

Punctuation

Rosemary Waugh, Claire Warner and David Waugh

it is not necessary to read very far in any article before realising that punctuation such as full stops commas and all the other marks we are used to are a great help in making sense of what would otherwise be a long string of words did you have to stop and work things out while reading this i bet you did it is therefore important when children are learning to write for them to understand the importance of using punctuation correctly in their work

Punctuation refers to the system of marks we use to break up the flow of language into smaller units. It is a feature of written language, to cover the features which tone of voice and pauses for breath do naturally in spoken language; the term comes from a Latin word meaning to stab or prick (as does puncture). The marks and signs of punctuation are non-alphabetic, and the system works beside the alphabetic symbols – letters and words – of our language to make text clear and unambiguous. Punctuation came later than other elements of grammar, and was not used at all in some early languages. In Latin, for instance, the rigid and complicated grammar meant that very complex ideas could be presented in lengthy rhetorical speeches which could then be written down verbatim without any ambiguity. Such details as the use of capital letters, indenting the writing at the beginning of a paragraph, and even the spacing between words, are all technically part of the punctuation system. Think how much more complicated reading would be without these ideas.

As a contrast to the first paragraph of this article, try reading any piece of written English aloud including all the punctuation marks, as if you were dictating. You will soon realise how all the phrasing, emphasis and nuance which can be expressed so easily in spoken English is shaped for writing by the conventions of punctuation. However, most of the time we use this system without stopping to think much about it. The idea of including the punctuation marks in spoken language has been exploited for comic potential many times, notably by the Danish comedian Victor Borge, whose “Phonetic Punctuation” is available on Youtube. (A sketch involving a dictated letter complete with punctuation, written for the Marx Brothers’ radio show in the fifties, was rejected by the censor because there were objections to the mention of a colon in a sentence about digestion!)

The simplest form of punctuation is the full stop. Full stops break up a passage into short sentences. Each sentence presents a new idea. As our writing develops, we can use commas to create longer sentences. A comma may be used to introduce a second clause which tells us more about the first one, such as a description or an example. Commas are used to separate ideas, phrases, the items in lists, or the different elements of a sentence. As writing becomes more sophisticated, we meet other punctuation; the semi-colon is an example. Fun, isn’t it?

When we read legal documents, renowned for their use of grand vocabulary and phrases such as “the property heretofore mentioned” or “insomuch as the party of

the first part shall agree...”, we often notice their lack of punctuation; in particular the lack of commas. This is a deliberate attempt to avoid any ambiguity. There was a well-documented legal case in 2006 between a cable television company and a telephone company in Canada, in which a contract stated:

“This agreement shall be effective from the date it is made and shall continue in force for a period of five years from the date it is made, and thereafter for successive five year terms, unless and until terminated by one year prior notice in writing by either party.”

(<http://www.adamsdrafting.com/costly-drafting-errors-part-1/>)

The cable provider wanted this to mean that the contract must last at least five years, but could be cancelled after this with one year’s notice. The phone company, however, claimed that the second comma meant that they could cancel at any time with one year’s notice. The court found in their favour – and the cable company lost millions of dollars’ worth of business. Be careful how you use commas!

The punctuation mark which causes the greatest amount of trouble and gives rise to the most discussion, however, must be the apostrophe. There are so many examples of its abuse and misuse that it is hardly surprising there are whole websites and societies devoted to the discussion. We are all used to seeing what has become known as the “greengrocers’ apostrophe”:

Apple’s, Orange’s, Fresh Tomatoe’s, You wont beat our price’s!

- but could we all explain what is wrong about it? And should it be the greengrocer’s, the greengrocers’ or the greengrocers apostrophe?

As recently as January 2014, the apostrophe made headline news yet again, as Cambridge City Council have made a public decision that new street signs will not show apostrophes, “as it might lead to confusion for emergency services”. Grammar fans are up in arms, and the Apostrophe Protection Society (www.apostrophe.org.uk) deplores the move.

The rules for apostrophes are not too complex once you are used to them, but can confuse children.

- An apostrophe can show that a letter or letters have been omitted:
 - can’t, don’t, we’ll.
- It can show ownership:
 - Dave’s car – the car belonging to Dave
 - The People’s Park – the park belonging to the people
 - If showing ownership, the apostrophe goes after the noun but before the final ‘s’, and if a plural ends in –s, another one is not usually added.
 - The men’s coats (men is a plural form)
 - The ladies’ hats (not ‘the ladies’s)
 - The exception is *it’s* which always means *it is* and never shows possession.
 - It’s a lovely day today

- The dog has eaten its dinner.

A classic example of how apostrophes can be misused came from the writer Kingsley Amis, who suggested: *Those things over there are my husbands*. One husband with lots of possessions? Several husbands who have all left belongings lying around? Or a much-married woman referring to a pile of bodies? Punctuation can make all the difference!

Probably the most popular punctuation mark in writing by and for children is the exclamation mark, which tends to lose its impact when used too frequently. Some writers tend to rely on the exclamation mark for impact, and it is not uncommon to find writing like this:

“It was certainly a huge house! And the garden was a real jungle! The children were amazed! What fun they were going to have here!”

Good writing should be able to convey excitement or atmosphere through the words themselves, and use the “screamer”, as it is nicknamed, as little as possible. This advice, however, would be poorly received in the towns of Westward Ho! in Devon or St. Louis du Ha! Ha! in Quebec, where the ! is an integral part of the towns’ names.

As we progress to more sophisticated levels of reading, we meet the less frequently-used punctuation symbols; the semi-colon, for instance, which can introduce an explanatory clause. If a semi-colon is seen as a glorified comma, the colon is a glorified full-stop: a colon links two sentences. Brackets (sometimes called parentheses) are used to give an explanation which in speech would be an aside. Dashes are sometimes – though not invariably – used for the same purpose, and many writers use a dash to add an afterthought or comment to a sentence – which can help give a casual and impromptu air to the writing.

In short, it is punctuation which adds richness and complexity to the structure of all writing: a sound understanding of how to use it correctly will enhance both our own reading and our ability to help children develop their writing style.

You may like to test your own knowledge of punctuation by trying out some of these old “chestnuts”:

a) I would rather be looked after by a red cross nurse than by a red cross nurse.

b) Joe walked to the market to sell his sheep along with his wife.

c) Caesar entered on his head
A helmet on each foot
A sandal in his hand he had
His trusty sword to boot.

d) Jim where John had had had had had had had had had had had the examiner's approval.

Answers:

a) I would rather be looked after by a Red Cross nurse than by a red, cross nurse.

b) Joe walked to the market to sell his sheep, along with his wife. (unless it was a slave market, of course)

c) Caesar entered: on his head
A helmet, on each foot
A sandal. In his hand he had
His trusty sword, to boot.

d) Jim, where John had had 'had', had had 'had had'. 'Had had' had had the examiner's approval. (If this one still looks confusing, think of two boys taking a translation test : should the phrase be "he had his tea" or "he had had his tea" ...?)

References

<http://www.adamsdrafting.com/costly-drafting-errors-part-1/>
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IF4qii8S3gw> (Victor Borge)
Daily Telegraph, 17.1.2014