

# The Red Letter



## I Give You My Words

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### Follow the Panda

*A panda walks into a café, orders a sandwich, eats it, then draws a gun and fires into the air. His confused waiter stops him. "Why?" he asks. The panda produces a badly punctuated wildlife manual and, as he heads for the door, tosses it over his shoulder. "I'm a panda," he says. "Look it up." The waiter turns to the relevant entry and finds an explanation. Under "Panda," he reads: "Large black-and-white bear-like mammal, native to China. Eats, shoots and leaves."*

This little joke comes from "Eats, Shoots & Leaves" by Lynne Truss. It might make one chuckle, but it underscores the importance of proper punctuation. Obviously, pandas don't eat, shoot and leave; they eat shoots and leaves. That misplaced comma changes the whole meaning.

And that's the point. Punctuation can help writers convey meaning more clearly. More than that, as Robert Masello points out in his book, "Robert's Rules of Writing; 101 Unconventional Lessons Every Writer Needs to Know," punctuation helps us inject inflection and expression into our work. Masello's Rule #86 states:

*Dashes and hyphens, ellipses and semicolons, periods and parentheses – they seem, I know, like so many little details, but... You can't raise your voice on paper, not literally, but an exclamation mark can make your intentions plain. You can't lower your voice on paper, not literally, but a parenthetical phrase allows you to slip in a sotto voce aside. A dash can do exactly what its name implies – pull your reader brusquely long – and a colon can bring him to a sudden stop.... That's actually what those pesky little marks were invented for – to help you make your writing voice as distinctive as possible.*

Make your writing clear and memorable – follow the panda in black and white.

### Beautiful Ribbons

In "Building Strong Brands," David Aaker says a good slogan (aka positioning line) can provide the "extra touch" for brand equity. He writes, "If a brand is 'packaged meaning,' a slogan can be the ribbon that ties the package together."

I like slogans that play on words for more than one meaning, deeper brand meaning, or show creativity and whimsy. My all-time favorite is General Electric's old one: *We bring good things to life*. Some beautiful ribbons I've seen recently:

- *We Pedal Good Bikes* – Minneapolis bike shop
- *Resourceful by Nature* – Archer Daniels Midland
- *It's Business & It's Personal* – regional MBA program
- *Quality Up and Down* – Twin City Garage Door
- *It's Poultry in Motion* – Minneapolis rotisserie

**Send your favorites and I'll print them next month.**

*Everyone lives by selling something. – Robert Louis Stevenson*

The Good Word

### One Way or the Other: It's Not Alternately

Despite their common misuse as synonyms, *alternately* and *alternatively* are not. One applies to sequences and the other to choices.

*Alternately* means "by turns." For example: We traveled alternately by car and rail.

*Alternatively* means "another option." For example: Sometimes we traveled by car. Alternatively,

when one wasn't available, we hopped the train.

To avoid confusing your meaning or, worse yet, your reader, keep your writing on track. Choose the right alternative.