

Punctuation is more important than spelling or grammar

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We hear reports that Michael Gove plans to “re-introduce” spelling-punctuation-and-grammar into our classrooms.

My fellow columnist Sharon Griffiths has also written about spelling-punctuation-and-grammar.

This rather common lumping together of these three very different aspects of writing English makes it seem as if they’re equally important.

But they’re not. Punctuation is by far the most important.

Writing is very deficient as a language medium compared to speech.

When we’re speaking, we can pause, slow down, speed up, speak more or less quietly, hesitate; and in particular we can use intonation, changing the pitch of our voice to convey all sorts of different and subtle meanings.

We can’t do those things in writing, and punctuation is our way of trying to make up for this inadequacy. Think of the difference between “You’re leaving today”, “You’re leaving today!” and “You’re leaving today?”.

This usage of punctuation to compen-



■ Sidney Grapes, author of the *Boy John Letters* that appeared in the EDP.

sate for the deficiencies of the written medium doesn’t include apostrophes. With apostrophes it’s the other way round.

The difference between “the girl’s house” and “the girls’ house” is a distinction which can’t be made in speech. And if

we manage without the distinction when we’re speaking – which we do – it’s hard to argue that it’s a matter of life and death in writing, though clearly it’s helpful if everybody gets it right.

But commas, full stops, colons, semi-colons, dashes, quotation marks, question marks and exclamation marks are different from apostrophes.

Punctuation will never be able to bring writing up to the level of subtlety and expressiveness of the spoken word, but there are many types of writing where we should try.

Speech is more important than writing in many ways. Human beings developed speech millennia before they developed writing. Most languages even today are not written down.

We learn to speak effortlessly in infancy, while learning to write is much more challenging and comes much later.

And according to one calculation, English speakers on average utter about 16,000 words a day – few people write that many words, not even the hard-working journalists at the EDP.

But writing obviously enables us to preserve language and transmit it from one place to another – and from one time to another. We can still read the wonderful *Boy John Letters* that Sidney Grapes wrote to the EDP in the 1940s and 1950s.

As he himself advised: “Aunt Agatha, she say, trust no memory however bright, put it down in black and white”. I reckon th’ol’ Boy John put all them commas in the right place, doon’t you?