

EDUCATION WEEK

Published Online: September 24, 2007

COMMENTARY

No Wiz at Grammar

Does it matter if the newest Harry Potter book is a punctuation train wreck?

By Alan Warhaftig

J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter novels have earned a special status in our culture, along with copious royalties for Ms. Rowling and profits for her publishers. The stories are imaginative, complex, and charming, and have accomplished the magical feat of inspiring millions of children to read.

[← Back to Story](#)

This special status brings with it special responsibility, and in one important respect the final novel in the series, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, fails: It does not respect the conventions of grammar and punctuation.

This complaint may seem peevish, but as a high school English teacher I have to question the curriculum at Hogwarts. Like Chaplin's dehumanized assembly-line worker in "Modern Times," who feels compelled to tighten everything in sight with his wrench, I found myself marking this final *Harry Potter* as though it were a student's paper.

For example, on Page 416, Hermione says, "I don't think anyone except Mr. Lovegood could kid themselves that's possible." On Page 426, she says, "If surviving was as simple as hiding under the Invisibility Cloak, we'd have everything we need already!" While many teenagers are casual in their use of language, Hermione is not one of them, and while we know that she excels in Potions and Divination, she is also the type who would be acquainted with pronoun-antecedent agreement and the subjunctive mood—the errors in these two examples.

Hermione would also have learned to express herself in complete sentences, yet on Page 414, she says, "It's just a morality tale, it's obvious which gift is best, which one you'd choose—"

Albus Dumbledore, the longtime headmaster at Hogwarts, may be the root of the problem, a non-grammatical hero for young wizards to emulate. On Page 685, he says, "Harry must not know, not until the last moment, not until it is necessary, otherwise how could he have the strength to do what must be done?"

If these were isolated errors, it would be one thing, but I noted 474 run-on sentences in *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*—all "comma splices" (We went to the store, then we went home)—and countless more saved only by

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dramatic overuse of the ellipsis, dash, and semicolon.

Speaking of the semicolon, a punctuation mark with noble potential, Ms. Rowling frequently misuses it, combining it with coordinating conjunctions (*and* and *but*) and using it between an independent and a dependent clause—both of which require English teachers to reach for the red pen.

An even more egregious problem is Ms. Rowling's approach to punctuation of quotations, which appears to be almost perfectly random. In some instances, italics are used in place of quotation marks, as on Page 248: *Her office must be up here*, Harry thought.

Frequently, as on Page 21, both quotation marks and italics are used: "I? *I see myself holding a pair of thick, woolen socks.*"

On Page 312, this technique is used in combination with another serious punctuation error:

He could hear Ron saying, "*We thought you knew what you were doing!*", and he resumed packing with a hard knot in the pit of his stomach.

In one instance, a punctuation train wreck on Page 566, the need for quotes within quotes is completely ignored:

"I told him, you'd better give it up now. You can't move her, she's in no fit state, you can't take her with you, wherever it is you're planning to go, when you're making your clever speeches, trying to whip yourselves up a following. He didn't like that, said Aberforth, and his eyes were briefly occluded by the firelight on the lenses of his glasses: They shone white and blind again.

Of course, none of these examples accords with the rules we teach in school, but what's impressive about the grammar and punctuation of *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* is its inconsistency, a trait it shares with the preceding novels in the series. Did Scholastic Inc. neglect to assign an editor to the project, or are Ms. Rowling's manuscripts protected by an immutability charm?

Writing is communication, and as readers we look for certain indicators to help us construct meaning. If we read, "John took *Jane Eyre* to bed," we may infer from the italics that the name refers to the title of a work rather than someone he met at a nightclub—even if we have never heard of Charlotte Brontë.

Reading and writing are two sides of the same coin. The clues we require as readers are our responsibility to provide as writers. Punctuation serves the function of traffic lights and signs: It may be inconvenient to stop when we're in a hurry and the light turns red, but we'd be far more severely inconvenienced if there were crashes at every intersection because there was no order to the flow of traffic.

In his 1946 essay "Politics and the English Language," George Orwell wrote that our language "becomes ugly and inaccurate because our thoughts are foolish, but the slovenliness of our language makes it easier for us to have foolish thoughts." Writing is not necessarily the recording of existing thoughts on paper; it can also be the means by which we form our ideas. The rules of language

provide boundaries within which our voice must flow; they force us to discipline both expression and thought, which is why it is so important for young people to learn to use language precisely.

Grammar is not the enemy, a scheme to suppress creativity wherever it rears its head, and following its conventions would not have compromised Ms. Rowling's vision. It is unfortunate that the editing of her books, with millions of young, impressionable readers, has not matched the quality of their storytelling.

How shall my colleagues and I respond to students who ask why they should follow the rules when the author of the wildly successful Harry Potter novels does not? Should high-stakes exams adopt an "anything goes" approach, with any of the multiple-choice answers considered to be correct? Writers and publishers have a responsibility, and Ms. Rowling and Scholastic Inc. have clearly dropped the snitch.

Alan Warhaftig teaches English at the Fairfax Magnet Center for Visual Arts, in Los Angeles.

Vol. 27