

Full Stop! Punctuation Police!

by George LaCas

Let me tell you a little bit about myself.

I'm a man who works in a dark room, surrounded by stacks and stacks of books, with two or three limp plants in the window that generate barely enough oxygen for me to live on, and I spend quite a lot of time in various online forums discussing things like:

“Should there be two spaces after a period, or only one?”

Really. Seriously. I kid you not. This is a hot topic for some of us. Imagine two giant-sized Books of Style—one from Oxford, one from Chicago—squaring off against each other like Behemoth vs Leviathan, or like the Hulk vs Godzilla.

It gets hairy out there.

At the risk of labeling myself an anachronism, I confess that when I learned to type, it was back in the days of Two Spaces After the Period. I can't even use being self-taught as an excuse, because while the other young men were on the football field, or in shop class learning a trade that actually paid off down the road, or smoking pot packed in the ends of their cigarettes in the smoking section ... I was sitting in Typing Class.

Picture a scene: Catholic School, circa 1987. In a well-ordered classroom full of future secretaries, I sit with my hands poised over a keyboard, but I can't see my hands because there is a paperboard shield hiding the keys.

“Do NOT look at the keys!” announces Lay Sister Agnes, the obese typing teacher. She has made this announcement 13,819 times, and it has the power of incantation, nay, of the Rite of Exorcism. Though she no longer has to make the announcement—it announces itself in all our heads, and will forevermore—she booms it out anyway. Lay Sister Agnes smells like a filthy car ashtray full of cheese balls, but she knows her shit.

"With your eyes on your Typing Primer," she booms, "please begin Typing Lesson #306, which begins *How do I love thee*."

And then, like forty straight-backed monkeys in an experiment that would never be allowed to go awry, I and the future secretaries type. Often in hammering unison. Lay Sister Agnes peers at us from piggy eyes. Rumor has it that she had escaped from a Home for the Criminally Insane ... or that she had been a drill sergeant in a women's prison.

One day, I glanced at my hands while typing ... or rather tried to, for the thick white disciplinary paperboard shield, like a disembodied nun's wimple, blocked my view.

"No no, not like that," said Lay Sister Agnes from right beside me. I had to shift in my seat to keep my lunch in my guts. I could smell a half-eaten cheeseball, covered in crushed nuts, with cigarette butts ground out in it, and with bright blooms of blue mold sprouting all over its foul hemisphere. Like a banquet in Hell.

"But but but but but," I said, as reasonably as I could.

"Hold your hands out straight, not bent at the wrists," she said. "That there will give you the carpal tunnel."

"Oh no, oh no, oh no ..."

"Hold them out."

Nowadays, when I want a four-hundred-pound dominatrix to whack my knuckles with the metal edge of a heavy wooden ruler, I have to make an appointment and then (of course) pay for it.

Looking back, I don't think Lay Sister Agnes ever did that to any of her other students (one of whom tied a typewriter around her neck and jumped into Lake Erie, but was pulled out in time), and I think the reason she did it to me was that, A) she didn't like me, and thought I should have been playing football or learning how to use a drill press, or B) she really wanted me to ... well, actually, I think it must have been reason A. Or some other reason. Who the hell knows?

But I know this much. In the first few weeks of class, the following mantra was hammered into our collective Typist

Unconscious with the force and volume, if not the friendliness, of a televangelist:

“Word word word period SPACE SPACE shift-to-capitalize-first-letter word word word.”

Not one space, but two. Lay Sister Agnes had her own Book of Style, and I ain't about to go lookin for another one.

