

A HISTORY OF PUNCTUATION

A paper delivered to the Quest Club, Fort Wayne, Indiana on February 28, 2014

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INTRODUCTION

Readers Do Care. A few months ago, Victoria's Secret introduced a new women's underwear brand called "BODY." In one ad, they declared: "You've never seen BODY'S like this!" The word "BODY," written in capital letters, was followed by an apostrophe and "s" to make it plural. Grammar Girl Mignon Fogarty reported she received numerous complaints about the error via facebook, Pinterest, and Twitter. Grammar Girl used this opportunity to blog online an educational lesson on when to use apostrophes to make things plural. For your edification, the answer is "almost never."

I start with this example to prove that readers do still care and argue about punctuation. Reportedly, some grocers admit to the intentional misuse of apostrophes on advertisements, for example, "Banana's 49¢," with a deliberate insertion of an incorrect apostrophe, just to lure punctuation complainers into the store as potential customers.

Punctuation styles and rules change and evolve over time. In marketing, especially, liberties are taken and creativity reigns. It appears that scholars, publishers, writers, and armchair critics will never entirely agree on preferred punctuation usage. This paper seeks to provide a history of punctuation in the English language and share some of the more interesting examples of the origin of common punctuation marks.

Punctuation is Important.

For those of you who think this topic is light or frivolous, I assure you this subject is serious. As proof, I share a gift I received this past Christmas from my good friend and fellow Questor, Roger Hultquist. It says:

**Let's eat Grandma.
Let's eat, Grandma.
Commas save lives.**

What is punctuation? Punctuation marks are symbols that indicate the structure and organization of written language. For the purpose of reading aloud, they also indicate the intonation and pauses to be observed. The word “punctuation” comes from the Latin word “punctuare” meaning “to point.”

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The first written languages, such as Chinese and Mayan script, used no punctuation at all. The earliest English writings which first appeared in Anglo-Saxon kingdoms around the 5th century, used no capitals, no spaces, and few punctuation marks. Some of the first marks of punctuation were probably used by playwrights and speech-writers to aid the speaker by indicating vocal pauses or inflections. In the 7th and 8th centuries, Irish and Anglo-Saxon scribes, however, began to add more visual cues to text to make it more intelligible to the reader. Around that same time, Irish scribes even began to put spaces between the words.

During the 11th century, after the Norman conquest of England, marks known as “positurae” came into use to show how the voice should be modulated when chanting the liturgy. These marks indicated the value of the pauses between words or the depth of breath needed to carry the voice to the next pause. Chaucer’s manuscripts, however,

written in the late 1300s, were punctuated with nothing more than an occasional period at the end of a verse line, without any regard to syntax or sense.

The invention of moveable type in the 1450s increased the availability of printed materials, and readership began to increase. The rise of printing meant that a standard system of punctuation was urgently needed. Venetian printers Aldus Manutius and his grandson Aldus Manutius the Younger are said to be responsible for standardizing punctuation. Aldus the Elder (1450 - 1515) designed the semicolon and invented italics. Aldus the Younger turned the printing world on its head when he declared in 1566 that the main object of punctuation was the clarification of syntax. By that, he meant that these little marks contributed to the intended meaning of the written words. His purpose in life was the standardization of these marks in order to facilitate communication. As he saw it, the printed text was now for reading, not intoning. The availability of more books made solitary reading possible, and this is probably about the time when moving your lips while reading became a no-no.

However, as late as the nineteenth century, punctuation was still commonly thought of as weighted marks to show the length of pause when reading aloud. This poem by Cecil Hartley in 1818 provides the formula:

“At every comma, stop while one you count;
At semicolon, two is the amount;
A colon doth require the count of three;
The period four, as learned men agree.”

The Earliest Marks. The only punctuation marks in use until the close of the 15th century were the period, the comma, and the colon. The period refers to a dot on the baseline of text. Early on, it was called the “full stop,” “full point,” or “punctus.” Only in America is it called the “period;” in other English speaking countries, it is the “full stop.”

The oldest punctuation mark, the simplest and smallest, the period is the only mark used for dramatic emphasis when spoken aloud, as in this example: “If you like your insurance plan, you can keep it. Period.”

The comma’s origin is from a single dot placed midway between the base line and the upper level of a text line, to indicate a separation of Greek verse read aloud. It was drawn as a diagonal slash mark from the 13th to the 17th centuries. Aldus Manutius, the Venetian printer, is the one who styled the hooked version we still use today and moved it to the base line. The comma’s use has always been to separate, to avoid ambiguity, or to set off certain words. In fact, the word “comma” came from the Greek word for “clause” because in Greek writings it was first used only to set off clauses.

Ben “Two Pricks” Johnson. Ben Johnson was a contemporary of Shakespeare, a prolific writer, and one of the first to try to codify the English rules of punctuation. The final chapter of his 1640 book *The English Grammar* discussed these punctuation marks: comma, parenthesis, period, colon (which he called “two pricks”), question mark (which he called the “interrogation,”) and exclamation point (which he called the “admiration.”) He liked the colon so much that he included one in his signature by signing Ben:Johnson, and was thus called “Two Pricks Johnson” by his cohorts.

When did other marks of punctuation come into use, and why?

The Apostrophe. It was first used in 16th century. Its name came from the Greek word for “turning away.” The first use was only for dropped letters or omitted letters, as in contractions, such as “’tis” or “it’s” for “it is.” Then, in the 17th century, printers began using it before the “s” in singular possessive cases. One theory is that during that time,

there was no word for the feminine possessive pronoun, and the male possessive pronoun, “his,” was used as the possessive for both genders. To denote ownership, people would say “the printer his shop” or “the lady his ring.” They would then contract it to “the printer’s shop,” “the lady’s ring,” with the apostrophe standing in for the word “his.” To this day, we still use apostrophes to show ownership. In the 18th century, printers began to add the apostrophe for plural possessives as well as for singular.

Seventy-five years ago when C.V. Carey wrote *Mind the Stop*, he gave just one paragraph to the apostrophe, because there was so little to say about it. Now, think about the myriad ways we use the apostrophe, all somewhat complicated: contractions; possessives; plurals of letters, time segments, numbers and words; and in Irish names such as O’Neill and O’Casey. The period, on the other hand, works only as a full stop. Lynne Truss, in her book *Eats, Shoots & Leaves*, refers to the period as the male of the punctuation world: it does one job at a time; does it well; and forgets it instantly. Whereas, she says, the apostrophe is like the frantically multi-tasking female, succumbing to burnout from all its thankless effort. It’s no wonder common usage is dropping the apostrophe in many informal cases; the rules are just too complicated for ordinary folk to remember. And no wonder there is a website devoted just to apostrophe errors at apostrophecatastrophes.com.

The Question Mark. In *The Glamour of Grammar*, Roy Peter Clark said the question mark, used well, may be the most profoundly human form of punctuation. It’s interactive; it imagines the unknown. He wrote: “The question is the engine of debates and interrogations, of mysteries solved and secrets to be revealed,...of anticipation and explanation.”

In very early times, a mark consisting of a slash over a dot was used in Parisian university printing to indicate an interrogation. However, it never gained common usage. In the late middle ages, a different symbol for the Latin word Quaestio, meaning question, was written as “qo” or a “q” written on top of the letter “o” which evolved into today’s symbol. In the 16th century, printer Henry Denham had the sophisticated idea of reversing the question mark to indicate a rhetorical question, but that idea never caught on.

The Exclamation Mark, aka Exclamation Point. One theory of its origin is the Latin word for joy (io) written with the “i” above the “o.” It was first introduced into printing in the 15th century but did not gain common usage until much later.

Do you remember when the exclamation mark did not have its own dedicated key on the manual typewriter? Before the 1970s, we typed a period, backspaced and typed an apostrophe over the period to achieve the symbol. In secretarial dictation, it was known as a “bang.” In the printing world, it was referred to as a “screamer,” “gasper,” “slammer,” a “dog’s cock,” or a “startler.”

If you are or were a SEINFELD fan, you might remember that the exclamation mark was the subject of a bitter argument between Elaine Benes and her boyfriend, Jake Jarmel, in one episode. Elaine got upset with Jake for not putting an exclamation mark at the end of a message about a friend having a baby. Jake took extreme exception to the trivial criticism and broke up with Elaine, putting an exclamation mark after his parting words: **“I’M LEAVING!”**

Overly frequent use of the exclamation mark is generally considered poor writing in the formal sense, because it distracts the reader and devalues the mark’s significance.

F. Scott Fitzgerald said: “Cut out all those exclamation points. An exclamation point is like laughing at your own jokes.” Some authors, however, most notably Tom Wolfe, are known for unashamedly liberal use of the exclamation mark. Informally, exclamation marks in text messages and email are as popular as ever. While preparing this paper, I surveyed my friends to ask for their favorite punctuation mark. Nine out of ten persons answered: the exclamation mark!

Quotation Marks were first used only for moralizing comments. Then, around 1714, some writers began to use them to denote direct speech. In Henry Fielding’s *Tom Jones*, written in 1749, a single quotation mark appeared in the left-hand margin of each line to indicate speaking. Since then, the uses and rules for quotation marks have proliferated. Especially confusing is that Americans almost always use double quotation marks, whereas the Brits more commonly use single marks. Americans tend to put the final sentence punctuation inside the end quotation mark, and the Brits put it outside the quotation mark. A final confusion is that the Brits refer to quotation marks as “inverted commas.”

The Dash and its little brother. What is the difference between the dash and the hyphen? The dash connects or separates phrases and sentences to demonstrate drama, humor, or stream of consciousness. The smaller hyphen is used only to connect or separate individual words.

And then, there are double dashes, used like brackets. Speaking of brackets, we Americans say “parentheses” for what the British call “round brackets.” What the Brits call “square brackets” are, in America, simply “brackets.” The origin of the term

“bracket” is from the use of a brace, or literally a bracket, to hold up a bookshelf, for the job of brackets, or parentheses, in punctuation is to lift up and hold a part of a sentence above the rest. Inserting a dash before and after a clause, for example, sets apart that information, but less formally, or in some cases, more dramatically, than the insertion of parentheses. The dash now seems to be a favored symbol, replacing quotation marks, semicolons, colons and parentheses in casual writing.

The hyphen, on the other hand, seems out of favor. Winston Churchill said that hyphens were a blemish, to be avoided whenever possible. Woodrow Wilson said the hyphen was “the most un-American thing in the world.” (The source of this quote hyphenated the word “un-American.”) Others have argued that there is no place in the English language for it. Yet, how can we get rid of the hyphen? If my friend writes to me about “extra marital sex,” how do I know if he’s referring to extra marital sex, or extra-marital sex? And ironically, my keyboard contains a hyphen key, but no dash key, so I expect the forecast of the demise of the hyphen is premature. Some words absolutely need the hyphen to clarify the meaning, such as de-ice, or to distinguish them from the non-hyphenated version, such as “re-sign” versus “resign.” Even so, many words which were hyphenated years ago are no longer spelled with a hyphen. Examples are cooperate, xray, tomorrow, and today. In fact, the elimination of about 16,000 formerly hyphenated words in the 2003 edition of the Oxford English Dictionary gives credence to the rumors that the hyphen is heading for extinction or at least greatly diminished use.

The ellipsis. This mark, consisting of three dots, is increasingly popular in tachygraphic language. You might ask “What is tachygraphic language?” The word

“tachygraphy,” originally referred to shorthand. The new meaning of tachygraphy refers to the language used in online chat and text messages. On the internet, the ellipsis indicates a non-verbal cue to, for example, hold the floor, meaning “more to come, wait;” to signal silence, as in disagreement, disapproval, or confusion; or, to announce a change of subject.

The ellipsis was first used in the 19th century only when a writer intentionally omitted a specific proper noun. In the early 20th century, it was used in pulp fiction in place of expletives or other words that would have been censored. Now, the three dot ellipsis has many uses, and many rules for its use. Some style guides require spaces between the dots; others do not. Today, extended ellipses of dozens of dots are becoming common constructions of internet chat.

Punctuation that Never Made it. The interobang was represented by a question mark followed by an exclamation point, or vice versa. A sentence ending with an interobang asked a question in an excited manner, such as “say what?!” or “she’s pregnant?!” American Mark Speckler conceived the interobang in 1962. By 1968, the mark was even available on some Remington typewriters, and a replacement key was available for certain Smith Corona models. It had evolved into a question mark on top of an exclamation point. Its use was in vogue only during the 1960s and even though the interobang is accepted in Unicode (in the computing industry) and several font styles of Microsoft Word, it is not a standard punctuation mark today.

Question Comma and Exclamation Comma. These marks were the subject matter of an international patent application in 1992. Their purpose was to allow the writer to

ask a question or get excited in the middle of a sentence. But the patent applications have lapsed and these marks are not in common use.

TRENDS AND INFLUENCES

Our system of punctuation was produced in the age of printing, by printers. The rules relied on the ascendancy of printing to survive. Who fortified the rules? Printers and publishers developed their own style guides which dictated how punctuation and grammar would be applied in newspapers, books, and magazines these many years.

Professional writers argue exuberantly over punctuation, with each other, and with their publishers. Grown men have been known to have knock-down fights over such a small thing as a comma. When the humorist James Thurber wrote for the *New Yorker* in the '30s and '40s, he and his editor Harold Ross could often be found smacking a big desk and barking at each other over the niceties of punctuation. According to Thurber, Ross had an extreme "clarification complex" in that he seemed to believe there was no limit to the amount of clarification you could achieve if you just kept adding commas. In contrast, Thurber saw commas as so many upturned chairs unhelpfully hurled down the wide-open corridor of readability. Thurber and Ross endlessly disagreed, but in the end, Thurber had to resign himself to his editor's way of thinking. So, the comma proliferated. Thurber was once asked by a correspondent why he had a comma in the sentence, "After dinner, the men went into the living room." He replied, "This particular comma was Ross's way of giving the men time to push back their chairs and stand up."

The comma, like all other little punctuation marks, now really has two important and distinct functions: 1) the syntactical one of illuminating the grammar, and 2) the

directorial one of setting the rhythm, pitch, tone and flow of the words. The comma used in the sentence about what the men did after dinner is an illustration of the latter use: it sets the rhythm and tone of the action described.

An example of the comma used to clarify syntax is in the following sentence:

“Woman, without her man, is useless.”

By moving the comma, the meaning of the sentence becomes exactly opposite:

“Woman, without her, man is useless.”

Without any commas, of course, we have no way of divining the writer’s intention in this sentence, or in the sentence about eating Grandma.

Now, with the rise of tachygraphic language forms such as online chats and text messaging, we have widely varying punctuation, or none at all. We now have global self-publishing. Now, everyone’s a writer. Who would have predicted the explosion of writing caused by the personal computer, the internet, and the key pad of the mobile phone? Who could have predicted that in 2013 I would receive a text message with no capitals, no spaces, and no punctuation?

On the other hand, who would have predicted the explosive use of punctuation marks in computer programming, unicodes, web searches, and email addresses? Punctuation marks are no longer used just for setting rhythm or clarifying syntax.

Who would have thought that the once humble pound or number sign would be born again on Twitter as a way to link tweets of the same topic or to add a quip? With a shiny new internet name, the pound sign, now known as the “hashtag,” has taken over and become a cultural icon. Words or phrases prefaced by a “#” sign turn into hyperlinks connecting that comment to others with the same “hashtagged” word or phrase.

How did this happen? Chris Messina is credited with launching the social media phenomenon in a tweet in 2007. He says he was just trying to follow a Twitter discussion of a conference called BarCamp. He tweeted a message asking others how they felt about using a pound sign for groups, such as “#barcamp.” It took a while to catch on, but now the hashtag has spread across multiple networks: Instagram, Vine, Pinterest, Tumblr, and just recently in 2013, facebook. Prior to Messina’s innovation, since the 70’s, this symbol was used in computer technology language, it’s true. But in just six years, the hashtag has become part of an international language and culture.

At the beginning of this paper, I mentioned Mignon Fogarty, also known as “Grammar Girl.” Born in 1967, she is today’s Ben Johnson of grammar and punctuation. A former science writer with degrees in English and biology, she now produces an educational podcast named “Grammar Girl’s Quick and Dirty Tips for Better Writing” which promotes the proper use of the English language. Her book bearing the same name was #9 on the New York Times Best Seller list in 2008. The fact that she’s popular as a writer, speaker, and reference guide bodes well for the English language and the continuity of a logical punctuation system.

SUMMARY

Certainly there is no argument that punctuation was first used many centuries ago for dramatic notation to actors to tell them when to breathe in preparation for a long bit of speech. For a millennium and a half, elocution was its only role. Due to the influence of Aldus Manutius, Elder and Younger, and the ensuing publishing industry, books evolved for reading, not intoning. Punctuation was primarily to aid syntax and its use proliferated. Linguists then entered the arena, and split into two sides: the descriptive linguists observe and analyze the changes in the language, and accept the

reality that some uses of marks will simply be extinguished and die; the prescriptive group argues to maintain the rigid rules learned in school and to burn all literature that does not comply. Sir Kingsley Amis, poet, novelist and literary critic, called the two camps “berks and wankers.” Berks, he said, are outrageously slipshod about the English language, and wankers are overly precise. Left to the berks, he predicted the English language will die of impurity; left to the wankers, it will die, instead, of purity.

C. V. Carey said that punctuation is governed two-thirds by rule and one-third by personal taste. I think that still applies today. The trend in the 20th century, starting with *The King’s English* in 1906 by H.W. Fowler was toward more simple punctuation: fewer commas, fewer spaces, relaxed capitalization. The trend in the twenty-first century is more accepting of innovative punctuation, more tolerant of inconsistencies, ready to release us from the exacting rules of previous ages. A reader from two hundred years ago would be shocked at our present-day punctuation, especially the animated emoticons sprinkling our text messages, for the smiley face and all her progeny, are, after all, just another form of punctuation.

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