue) help us to convey meaning through conversation. With writing, the only prop is punctuation. That's why, compared to how we write, we converse so sloppily. And it's why dialogue is so hard to recreate.

English is not only degraded by incorrect usage; it's rendered impotent. If we assume its function is communication, then without proper punctuation it ceases to work. Worse than that, it malfunctions, leads to misunderstanding and anger.

Emails and texts have spawned their own language (and punctuation), somewhere between speaking and writing. The abbreviated dialogue would seem abrupt, not to say rude, in any other context. And their pared-down minimalism reminds us of the *raison d'être* of punctuation: it's a set of rules, a framework for the system of signs, to facilitate communication.

Like all rules, it's there to be broken. But only once understood can it be constructively defaced.

The *Harangue* feature challenges you to flex your journalistic muscles by responding to one of our controversial subjects. Next issue's topic is falsification. Is lying about yourself (e.g. your name, age, credentials) to get published morally wrong or a matter of expediency? Send 800-word submissions, plus a bio and SAE, to the usual address.

The most infamous vandal on the block has to be James Joyce. *Ulysses* – all one thousand pages of it – has just been recorded on 22 CDs by actor Jim Norton. It took him two solid weeks and left him shattered. The fact that it has little, in some places no, punctuation made his work all the harder. But – and this is the interesting bit – he said that 'it's a book that's meant to be read out loud.'

Joyce forced his reader to be more pro-active – to enter a dialogue with the author through the novel, bringing his or her own interpretations to bear, so that the book is more like a conversation.

He revolutionised novel-writing, throwing out long-held conventions and abandoning many of the normal rules of writing, such as standard punctuation. He couldn't have done this if the framework hadn't been there in the first place.

So, I think you get my message: punctuation rules OK. But does over-rigorous application of it kill creativity? Au contraire. Just as the grammatical anarchists, ee cummings, Ezra Pound and, of course, Joyce, raged against orthodox conventions, others used punctuation of which grammarian HW Fowler would be proud, to convey startling images, evocative moods and powerful meaning.

Joyce's literary antithesis might be said to be Henry James, who leads his readers along labyrinthine sentences, some of them lasting an entire paragraph, all of them perfectly punctuated. And George Eliot's seminal novel *Middlemarch* contains, on its first page, an eight-line description of Dorothea Brooke, in a single sentence of seamless grammar.

The 17th-Century metaphysical poet John Donne wrote some of the most beautiful and, in their time, scandalous love poems in the English language, with daring erotic images distilled in perfectly punctuated elegies and stanzas.

All these 'conventional' writers broke new barriers of their own – they were undoubtedly creative. Some might say ee cummings' poem *!blac (1)*, which begins '!blac / k / agains / t' is dangerously, wonderfully creative. Others might say they don't know what the hell it means, dismissing it as pseud's corner nonsense.

I say this: punctuations dead long live punctuation

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