

## Proselytizing Punctuation: Lewis Thomas

Lewis Thomas (1913 – 1993) was a medical doctor and essayist who won the National Book Award for the collection of essays *Lives of a Cell*. As you read Thomas’s essay “Notes on Punctuation,” consider the following:

1. How would you describe Thomas’s attitude towards punctuation in general?
2. Identify at least one or two passages that you find most memorable from Thomas’s writing about punctuation and explain why you chose these passages.
3. For Thomas, writing is an important passion and focus. Name an activity that you care about or participate in, and then identify details or specifics of the activity that others might not notice but that are important to you and other participants.
4. Why do you think Thomas cares enough about punctuation to write an essay like this?

### “Notes on Punctuation” by Lewis Thomas<sup>1</sup>

There are no precise rules about punctuation (Fowler lays out some general advice (as best he can under the complex circumstances of English prose (he points out, for example, that we possess only four stops (the comma, the semicolon, the colon and the period (the question mark and exclamation point are not, strictly speaking, stops; they are indicators of tone (oddly enough, the Greeks employed the semicolon for their question mark (it produces a strange sensation to read a Greek sentence which is a straightforward question: Why weepest thou; (instead of Why weepest thou? (and, of course, there are parentheses (which are surely a kind of punctuation making this whole matter much more complicated by having to count up the left-handed parentheses in order to be sure of closing with the right number (but if the parentheses were left out, with nothing to work with but the stops we would have considerably more flexibility in the deploying of layers of meaning than if we tried to separate all the clauses by physical barriers (and in the latter case, while we might have more precision and exactitude for our meaning, we would lose the essential flavor of language, which is its wonderful ambiguity )))))))))).

The commas are the most useful and usable of all the stops. It is highly important to put them in place as you go along. If you try to come back after doing a paragraph and stick

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<sup>1</sup> Excerpts from “Notes on Punctuation,” appearing in *The Medusa and the Snail: More Notes of a Biology Watcher*, pages 103 – 106, Toronto: Bantam Books, 1979.

them in the various spots that tempt you you will discover that they tend to swarm like minnows in all sorts of crevices whose existence you hadn't realized and before you know it the whole long sentence becomes immobilized and lashed up squirming in commas. Better to use them sparingly, and with affection, precisely when the need for each one arises, nicely, by itself.

I have grown fond of semicolons in recent years. The semicolon tells you that there is still some question about the preceding full sentence; something needs to be added; it reminds you sometimes of the Greek usage. It is almost always a greater pleasure to come across a semicolon than a period. The period tells you that that is that; if you didn't get all the meaning you wanted or expected, anyway you got all the writer intended to parcel out and now you have to move along. But with a semicolon there you get a pleasant little feeling of expectancy; there is more to come; to read on; it will get clearer.

Colons are a lot less attractive for several reasons: firstly, they give you the feeling of being rather ordered around, or at least having your nose pointed in a direction you might not be inclined to take if left to yourself, and, secondly, you suspect you're in for one of those sentences that will be labeling the points to be made: firstly, secondly and so forth, with the implication that you haven't sense enough to keep track of a sequence of notions without having them numbered. Also, many writers use this system loosely and incompletely, starting out with number one and number two as though counting off on their fingers but then going on and on without the succession of labels you've been led to expect, leaving you floundering about searching for the ninthly or seventeenthly that ought to be there but isn't.

Exclamation points are the most irritating of all. Look! they say, look at what I just said! How amazing is my thought! It is like being forced to watch someone else's small child jumping up and down crazily in the center of the living room shouting to attract attention. If a sentence really has something of importance to say, something quite remarkable, it doesn't need a mark to point it out. And if it is really, after all, a banal sentence needing more zing, the exclamation point simply emphasizes its banality!

....The things I like best in T.S. Eliot's poetry, especially in the *Four Quartets*, are the semicolons. You cannot hear them, but they are there, laying out the connections between the images and the ideas. Sometimes you get a glimpse of a semicolon coming, a few lines farther on, and it is like climbing a steep path through woods and seeing a wooden bench just at a bend in the road ahead, a place where you can expect to sit for a moment, catching your breath.

## Proselytizing Punctuation: Helen DeWitt

Helen DeWitt (1957 – ) is a writer who is best known for her award-winning novel *The Last Samurai*. As you read DeWitt's blog post "Cormac McCarthy & the semi-colon," consider the following:

1. How would you describe DeWitt's attitude towards punctuation in general?
2. Identify at least one or two passages that you find most memorable from DeWitt's writing about punctuation and explain why you chose these passages.
3. For DeWitt, writing is an important passion and focus. Name an activity that you care about or participate in, and then identify details or specifics of the activity that others might not notice but that are important to you and other participants.
4. Why do you think DeWitt cares enough about punctuation to write an essay like this?

### "Cormac McCarthy & the semi-colon" by Helen DeWitt<sup>2</sup>

....Oprah asked McCarthy about punctuation. He said at one point he had a job, he was working for someone who was writing a book that included excerpts from 18th-century writers, and he was given an assignment: Go away and fix the punctuation.... The punctuation is part of the texture of the text, and when I read that a text has been repunctuated for modern readers I go away and find another edition of the text. I like McCarthy's punctuation in McCarthy's texts, but I would rather not have it imported into the work of Jonathan Swift. The assumption that one has the right to repunctuate a writer's texts is in fact a very dangerous one, since it leaves modern writers open to all kinds of abuse....

When I was given an offer of publication I asked my lawyer to change the clause relating to house style; the book had many different kinds of punctuation, including a small boy's diary, and one could not require it to conform to some arbitrary standard. He changed the clause, so the contract gave me the last word on spelling, punctuation, grammar, usage and so on....The editor, copy-editor and production manager all assured me that the copy-editor's comments were only suggestions; I could change anything I didn't like, and then the book would be sent to the printer. I asked whether there were any points on which the

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<sup>2</sup> Excerpts from DeWitt blog post dated Friday, August 17, 2007, available at <http://paperpools.blogspot.com/2007/08/cormac-mccarthy-semi-colon.html>

editor felt strongly. If anyone wanted to make a case for some particular point I was happy to discuss it. The editor and copy-editor both said there was no point on which the editor felt strongly; no one wanted to make a case for any particular point. I reminded everyone politely that my contract gave me the last word.

...[but as the author later finds out] The production manager looked through the book and she was very very unhappy, because I did not want to italicise titles of books and films, I did not want to use quotation marks around the titles of songs, I had used numerals in many cases instead of spelling out numbers below 100, I had used ALL CAPS WHEN A CHARACTER WAS OUTRAGED and told there was no need to get so excited instead of italics, which is the correct usage, or small caps, which is another possibility, and altogether the production manager was afraid the book would bring shame on Miramax if published with its author's grammar, spelling and punctuation....

....A couple of weeks go by. I get the proofs of the book. I start reading through, and I see something on the first page and think: Is that what I wrote? I thought I changed that. So I check the text on my hard drive, and this was not in the text. I don't have a copy of the mark-up I sent in (later other writers would say to me, you should ALWAYS keep a copy). I ask my publishers to send me a copy of the copy-editor's mark-up, and when it comes I can see places where I had written STET where the STET had been whited out, because the whiter-out had been careless and whited out part of the text.

So now I'm insane....I ask my publishers to send me the copy-editor's original. I go through looking for incrustations of white-out. Poor crazy head. There are a couple of places where I wrote a long explanation in the margin of why the copy-editor's suggestion was not right, and in those places she had allowed the author's text to stay, so if I had written a long explanation for every single one of thousands of changes, explaining why the text as marked up was the way it was, this might have been acceptable in a way that merely writing the book was not.

The typesetter had made all the thousands of gratuitous changes, which were sent out in the Advance Reading Copies, and now he had to go through the text making thousands of changes....McCarthy seems not to have gone through this.

McCarthy is laconic, with a deep voice. He's impressive. This is someone who had no doubt that he had improved on Swift by fixing the punctuation -- and in some cases rewriting sentences to accommodate the improvement. He's been lucky, though, because he never came up against an editor or a production manager or a copy-editor who decided his own texts were not fit to be seen.