

Chambers

Punctuation Guide

Chambers

EDINBURGH NEW YORK

世界图书出版公司

Chambers *Punctuation* *Guide*

Gordon Jarvie

Chambers

EDINBURGH NEW YORK

世界图书出版公司

北京·广州·上海·西安

Published 1992 by W & R Chambers Ltd,
43-45 Annandale Street, Edinburgh EH7 4AZ

© Gordon Jarvie 1992

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of W & R Chambers Ltd.

British Library Catalogue in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 0-550-18044-3

This edition of Chambers Punctuation Guide
© W & R Chambers Ltd Edinburgh 1992
is published by World Publishing Corporation, Beijing, 1993
by arrangement with W & R Chambers Ltd
for sale in The People's Republic of China
Unauthorized reproduction in whole or in part is prohibited.

ISBN 7 - 5062 - 1653 - 1

Typeset by Chatsworth Studios Ltd., Killingworth,
Newcastle upon Tyne
Printed in England by Clays Ltd., St Ives plc

Introduction

Punctuation is essential to good writing. Without it, we are hard-pressed to say where a sentence ends or a paragraph begins, or how the nuances of a text are to be understood. Yet over the last thirty years, there has been a trend in British education away from formal teaching of this basic subject, with the predictable result that generations of students – and now, alas, of teachers too – are unsure of their ground. This book has three ambitions: firstly to offer simple guidelines for writers of text; secondly to show that punctuation is easy; and thirdly to suggest that it is important. It does not pretend to be the authoritative work on the subject: that would take a much longer book. But it does try to cover all the basic aspects of punctuation. It not only covers those areas where agreement is general, but also comments on matters of stylistic preference.

Generally speaking, the times we live in favour a minimalist approach to punctuation. When we read material written in the 1950s or earlier, we are often struck by the amount of punctuation in use – excessive to our latter-day eye. This book goes along with the minimalist or utilitarian philosophy: it seldom recommends the intervention of punctuation if none is strictly necessary. However, as I have said, it also takes the view that punctuation is important, so it takes issue strongly with those time and motion experts who advise the Civil Service and other hapless bodies that secretaries can pound out more letters per hour if they do away with commas. This may be true, but it is worthless advice, and if it is followed it may well account for not a little bureaucratic gobbledygook.

There are few absolutes in good punctuation. Like so

many other aspects of language, it is a moving target. We have only to look at the King James Bible to see how very far punctuation has evolved over the last four hundred years. The advent of the typewriter, of the popular press, and most recently of the word processor, have all had a significant impact on our approach to punctuation – not always for the better.

Where possible, and appropriate, in this book – for example, with the dash – I have tried to show examples of good practice, rather than a list of ‘Thou shalt not’s’. Because, while I firmly believe that punctuation can – indeed must – be taught, I am also aware that one of the best ways to teach is by good example.

An asterisk has been used in front of a sentence or word, as on page 18, to signify an erroneous construction – to be avoided. But note that not every erroneous construction in the book is preceded by an asterisk; in some cases, the text is sufficiently explanatory.

I believe readers will welcome the opportunity to check their own punctuation skills. At the end of most chapters, there is a ‘Check-up’ section containing sentences and longer texts which need punctuating. Readers are invited to complete these exercises, and check their accuracy against the answers offered at the end of the book.

Contents

Introduction		
Chapter 1	The Full Stop	1
Chapter 2	The Exclamation Mark and the Question Mark	6
Chapter 3	The Comma	10
Chapter 4	The Semicolon	22
Chapter 5	The Colon	25
Chapter 6	The Apostrophe	28
Chapter 7	Capital Letters	33
Chapter 8	The Hyphen	38
Chapter 9	Quotation Marks and Direct Speech	44
Chapter 10	The Paragraph	51
Chapter 11	Brackets	56
Chapter 12	The Dash	60
Chapter 13	A Note on the Oblique Mark or Slash	63
Chapter 14	A Note on Using Italics	66
Chapter 15	Punctuating and Setting Out a Letter	69
Chapter 16	American Punctuation	74
Chapter 17	Common Errors	77
Chapter 18	A Final Check-up	80
Key to Check-up Sections		87
Index		100

The Full Stop

1.1 A preliminary note on the sentence

It makes little sense to talk about punctuation marks without a word on the sentence. The *Oxford English Dictionary* calls a sentence 'such a portion of composition or utterance as extends from one full stop to another'. *Chambers English Dictionary* calls it 'a number of words making a complete grammatical structure, in writing generally begun with a capital letter and ended with a full stop or its equivalent'. For the purposes of this book, let us define a sentence as a group of words that makes sense, that contains a verb, that begins with a capital letter and ends with a full stop or its equivalent (a question mark or exclamation mark).

1.2 The full stop as the end of a sentence

The full stop or period is the basic punctuation point. Everyone knows that it indicates the end of a sentence. If you take the view that sentences should be short and simple, you will be happy to see a text with lots of full stops in it. Because usually that means a text that is easy to read.

In formal or correct English, a sentence is usually an indication by the writer of a complete, unified thought. In most simple sentences, a full stop is the only punctuation required:

He lives in Jamaica.
Monday was a glorious day.
Their work was hopeless.
I was completely fed up with her.
Our beach is badly polluted.

Even in some longer and more complicated sentences, a full

stop is the only punctuation required:

I was late home on Monday because I couldn't start the car.

She works in the evenings in order to save some money for her holidays.

He was a keen sportsman and had won a number of trophies.

She packed an overnight bag and left by the 10 o'clock train.

These longer sentences do not need to be broken up by a comma. Why? Because of *continuity of subject*. But the following sentences are different, and a comma is called for:

I was late home on Monday, and my daughter had gone back to London.

She works in the evenings, so her husband stays at home to put the children to bed.

Can you see the difference? It will be discussed further in Chapter 3 (page 12).

A common error is to use a full stop where no punctuation is necessary, or where another punctuation point should have been used:

* He stood there. Looking at us.

* They are at the pub. Celebrating his promotion.

* Two people came to see us. One called Andy and one called Sally.

What should we write?

He stood there looking at us.

They are at the pub celebrating his promotion.

Two people came to see us – one called Andy and one called Sally.

or –

Two people came to see us. One was called Andy and one was called Sally.

For purposes of emphasis, it is possible to use a full stop in the following context, even though it does not conclude a sentence:

I do not disagree with you. On the contrary.
He was not distressed by the criticism. Far from it.
I object. Comprehensively.
I love you. Honestly. Believe me.

There is a sort of compression (called ellipsis) at work here. *On the contrary*, *Far from it*, *Comprehensively* and *Honestly* are not real sentences. The implication of these statements gives the following complete sentences:

I do not disagree with you. On the contrary, I agree with you.
He was not distressed by the criticism. Far from it – he throve on it.
I object, and I object comprehensively.
I love you. Honestly I do. Believe me when I say this.

Stylistically, the earlier versions are better because much more succinct.

Unpunctuated text gives the stilted robot-effect of ‘computer-speak’. Readers cannot begin to guess the tone required, indeed they may find it difficult to establish the basic meaning. They soon run out of breath if trying to read unpunctuated text aloud. Try it with the following text, and then see if you can put in the full stops.

Cinderella entered the room on her hands diamond rings glittered on her head a rich tiara sparkled among the golden curls on her pretty little feet two glass slippers gleamed as she swirled through the room in a beautiful silken gown Prince Charming strode towards her (five full stops)

If you get the full stops in the wrong place, you can of course make the text look rather silly.

1.3 The full stop as an abbreviation mark

Full stops are also used as abbreviation marks, although nowadays many writers do not follow this usage. Hence you may find either:

Wm. Shakespeare	or	*Wm Shakespeare
J.B. Priestley		J B Priestley

Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde <i>or</i>	Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde
Alan Matthews O.B.E.	Alan Matthews OBE
T.V.	TV
R.S.V.P.	RSVP
Jones and Co. Ltd.	Jones and Co Ltd
U.K., U.S.A., and	UK, USA, and
U.S.S.R.	USSR
12 Feb. 1992	12 Feb 1992
A.D. and B.C.	AD and BC
i.e. and e.g.	ie and eg

There are still some exceptions to this optional approach to full stops. Full stops are *never* used for decimal currency (£ and p) or for metric measurements (km, m, cm, kg, g, l, etc).

1.4 The full stop to indicate ellipsis

Finally, a succession of full stops (sometimes called omission marks) is used to indicate ellipsis within or at the end of a sentence, to suggest that something is missing or withheld from a text, or that a sentence is tailing off in an incomplete way. In the latter sense, it may also be used to imply a threat:

- (a) What the ... does he think he's talking about?
- (b) There was a long, eerie silence and we waited and waited ...
- (c) Oh, so you'll hit him, will you? You dare ...
- (d) Let us leave them there, murmuring sweet nothings under a waning moon ...
- (e) How does it go? 'To be, or not to be, that is the question ...' But I'm afraid I've forgotten the next line.
- (f) I promise to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but ... so help me.

In (e) and (f) we see ellipsis used to indicate an incomplete quotation – a common context in which to find omission marks.

Generally, we use three dots to indicate the omission of a word or words. If this omission occurs at the end of a sentence, one of these three dots is seen as representing the full stop).

Punctuation Check-up

Make the following texts into sentences, with capital letters at the beginning and full stops at the end. Check your answers with page 87 for accuracy.

- (a) the crocodile lives in the mudbanks of rivers in India and Africa his huge body grows to a length of about ten metres people sometimes hunt him for his leather skin he has four short legs and can walk reasonably well but water is his chosen element here he can move really fast
- (b) one night a great storm broke over the city the thunder rolled and roared the lightning flashed and the rain fell in torrents everyone stayed indoors and hid from the elements suddenly there was a positive eruption of noise and flashes of blinding light the bursts came again and yet again the huddled masses trembled in their hovels
- (c) you have heard of the famous Niagara Falls several men have tried to go over these falls in barrels or small boats in nearly every case the barrels were smashed to pieces against the rocks and the men in them killed or drowned the only man who ever succeeded in going over the falls was Captain Webb later he was to lose his life trying to swim the rapids just below the falls

The Exclamation Mark and The Question Mark

In Chapter 1 we said that sentences ended with a full stop *or its equivalent*. There are two modifications of the full stop which may also be used to end a sentence: the exclamation mark and the question mark. They are in fact specialized forms of the full stop, so it would be quite correct to write any of the following sentence variations:

This is a dead parrot.

This is a dead parrot!

This is a dead parrot?

There is a ghost in the bedroom.

There is a ghost in the bedroom!

There is a ghost in the bedroom?

Only the punctuation marks at the end of these sentences tell you which one is a statement, which an exclamation and which a question. Only the punctuation tells you what tone or expression to use if you are reading these sentences aloud (for example, from a playscript). Exclamation marks and question marks signal particular kinds of statement or utterance, and I have listed the main types below.

2.1 The exclamation mark as a signal of emphasis

The exclamation mark is used to signal an exclamation, or emphatic utterance, and often suggests strong emotion. Sometimes it implies a sentence that is not to be taken seriously. The utterances may be complete or incomplete, single words or long sentences, as in:

Heavens above!

Not on your life!

Encore! Encore!

How dare you say a thing like that to me!
What an ass!
How lovely she looked!
Hail, Caesar!
Help!
Look out!

Two tendencies are to be avoided here. One is the gushing tendency – the addition of exclamation marks to ordinary statements, perhaps with the intention of artificially brightening up one's writing, as in:

It was lovely to see you all last week!
Your hospitality was much appreciated!

These two sentences should of course close with a full stop, and the exclamation marks might in fact be construed as a gratuitous form of ambiguity. Was it *really* lovely to see them all last week, one wonders? And was the hospitality perhaps on the meagre side?

The other tendency to curb is the multiple exclamation mark which is also used as a rather feeble attempt at extra emphasis. (There is more on this at **2.3**, *below*.)

2.2 The critical exclamation mark or question mark

You will occasionally come across an exclamation mark or question mark in parentheses. This rather special use is to draw attention to something surprising or suspicious or uncertain in a statement. It is used thus:

He said he was enjoying (!) himself, but he didn't look too good to me sitting there in his hospital bed.

He said in rapid French that his name was Ellis (?) and that he wanted a meal – something like that.

He gave an interesting series of talks on the poetry of Geoffrey Chaucer (?1340 – 1400) and the paintings of Hieronymus Bosch (?1450 – 1516).

2.3 The question mark to signal interrogation

The normal use of a question mark is of course to signal the asking of a question. Thus:

Where are you going?
What on earth are you doing?
How far is it to Rickmansworth station?
Where is he, I wonder?
Have you sent in your tax return for last year?

When these questions are being reported indirectly, the question mark is not required. So:

He asked me where I was going.
She asked me what on earth I was doing.
He asked how far it was to Rickmansworth station.
I wondered where he was.
I am writing to ask whether you have sent in your tax return for last year.

Question marks, like flowers and exclamation marks, seem to invite bad writers to use them in little bunches. So we often see things like this:

- * Who the hell does he think he is???
- * I was really and truly hopping mad with him!!!

The tabloid press has tended to set a bad example in this. In my view, we do well to avoid this misuse of the simple conventions of punctuation, however indifferently we write. It takes more than multiple punctuation marks to pep up a tired piece of text.

Punctuation Check-up

See if you can replace the numbers in these sentences with the appropriate punctuation marks – full stops, question marks, exclamation marks, etc. The answers are on page 87.

- (a) It is a painting by Renoir, isn't it(1)
- (b) I'd call it a ghastly mess – just look at it (2)
- (c) Where's John's ball (3) Give it back to him at once (4)
- (d) 'What's the time (5)' asked John (6)
- (e) Have you change for a pound coin please (7)
- (f) 'What is truth (8)' asked Jestling Pilate, but did not stop for an answer (9)
- (g) Help me (10) I'm drowning (11)

- (h) Who is the man in that shop (12) I haven't met him before, have I (13)
- (i) Pass on the good news (14) He's won the football pools (15)
- (j) She asked me where I'd been for my holidays (16)

The Comma

The comma is the second key punctuation point. If the full stop is the most important of the 'heavier' stops, the comma is by far the most important of the 'lighter' stops. It is the commonest and most versatile punctuation mark *inside the sentence*. It has been well described as 'the most ubiquitous, elusive and discretionary of all stops'.

3.1 The comma in lists

One of the easiest uses of the comma is in lists. The lists may be nouns, they may be adjectives, they may be verbs or other parts of speech. The rules are similar. Look at these sentences:

- (a) They played football, cricket, tennis and rounders.
- (b) France, Italy, Germany and the Benelux countries were the founding members of the European Community.
- (c) Nick Faldo, Ian Woosnam, Seve Ballesteros and Steve Richardson were members of the Ryder Cup team.
- (d) It was an excellent shopping centre with all the main High Street stores, including Boots, W H Smith, Woolworths, John Lewis, and Marks and Spencer.
- (e) A variety of old classic comedy movies was on offer, by stars such as Woody Allen, Buster Keaton, the Marx Brothers, and Laurel and Hardy.
- (f) For its antiquity, for its massive size, for its peacefulness and its sheer beauty, the cathedral at Chartres is well worth visiting.

The only real question here is whether or not to put a comma between the last two items in a list – the items joined by *and*. The answer to this knotty problem is: it depends. Sometimes the sense demands one, sometimes not. I have used one in (d), (e) and (f) above, but not in (a), (b) and (c). Why? In (a), (b) and (c) the meaning of the sentences does not require a comma to precede *and*. In (d), on the other hand, if we had written *John Lewis and Marks and Spencer*, without a separating comma, a stranger to Britain's High Streets might have wondered if the store in question was called *John Lewis and Marks and Spencer*, or even wondered if there were stores called, on the one hand, *John Lewis and Marks*, and on the other, *Spencer*. The simple addition of a comma resolves any ambiguity. In (e) too, use of a comma before the final *and* resolves a similar problem.

3.2 Commas between adjectives

Often we use two or more adjectives to describe a noun, as in the following sentences. We treat these as we treat any cumulative list, by separating the elements with a comma:

It was a tall, ugly, post-war municipal building.

She was a grumpy, sinister, long-nosed old witch.

The Grand Old Duke of York presided over a council of his feckless, unruly, warlike barons.

There are occasions, however, when multiple adjectives are not used cumulatively, so are not separated by a comma. If we talk about *the Grand Old Duke* (or *a bright red car*, or *a great big dog*), no comma is required. This is because the two adjectives together convey a single idea rather than two different ones: *grand* and *old* convey a single, affectionate sense (just as *bright* and *great* function in a similar way, as modifiers rather than independent adjectives).

Again, where two or more adjectives are linked by *and*, no comma is necessary. So one might write *a dilapidated, blue and white bus*, or *an old, crumbling and derelict building*.

3.3 Commas in pairs

A pair of commas is often required, and is used in the same way as brackets or dashes. Look at these sentences: