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# Punctuate It Right!

HARRY SHAW

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A COMPLETE QUICK-REFERENCE GUIDE  
TO MODERN PUNCTUATION

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# ***Punctuate It Right!***

***by***

***Harry Shaw***



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## Foreword

Punctuation and spelling apparently cause more people more trouble than any other aspect of writing with the possible exception of what is loosely known as "grammar." Both are somewhat mechanical and superficial phases of writing, nowhere near so important as having something significant to say and a genuine interest in saying that something, whatever it is. But neither punctuation nor spelling can be neglected because they have a direct bearing upon success or failure in communicating ideas from writer to reader—the primary aim of writing—and because errors in either one unfairly, and all too often, reflect adversely upon a writer's intelligence, knowledge, and social standing.

In another work,<sup>1</sup> I have done what I can to help with the pesky problem of spelling; in this, my aim is to provide helpful comment on all the marks of punctuation and mechanics which are likely to confront you in reading and which you may need in any writing of whatever kind you do. In fact, this book includes discussion and illustration of many marks which, properly speaking, are not matters of either punctuation or mechanics but are closely allied to each. It is, I believe, the most comprehensive work on punctuation ever designed for the general reader and writer; obviously, it is less bulky than books assembled for the guidance of such professional workers as copyreaders, copy editors, and printers.

Much that it contains is based upon problems which I have encountered over the years in the usages of fellow workers in various offices and in the manuscripts which, as an editor, I have been reading for more than two decades. These studies have been supplemented by wide reading in contemporary magazines, newspapers, and books in an attempt to discover not what *should* be considered correct punctuation but what is actually being used in reputable publications. All of my findings have been compared

<sup>1</sup> *Spell It Right!*, Barnes & Noble, 1961.

## FOREWORD

to, and contrasted with, the suggestions of several excellent works of importance and distinction:

Ball, Alice Morton, *The Compounding and Hyphenation of English Words*. New York: Funk & Wagnalls Company, 1951.

Collins, F. Howard, *Authors' and Printers' Dictionary*. 10th ed. London: Oxford University Press, 1956.

*A Manual of Style*, 11th ed. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1949.

*The New York Times Style Book*. Edited and revised by Lewis Jordan. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1962.

Parker, William Riley, *The MLA Style Sheet*. Revised edition. New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 1951.

Skillin, Marjorie E., et al. *Words into Type*. New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, Inc., 1948.

*Style Manual of the United States Government Printing Office*. Revised edition. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1959.

Summey, Jr., George, *American Punctuation*. New York: The Ronald Press Company, 1949.

These authoritative, superbly prepared books do not always agree with each other, but there is far more agreement than might be expected about so involved a subject as punctuation. When differences of opinion occur in these works, or where modern publication practices seem to differ, I have tried to suggest the more prevalent usage, the most generally accepted "rules," but have been careful to call your attention to these variations.

Because practices in punctuation do vary so widely and because authorities sometimes differ among themselves, writing a book on modern American punctuation is not easy. Scores of unnamed and unknown copy editors and printers have helped to shape this small book, but a few persons who have given me direct aid *are* known to me and should be named. Chief among them is my longtime friend and co-worker, George S. Wykoff of Purdue University. Parts of the book you hold in your hands are adapted from materials which he and I have prepared for other works which we have written together. In addition, Professor Wykoff read the manuscript of this present book and strengthened it immeasurably through his sage advice and as a result of his long experience as a close student of writing. I also acknowledge my indebtedness to Holly Hanford and Ann Perry, each of whom has

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done much to help me with the voluminous reading, research, and typing and editing chores involved. Without the assistance of these three friends and that of hundreds of unnamed writers, copy editors, former students, and professional associates this book would be far less helpful than possibly it is.

As you begin, or renew, your study of punctuation, always keep in mind that punctuation at times is simple, clear, and unchanging in its applications. But you must be equally sure to remember that punctuation, like spelling, is not always and uniformly subject to precise and unvarying rules. It is often illogical; common sense will not always be your salvation; certain punctuation practices are matters of convention, nothing else. And yet, punctuation is of basic importance in writing; it is truly organic, a genuine part of writing. Edgar Allan Poe was hardly exaggerating when he said: "Even where the sense is perfectly clear, a sentence may be deprived of half its force—its spirit—its point by improper punctuation."

In routine correspondence, and particularly in business affairs, proper punctuation often has an importance out of proportion to the worth of ideas being expressed. Occasionally, however, you simply *must* punctuate correctly in order to communicate without error and without distortion. An 18th century English writer once said: "Method is the very hinge of business; and there is no method without punctuality." The statement can be rephrased and expanded without too much stretching of the truth: "Method is the very hinge of business; and there is no method in business correspondence without proper punctuation." Whatever your writing *business* is—an informal letter, an order from a catalog, an application for a job, a tender missive to your beloved—make sure that your punctuation is working for and not against you. Doing so is easier than you may think.

H.S.

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**Part One**

**WHAT PUNCTUATION  
IS AND DOES**

THE ONE

WHAT FUNCTION

AND DOES

## Chapter I

# Punctuation Is for Clarity

When you talk you do not depend upon words alone to tell your listener what you mean. Facial and bodily gestures can and do add much to the words themselves: you shrug a shoulder, wiggle a finger, raise an eyebrow, wink, clasp hands, bend forward or backward, grin or grimace, stamp your foot, nod or shake your head. The tone and stress of your voice can and do influence the meanings of words you speak: you yell or whisper; speak calmly or angrily; lower or raise your voice at the end of a statement or a question. Meaning in talk is affected by pauses and halts which are often as significant as words themselves. Each of us has probably seen a skilled actor convey ideas and moods without using any words at all.

Similarly, when we write we cannot expect words alone to make clear to our reader what we have (or think we have) in mind. The pauses, stresses, and inflections which occur in speech must be represented in writing by various marks of punctuation if meaning is to be fully clear. The needs of the eye are quite different from those of the voice and ear.

Punctuation came into existence solely for the purpose of making clear the meaning of written words. Every mark of punctuation is a sort of shorthand device or road sign provided to help the reader along his way. Punctuation is effective if it helps the reader to understand; it is harmful or ineffective if it impedes the flow of thought from your mind to that of your readers.

Consider the matter this way: a question mark in writing is related to the rising inflection in one's voice when he asks a question. The mark indicates to the reader, "You have just read a

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group of words which should be interpreted as a question." An exclamation point conveys an idea of surprise or determination or command which would be indicated by a strongly emotional tone in speaking. A period represents the pause which occurs in speaking when one idea has been stated and another is perhaps to be expressed; it signals to the reader, "What you have just read is a statement, a sentence or sentence-equivalent." A comma indicates a shorter pause than a period or question mark or exclamation point or, indeed, than several other marks of punctuation. Proper punctuation is essential to clear, correct, effective writing because it actually and realistically helps to express thoughts and the relationships of thoughts.

When you listen to conversation, you know who is speaking at any given moment, but when you read an account of such a conversation, the dialogue must be properly set off in paragraphs and the talk put between quotation marks if it is to be clear and meaningful. When you wish to refer in conversation to "a man's hat," you don't say *a man apostrophe s hat*, but when you write the phrase that is precisely what you convey: *a man's hat*. We say *mans*, but if we wrote the word that way we would be thought childish, or ignorant, or both.

Again, the relationship between parts of a sentence is revealed by word order; words in an English sentence have meaning largely because of their position. But word order in both spoken and written English is flexible and can be widely varied. *Beyond the door* and *the door beyond* may have quite different meanings. "*The door beyond* could be plainly seen, half open" is a clear and correct sentence. But what about "*Beyond the door* could be plainly seen, half open"? Note that the addition of a mark of punctuation will make the meaning of this second sentence instantly clear: "*Beyond, the door* could be plainly seen, half open."

In written English, various marks of punctuation both suggest and indicate the grouping and relationship required to convey meaning clearly. That is, punctuation shows what to take together and what to separate in quick, silent reading; it suggests the relationships of words and groups of words and indicates something about their emphasis and importance. Punctuation is organically related to the *sense* of a sentence, to "sentence flow," as it has been called.

A merchant who sold only *fuel oil* and *lumber* was horrified,

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and his telephones were swamped with calls, because one of his advertisements mistakenly read: WE SELL FUEL, OIL, AND LUMBER. The addition of two commas changed the description of his business and cost him time, trouble, and money.

Here is another true anecdote which will drive home the necessity of punctuation in writing and of correct pauses and inflections in speaking so that meaning will be clear. A man walked into a friend's office and asked the friend's secretary, "Is he overeating?"

"I hope not," was her prompt reply.

Now what both the visitor and the secretary well knew was that the former meant to inquire whether the other man was away, across the street at a popular restaurant, "over there" and engaged in "eating." That is, he meant to ask, "Is he over, eating?" or "Is he over—eating?" or "Is he over? Eating?" Without a pause in speaking after *over* or without punctuation after it in writing, the secretary may be considered to have made a sensible reply to the query. Those who feel that the main purpose of punctuation is to indicate the stops, or breathing spaces, suitable in reading have a little truth on their side, but not much.

If you came across them in your reading, what sense would you make of these famous "trick" sentences often used in stressing the importance of punctuation?

Jones where Smith had had had had had had had had had had the examiners approval.

That that is is that that is not is not is not that it it is.

These sentences can be punctuated in several ways, but here are acceptable methods illustrating that punctuation is indeed essential for clarity in writing:

Jones, where Smith had had "had," had had "had had." "Had had" had had the examiner's approval.

That that is, is. That that is not, is not. Is not that it? It is.

Correct punctuation is organic, not merely mechanical and arbitrary. By *organic* is meant "belonging to, an essential part of." If you doubt that correct punctuation is an integral part of written English, ask someone to copy a page from a book or a few paragraphs from a newspaper story, omitting all marks of punctuation and mechanics. Try to read what he has copied. Yes, you can probably make sense of the passage, but how much extra time and effort did you expend? Correct punctuation is in itself a form

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of communication. And communication is, or should be, the primary purpose of all writing.

Punctuation usage does vary with individual writers, but not so much as you may have thought and then only to the extent that communication from writer to reader is aided, not impeded. Possibly as much as one-fourth of punctuation is a matter of personal taste—but only to the extent that marks used help to make fully clear the words themselves. This leaves most practices in punctuation a fairly rigid matter of “rules.” Certain basic practices and principles of punctuation remain steadfast and have done so for many decades. These principles may be called “descriptive rules,” since they have been formulated from hundreds of thousands of examples as applied by reputable writers and, much more importantly, by professional editors and printers.

Variations in practice do occur, and writers do interpret in different ways the shorthand symbols of punctuation, but areas of agreement far exceed those of disagreement. What is normally considered correct punctuation has been fixed over the years by professional workers following the advice and suggestions set forth in standard guidebooks and dictionaries. These guidebooks have been slowly evolved from observed practices in carefully written English.

When a preponderant number of examples of one use of a mark of punctuation has been gathered, a general rule is phrased: “Always use the . . .” When the majority of examples agree, the rule is stated: “This mark is *usually* used . . .” When examples of the use of a mark of punctuation for a particular purpose are insufficient to make a generalization, the rule will state “The mark is *occasionally* used . . .”

Certain marks are always used to accomplish a particular purpose. To fulfill other aims, other marks may be used somewhat indiscriminately and loosely. But the dominant aim of every mark of punctuation and mechanics is to aid in making writing clear. In fact, this is the one and only true aim of *all* punctuation.