

It's Not Just Rules; It's Clear Thinking

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In a culture characterized less by the printed word than by YouTube videos, it's easy to cast off grammar as if it were a quaint vestige of some prim and proper era — a form of good manners or etiquette, like using the right fork. But without grammar, we lose the agreed-upon standards about what means what. We lose the ability to communicate when respondents are not actually in the same room speaking to one another. Without grammar, we lose the precision required to be effective and purposeful in writing.

Yes, this is important. Unlike the grunt of pleasure or pain one might express in the moment, written language endures over time. It takes the place of live human contact, and stands in for the full array of verbal and nonverbal communication passing between people who are together in real time and space. Text extends our speech into the future. Thanks to the introduction of text in the Axial Age, we were able to invent contracts, the law and even the covenant that served as the basis for the Judeo-Christian tradition. Our civilization owes its notions of ethics, progress and human rights to the durability and accountability of text. For better or for worse, a person's ability to participate in the culture of the past thousand or so years has depended on his or her ability to read and write.

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In most jobs, the ability to write clearly and unambiguously remains an essential skill. It distinguishes the worker who takes direction from the boss who can leverage the power of text to write down instructions and leave them for someone else. Only the writer skilled in grammar is entrusted with representing a company in a letter or an e-mail. Only the entrepreneur who can persuasively express a new idea in writing can craft a business plan that will win the faith of partners and investors.

Language is no less exacting than math. As the book title “Eats, Shoots and Leaves” *demonstrates, a single comma can change a sentence about the diet of a panda to one describing the behavior of a dine-and-dash killer. The emergence of digital technology makes precision in language even more important than before. As the grammar of standard English extends to the grammar of code, our errors find themselves embedded in programs and replicating further and more widely than previously imaginable. Even a poorly constructed tweet reflects a poorly constructed thought, while grammatically lacking e-mail messages have become the hallmark of password phishing scams. Without command of grammar, one can't even truly read, much less write.

So yes, an employee who can write properly is far more valuable and promotable than one whose ambiguous text is likely to create confusion, legal liability and embarrassment.

Moreover, a thinking citizen deserves the basic skills required to make sense through language, and to parse the sense and nonsense of others.

*Eats, Shoots and Leaves is a book about grammar written by Lynne Truss. The joke to which the article refers is below:

A panda walks into a café. He orders a sandwich, eats it, then draws a gun and proceeds to fire it at the other patrons.

'Why?' asks the confused, surviving waiter amidst the carnage, as the panda makes towards the exit. The panda produces a badly punctuated wildlife manual and tosses it over his shoulder.

'Well, I'm a panda,' he says, at the door. 'Look it up.' The waiter turns to the relevant entry in the manual and, sure enough, finds an explanation. 'Panda. Large black-and-white bear-like mammal, native to China. Eats, shoots and leaves.'

