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Leith, S. (2018). *Write to the point*. London, England: Profile Books.

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The trouble with some textbooks offering guidance on grammar and expression is that they wallow – not without a self-imposed touch of irony – in lexical quagmires. A quick visit to the shelves of my own study demonstrates the point:

- One manual identifies certain ‘inducements to inversion in the syntactic form as in the paratactic’.
- ‘It is sometimes maintained,’ says another, ‘that the Cognate Object is adverbial in force, and therefore should be classed with the Adverbial Accusative.’

I must confess to finding a certain perverse pleasure in interpreting such opaqueness; there is something deliciously indulgent about sloshing through the sticky syntax. Other searchers for advice, I further confess, are not necessarily so disposed. They want authority of opinion, free of technicalities, delivered in a painless and undemanding fashion.

Those virtues are apparent in Sam Leith’s *Write to the Point*, as one might expect from an author of seniority and distinction in British journalism – literary editor at the *Spectator* and columnist for the *Guardian* and the *Evening Standard*.

His advice bridges both the tyranny of distance and the generational gulf. I tried it out by copying some key passages – on parenthetical expression and the passive voice – and discussing their content with Australian students in the final year of a journalism degree. They liked the user-friendly form of address and grasped the unflinching logic.

Smartphones were brandished; key passages photographed; messages received. They read, marked,

learnt and (so I am persuaded) inwardly digested. What gives Leith’s book its appeal, apart from the enduring quality of its teaching, is its capacity for illustrating the argument by earthy anecdote. He recalls, by way of example, the day in 2008 that Times writer Giles Coren ‘lost his rag completely’ when a sub-editor removed a solitary indefinite article (the word ‘a’) from a restaurant review. Leith quotes Coren’s rant (emailed to the newspaper’s team of sub-editors) in all its earthiness:

When you’re winding up a piece of prose, metre is crucial. Can’t you hear? Can’t you hear what is wrong? ... It’s not fucking pre-GCSE scansion. I have written 350 restaurant reviews for *The Times* and I have never ended on an unstressed syllable. Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck.

In more lyrical and romantic mood, he quotes a love letter from Ted Hughes to Sylvia Plath before their marriage turned to pain:

“Above all, save every whisper until Saturday, save every little bit of you ... I shall pour all this into you ... and fill you and fill myself with you and kill myself on you.”

This catholic text turns, too, to writing for the screen (albeit in brief), social media, selection of fonts, job applications, and letters of condolence. Along the way, it offers sustained enlightenment on building sentences, applying apostrophes, deciding between the full stop and the semi-colon, exercising the gerund, and engaging with metaphor, simile and analogy.

Leith is a master of his craft. His book deserves to grace many a recommended reading list right across the syntactic, paratactic, cognate, and accusative spectrum – even those ending on an unstressed syllable.

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