Silence. As a former middle school teacher, I have often thought, “How can you hear me if you are talking?” Or, “Weren’t you listening? I just explained how to do this.” As adults and educational professionals who spend all day in noisy, busy classrooms, is it possible for even us to listen and talk at the same time? Are we not all guilty of daydreaming or making a mental to-do list during a meeting only to find out later that some big news was announced that we totally missed?

Silence. For some of us, the very word “silence” causes anxiety. Many of us judge our successes based on how busy we are. We go 100 miles an hour from sunrise to sunset. We are all busy being spouses, or adult children caring for elderly parents, or parenting our own children, or taking care of our home. When do we make time to just stop and listen? When we pray, do we bombard God with requests and prayer intentions and then carry on with our day, or do we take the time to just sit and listen?

Mother Teresa has written many beautiful reflections on silence, and in this passage, she ties it to prayer and service.

“God is the friend of silence, in that silence He will listen to us; there He will speak to our soul, and there we will hear His voice. The fruit of silence is faith. The fruit of faith is prayer, the fruit of prayer is love, the fruit of love is service and the fruit of service is silence.”
This of course is not as easy as it sounds. It means we have to step away from our busy lives, put down the smartphone, turn off the TV, stop doing chores, and even stop grading papers or lesson planning. The laundry will wait. The kitchen floor can be mopped tomorrow. Maybe it means that we don’t check off every single thing on today’s to-do list so we have time to be still and listen for God in the silence.

I was once offered the opportunity to go with a friend on a contemplative retreat, where we would be in total silence for a whole weekend, talking was only allowed during meals. I was too busy to go, I told my friend, but deep down inside I didn’t think I could do it. I didn’t think I could be silent for an entire weekend, but now I wish I would have gone and experienced it. What might I have heard in the silence?

St. John Paul II often went away to a quiet place to sit in prayer and in silence. He told his people in the Vatican that he was emulating Jesus, who also broke away from the crowds and even his own disciples to be alone and sit in silence. In his homily at his inauguration as pope, John Paul II said,
“So let us leave aside words. Let there remain just great silence before God, the silence that becomes prayer.”

Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI also spoke of silence, establishing a connection between silence and prayer,

“In our prayers, we often find ourselves facing the silence of God. We almost experience a sense of abandonment; it seems that God does not listen and does not respond. But this silence, as happened to Jesus, does not signify absence. Christians know that the Lord is present and listens, even in moments of darkness and pain, of rejection and solitude. Jesus assures His disciples and each one of us that God is well aware of our needs at every moment of our lives.”
In John 3:30, Jesus comes to be baptized as an act of solidarity with the sinners who have gathered, John the Baptist is the first to recognize Jesus as the One to come. Later when Jesus' ministry is drawing followers away from John the Baptist, John calms his own anxious disciples by announcing,

“This joy of mine has been made complete. He must increase; I must decrease. The One from Heaven.”
Silence. We should make the time in our busy lives for silence. We should be still and know that God is near. If we can decrease, He will increase. He will speak to our soul. We will hear His voice.
Thanksgiving Break. I recounted how I had spent the summer in a boot due to a bad break, a broken ankle. I just couldn’t wait for five whole days in a row off from school and being free to cook to my heart’s content. My Thanksgiving Break was fabulous.

After Thanksgiving, I turned my greedy eyes to Christmas Break. My younger daughter flew in from Los Angeles (#veryworriedabouttherightnow), and the four of us were all home together. It was glorious.

When a teacher returns to school from Christmas Break, there is a certain sense of urgency to lesson planning as the rest of the school year flies by with little breaks here and there: MLK, JR Day in January, a faculty retreat and Presidents’ Day in February, and for my school, a professional development day in March. Next on the calendar is Easter Break. For a Catholic school, this is a big deal. We observe Lent at school with no meat in our lunches on Fridays, extra prayers in the classrooms, attendance at Mass on Fridays as usual but in the afternoon we return to church for the Stations of the Cross. We have Holy Thursday and Good Friday off, and then all of the next week (Easter Week) for Easter Break.

This year, wow, this year, we have been thrown a curveball. Yesterday afternoon, Thursday, March 12, 2020, at 4:15 pm, Maryland Governor Larry Hogan announced ALL the schools in Maryland would be closed for at least two weeks, from March 16-March 27, out of an abundance of caution (this is the # phrase of the year) in light of COVID 19. Our school was scheduled for its spring professional development day today, March 13, so our school was already closed; thus I have an unexpected eleven school-day break stretching out ahead of me.

A bigger shock occurred later in the evening last night. I received an email with an announcement from the Archdiocese of Washington (DC) stating that ALL church services would be canceled starting Saturday, March 14, 2020. ALL? No Mass on Sunday? No Stations of the Cross on Fridays? This is a first for me. Even with my bad break this past summer, I attended Mass every weekend except for the week before the surgery and the week after the surgery. Sure, it was quite the palaver as the British would say (wheelchair, crutches, cane, oh my), but for me, it was non-negotiable that I was going to Mass.

This morning, on the first day of my COVID 19 Break, I went to 9:00 daily Mass. When the priest started Mass, he announced that it was the last Mass until further notice. There was a collective sigh from those present, the majority of the 50 or so parishioners who attend daily Mass year-round, but the mood worsened as Fr. Bob went on to say, in a poignant and personal address to us, that in his 46 years as a priest he had not been stopped from celebrating Mass for his people. It was a beautiful Mass with a short but meaningful homily, and then after, some stayed behind to pray the rosary while Fr. Bob heard confessions.

Many of the regulars stayed in the church, some praying and some just sitting. It was as though we didn’t want to leave. As Fr. Bob
said in his opening comments, “We don’t miss something until we don’t have it.” We don’t have Mass for at least two weeks. No receiving the Eucharist. No standing in communion with others, celebrating the Mass. No listening to the liturgy of the word. No homily. I miss it already. Heart break.

My “1st” day of school this year, back pain and all!

My daughter’s 5th grade class photo from Belgium, Johanna far right middle row

A New Year, A New Me

SEPTEMBER 16, 2017 / 10 COMMENTS

A new school year has begun, and week two is in the books, or grade books as it were. However, my school year began a day late, due to a back injury that sidelined me for the first day of school. Calling in sick has never been easy for me; I was even more devastated to miss the excitement of the first day back, and particularly this year. In early June, I accepted a teaching position at a new school and spent all summer working on new curriculum and moving into a new classroom. I was ready for the first day at least a month ago, but God sure does have a sense of humor. You think you are ready, LOL, I’ll show you.

This is my eleventh year as a teacher. Starting at a new school this year, however, really meant coming home for me, as I am teaching in my home parish school, where both my daughters were educated and where my husband and I have been parishioners for over twenty years. While I was excited and thrilled with the opportunity to make this change, leaving my former school after ten years meant leaving colleagues who have become dear friends and saying goodbye to a truly wonderful school community filled with supportive and generous families.

Starting over, being the new person, adapting to new policies, and making new friends can be difficult, and sometimes, we hold ourselves back from new opportunities because of being too comfortable, and perhaps because we are afraid of change. But, change can be good. Change is an opportunity to push that reset button, to abandon bad habits, to refresh and renew one’s enthusiasm for work.

Over the summer, as I worked my way through three new literature textbooks and a bag full of new YA novels, I learned of the untimely passing of one of the greatest educators I’ve had the pleasure of knowing. Johanna Bambridge was my younger...
Early in that school year, my daughter came home and told me she had volunteered me for something at school, and that I needed to call Mrs. Bambridge, which I did. Mrs. Bambridge told me that she had asked if anyone’s mother could come in to do a cooking demonstration on the foods of ancient cuisines, and that my daughter had assured her I was the perfect person for this.

Now, let me tell you that I knew almost nothing about foods of ancient civilizations, but I do love to cook, so I sat down at my computer and began to research the foods of ancient Rome, Greece, and Egypt. And, so began my adventure in the classroom. My first cooking demonstration was karkadé (iced hibiscus tea) and koshari (lentils and rice) with sausages. For dessert, I served the 5th graders seed cake sweetened with honey and dates. It was a smashing success. As I was cleaning up, Mrs. Bambridge said to me with her usual 1,000-watt smile, “You should be a teacher!” At first, I was startled at this (what, me?), but I admit I was also intrigued, and for the rest of our time in Belgium, I volunteered extensively at the school, including substitute teaching in the middle school and working in the high school library. Five years later, after completing grad courses and the Praxis, armed with state certification in English for grades 7-12 and with Johanna Bambridge’s endorsement ringing in my ears, I began my second career as a middle school language arts teacher.

I not only knew Johanna Bambridge as my daughter’s teacher, but also as a fellow parishioner and parish council member at our Catholic church parish in Belgium, Our Lady of Mercy. Meetings were on Sunday nights, which all teachers know is the time when we wind down from the weekend and prep for the school week: lesson planning, grading papers, posting grades, emailing parents. But, Johanna was there for each and every meeting, prepared and ready to discuss parish business, plan events, and prepare for liturgical feasts. She was also there to represent the religious education program for the English-speaking families of the parish. Even though she was a wife and mother of two with a very full day-job, she was the Director of Religious Education and taught one of the classes herself every Sunday. It was hard to say no to her when she asked me to teach a class myself. After all, I was technically a stay-at-home mom for our two years in Belgium. Like the platoon leader who vows not to ask his soldiers to do anything he wouldn’t do himself, Johanna not only talked the talk, she walked the walk.

When I casually mentioned to her that I wished we would have shipped our piano to Belgium when we moved, she offered me her piano, free, “just pay to have it moved,” she said. It was an old upright with many years behind it, but after having it moved to our house and getting it tuned, it added much to making our assigned housing a real home during our time in Waterloo.

Shortly after her death on July 6th, a colleague from St. John’s International School created a tribute page on Facebook for Johanna. Each day I logged on to Facebook to read the condolences and remembrances left there by friends and former students from all over the world: Japan, Belgium (when we knew her), France (where she moved after Belgium). All, without exception, carried the same themes: selfless, caring, faith-filled, devoted to education, energetic. Many, many people said that their most vivid memory of Johanna was of her with her arms...
Johanna Bambridge will be greatly missed by all whose lives she affected, but she will not be forgotten. I know in my heart that she was welcomed with open arms to her final reward, where she heard, “Well done, good and faithful servant.” Rest in peace, Johanna. This year is for you.

Source: http://obits.dignitymemorial.com

Carbs: 6, Me: 0

MARCH 13, 2017 / LEAVE A COMMENT

We are nearing the end of the first quarter of 2017. Before I became a teacher, the end of the quarter meant additional stress to get commercial real estate leasing agreements negotiated and signed. Now that I’m a middle school language arts teacher, the end of the quarter means essays and tests to grade, report cards, and progress reports. This weekend I gave myself a progress report. Carbs: 6, me: 0. In tennis terms, that would be a bagel. (Who knew?)
My love and ultimate renouncement of carbs played out in my previously published essay, *Scared Skinnier*. I was doing so well, until, the holidays, a/k/a the mother of all diet-related battlefields. My birthday was in October, where I celebrated a major milestone, documented in *The Big One*, quickly followed by a trip to Puerto Rico for Thanksgiving, and then Christmas. It’s been tough getting on back on track, and I’m none too happy with the pounds that have crept back on.

It’s amazing how quickly a bad habit will return in full force. First it was the grilled bread that came with my *moules frites* for my birthday dinner. Then it was freshly made corn tortillas served with rice and beans, I mean, it was Puerto Rico, for heaven’s sake. And, Christmas, seriously, have you ever seen the “haul” a teacher gets, both edible and non-edible, just before Christmas break? And, then Valentine’s Day...the only thing better than a Reese’s Peanut Butter Cup is a Reese’s Peanut Butter Heart. Basically, from October 11th to now has been one long, slippery, slide down the rabbit hole. That’s why I declared this past weekend as THE END. As in, stop the madness. No more. I’m done. Game, set, match. *Fini*.

But, deciding to go out with a bang and not a whimper, which is what winter is doing here in the DC metropolitan area with a late-season snow storm bearing down on us, I had a bagel this weekend.

We had an overnight guest on Friday night and we were all going to Mass early Saturday morning. My husband suggested coffee and bagels put out for our guest to help herself before Mass. Late Saturday afternoon, staring at the bag of bagels, I caved. We used to have a tuna bagel from Bagel City on Saturdays for lunch, but I haven’t had a bagel since July of 2015, when my ill-fated visit to a cardiologist put an end to my relationship with bread. Since then I’ve subsisted on Magic Pops, a break-like creation that looks like a six-inch flour tortilla but is only 4 grams of carbs with a really pleasing crunch. I cover them in peanut butter, cottage cheese, ham and cheese, tomatoes and mayo, avocado, tuna, Nutella, and anything else I can think of as a sandwich replacement.

As you can imagine, the toasted everything bagel with Irish butter I enjoyed Saturday afternoon was delicious. I had nearly forgotten how wonderful that dense chewiness is in a good bagel. I could almost hear the angels singing as I ate it slowly with a steaming cup of tea. In fact, it was so good, I had the exact same thing again on Sunday afternoon. See what I mean? Classic slippery slope.

I’ve declared Wednesday my restart day, deciding today that to start eliminating carbs the day before a major snow storm is just plain ridiculous. Yes, I will have to contend with Public Enemy No. 1 over Easter break, the Reese’s Peanut Butter Egg, but enough is enough. Let the games begin (again).
One of the things I love most about being Catholic is the ability to practice my faith anywhere, anytime. I’ve attended Mass in nearly every state and country that I’ve visited. Sometimes it has been in a foreign language, and while listening to the homily can be a challenge, I know the parts of the Mass so well I can easily follow along, responding quietly in English. I also always carry my Magnificat with me so I can read the readings and prayers, no matter where I am.

While visiting a friend in beautiful Fort Myers, Florida, I attended Sunday Mass at the Church of the Resurrection of our Lord. The celebrant was Fr. Oliver Toner, an old (his adjective, not mine) Irish priest, whose lilting accent and demeanor reminded me of one of my favorite priests of all times, Msgr. Oliver McGready, another Irish priest I was blessed to have as pastor of my parish church for over ten years.

The Irish are always ready with a good story to make a point, teach a lesson, or simply just to entertain. Fr. Toner was no exception. The readings for the Seventeenth Sunday in Ordinary Time were from Genesis and Colossians, with the gospel coming from Luke. The church bulletin advised that the day’s readings were to “address the importance of persistent prayer.” It’s no surprise that this message was especially poignant, given the unrest and discord in the upcoming presidential election as well as the recent spate of violence and brutal killings in my home state of Louisiana, in Florida, in Texas, in Germany, and just recently, in France, where an elderly priest was beheaded while celebrating morning Mass.

Fr. Toner’s homily focused in on a specific type of prayer, not one of asking but of thanking. His advice was to thank God for the negatives in our lives, not just the positives. In his typically-Irish way of using homey, intimate stories, he illustrated this with several examples. One was that of being called out to give last rites to a woman who had suffered a massive heart attack. The doctor, a golfing buddy of his, advised him that the prognosis was dire as the heart attack had damaged three-quarters of the woman’s heart. On his way out of the emergency room, he was approached by the woman’s husband who was seeking comfort and solace. Fr. Toner told him to pray, and in his prayer, try thanking God for his wife’s heart attack. The man thought it was crazy to do so but felt he had nothing to lose so he did. Months later, Fr. Toner was visited by the man and his wife, who had indeed recovered from the heart attack.

Fr. Toner told several other stories with similar threads, one including a blocked sewer pipe, which brought a laugh from the congregation. He didn’t just tell stories, however, he backed them up with a powerful passage from scripture, 1 Thessalonians 5:18. “In all circumstances give thanks, for this is the will of God for you in Christ Jesus.” In other words, thank God for everything, positive and negative.
On the surface, this seems counter to what we have been taught in our prayer life. As a teacher, when I pray with my students, whether it be before a field trip, before a big exam, or before a rehearsal for the school play, I always tell them to thank God for the blessings He has bestowed on them and only then should they ask for what they need or want. Fr. Toner offered a different template for prayer, one which I will bring back to school with me this fall: ACTS. This simple acronym focuses our prayer efforts in four easy steps. “A” is for acknowledge God as our Father and worship Him in adoration. “C” is for confession of our sins which we bring to Him for healing and mercy. “T” is for thanksgiving, but Fr. Toner shared that perhaps we should think of trust instead, putting our trust in Him to help us through our ordeals. It is at this stage of prayer that Fr. Toner suggested we thank God for the negatives in our lives. Finally, “S” is for supplication, where we turn to God with our requests.

Why should we thank Him for the problems in our lives, for the large and small crosses we feel we have been given to bear? Fr. Toner was ready with the answer to this. He wrapped up his homily by telling the congregation that God is waiting for us to give Him control, for choosing obedience over free will, for allowing Him to embrace the evil and transform it. Fr. Toner said simply, “Bring God into the storms of your life. God can surprise you.”
writer, and executive producer of Downton Abbey. Long before Downton Abbey’s conception, I knew him as a major character on another of my favorite British series, Monarch of the Glen, where he played neighbor and frenemy Kilwillie. Monarch of the Glen takes place on a grand country estate, Ardverikie in the Scottish highlands. With my own ties to Scotland, my maternal grandparents were born and raised in Glasgow, watching Monarch of the Glen and the beautiful landscape of the highlands, made me dream of visiting Scotland again.

I’ve been filled with mixed feelings all day about the start of this sixth and final season of Downton Abbey, which is filmed at Highclere Castle in Hampshire, England. I’ve been waiting (almost) patiently for this day for what seemed like an eternity, when I have Sunday nights reserved for watching the show and finding out what Julian Fellowes has in store for these characters that I have come to know so well. Tonight as the opening credits began playing, I was also filled with dread, anxiety that there are only nine episodes left, and then I will be left with nothing but reruns and the reputed promise of feature length movies in the future.

The opening scene of tonight’s first episode (no spoilers, you are safe to continue reading if you haven’t seen it yet) is that of a typical country hunt, members of the Crawley household, friends, and neighbors riding on horseback with their hunting dogs in chase of a fox. As the scene unfolded, I was struck at how one man created all of this, a fictional world that millions of viewers have fallen for, head over heels. He made up this whole thing, wrote it all out, created characters and gave them voices and lines to speak. He decided who would live and who would die on the Titanic, in World War I, of the Spanish Flu, in childbirth. He decided who would marry and who would be left at the altar, who would marry and who would be widowed, who would love but not marry, who would bear a child and who would miscarry. He decided it all with his words, thought up one by one, and put on paper, whether it be in longhand with a fountain pen or on an IBM Selectric typewriter or on a Mac.

The very thought of this was inspirational enough to lead me to the conclusion that I will continue writing and continue with my Cajun Girl in a Kilt work, for the sheer pleasure of creating something on paper each week, that someone somewhere might read and enjoy. This essay, on the art of creating, will be the first of this new year; it will be my entry into 2016 and wherever my writing leads me this year. In the coming weeks you may notice some new pages on my website, some saplings taking root and spreading their wings, where I can write about two of my passions: food and literature. Whatever it may be tumbling around in “my little grey cells” on Sunday afternoon will find itself somewhere on Cajun Girl in a Kilt. I hope you follow along and I hope you enjoy it. I also resolve to work on my fiction, a story about a missing suitcase, with the goal of getting it on paper, edited, reviewed, and published. As always, I welcome your feedback in the comment section below on any of my work.

May you find your own inspiration for the art of creating, using your own unique talents and interests. Best wishes to you for a happy and healthy 2016! Cheers!
My eighth grade students took an English quiz on Friday. This came after a solid week of “reviewing” the basic rules of punctuation and capitalization: the comma, the period, the colon, the semicolon, the exclamation point, the question mark, the dash and the hyphen, and when to use quotation marks and italics. All of these rules are condensed into a very simple chapter of our English textbook entitled, “Section 10: Punctuation and Capitalization”. The chapter is divided into four sub-sections, and we spent a class period on each one. We read aloud the rules and examples and discussed each thoroughly. As homework, the students completed all of the accompanying pages in the grammar workbook, practicing the application of the rules discussed in class that day. Each day we started class by checking homework and reviewing the rules again. Not a minute of the 40-minute English period was wasted Monday through Thursday. So, after all of that, I am very sad to report that the grades on this quiz are abysmal. I’ve only graded half of them so far, but I had to stop after that half to take a break. It was just too painful to continue.

Why is this? This is a good school, with students coming from well-educated parents. The vast majority of my students are being raised in homes where English is the mother tongue. Our eighth graders go on to attend some of the finest high schools in the nation, whether they be Catholic, public, or private. Why is the study of grammar and punctuation so challenging? Why do teachers have to teach and reteach the same basic rules each and every year?

Just after Thanksgiving of this year, these same eighth graders will be taking a national standardized test, the High School Placement Test. This test is important to them, because the score of the HSPT is one of the seven or eight factors used by the area Catholic high schools to make decisions about admissions and scholarship offerings. The test is divided into five sections: verbal skills, quantitative skills, reading comprehension, mathematics, and language skills. Yes, that’s right. The test is 3/5 language arts and 2/5 math.

We all have our weaknesses and our strengths. Words have always been my strength, whether written or spoken. Likewise, one of my weaknesses has always been math, algebra in particular. I struggled with it all through school, and was dismayed to find out that even as an English major, I still needed two semesters of math to graduate. But, my theory is that we don’t use algebra every day in every subject. We do, however, use the English language and its conventions every day and in every subject.

All of the foreign language teachers I have known and worked with all say that their students, whatever the foreign language they are taking, do not know their English grammar well enough to learn a foreign language. How do you learn to conjugate verbs in Spanish if you can’t find the verb in an English sentence? How do you know which tense to use in French if you don’t know the difference between past, present, or future tenses in English? Yet, we teach and reteach parts of speech each year.

Recently I spent a day of professional development in a room of fellow middle school English teachers. We all unanimously decried this phenomenon. One teacher, someone I know to be an excellent teacher, told me that at the beginning of the year she gives her each of her eighth graders a strip of paper with commas stretched across it—commas, nothing else. She then explains to them that she knows the comma is rare and difficult to find, so she is giving them each a free supply of them to use in their essays for her all year. This is true. Let’s face it, commas are important. Commas and other punctuation marks help the reader interpret the sentence correctly. For example, consider this simple sentence: Let’s eat Grandma! Is this a horrifying statement from a family of cannibals preparing for Thanksgiving? No, it is simply a missing comma that causes us to shriek at the sight of that
sentence. The addition of a simple comma makes all the difference: *Let’s eat, Grandma!*

However, it appears to be feast or famine when it comes to the comma. I explained to my teacher friend that at my school, we have a comma epidemic. Consider this response on a question from Friday’s quiz where the students were asked to insert commas where needed: “Lighthouses, can range in height from 193 feet, to only 14 feet,” the keeper explained. When I am grading a stack of eighth grade essays, I feel like Captain Kirk in the famous episode “The Trouble with Tribbles”. Not even the CDC and a lifelong supply of red pens could control this.

Of course, this epidemic is not restricted to the confines of the middle school English classroom. Proofreading and editing is on the decline across the board. Are our standards of proper grammar dropping due to the internet, the popularity of blogs, self-publishing, and the like? Where have all the proofreaders and copy editors gone? Is the “do it yourself” spirit of America the cause? Is “teaching to the test” the problem? Can we blame it on the Common Core? Or, is it what my eighth graders believe, “We won’t need this after the test.”

There’s a comedic side to all of this. Jay Leno used to have a segment where he periodically displayed advertisements and billboards with humorous typos and grammar errors. Two guys, Jeff Deck and Benjamin D. Herson, made a big splash in the media world with their endeavor, The Great Typo Hunt, which was later turned into a book, one that is hopefully written with perfect grammar and error-free. Each year in my back-to-school night presentation for my eighth grade parents, I interrupt my normal power point presentation explaining my syllabus with a slide meant to both garner a laugh and make a point. They all laugh, but it’s not going to be funny when they see the grades on Friday’s quiz.

Of course, with the holidays right around the corner, I must steel myself for the complete and abject failure of the Christmas-card sending population to correctly identify themselves:

**Merry Christmas from the Johnson’s**

Why an apostrophe? The apostrophe is used to denote possession or to create a contraction. (For the record, it’s Johnsons, no apostrophe!) And, what about those poor families whose last names end with an “s”:

**Merry Christmas from the Jones’s**

or, is it

**Merry Christmas from the Jones’**

Here we add insult to injury. (For the record, it’s Joneses, no apostrophe at all!) One of my students admitted that her mother has changed the way she words her Christmas greeting because their last name ends in an "s" and even when she did it correctly, her friends tried to correct her. She now writes “Merry Christmas from the ________ family”, avoiding the plural and possessive problem altogether.

What’s the average well-educated but grammar-anxious person to do? There are many reliable sources for help, and none involve an intervention or regular attendance at AA meetings. One of my favorite resources is the Purdue University OWL (online writing lab). Finding the answer to your grammar question, from easy things like basic comma or apostrophe usage to more complicated things like the MLA rules for citing sources, is just a click away. Another good source is the award-winning website Grammar Girl.
So, how is your grammar and punctuation? Want to test it? Here’s a sampling of the exact questions from my eighth graders’ quiz on Friday. Give it a go. Proofread carefully. When you’re finished, check your work. Let’s see if you are ready for my red pen!

**Directions:** Correct the following sentences by adding or correcting punctuation or capitalization as needed.

1. Kim what did Dad mean when he said You can't judge a book by its cover? asked Sue
2. The ring was turned into the office however the owner was never found
3. Max give your sister the keys so she can take them immediately to Mrs Lee
4. We have been to these locations Augusta Maine Boise Idaho and Frankfort Kentucky
5. Other activities the train ride the bumper cars and the petting zoo are still open
6. I attend school in the east ski in the west vacation in the north and live in the south
7. We couldn't understand how Dads wallet and the twins backpack had been misplaced
8. Rileys first time on a merry go round was when he was 15 months old
9. My spanish teacher lived in mexico she was born in a US territory
10. This is the last straw senator Johnson said i am not voting for this amendment

To check your work, click here! [Answer Key](#)

If you didn’t do as well as you expected, don’t dismay. With a little practice, you too can send out your Christmas cards without fear. Visit a local bookstore or log on to [Amazon.com](http://amazon.com) and purchase a grammar guide; there are many choices and price points. Can’t commit to a 300-page tome? Check out the illustrated version of *Eats, Shoots & Leaves* by Lynne Truss and Bonnie Timmons. Or, spend a few minutes each day on Purdue’s *Owl* or *Grammar Girl*.

If you scored 100%, be kind to your friends and family members when correcting their grammar and punctuation. The red pen is a tool of instruction, not a weapon of mass destruction. Yes, it is important to help and educate your loved ones, but remember, violence is never the answer.

---

**Love Never Fails**

**OCTOBER 4, 2015 / LEAVE A COMMENT**

It’s midday Sunday and I am just sitting down to write this week’s essay. It’s been a busy weekend. Friday night was the wedding rehearsal and rehearsal dinner for one of my colleagues, a third grade teacher at my school. Months ago, after announcing her engagement, she stopped me as I was coming in to school one morning and asked me to do one of the readings of scripture at her wedding. I am still surprised at how emotional I became
when she asked me, immediately choking up and fighting back tears. I hugged her and said yes, of course, and thanked her for making me a part of her special day. Yesterday was the wedding and reception, and much of this morning was spent looking at wedding photos on Facebook posted by some of those in attendance.

I moved to the DC area from my home state of Louisiana in 1988, so by all accounts this should be my home now. But, with no extended family here, and not having grown up here or gone to school here, in a lot of ways I don’t feel “at home”. One of the times when this is most evident to me is when hearing about weddings. If we lived in Louisiana, we would be invited to weddings much more frequently than we are here in Maryland. We are friends with a lot of people, but often not close enough to get invited to weddings. It is understandable, with the high costs associated with even a modest wedding in this day and time, but nonetheless, when we are invited to a wedding, it is indeed a special occasion for us.

Our own wedding, June 10, 1989, was very small, mostly just family, a few of our own friends who mostly were involved in the wedding in some way, and a few friends of our parents. The rehearsal dinner was at Tom’s family restaurant, Ardillo’s in Amite, Louisiana, founded by his grandfather Roy S. Ardillo, in 1947. My father-in-law continued to run it after the death of his siblings, until it closed in May of 2012.

The reception was at my parents’ house, with a table set up in the living room for the wedding cake made by a friend of my mom’s, the groom’s cake made by me, and finger foods that were made by my mom, some of her Sodality friends, and relatives. It was in our minds, the perfect balance. We placed our focus on the wedding Mass, where we received the Sacrament of Matrimony. We had attended pre-Cana preparation at our then parish, St. Ann’s in Washington, DC, where we were both active in parish life while we dated and were engaged, Tom singing in the choir and me teaching religious education on Sunday mornings. We spent time picking out our readings, asking friends and family members to participate, and picking out music for the Mass. My good friend Ann was my maid of honor and Tom’s brother Jay was his best man. Our godparents brought up the gifts. My cousin, Penny, played the organ for the processional and recessional. A mutual friend, Steve, who was instrumental in our spending time together early on, played guitar and sang, along with another friend, Kay, who cantored the Mass. Steve even wrote a song just for us and sang it after Communion. In every single way, to us, it was perfect.

This weekend’s wedding festivities were quite different by contrast. The bride has a large extended family, representing several different cultures. Both the bride and groom grew up here so they had many friends and family members to invite. The wedding Mass was held at the church parish of the school where we teach so there we all felt “at home”. The bride had invited her current 3rd grade class to the wedding, and they attended in full force, along with many of their parents, all smiles as they watched every move of their teacher on the altar. There was a certain energy to the wedding Mass that was almost palpable, brightly colored dresses and the sounds of young children filling the large church. The reception was equally lively, with a steel drum band playing during the cocktail hour and a DJ spinning popular hits in dance music after dinner. Flower girls and junior bridesmaids danced the night away side by side with older relatives and middle-aged couples, ourselves included. The featured libation was chosen by the newly married couple, a rum punch, which was delicious and as colorful as every other detail of the two days of festivities. It was a beautiful celebration of the love of these two young people.

Knowing the bride stemmed from a large family, I was truly honored to take part in the ceremony. I was given the
A reading from the first Letter of Saint Paul to the Corinthians (12:31–13:8a)

Brothers and sisters:
Strive eagerly for the greatest spiritual gifts.
But I shall show you a still more excellent way.
If I speak in human and angelic tongues
but do not have love,
I am a resounding gong or a clashing cymbal.
And if I have the gift of prophecy
and comprehend all mysteries and all knowledge;
if I have all faith so as to move mountains,
but do not have love, I am nothing.
If I give away everything I own,
and if I hand my body over so that I may boast
but do not have love, I gain nothing.
Love is patient, love is kind.
It is not jealous, is not pompous,
it is not inflated, it is not rude,
it does not seek its own interests,
it is not quick-tempered, it does not brood over injury,
it does not rejoice over wrongdoing
but rejoices with the truth.
It bears all things, believes all things,
hopes all things, endures all things.
Love never fails.
The word of the Lord.

Even though St. Paul was not talking to a young couple about to embark on a lifetime together, this popular New Testament reading is still listed as a choice for Catholic wedding Masses. The detailed “laundry list” of what love is, as well as what love is not, can be applied to the Christian community of Corinth, who had fallen away from the teachings of the Gospel, as easily as to a young man and a young woman trying to live a life of faith in today’s fast-paced world. It is difficult to find time for peace and quiet reflection in a world of instant communication via many different types of social media, evidenced by Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram images of this weekend’s wedding being posted while the events were still taking place. I myself fell victim to this increasingly more popular trend, taking a quick photo when the couple took their seats for the first reading. The way the groom so sweetly was holding the bride’s hand was so reminiscent of my favorite photo of our own wedding, a now-yellowed photo taken by a relative as we exited the church after the wedding, my new husband not only giving me his arm to walk me down
In the end, this young couple needs only the excerpt from St. Paul’s letter to the people of Corinth and the closing words of the priest’s homily at their wedding to help them navigate the joys and strife of their new life together. It isn’t about the beautiful wedding attire or the delicious food and drink at spectacular venues. It isn’t about the Pinterest ideas or the ubiquitous iPhone cameras in the hands of nearly all of the guests. It isn’t about the rain and dark clouds that dampened the two days’ activities. It isn’t about the dress or the cake or the flowers. It is about love. And, love never fails.


Once the school year begins, and the “train” leaves the station, it seems like I don’t have any time, inclination, or energy for a big project around the house. For ten months I struggle with the enormous piles of essays, tests, and quizzes that befall a middle school language arts teacher. About all I can manage around the house is cooking dinner each night and doing the laundry on Sunday evening while I do my lesson plans for the next week.

At the start of my eight-week summer break, I wander around in a daze unable to commit myself to much of anything, even the laundry, other than reading (for pleasure as opposed to reading for school), cooking, and baking, three things I find truly relaxing. Eventually, however, it dawns on me that the summer is slipping by and I buckle myself down to tackle a project.

Because we are a houseful of avid readers, and by avid I mean obsessed, one of my first projects last summer was to make room for the overflow of books that is the result of (a) one college graduate moving back home with her boxes of books and (b) the whole family’s favorite weekend forays to the two excellent used bookstores in our neighborhood. We all regularly give and get books as gifts, and we actually use Amazon gift cards to purchase, surprise, books. Unpainted planks and concrete blocks from the local hardware store and voila, an entire wall of bookshelves. I know it would have been nicer to purchase bookshelves, or hire a carpenter to build some, or at the very least, to sand and paint the planks, but once the shelves are filled with books, the beauty of the spines of the books and their jackets seems to take over and elevate the whole thing to an acceptable point.

My next major project was to go through my closet. This is a much more monumental task than finding shelf space for books. Books are my friends, and no matter how old they are, or how many times I have read them, I can always pull them out and read them again. However, some of my clothes stopped being my friends years ago. Some items were impulse buys, and once home, decided they were loners and did not wish to see the light of day. Other items were once cherished BFF’s, building me up and making me shine, and now they taunt me instead.
unwilling to zip or button or match with anything that does zip or button. This surliness has even spilled over onto my shoe racks. That beautiful pair of bone pumps, with the pretty kitten heels and the stylish brushed nickel buckle across the rather pointy toes, has turned into a mean and spiteful set of twins who tease me by taking nips out of my little toes every time I wear them. It was time for me to “unfriend” some of these hangers-on and free up valuable closet space for new friends.

This seemed like a one day job: take everything out of the closet, inspect it, try it on, and either hang it back up or fold it for the donation box. Ha! One day my foot. Speaking of feet, the shoes alone took a whole day. So many painful decisions. I finally decided on the only reasonable method of deciding to keep or pitch: could I survive a day teaching in that pair of shoes? Strappy sandals, no way! Red clogs purchased in Holland (but ironically say “Made in Sweden” on the bottom), uh—I don’t think so. This made all further shoe decisions extremely easy.

Day two: jewelry. Seriously, you would think I was a member of the British royal family with all the pins and brooches I have collected over the years. Don’t get me wrong, I love my pins and brooches. I wear one almost every day. Some I have had for thirty plus years. Others I bought because they reminded me of a particular piece of literature and I wear them when I teach that book or short story. What? You don’t understand? Well, in a thrift store I once found a burnished gold brooch in the shape of a marlin, as though it were leaping from the water, back arched and scales glistening in the sun. I just had to have it, I mean, for goodness sake, I teach Hemingway’s Pulitzer Prize winning novella *The Old Man and the Sea*. So you can see how sorting and organizing my extensive collection of costume jewelry would be a day in itself.

Day three: scarves. Okay, now you probably have an image of someone your grandmother’s age, or older, swathed in some smelly old Victorian printed piece of gauzy material, but I can validate how my love of scarves began. Years and years ago my mother’s great uncle died and when her family went through his belongings they offered my mother one of his ancient leather suitcases, embellished with his initials in gold leaf near the handle. When we got the suitcase home and opened it, we were surprised to find inside items left behind by his wife, not him, a small sandwich baggie filled with costume jewelry, some of it marked with well-known names such as Monet, Napier, and Sarah Coventry, and a collection of silk scarves. My mom gave it all to me and gave the suitcase to one of my cousins who had been named for this great uncle. And so my love of scarves began. A plain knit top becomes an outfit with the addition of a scarf and a brooch. Perhaps not as fashionable as in the past, I still love to accessorize with these items, and my collection of both scarves and brooches has continued to grow.

Day four came and finally it was time to tackle the clothes. This was undoubtedly the hardest day as some items have such sentimental memories attached to them. There’s the knit top purchased at a Gap store on the day it first opened, and I had negotiated the legal documents between the landlord and the tenant for the build-out of the store. As a result of my work on the deal, I was given an employee discount card for one day and was able to shop in the store before it opened to the public. I loved that shirt. I wore it all the time. I have a charming picture of my family taken on a summer vacation to Williamsburg with me wearing that top. It has seen its better days and frankly, doesn’t fit anymore, but for years, when I attempt to organize my closet, I just can’t bear to part with it. There are other items like that. A brown denim maxi-skirt appliqued with bits of corduroy and plaids in a swirly pattern down one side is another example. During the two years we lived overseas I didn’t purchase much clothing in the stores on the local economy as we were able to have shipped to us American goods via the APO system as well as being able to shop at the PX and commissary near Brussels. In addition, the European tight-fitting clothing didn’t quite agree with my all-American (for better and worse) body-type. But, one day, in a mall in Brussels, I found this brown denim skirt and by some miracle, the largest size fit me. I absolutely adore that skirt (still) and wore the daylight out of it until it turned on me and decided not to zip one morning as I was dressing for work. I can’t give that skirt away, even though it has betrayed me; I just can’t. So, on that day I made a decision to make a small stack of clothes like the Gap shirt and the brown denim Belgian skirt,
and pack them into a box marked “Keepsake Clothing”. Now, they can’t taunt me from their never-touched coat hangers and I actually have room in my closet to see what does fit!

About halfway through the clothing process I stumbled upon a black zip-front cardigan that had been my mother’s. She wore it all the time as she was always cold as she grew frailer from the illnesses that plagued her for the last fourteen years of her life. In 2007 when going through her closets after her funeral, I found that cardigan and had a good cry while holding it close to me. That day I packed it in my suitcase and hung it in the back of my closet when I got home. Seven years later, I was overwrought with emotions once again as I took it from the closet. I had to sit on the edge of my bed and hold that cardigan, and yes, have a good cry. It was shabby from much wear, and one shoulder seam had become frayed. It wouldn’t fit anyone in my family and looked so dated I am sure it wouldn’t be worn by someone that it did fit. That cardigan is not my mom; it can’t bring me closer to her or do anything other than make me sad when I look at it. So I did something my mom would have advised: say a Hail Mary, wipe my eyes, and put it in the donation box. Just before I did that, though, I checked the pockets and there I found two clean tissues, a packet of Equal sweetener, and the balled-up wrapper of a Hershey’s Kiss, with its little paper tail sticking out. There you have my mom in a nutshell. Tissues always at the ready, and because one of her medications had brought on Type II diabetes, she used Equal in her coffee and tea. Type II diabetes, however, wasn’t strong enough to ward off a little bit of chocolate here and there.

Sadly, after four days I was still not finished with the reorganization efforts in my bedroom. I still have a large drawer crammed full of socks. Oh the stories those socks could tell if they had tongues instead of toes. But, I have run out of steam on this project, and it is almost “back to school” time for me. The remainder of my time off will be devoted to cleaning and decorating my classroom, organizing my teaching materials, going through my school library, throwing out student work not collected at the end of the year - -a lot like organizing my closet at home. Besides, in the dead of summer, who wants to sort through matched pairs of socks, mismatched pairs of socks, and sock widows and widowers? I think the stories from my sock drawer will have to wait until next summer.

A Love Letter to Laurie Colwin

JULY 12, 2015 / LEAVE A COMMENT

Everyone has a list of people, either alive or deceased, that they would love to have dinner with. I’m sure there is a BuzzFeed list of the top candidates for those lists, chock-full of celebrities and famous people. For me, however, at the top of my list, is Laurie Colwin.

Born and raised in Manhattan, Colwin was a writer and foodie who left us with a small repertoire: three collections of short stories, five novels, and two collections of essays on food, family, and entertaining. She died in 1992 at the far too young age of 48, leaving behind a husband, Juris, and an eight-year old daughter, Rosa. It’s that part that eats at me, the eight-year old daughter. I’ve had two eight-year old daughters in my lifetime, and I can’t imagine what life would be like for them if I had not lived to see them become nine, or nineteen, or someday in the very near future, twenty-nine.

In the late 80’s, I moved from Louisiana to the Washington, DC area, taking up residence in a high-rise...
apartment in Bethesda. Unsure of how I would afford both the sky-high rent and a parking spot in the basement garage, I sold my car before I moved, knowing that my new job was a fifteen minute walk from my future apartment. On the way home from work in the afternoon I would stop in the little shops and markets along the way as I was exploring and getting to know my new neighborhood. One of my favorites was a bookstore just a block from my apartment. They frequently had an outdoor table piled high with books for sale. That’s where I found Laurie Colwin.

There was something about the cover of *Home Cooking* that made me pick it up. Much like Laurie Colwin who was one of a kind, the cover of *Home Cooking* (as well as its sequel) was taken from a monotype by artist Janet Yake. To create a monotype the artist first paints the image on a flat surface like glass or Plexiglas, and then while the paint is still wet, transfers the image to paper by hand by pressing or rubbing—producing a one of a kind print, not leaving much room for error.

That night, I read about half of *Home Cooking* in one sitting. I carried it to work with me the next day so I could read it while I ate my lunch at my desk. I was intrigued by her writing style, her homey attitude towards entertaining, and her very palpable love of her family. How I wished I could be invited to dine in her NYC apartment and sup on one of the dishes detailed in *Home Cooking*. I later discovered some of the essays found in her books originated as articles for *Gourmet* magazine. Again, at a used bookstore, I managed to hunt down several old issues with her work. Eventually I discovered the sequel, *More Home Cooking*, which was published after her death. Recently Laurie Colwin has been in the literary news, with the release of some of her work as e-books. I immediately purchased the e-book of *Home Cooking*, even though I have owned a print copy for over twenty years.

I know these two books very well; they are like old friends to me, friends I would gladly have over for a lovely cup of tea and a freshly baked scone. Each August, when I return to my classroom after a nice summer break, I begin literature class with my new 7th graders reading “Lemons and Limes” from *More Home Cooking*. It is the perfect example of descriptive writing, writing that truly appeals to the senses. As you read Colwin’s descriptions of the many things she does with lemons and the zest from their bright yellow peels, you can feel your mouth puckering, your tongue tingling. While the class discusses Colwin’s talented use of descriptive writing, we talk about their favorite foods and what their family dinners at home are like. It’s through these classroom discussions, under the guise of studying a piece of non-fiction literature, that they get to know me as a teacher and I get to know them as students. The fact that they also get to know Laurie Colwin is just a bonus.

I love trying to recreate the dishes from Colwin’s books. They aren’t so much recipes as they are narratives. Apparently, there are cooking clubs that meet periodically to cook and eat an entire meal from Colwin’s books. A cursory search on Google produces quite a list of articles and blog posts about Laurie Colwin’s writings. In her short life, she made quite an impact on many, some of whom weren’t even born when she died. And, she did that without a computer, a tablet, an iPhone, a show on the Food Network, or a blog.

It’s hard to imagine Laurie Colwin living and writing about food in today’s gourmand-crazy and technology-frenzied world. If you read even just one or two of her food essays you will see that she was a no-nonsense home cook, not a fancy haute cuisine multi-ethnic fusion type of chef. I read a 2014 article on the *The New York Times* website by Jeff Gordinier who interviewed Colwin’s daughter, now a grown-up foodie and writer herself:

“In some ways, Ms. Colwin prefigured a lot of what the food world is obsessed with now: organic eggs, broccoli rabe, beets and homemade bread, yogurt and jam. ‘She was so ahead of her time with the organic stuff,’ Ms. Jurjevics said. ‘That was so hard growing up, I’ve got to say. I was the kid with the weird lunch.’

On the other hand, the surge in food media might have befuddled her. ‘I wonder what she would
have made of so many things,' Ms. Jurjevics mused. ‘Would she have a computer? Would she email people? She was so particular about everything. Would she blog? I wonder, would she compulsively Google herself?’

I’ve always imagined Colwin sitting at her kitchen table with a cup of steaming coffee and a yellow legal pad, writing away, while stopping periodically to stir something on the stove or to read a book to her daughter. So, it’s a little difficult to see her, she of the bread-baking, jam-making, beef-stewing variety, sitting hunched over a MacBook Pro, sipping a chai latte, tapping away at her latest novel or food essay. I have an easier time visualizing her blogging, casually spinning out one of her food stories, drawing us in, making us want to rush to our own kitchens and roast a chicken stuffed with a lemon.

Whenever I am writing about food, whether it is a restaurant meal or one I’ve prepared at home myself, I hear her voice in my head. I know, however, that what comes out of my printer is not even close to the quality of what she herself would have written. She was a master story-teller; she brought you into her kitchen, or, as she recounts in Home Cooking, into her kitchen-less studio apartment during her early days on her own. Even without a kitchen she cooked and entertained regularly, cooking on a two-burner hotplate and draining pasta in her bathtub. I’ve been told by family and close friends that I am a good story-teller, so I keep trying to tell a food story the way she would have. I don’t know if I will ever accomplish that, but until then, I will keep re-reading her stories, and as I write, I will keep listening to her voice.

Bibliography


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>GOODREADS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Olive Kitteridge  
by Elizabeth Strout |
| Lyla’s Encore  
by Mary Jackson Meyer |
| A Rule Against Murder  
by Louise Penny |
| Florence & Leon  
by Simon Boulerice |
| Evvie Drake Starts Over  
by Linda Holmes |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TWEETS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>My Tweets</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

SEE MY ESSAYS “MY KINGDOM FOR A LAMP” AND “MAKE NEW FRIENDS BUT KEEP THE OLD”
"Like This", by Jessica Mauboy featuring Iyaz from Get 'Em Girls. "Like This", by Marques Houston from Veteran. "Like This", by Meisa Kuroki.

"Like This", by Shawn Mendes from Illuminate. "Like This", by Snoop Dogg from Tha Blue Carpet Treatment. "Like This", by Technotronic featuring Monday Midnite.

To find out more, including how to control cookies, see here: Cookie Policy.