

How to punctuate

By Russell Baker
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When you write, you make a sound in the reader's head. It can be a dull mumble — that's why so much government prose makes you sleepy — or it can be a joyful noise, a sly whisper, a throb of passion.

Listen to a voice trembling in a haunted room:

"And the sulken, sad, uncertain rustling of each purple curtain thrilled me — filled me with fantastic terrors never felt before..."

That's Edgar Allan Poe, a master. Few of us can make paper speak as vividly as Poe could, but even beginners will write better once they start listening to the sound their writing makes.

One of the most important tools for making paper speak in your own voice is punctuation.

When speaking aloud, you punctuate constantly — with body language. Your listener hears commas, dashes, question marks, exclamation points, quotation marks as you shout, whisper, pause, wave your arms, roll your eyes, wrinkle your brow.

In writing, punctuation plays the role of body language. It helps readers hear the way you want to be heard.

‘Gee, Dad, have I got to learn all them rules?’

Don't let rules scare you. For they aren't hard and fast. Think of them as guidelines.

Am I saying, "Go ahead and punctuate as you please"? Absolutely not. Use your own common sense, remembering that you can't expect readers to work to decipher what you're trying to say.

There are two basic systems of punctuation:

1. The loose or open system, which tries to capture the way body language punctuates talk.
2. The tight, closed structural system, which hews closely to the sentence's grammatical structure.

Most writers use a little of both. In any case, we use much less punctuation than they used 200 or even 50 years ago. (Glance into Edward Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, first published in 1776, for an example of the tight structure system at its most elegant.)

No matter which system you prefer, be warned: Punctuation marks cannot save a sentence that is badly put together. If you have to struggle over commas, semicolons, dashes, you've probably built a sentence that's never going to fly, no matter how you tinker with it. Throw it away and build a new one to a simpler design. The better your sentence, the easier it is to punctuate.

Choosing the right tool

There are 30 main punctuation marks, but you'll need fewer than a dozen for most writing.

I can't show you in this small space how they all work, so I'll stick to the most important — and even then can only hit the highlights. For more details, check your dictionary or a good grammar book.

Comma

This is the most widely used mark of all. It's also the toughest and most controversial. I've seen aging editors almost come to blows over the comma. If you can it without sweating, the others will be easy. Here's my policy:

1. Use a comma after a long introductory phrase or clause: *After stealing the crown jewels from the Tower of London, I went home for tea.*
2. If the introductory material is short, forget the comma: *After the theft I went home for tea.*
3. But use it if the sentence would be confusing without it, like this: *The day before I'd robbed the Bank of England.*
4. Use a comma to separate elements in a series. *I robbed the Denver Mint, the Bank of England, the Tower of London and my piggy bank.*

Notice there is not comma before *and* in the series. This is common style nowadays, but some publishers use a comma there, too.

5. Use a comma to separate independent clauses that are joined by a conjunction like *and*, *but*, *for*, *or*, *nor*, *because* or *so*: *I shall return the crown jewels, for they are too heavy to wear.*
6. Use a comma to set off a mildly parenthetical word or grouping that isn't essential to the sentence: *Girls, who have always interested me, usually differ from boys.*

Do not use commas if the word grouping is essential to the sentence's meaning: *Girls who interested me know how to tango.*

7. Use a comma in direct address: *Your majesty, please hand over the crown.*

8. And between proper names and titles: *Montague Sneed, director of Scotland Yard, was assigned the case.*

9. And to separate elements of geographical address: *Director Sneed comes from Skokie, Ill., and now lives in London, England.*

Generally speaking, use a comma where you'd pause briefly in speech. For a long pause or completion of thought, use a period.

If you confuse the comma with the period, you'll get a run-on sentence: *The Bank of England is in London, I rushed right over to rob it.*

Semicolon

A more sophisticated mark than the comma, the semicolon separates two main clauses, but it keeps those two thoughts more tightly linked than a period can: *I steal crown jewels; she steals hearts.*

Dash and parentheses

Warning! Use sparingly. The dash SHOUTS. Parenthesis whispers. Shout too often, people stop listening; whisper too much, people become suspicious of you.

The dash creates a dramatic pause to prepare for an expression needing strong emphasis: *I'll marry you — if you'll rob Topkapi with me.*

Parentheses help you pause quietly to drop in some chatty information not vital to your story: Despite Betty's daring spirit (*"I love robbing your piggy bank, " she often said*) , she was a terrible dancer.

Quotation marks

These tell the reader you are reciting the exact words someone said or wrote: *Betty said, I can't tango.*" Or: *"I can't tango," Betty said.*

Notice the comma comes before the quote marks in the first example, but comes inside them in the second.

Not logical?

Never mind. Do it that way anyhow.

Colon

A colon is a tip-off to get ready for what's next: a list, a long quotation or an explanation. This article is riddled with colons. *Too many, maybe, but the message is: "Stay on your toes; it's coming at you."*

Apostrophe

The big headache is with possessive nouns. If the noun is singular, add 's: *I hated Betty's tango.*

If the noun is plural, simply add an apostrophe after the s: *Those are the girls' coats.*

The same applies for singular nouns ending in s, like boss: *My boss's favorite author is Dickens.*

And in the plural: *This is the Dickenses' cottage.*

Keep Cool

You know about ending a sentence with a period or question mark. Do it. Sure, you can also end with an exclamation point, but must you? Usually it just makes you sound breathless and silly. Make your writing generate its own excitement.

Filling the newspaper with !!!! won't make up for what your writing has failed to do.

Too many exclamation points make me think the writer is talking about the panic in his own head.

Don't sound panicky. End with a period. I am serious. A period. Understand?

Well...sometimes a question mark is OK.