

The Third Act

Mind Your Commas

By [Ellen Waterston](#)

I have a feeling none of you currently have (or ever had) "Eats, Shoots & Leaves" on the top of your must-read list, especially considering the subtitle: "The Zero Tolerance Approach to Punctuation." It sounds boring but trust me, Lynne Truss's book, first published in the early 2000s and still going strong, is hysterically funny.

The author is no flash in the pan. She has many novels and children's books to her credit, is a book reviewer for London's The Sunday Times and a regular on the BBC. As a dramatist, Truss is also known for her riotous wit as the author of numerous radio comedies. But a book based on a misplaced comma an international bestseller? Come on!

It's true. "Eats, Shoots & Leaves" is hilarious history and, considering careless usage and low standards in e-mail, text messages and on the Internet, is a droll reminder of what an important thing the correct placement of punctuation is. The inspiration for this frolic resulted from Truss coming across a misplaced comma that called into question the presumed gentle nature of the giant panda bear. Here's how Truss sets up the scene:

"A panda walks into a cafe. 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 makes toward the exit. The panda produces a badly punctuated wildlife annual 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 mammal, native to China. Eats, shoots and leaves."

The only thing the poor panda ever really wanted to do was to eat bamboo shoots and leaves, but an errant comma in an annual report turned him into a gunslinger. Who knew the comma was such a gamechanger. No doubt! No, doubt! Don't stop now! Don't, stop now! Or this, offered by Truss, "Leonora walked on her head, a little higher than usual." The right answer? Leonora walked on, her head a little higher than usual. And then there's net zero versus net, zero.

I'm acquainted with a retired couple who live in a small town in rural central Oregon. Their favorite getaway is not the big city rather a cabin in an even more remote high desert location. Despite logistics and distances, these two are committed to living net zero, defined by the United

Nations as cutting greenhouse gas emissions as close to zero as possible. If it's good enough for the U.N., it's good enough for this dedicated duo. They recognize the positive accumulative effect of individual actions for the good of the planet, that each reduced carbon footprint is a step forward. Their residence operates on solar energy with any excess exported to the electric grid. There, it either earns them a credit or reduces the load on local electricity, saving money for all residents in the area. In addition, they have installed a small, grid-tied solar array at their cabin and charging stations at both their home and their cabin to accommodate their electric pick-up.

If you're tired of singing Cry Me an Atmospheric River, there are lots of ways to get to the golden goose egg besides going solar or ditching your gas mobile(s). Eat more fruits, nuts and plants (or bamboo, if you're channeling your inner panda); use public transportation when available; if not already in place, encourage your community to offer compost collection services to reduce food waste; plant more trees while preserving existing trees. (FYI, the goals of Bend's Vision Action Plan 2024-2028 feature "Solarizing Bend" and "Thriving Urban Tree Canopy" defined as "...no net tree loss and an equitable canopy cover citywide.") And, of course, reduce trash any way you can. Colorado's Center for Science Education has determined "landfills are, in fact, the third largest source of methane emissions in the U.S., behind natural gas/petroleum use and animals raised for food production (and their manure). In the U.S., each member of a household produces an average of 4.4 pounds of trash per day. That's 1,660 pounds of trash per person per year!"

Before you write a letter to the editor of The Source Weekly letting her know you think Ellen Waterston needs to get out more often because she's worried about misplaced commas, let us old methane producers (get it?) instead commit to doing whatever we can to achieve net zero before reaching the "point final," the end of life's sentence, the inevitable net, zero...not to put too fine a comma on it.