

## The Disheveled Dictionary

*A Curious Caper Through Our Sumptuous Lexicon*

KAREN ELIZABETH GORDON

Mariner Books/Houghton Mifflin, \$10.00 paper, ISBN 0-618-38196-1

## The New Well-Tempered Sentence

*A Punctuation Handbook for the Innocent,*

*the Eager, and the Doomed*

KAREN ELIZABETH GORDON

Mariner Books/Houghton Mifflin, \$10.00 paper, ISBN 0-618-38201-1

Anyone can spin a sentence. But suppose you want to **A**turn phrases that are gymnastic: stretching in marvelous and untold positions; demonstrating balance, bravado, and muscular pose; ripping from tiptoe into full sprint, hand-springs, and double back flips. You want your vocabulary to touch all corners of the mat, throw its arms back, and score a perfect 10. And afterward you want to feel the swell of thoughts punctually exercised and wrought into artistic routines. How can you pluck this shimmering chalice, this lofty dream, from the grip of concupiscent fantasy?

Karen Elizabeth Gordon offers tandem books that are indispensable. *The Disheveled Dictionary* places words on pedestals. Words are “characters,” “stars,” objects of admiration. Gordon dresses them up—positioning each in a florid sentence, sometimes beneath an evocative illustration—and dresses them down with concise definitions that bend into history. There is nothing predictable about the dictionary, no method (or reason) to calculate the number of words presented or why, in particular, they were selected. What is evident is Gordon’s passion. She delights in linguistic trips to exotic and dusty locations—gathering origins, roots, and oral fascinations. Her fervor is infectious and her objective is anything but strident:

*This tremulous temptress of a dictionary is about the music of language, the sound and sensuality of words, the rhythms and cadences they embrace. ... This book is about liberating words from their literal meanings, ourselves from our circumscribed scripts.*

A liberated tongue is one thing, but the written sentence must tug its corsets and breathe less freely. *The New Well-Tempered Sentence* demystifies punctuation and imposes personality on its blank face:

*The rakish slash cries, “Give me ambiguity or give me death!” The promiscuous hyphen is game for liaisons with anyone. A period can pirouette and still make its point. An exclamation mark leaps onto the page in the place of flaming eyes, thumping fist, a defiant thrust of chin.*

In Gordon’s hands the comma, the dash—in “en” or “em” form—the parentheses (how can you resist their coy interruption?), and the colon become an amiable cast: They save your sentence from ghastly implications and structural embarrassment. Gordon’s approach is no less cavorting here than it is in *The Disheveled Dictionary*. Still, she promenades through confusing terrain with a serious eye for clarity. If you pay attention, you will write better sentences. You will make dis-

cerning choices about when to plunk a period and when to posit a semicolon. “However frenzied or disarrayed or complicated your thoughts might be, punctuation tempers them.”

The English language is ridiculous. It is frivolous and fanciful and stuffed with bounce. But you are the master. If you apply technique, your words and sentences will not be content to sit like slugs or drone toward all manner of confusing ends.

Gordon’s dictionaries and handbooks will never replace essential reference tools like *The Chicago Manual of Style* (for career-minded writers). But her presentation of “our sumptuous lexicon” comes across like frosting to a healthy appetite. ■

## Writing in Bullets

*The New Rules for Maximum Business Communication*

KIM LONG

Running Press, \$8.95 paper, ISBN 0-7624-1597-5

**O**bfuscation has its place—on bumper stickers. But the business community demands information that is tidy and flourish-free. The objective is clarity, efficiency, and potency of thought. Bullets, in all manner of presentations, can manipulate text into this ideal format; they can speed your concepts to home plate. But, author Kim Long points out, the construction of a “well-turned bulleted list is somewhere between rule-governed craft and instinct-guided art.” And many of us will admit to fledgling instinct and stunted artistry when it comes to such things. Which is precisely why Long’s book fills an essential niche.

*Writing in Bullets* provides the architecture for an emerging style that will become standard in the workplace. Readers learn the history of the “bullet” (word origin and definition); how and when to use bulleted lists and why their use is advantageous; how to format pages that include bullets (layout); how conventional grammar is applied to bullets; and how/when to incorporate call-out techniques (bold, italic, or all-caps lettering). Some of Long’s tips seem shockingly meticulous—“The most effective vertical position for a bullet is a placement halfway between the top and bottom of a lowercase letter that has no ascenders or descenders”—but most of his design comes from observational research. For example, Long cautions enthusiastic bulleters *not* to use all caps for *all* list entries, because they “create a barrier to readability.” He explains that

*variation in the tops of letters as they are used in lower-case versions ... is directly linked to the efficiency with which the human brain processes words.*

Likewise, we learn that the human eye, during average fixation, can absorb approximately 30 characters—something like “the width of one to three standard words.” So if you want to capitalize on audience fixation, longer is not better.

Beyond the strategy of list presentation, *Bullets* devotes its energy to content. This is key. You need to identify your target audience and what those people expect. More important, you need to know what they can handle. Should you create phrase lists? sentence lists? paragraph lists? numbered lists? logic lists?

... the list goes on. Should you be objective? persuasive? or personal? It all depends on the audience. (By the way, science predicts an inverse relation between attention span and corporate seniority. This means that top-level execs possess ankle-high attention.) Still, strategic concepts can be applied across the board. You always want to position key points—those that are most relevant—at the beginning of a bulleted list, and within list entries you must attend to what I call “invisible bullets.”

Invisible bullets attract attention despite the absence of a literal point mark. They are created through word choice and placement, sentence structure, and sentence consistency or lack thereof. For example, *Bullets* recommends that we say, “Management controls production” versus “Management has control over production.” However, if we want to emphasize the role of production, we would say: “Production is controlled by management.” In this example, production steals the emphasis (even though it is being controlled by management) because it opens the sentence. At other times, an entry will be memorable for its stylistic failings. If every bullet except one forms a complete sentence, that one stands out, regardless of its relative importance/position in the list. There is much more to this than meets the eye.

Bullets are superb vessels for communication, and the smart writer will not make awkward lunges at their employment. Take the task seriously. Beef up your presentation with high-impact, slimming techniques. Follow Long’s rules for consistency and be thankful that someone has done the thinking for you. Oh, and one final note: Brevity, we know, is the soul of wit; but it is also the trumpet of mistakes. Any error on your bulleted list will sing like a canary, so buy a second pair of eyes before hitting the road with your show.

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