



Gertrude Stein on degrading commas in the prose alas

by Mary Ellen Kerans

My writing took a small turn for the better in the 1970s after a friend mentioned that Gertrude Stein thought we could manage very well without commas. We were of a generation whose teachers had given us beat poets alongside Dickens and Eliot so when we opened the *Village Voice* every week to read a column with no trappings of capital letters or punctuation beyond periods we were open to it, attended to content and found it witty not silly. In New York publishing at that time we kids just out of college knew how to punctuate but could appreciate purposeful rule breaking.

I picked up a bit of Stein to read to see how she managed. Hers were well formed sentences where sounds and order helped me glide from images to thoughts. Reading felt like swallowing honey. It was easy and intuitive and left me open to surprises in content. I'm not remembering pigeons on the grass alas or a rose is a rose but rather the Toklas *Autobiography* and bits of Stein's writing on writing.

Stein's sentences invited critical thinking about punctuation and grammar. Minimalism was more than a modernist stylistic trick it was a discipline to ensure words were useful and structure optimal. Punctuation was no quick fix for lame clauses with nested afterthoughts however correctly marked up they might be.

Reading Stein herself makes the point better, but the Internet gives me few examples available open access to recommend. Someone must still sit on copyright. Only excerpts quoted by others: a wonderful article by filmmaker and feminist academic Kay Armatage (2007) [1] on Stein's attitude toward sentences is a good place to start. Armatage expresses the same feelings I remember that Stein's writing on writing combines thoughtful liberation exploration and good sense. Some of the quotes Armatage provides give the flavor of Stein's own sentences better than my imitations can:

On names and nouns:

People if you like to believe it can be made by their names. Call anybody Paul and they get to be a Paul call anybody Alice and they get to be an Alice.

That is the reason that slang exists it is to change the nouns which have been names for so long.

On editing:

Of course the first thing that anybody takes out of anybody's writing are the adjectives.

On how commas weaken writing:

A comma by helping you along holding your coat for you and putting on your shoes keeps you from living your life as actively as you should lead it . . . the use of them was positively degrading.

A longer quotation from Stein on commas was available on a US community college support website on punctuation (<http://grammar.ccc.commnet.edu/grammar/commas.htm>). It expresses Stein's main message as I discovered it in the 1970s. Good writing needs few commas. We will understand sentences if the writer has involved us in their content because knowing that content will 'force itself' upon us:

And what does a comma do, a comma does nothing but make easy a thing that if you like it enough is easy enough without the comma. A long complicated sentence should force itself upon you, make you know yourself knowing it and the comma, well at the most a comma is a poor period that lets you stop and take a breath but if you want to take a breath you ought to know yourself that you want to take a breath. It is not like stopping altogether has something to do with going on, but taking a breath well you are always taking a breath and why emphasize one breath rather than another breath. Anyway that is the way I felt about it and I felt that about it very very strongly. And so I almost never used a comma. The longer, the more complicated the sentence the greater the number of the same kinds of words I had following one after another, the more the very more I had of them the more I felt the passionate need of their taking care of themselves by themselves and not helping them, and thereby enfeebling them by putting in a comma.

So that is the way I felt about punctuation in prose, in poetry it is a little different but more so . . .

Gertrude Stein, from *Lectures in America*

Would Gertrude concede that punctuation is a little different but more so in medical texts too? She didn't have to deal with strings of odds ratios, confidence intervals and the like and alas feel a need for all the punctuation she could get. But the crux of Stein's lesson transcends genres: that well chosen words in good order will be all the stronger if we weed out some of the clutter that obliges us to use commas.

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Reference:

1. Armatage K. Gertrude Stein's radical grammar. *The Walrus*. 2007; February. (Cited 27 March 2007.) Available from: <http://www.walrusmagazine.com/print/language-gertrude-steins-radical-grammar/>