

On Punctuation

**Gertrude
Stein**

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On Punctuation

Gertrude Stein

There are some punctuations that are interesting
and there are some punctuations that are not.
Let us begin with the punctuations that are
not. Of these the one but
the first and the
most the completely most
uninteresting is
the
question
mark.

The question mark is alright when it is all alone when a question is a question as it is written in writing.

when it is used as a brand on cattle or when it could be used in Therefore I ask you therefore wherefore should one use the question

decoration but connected with writing it is completely entirely mark. Beside it does not in its form go with ordinary

completely uninteresting. It is evident that is you ask a question printing and so it pleases neither the eye nor the ear

you ask a question but anybody who can read at all knows is therefore like a noun, just an unnecessary name for

something.

A question
 is a question,
 anybody can
 know that a
 question
 is a question

 and
 so
 why add

 to it the

 question mark when it is
 already there
 when the question is

 already
 there
 in the writing.

 Therefore
 I never

 could bring myself
 to use a

 question

 mark, I
 always found it
 positively

 revolting,
 and now
 very few do use it.

 Exclamation
 marks
 have

 the same
 difficulty

and also
 quotation

 marks, they are unnecessary,

 they are
 ugly, they
 spoil the
 line of the
 writing
 or
 the printing

 and anyway what
 is the use, if you

 do not know that a question
 is a question
 what is
 the use of its

 being a
 question. The same thing is
 true of a quotation.
 When I first

 began
 writing I found
 it
 simply
 impossible
 to use question
 marks
 and quotation

 marks
 and
 exclamation
 points

 and
 now anybody
 sees it that way.

Perhaps some
day they will
see it some
other way but
not at any
rate anybody
can and does
see it that
way.

So there are
the things in punctuation
uninteresting in a
way that
is perfectly
obvious, and so
do we
not have
go to
any
farther into
that.
There are besides
dashes
and dots,
these and
might
be interesting
spaces
be might interesting.
one might if They
that felt way
about them.

| | |
|------------------|---|
| One other little | punctuation mark one can have feelings about and that is the |
| apostrophe for | possession. Well feel as |
| you like about | that, I can see and I do see that for many that for some the |
| possessive case | apostrophe has a gentle tender insinuation that makes it very difficult |
| to definitely | decide to do without it. One does do without it, |
| I do, I mostly | always do, but I cannot deny that from time to time I feel myself |
| having regrets | and from time to time I put it in to make the |
| possessive case. | I absolutely do not like it and leaving it out I feel no regret, there it |
| is unnecessary | and not ornamental but |
| inside a word | and its s well perhaps, perhaps it does appeal |
| by its weakness | to your weakness. |

At least at any rate from time to time I do find myself letting it alone if it has come in and sometimes it has come in. I cannot positively deny but that I do from time to time let it come in.

So now to come to the real question of punctuation, periods, commas, colons, semi-colons and capitals and small letters. I have had a long and complicated life with all these. Let us begin with these I use the least first and these are colons and semi-colons one might add to these commas.

When I that writing to do with
first began should go on writing going
writing, I and on and on which was
felt that if writing at that time
writing should go the most
should go on, on what had profound
I still do colons and need I had
feel that it commas to do in connection
should go on with it, what with writing.
but when I had periods What had
first began to do with colons and
16 writing I was it what had semi-colons
completely small letters to do with
possessed by and capitals it what had
the necessity to do with it commas to do

with it what had periods to do with it.

What had periods to do with it.

Inevitably no matter how completely I had to
have writing go on, physically one had to

again and again stop sometime and if one had to
again and again stop sometime and if one had to
again and again stop sometime
then periods had to exist.

Beside I had always liked the look of periods
and I liked what they did. Stopping sometime did
not really keep one from going on, it was
nothing that interfered,

it was only something that happened, and as it
happened as a perfectly natural happening, I did
not believe in periods

and I used them.
I really never stopped using them.

Beside
that
periods might later
come to have
a
life of their own to
commence breaking up
things in

arbitrary ways,
that has
happened
lately with
me in
a poem I have written
called Winning His

Way,
later I
will read you
a
little
of it.
By
the
time

I had written this poem about

20 three years ago periods
had come to have for
me completely
a life of their own. They could

begin
to act as
they
thought best and one might

interrupt
one's writing with them
that is not really
interrupt
one's writing with them but one could

come to stop arbitrarily stop at times in one's
writing and so they could be used and you could
use them Periods could come to exist in this way
and they could come in this way to have
a life of their own. They did not serve you
in any servile way as
commas and colons and
semi-colons do. Yes
you do
what feel
I mean.

Periods have a life
of their own a necessity
of their own a feeling
of their own a time
of their own.

And

that feeling
that life
that necessity
that time

can
express
itself
in

an
infinite
variety

is the that reason
that I have
always remained periods
true to
so much
so that recently
as I say I have that one
felt could need
them more than ever
one had needed them.

You can see what an entirely different thing a
period is from a comma, a colon or a semi-colon.
There are two different ways of thinking about
colons and semi-colons

you can think of them as commas
and as such they are purely servile or
you can think of them as periods
and then using them can make you feel
adventurous

I can see that one might feel about them
as periods but I myself never have, I began
unfortunately to feel them as

a comma and commas are servile they have no
life of their own they are dependent upon use
and convenience and

they are put there
just for practical purposes.

They are

than a comma
are a comma

more powerful
more imposing
more pretentious
but they
all the same.

Semi-colons and colons had for me
from the first completely
this character the character
that a
comma has and not the character
that a period
has and therefore and
definitely
I have never used
them. But now dimly
and definitely I
do see
that they might well possibly they
might have in them
something of
the character of the
period and
so it might have been
an adventure
to use them. I really do
not think so.
I think however lively
they are or disguised they
are they
are definitely more
comma than period
and so
really I cannot
regret not having used them.

keeps you
 from living
 your life as
 actively as
 you should
 lead it and to

 me
 for
 many

 years and

 I still do feel that way
 about it only
 now I do not pay as

 much
 attention
 to them, the use

 of them was
 positively

 degrading. Let me
 tell you

 what I

 feel and
 what I mean and
 what I felt

 and what I
 meant.
 When I was writing

 those long
 sentences
 of The

 Making of
 Americans,

verbs active
 present

 verbs with long dependent

 adverbial
 clauses
 became a
 passion
 with
 me. I have

 told you that I
 recognize verbs and

 adverbs aided by prepositions
 and conjunctions
 with
 pronouns as

 possessing
 the whole of the active life
 of writing. Complications
 make eventually

 for
 simplicity and
 therefore
 I have
 always
 liked dependent
 adverbial
 clauses. I

 have
 liked
 dependent
 adverbial

 clauses
 because of their
 variety of dependence
 and independence.

You can see how loving the intensity of
 complication of these things that commas would
 be degrading. Why if you want the pleasure of
 concentrating on the final simplicity
 of excessive complication would you want
 any artificial aid
 to bring about that
 simplicity. Do you now
 see why
 I feel
 about
 that
 simplicity.

Do you see now why I feel about
 the comma as I did and as I do.
 Think about anything you really
 like to do and you will
 see what I mean. When
 it gets really
 difficult you want to
 disentangle rather than to cut
 the knot, at least of
 anybody feels who
 is working
 with any
 thread, so anybody feels who
 is working
 with any tool so anybody feels
 who is writing any
 sentence
 or reading it after it
 has been written. And what
 does a comma do
 a comma does nothing
 but make
 easy a thing that if you
 like it
 enough is easy enough without
 the comma.

A long take a breath but taking
complicated but if you a breath
sentence want to take well you are
should force a breath you always taking
itself upon ought to know a breath and
you, make you yourself that why emphasize
know yourself you want one breath
knowing to take a rather than
it and the breath. It another
comma, well is not like breath.
at the most stopping Anyway that
34 a comma is a altogether is the way
poor period has something I felt about
that lets to do with it and I felt
you stop and going on, that about it

very very strongly.

And so I almost never use a comma.

The longer,
the more
complicated
the sentence
the greater
the number of
the same kinds
of words I had
following one

one after
another, the
more the very
more I had
of them the
more I felt
the passionate
need of their
taking care

of themselves
by themselves
and not
helping them,
and thereby
enfeebling
them by
putting in
a comma.

So that is the way I felt about punctuation in
prose, in poetry it is a little different but
more so and later I will
go into that. But
that is the way I
felt about
punctuation
in
prose.