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TRANSCRIPT: SEASON 3, EPISODE 8  
WHAT IS A COMMA SPLICE?

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**Denise Cowle:** Hello and welcome to this episode of The Editing Podcast. So in the episode (5) on semi-colons, we promised to look at comma splices in more detail. So that's what we're going to talk about today.

**Louise Harnby:** Yes, this is one of those things that gets people in a knicker knot, along with adverbs and serial commas! So let's see if we can break it down. If you've never heard of a comma splice, it's when two independent clauses, which could stand on their own as sentences and make perfect sense, are separated by a comma.

**DC:** So let's use the two sentences we played with in the other episode: 'I love tomatoes' and 'Red and yellow ones are my favourites'. You can read either of those sentences on their own and they'll make sense. They could be separated by a semi-colon, a dash, or a full stop and no one would be breathing grammar rules down your neck.

**LH:** But if you used a comma to separate them, that heavy breathing would come from some quarters. Now, some people don't know what a comma splice is and don't care. But plenty do, and even if they don't know what's it called, they trip up. For me, these things scream off the page at me precisely for that reason – I trip. Well, nearly always. But more on that later!

**DC:** Me too but, yes, with caveats! But the tripping issue is the best reason to consider whether a comma splice needs fixing. So the thing about commas is that readers see them and think, *This is the start of a list*. So if I write, 'I like apples, raspberries, tangerines and oranges', as soon the reader sees a comma, they expect a new item.

**LH:** And the standard way in which we show a reader that they're coming to the end of a list is to put in a coordinating conjunction such as 'and', 'but', 'though' and 'or'. That acts as a shorthand for: 'One more item's coming and

then there'll be a full stop.' When there are only two items, separated by a comma, the reader's expecting at least one more item in that list, and that means they read the text in a certain way. And when that third item doesn't appear and the sentence finishes, it jars.

**DC:** Let's give an example so people can hear the spliced version in action in comparison with other punctuation choices.

**LH:** This is how it works with a coordinating conjunction: I like tomatoes, though the red ones are the sweetest.

**DC:** This is how it works with a full stop: I like tomatoes. The red ones are the sweetest.

**LH:** And this is what happens with a comma: I like tomatoes, the red ones are the sweetest [...]

**DC:** And what's happened is that Louise stumbled because she realized she'd got the emphasis all wrong.

**LH:** And that's just a distraction that, even if only for a split second, pulls the reader out of your book. Now they're thinking about where they placed the emphasis, not on your fabulous learning tool, enthralling plot line or groundbreaking academic research.

**DC:** So let's talk about fiction a bit more because there's still a sense that these are more prevalent there, and more acceptable.

**LH:** That's true. I don't think they're always wrong. There are instances when it would be fair to say that the comma is an option rather than a straight trip-up. The thing is, there's a difference between splicing purposefully and doing it all the time because you don't realize when it doesn't work. So we can have a look at a couple of examples in a minute where it works. But sometimes you'll hear people saying, 'Well, there are comma splices in books by Cormac McCarthy or Virginia Woolf or Charles Dickens.' But that doesn't mean you or I can pull it off. I avoid them like the plague for the most part because I am not, and never will be, any of those writers.

**DC:** Yeah, so the classic one that comes to mind is Dickens's 'It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity' and so on.

**LH:** And what's going on there is an experiment in rhythm. Those splices work. But there's something else, a counterbalancing factor, and it's the anaphora.

**DC:** You'd better explain that quickly.

**LH:** Sure, so anaphora is a literary device whereby an author uses repetition for rhythmic effect. So 'It was the best **of times**, it was the worst **of times**, **it was the age of** wisdom, **it was the age of** foolishness, **it was the epoch** of belief, **it was the epoch** of incredulity' ... and all the anaphora, that repetition, pulls us along. It's like being on a gorgeous booky wave. And editing semi-colons or full points into that would just be horribly interruptive.

**DC:** Yeah, that's a good example of editorial hypercorrection. So how about in dialogue? Because I see it more there, and whereas a comma splice sticks out like a sore thumb in, say, a piece of academic research or an education textbook, that's not always the case in written speech. I'm not necessarily as bothered about it.

**LH:** I think you're right, especially when it's truncated and that repetition thing's going on. So if you had an argument in a novel, and one of the characters was saying something like 'It's not me, it's you' and the writer separated those two independent clauses with a comma, that would, strictly speaking, be a splice. But it wouldn't bother me. And if I were editing that book, I'd think really carefully about what changing that to a full stop would do because that would slow down the rhythm of that character's speech and affect the emotionality in the dialogue.

**DC:** So, fine; there's emotion and mood. But we can't forget clarity when it comes to creative writing, can we? So in that example above, even with a comma, the important thing there is that you *don't* trip when you're reading it, which is very different from our tomatoes example from earlier.

**LH:** That's absolutely it. It's like what we talked about earlier in terms of expectations. If shorter lines are spliced in dialogue, and the reader's expectations aren't dashed, it's not going to be an issue. But every time we pull a reader out because they've not made sense of prose in the way they thought they had, that's a problem.

**DC:** So the advice here is understand what a comma splice is, because only then can you make an informed decision about whether to let it stand or fix it.

**LH:** And try reading it aloud, too, if you're not sure. Or get someone else to. If you or they stumble over what you've written, so might your reader. And, remember you're not Woolf or McCarthy! And nor am I. But, yes, again, we're back to that point again how even with something like comma splices, we can't prescribe for always right or always wrong. Sometimes it's about style, rhythm and flow.

**DC:** Same old, same old! Now it's time for Editing Bites – the regular bit of the show where we each recommend a favourite resource that we think you'll find useful. So mine is *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language*. Now in its third edition, it's by David Crystal, and for a glorious dive into our language you just can't go wrong. It's like diving into the rabbit hole – it takes you to all sorts of places!

**LH:** So we talked about emotionality in fiction writing briefly above, so I'm going to recommend Donald Maass's *The Emotional Craft of Fiction*. As you might guess from the title, it's all about evoking emotion in creative writing. I particularly like the section on evoking emotion through showing rather than telling, but specifically the focus on secondary emotion and how that can surprise a reader and deepen their emotional engagement.

**DC:** So we hope you think those two resources are useful, and that you enjoyed this episode. Thank you so much for listening to The Editing Podcast. You can rate, review and subscribe to us via Apple Podcasts, Spotify or whichever platform you prefer.

**LH:** And we've put all the links we've mentioned in the show notes so you can grab everything there.

## Editing bites

- *The Emotional Craft of Fiction*, Donald Maass
- *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language*, 3rd ed., David Crystal

## Ask us a question

The easiest way to ping us a question is via Facebook Messenger: Visit the podcast's Facebook page and click on the **SEND MESSAGE** button.

## Denise and Louise

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