The art of punctuation

THE CROSSROADS OF LIFE, THE PLIGHT OF HAPPINESS AND WHY YOU'RE NEVER TOO OLD TO SCRIPT A NEW CHAPTER.

A panda walks into a café. 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 towards the exit. The panda produces a badly punctuated wildlife manual 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 in the manual and, sure enough, finds an explanation. "Panda. Large black-and-white bear-like mammal, native to China. Eats, shoots and leaves."

The joke turns on the ambiguity of the final sentence fragment. The erroneous introduction of the comma gives the mistaken impression: it eats, then it shoots, and finally it leaves. It should say "eats shoots and leaves", the panda's diet. This joke is featured in *Eats, Shoots & Leaves: The Zero Tolerance Approach to Punctuation* by Lynee Truss.

I was speaking to Tomcat, my Australian mate (he is not an imaginary friend even with a name like this) a few months ago, at the beginning of COVID-19. We were discussing how the world's leaders looked like rabbits caught in headlights, devoid of clarity and therefore unable to make meaningful, coherent decisions as sound decisions must pass the test of time.

It is within the context of that conversation that I mentioned to Tomcat that, in order to live fulfilling lives, we must control our own narrative, the story that we find ourselves in. And, the most powerful variable in that context is to control the punctuation of our lives, know when to question, exclaim, escape and, most importantly… when to stop.

On 7 August 2020, Pope Francis was quoted at the Vatican saying: "Being happy is not a fatality of destiny, but an achievement for those who can travel within themselves. To be happy is to stop feeling like a victim and become your destiny's author."

It is often said that we are all born into someone else's chaos, otherwise known as our parents' lives. We then spend our formative years following paths of least resistance, riding the crest of our family's destiny with various levels of obedience and rebellion. Obedience brings rewards and approval whilst rebellion can bring pain and rejection. However, obedience


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often leads to a life devoid of individual purpose, colour and a clear identity while rebellion can bring forth a misery of choice, a life whose geometry makes our adrenal glands work overtime. And, in the end it all comes down to the battle between hope and fear. According to experts, we are born with two fears: that of falling and noise. All of the other neuroses are learnt behaviour, including the latest phobia – the fear of missing out, aka FOMO, so hope has a fighting chance.

Armed with this new-found wisdom, and as the age of reason downs, at different stages in people's lives, we hit the T junction. Right, you follow and perpetuate your parents' legacy. Left, you take a step on the wild side and begin to script your own destiny, control your own narrative. And, at the heart of that story lies punctuation. Punctuation like great orators, is what transforms a good story into something amazing. To be able to apply those commas, brush strokes on canvas, determine the what, when, who, where and how of our lives is what genuine freedom really is. Your life becomes a symphony, merely playing out the musical notes, the fruit of your decisions.

It is my belief that decisions have consequences and that the more good decisions we can make, the better outcomes we experience and the better lives we lead. And that the more those decisions are made by those who have your best interests at heart- i.e you, then your joy becomes exponential.

Also keep in mind that, from birth until your dying days, the story of your life will continue to be written. The only question left is by whom, that if you do not choose to pen your own narrative, then it will be written by someone else. But written it shall be.

Now for the equipping part. My suggestions are as follows:

- Step 1. Imagine the narrative. Use a pencil or crayons if you are looking for colour. Why? You may edit the future parts you do not like as you progress through the story.
- Step 2. Execute the narrative. No more writing, just enjoying the journey.
- Step 3. Write and reflect on the story as it enfolds. You may use a pen at this stage as you cannot erase the past.

In our industry the same paradigm enfolds. When control is abdicated and others assume it, our prospects often appear to diminish, decrease. From the coffee farmers, the café owners and the baristas, all have the power to apply form and substance to their own canvas. People who exert control over others, aka dictators, make them believe that they are impotent, have no choices nor decisions to make. They believe their future, like a train, is on a set of solid rails on its way to a destination that has already been established, decided…by others, someone other than you.

People often ask me questions related to the future of the barista. And, while I may have an educated opinion, I do not feel apt to control that narrative as a barista I am not. We should ask those involved about the choices they would like to make to their profession, how they can envisage their role changing, evolving for the better. They should control their careers, decide whether to persevere, pause or even stop and rewrite the narrative.

A few years ago, I found myself in a role I had ceased to enjoy. I decided to speak to one of the company's owners and he gave me advice that has stayed with me the whole of my career. He said that I had three potential choices: to stay and submit, stay and fight, or leave. A few months later I left the company and embarked on a new chapter in the story of my life. It was a painful few years as I had decided to start my own business. But I would not trade this time for any other as the lessons I learnt then currently form the foundation of the person I have become. Character like steel, may only be forged in the crucible of life.

And, you are never too old to script a new chapter for as long as you allow the wind of hope to tickle your sails, welcome imagination as a friend and allow curiosity to lead you on roads less travelled, you may prolong your tale into a rich and bright sunset.

"Remember that to be happy is not to have a sky without a storm, a road without accidents, work without fatigue, relationships without disappointments. It is not only to celebrate the successes, but to learn lessons from the failures. It is not only to feel happy with the applause, but to be happy in anonymity. For only then will you be in love with life – Pope Francis.

As for me, while I have really appreciated writing *Global Coffee Report's* opinion column, I have decided to press the pause button.

This narrative has now come to an end. Full stop. **GCR**