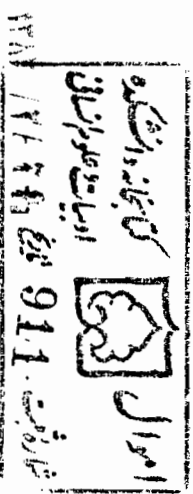


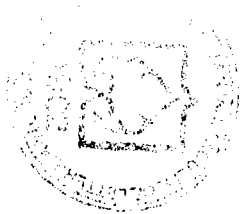


# Good Punctuation

Graham King



HarperCollins Publishers



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HarperCollinsPublishers

Westerhill Road, Bishopbriggs, Glasgow G64 2QT

www.collins.co.uk

First published 2000 as Collins Wordpower Punctuation

This edition published 2004

Reprint 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 0

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Cartoons by Hunt Emerson

ISBN 0 00 717292 3

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

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Typeset by Davidson Pre-Press Graphics Ltd, Glasgow G3

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

## GRAHAM KING (1930-1999)

Graham King was born in Adelaide on October 16, 1930. He trained as a cartographer and draughtsman before joining Rupert Murdoch's burgeoning media empire in the 1960s, where he became one of Murdoch's leading marketing figures during the hard-fought Australian newspaper circulation wars of that decade. Graham King moved to London in 1969, where his marketing strategy transformed the *Sun* newspaper into the United Kingdom's bestselling tabloid; subsequently, after 1986, he successfully promoted the reconstruction of *The Sunday Times* as a large multi-section newspaper.

A poet, watercolourist, landscape gardener and book collector, Graham King also wrote a biography of Zola, *Garden of Zola* (1978) and several thrillers such as *Killtest* (1978). Other works include the novel *The Pandora Valley* (1973), a semi-autobiographical account of the hardships endured by the Australian unemployed and their families set in the 1930s.

In the early 1990s, inspired by the unreadability and impracticality of many of the guides to English usage in bookshops, Graham King developed the concept of a series of reference guides called The One-Hour Wordpower series: accessible, friendly guides designed to guide the reader through the maze of English usage. He later expanded and revised the texts to create an innovative series of English usage guides that would break new ground in their accessibility and usefulness. The new range of reference books became the Collins Wordpower series, the first four titles being published in March 2000, the second four in May 2000. Graham King died in May 1999, shortly after completing the Collins Wordpower series.

**PUNCTUATION. n. [punctum, Latin]. 1. The use of symbols not belonging to the alphabet to indicate intonation and meaning not otherwise conveyed in the written language. 2. The symbols used for this purpose.**

## **Introduction**

Punctuation makes possible the clear presentation of the written language.

Or, as one British newspaper advises its writers, punctuation is 'a courtesy designed to help readers to understand a story without stumbling'. It is the nuts and bolts of the language.

There is a strong view that punctuation is more important than spelling. Dr Temple, a former Archbishop of York, thought so. 'Now spelling is one of the decencies of life, like the proper use of knives and forks,' he wrote in 1938. But, 'if you are getting your commas, semicolons and full stops wrong, it means that you are not getting your thoughts right, and your mind is muddled.'

Despite the importance of punctuation in effective communication, there seems today to be a woeful indifference to and ignorance about using even its simplest forms.

Or can it be fear? If so, then punctuation's scary image is undeserved, as you'll soon discover in this book. Although designed as an all-inclusive, authoritative reference work it will guarantee to take the perils out of punctuation quickly, efficiently and – yes – entertainingly.

*Everyone in the cast knew that Pamela would wish to be the star performer, and once having achieved that status would look down on the rest.*

*Everyone in the cast knew that Pamela would wish to be the star performer and, once having achieved that status, would look down on the rest.*

With the invention and growth of printing, the need for punctuation was inevitable, and publishers have played a vital part in its development. With punctuation, a page of type became more inviting and easier to read, and self-interested publishers ensured that the system was refined and permanent. More than any other group, publishers of newspapers, magazines and books are our punctuation police, the custodians of the language. But publishers are also human and thus prone to sloppiness and error, as the many examples of punctuation bloopers and barbarisms in this book will attest.

None of us should ever take punctuation for granted!

### ***Collins Makes Punctuation Easy***

Anyone who reads and writes needs to possess a good working knowledge of English grammar, and that includes punctuation. Any piece of writing will fall apart without the nuts and bolts of punctuation.

It's an irony that although the wonderful communicating tool known as English is the second most widely used language in the world today, it is also probably the most abused and misused. During the last few decades millions of British schoolchildren were

denied any formal instruction in important aspects of grammar and punctuation.

Now, as adults, many lack confidence when they come to put pen to paper or finger to keyboard. Fortunately there are signs that near-illiteracy is no longer the fashion, and the urge to improve writing skills (judging from the sales of dictionaries and language books) is growing at a phenomenal rate.

This book is intended for all those people for whom punctuation is a plague of spots and dots and marks. The role of punctuation in writing good English is demonstrated step by logical, practical step. Hundreds of examples help explain in seconds what hours of former teaching – or the lack of it – never managed to impart.

And take heart! Somerset Maugham couldn't handle commas. Jane Austen got her quotation marks in a twist. George Orwell feared semicolons so much he wrote a novel without any at all. The competition isn't so awesome after all.

*Collins Good Punctuation* is an easy-going refresher course that banishes forever hassles with hyphens, catastrophes with apostrophes, confusion with commas. After an hour or two with this book the perils of punctuation should exist no more.



### ***Punctuation for the Birds***

The following passage employs all the punctuation marks used in writing English. They are, in order of appearance: capital letter, italic and bold emphasis, asterisk, semicolon, comma, parenthesis, colon, full stop, double quotation marks, contraction apostrophe, question mark, exclamation mark, underline, dash, hyphens, possessive apostrophe, square brackets, stroke, single quotation marks, and three-dot ellipsis.

The habits of the ***Rook\**** are very interesting and easily watched; hours can be wasted in early spring observing them as, cawing incessantly, they gather in their rookery to build or repair their large nests in the topmost branches, causing a rain of twigs and sticks to fall on the garden below (and not only on the garden: my brother was almost knocked out after being hit by a branch of Scots pine. "What's that?" he cried out, obviously dazed. "A tree's fallen on me!") and which are never retrieved. Worse, of course, is to be struck by a dead rook – the weak and ne'er-do-wells are executed and expelled from their nests – and anyone blizzed by a half-kilo chunk of solid rook's meat can say with some feeling [the editor concurs, having had just such an experience/calamity] that walking under a rookery is definitely 'for the birds' . . .

\* And this is a footnote.

## **A Victorian Schoolmistress's 10 Golden Rules of Punctuation**

Sentences begin with a *Capital letter*,

So as to make your writing better.

Use a *full stop* to mark the end.

It closes every sentence penned.

The *comma* is for short pauses and breaks,

And also for lists the writer makes.

*Dashes* – like these – are for thoughts by the way.

They give extra information (so do *brackets* we may say).

These two dots are *colons*: they pause to compare.

They also do this: list, explain, and prepare.

The *semicolon* makes a break; followed by a clause.

It does the job of words that link; it's also a short pause.

An *apostrophe* shows the owner of anyone's things,

And it's also useful for shortenings.

I'm so glad! He's so mad! We're having such a lark!

To show strong feelings use an *exclamation mark*!

A *question mark* follows What? When? Where? Why?

and How?

Do you? Can I? Shall we? Give us your answer now!

*"Quotation marks"* enclose what is said,

Which is why they're sometimes called "speech marks"  
instead.

# Units of Space

# Sentences and Paragraphs

Space is a basic form of punctuation. It separates words, sentences, paragraphs and larger units such as chapters.

Historically, in mediaeval manuscripts and early books, sentences were separated by a variety of decorative devices.

But with the advent of printing this labour-intensive practice was dropped in favour of plain spaces: small spaces between words, larger spaces between sentences, and fresh lines – sometimes indented – for paragraphs, as in this book.

Early capital letters were typically highly ornamented to draw attention to the start of a sentence. Today, although we have dropped the ornamentation, the capital still conventionally serves as a marker for the beginning of sentences and proper names and is also used for several other functions.

The sentence is about the most common of all grammatical units. We speak in sentences. The most untutored letter-writers among us will use them while ignoring every other form of punctuation. So the sentence seems to be a good place to begin a discussion about punctuation.

## **The Unique Nature of the Sentence**

So, what is a sentence? The *Oxford English Dictionary's* famous definition was: 'Such portion of a composition or utterance as

extends from one full stop to another.' More recently (1998) the *Collins English Dictionary* described the sentence as 'a sequence of words capable of standing alone to make an assertion, ask a question, or give a command, usually consisting of a subject and a predicate containing a finite verb.' And there are dozens more stabs by eminent grammarians at defining what a sentence is and is not, which is surprising as the unit has been around for some 1,500 years.

What the grammarians seem to miss is the sentence's quality of uniqueness. The American philologist Professor Stephen Pinker delights in pointing this out.

'Go into the Library of Congress,' he suggests, 'and pick a sentence at random from any volume, and chances are you would fail to find an exact repetition no matter how long you continued to search. Estimates of the number of sentences that an ordinary person is capable of producing are breathtaking . . . Let's assume that a person is capable of producing sentences up to twenty words long. Therefore the number of sentences that a speaker can deal with in principle is at least a hundred million trillion (100,000,000,000,000,000).'

If that statistic puts you into a spin, at least the functions of the sentence are quite straightforward:

- To make statements.
- To ask questions.
- To request action.
- To express feelings.



It's also reasonable to say that a sentence should express a single idea, and that it should be complete in thought and construction. Like this:

*The rare great crested newt was once called the great wary newt.*

The sentence can be quite elastic, and punctuation allows us to expand this useful unit:

*The rare great crested newt, which is native to Britain and rarely exceeds fifteen centimetres in length, was once called the great wary newt.*

You'll notice how the cunning commas have enabled us to double the length of the sentence without sacrificing any of its original clarity.

Sentences can also shrink, often alarmingly:

*'Don't!'*

That single word, providing it is given meaning by other words and thoughts surrounding it, is a sentence, or more accurately, a sentence fragment. Here it is, now in a context that provides its relevance and meaning:

*I went over to the door and tried to open it.*

*'Don't!'*

*I spun around, searching for the owner of the angry voice. In the darkness, a face appeared . . .*

You can see that not only the surrounding words, but also a range of spaces and punctuation marks, help to give that single word the meaning intended. Here is another example, the opening of Charles Dickens's novel *Bleak House*:



*London. Michaelmas Term lately over, and the Lord Chancellor sitting in Lincoln's Inn Hall. Implacable November weather. As much mud in the streets, as if the waters had but newly retired from the face of the earth, and it would not be wonderful to meet a Megalosaurus, forty feet long or so, waddling like an elephantine lizard up Holborn Hill. Smoke lowering down from chimney-pots, making a soft black drizzle, with flakes of soot in it as big as full-grown snow-flakes – gone into mourning, one might imagine, for the death of the sun. Dogs, undistinguishable in mire. Horses, scarcely better; splashed to their very blinkers.*

*Foot passengers, jostling one another's umbrellas, in a general inflection of ill-temper, and losing their foot-hold at street-corners, where tens of thousands of other foot passengers have been slipping and sliding since the day broke (if this day ever broke), adding new deposits to the crust upon crust of mud, sticking at those points tenaciously to the pavement, and accumulating at compound interest.*

The first three sentences in this passage are not grammatical sentences at all, and most grammarians would choke over several of the others, too. But it is such a vivid evocation of a miserable rainy November day in Victorian London that few would dare to challenge the novelist's masterly manipulation of the language. Or argue too much about 'proper' sentences. At least they are punctuated correctly; they all start with a capital letter and finish with a full stop.

### **How Long is a Sentence?**

A question that crops up with astonishing regularity is, 'How long should a sentence be?' The usual answer is, neither too long nor too short. A sensible approach is to regard short sentences as more easily understood than long, complicated ones, but an endless succession of staccato sentences can be irritating to the reader. It really comes down to judgment. Careful writers will 'hear' their work as they proceed; that way the sentences will form themselves into a logical, interesting, economical and, with luck, elegant flow of thought.

Here's a piece of prose that's more a form of mental torture than sentence:

*A person shall be treated as suffering from physical disablement such that he is either unable to walk or virtually unable to do so if he is not unable or virtually unable to walk with a prosthesis or an artificial aid which he habitually wears or uses or if he would not be unable or virtually unable to walk if he habitually wore or used a prosthesis or an artificial aid which is suitable in his case.*

That is a grammatical sentence written by someone expecting it to be understood, but it defies understanding. Yet what it is trying to say is something very simple and which can be unambiguously expressed in our ideal sentence, 'complete in thought and construction':

*Persons are regarded as physically disabled if they always need an artificial aid to walk.*

As you can see, sentences can be grammatical without making any sense. The linguist Noam Chomsky proved this by forming a chain of words that bore the least logical relationship with each other: *Colourless green ideas sleep furiously*. The words make no sense but it is a well-formed sentence complete with verb.

### **The Paragraph**

The most quoted definition of a paragraph is that of Sir Ernest Gowers, who wrote in *The Complete Plain Words* that it is 'a unit of thought, not of length . . . homogeneous in subject matter and sequential in treatment of it.' *The Times*, in advising its journalists, adds: 'Rarely should a paragraph in *The Times* be of only one sentence, least of all a short one, unless special emphasis

is needed. Long paragraphs are tedious but short ones are jerky and can be equally hard to follow. The best advice is to remember Gowers and ask, before pressing the paragraph key, "Have I finished that thought?"

All very well, but of all the units of punctuation the paragraph is the least precise and the most resistant to rules. Sometimes they are indented, sometimes not. Quite often, the first paragraph under a heading is not indented, although all subsequent paragraphs are. Browse through a handful of books and you'll note that paragraphs can consist of a single line or a single word; you'll also see leviathan examples which take up a page or more.

Here are some practical pointers. Think of the end of a paragraph as a sort of breathing space for both writer and listener. The writer needs to gather his thoughts afresh, and the reader needs a momentary rest from concentration. In writing, a new paragraph marks a break or change in the flow of thought, which is as good a reason as any to begin on a fresh line.

### Capitalisation

Capital letters are an important form of punctuation in that they help to guide the eye and mind through a text. Try this:

*mi5 is the branch of the british intelligence organisation responsible for internal security and counter-espionage in the united kingdom. mi6 is the branch responsible for international espionage. the us has its fbi, south africa has its boss, israel its mossad and the republic of ireland its g2. spies love abbreviations. Then, in britain there's mil, mi8, mi9 and, ultimately, wx, the butlins of the spy world.*

That's a paragraph shorn of capital letters. It's readable, with some effort, but how much easier would the eye glide through it were the beginnings of sentences and names guided with capital letters – not to mention abbreviations!

Using capitals to flag the start of sentences is clear enough but confusion surrounds the capitalising of certain nouns and names. Try this Capital Quiz:

### Capital Quiz

Of this dozen nouns and names, half are incorrect.

Which ones?

the Army, Spring and Autumn, bulldog, Great Dane, union jack, Vincent Van Gogh, jacuzzi, french fries, Renaissance, Venus, new testament, down under.

*[Answers: the army, spring and autumn, Union Jack, Vincent van Gogh, Jacuzzi, New Testament, Down Under. The others are correct.]*

Some capitalisations are logical but many are not. Some are consistent throughout the language while others are arbitrary, differing from country to country and even from one publisher or newspaper to another. Here, as a guideline, are the generally accepted capitalisations for a range of fairly common nouns and names.

### A Guide to Capitalisation

#### Sentences

Begin every sentence with a capital letter.

#### First Person

Always capitalised: *I said I was going out.*

**Pronoun** Capitals do not follow commas, semicolons or colons except where the following word is a name or proper noun.

**Aircraft** *Concorde, Boeing 747, Fokker*, etc.

**Armed Forces** *British Army, Italian Navy, Brazilian Air Force*, but *army, navy, air force*. *The Royal Marines*, but *marine*. Ranks are capitalised: *Sergeant, Admiral, Lieutenant*, etc.

**The Calendar** *Monday, March, Good Friday, the Millennium Dome* but *the new millennium*.

**Compass Points** *north-west, south-south-west*, but *mysterious East, deep South, frozen North*.

**Days** *Christmas Day, Derby Day, New Year's Day*, etc, but *happy new year*.

**The Deity** *God, Father, Holy Ghost, Holy Spirit, Almighty, Jehovah, Supreme Being, Jesus Christ, Son of Man, Holy Trinity, Redeemer, Saviour, He, Him, Thee, Thou, Virgin Mary, the Virgin, Madonna, the Holy Mother, Our Lady, Allah, Buddha, Muhammad, the Prophet*, etc; *Holy Bible, New Testament, Book of Common Prayer, Ten Commandments*; all names from the Bible. *Hades*, but *hell*; *heaven* but *Heaven* when referring to the Deity.

**Diplomatic** *Nicaraguan embassy* (*embassy* is usually lower case)

### Dog Breeds

**Capitalised:** *Afghan hound, Airdale terrier, Basenji, Great Dane, Kerry blue, Labrador, Newfoundland, Pomeranian, Samoyed, Schnauzer, Cairns terrier, Scotch terrier.*  
**Lower case:** *basset hound, bulldog, bull terrier, cocker spaniel, golden retriever, lurcher, pug, poodle, rottweiler*. Check a good dictionary for other breeds.

### Exclamations

*Oh! Ahrrgh! Wow!*

### Flora and Fauna

*Arab horse, Shetland pony, Montague's harrier*, but *hen harrier* (caps where proper name is involved). Plants are lower case but with scientific names, orders, classes, families and genuses are capitalised; species and varieties are lc: *Agaricus bisporus*.

### Geographical

*the West, the East, the Orient, Northern Hemisphere, Third World, British Commonwealth, the Gulf, the Midlands, the Levant, the Continent, the Tropics, the Left Bank*, etc, but *eastern countries, facing north, oriental life, tropical fruit, northern Britain, western fashions*.

### Headlines

With cap and lc headlines, capitalise nouns, pronouns, verbs and words of four or more letters. Generally, capitalise *No, Not, Off, Out, So* and *Up* but not *a, and, as, at, but, by, for, if, in, of, on, the, to* – except when they begin headlines. Capitalise both parts of hyphenated compounds: *St-I-In, Cease-Fire, Post-War*.

<b>Heavenly Bodies</b>	<i>Mars, Venus, Ursa Major, Halley's Comet, Southern Cross, Milky Way, etc.</i>
<b>History and Historical Names</b>	<i>Cambrian Era, Middle Ages, Elizabethan, the Depression, Renaissance, Year of the Rat, Georgian, Victorian etc.</i>
<b>Law and Lords</b>	<i>Lord Chancellor, Black Rod, Master of the Rolls, Lord Privy Seal, Queen's Counsel.</i>
<b>Local Government</b>	<i>council, but Kent County Council, Enfield Borough Council, Lord Mayor of Manchester.</i>
<b>Member of Parliament</b>	<i>member of parliament, but when abbreviated, MP.</i>
<b>Nations, Nationalities</b>	<i>Venezuela, Alaska, Brits, Estonians, Sudanese; Arabic, Latin, Hellenic, Parisian. Indian ink, Indian file, Indian clubs but indian summer. French polish, French stick, French kiss, French letter but french window. Morocco but morocco bound. Chinese but chinaware; Turkish bath, Turkish delight.</i>
<b>Personification</b>	<i>The family gods were Hope and Charity.</i>
<b>Political Parties, terms</b>	<i>Tory, Conservative Party, Labour Party, Liberal Democrats, Communist Party but communist, communism; Thatcherism, Leninist, Luddites, Marxist, Gaullist etc.</i>
<b>The Pope</b>	<i>the Pope but popes; Pope Paul, Pope John etc.</i>
<b>Proper Names</b>	<i>Names of people (Tony Blair, Spice Girls); places (Europe, Sydney, Mt Everest); titles (Pride and Prejudice, Nine O'Clock News);</i>

<b>Quotations</b>	<i>epithets (Iron Duke, Iron Lady); nicknames ('Tubby' Isaacs, 'Leadfoot' Evans). Capitalise the first word of complete quotations (The boss asked him, 'Well, where's the money?'), but not partial quotations, words or phrases.</i>
<b>Races</b>	<i>Aztecs, Shawnees, Aborigines, Asiatic.</i>
<b>Religious Names</b>	<i>the Church of England, the Roman Catholic Church etc, but church, synagogue, temple, cathedral. Rev Adam Black, Fr O'Brien, Sister Wendy, Mother Teresa, Archbishop of Canterbury; Catholics, Jew, Jewish, Semitic, anti-Semitism, Protestants, etc.</i>
<b>Royalty</b>	<i>The Queen, Duke of Edinburgh, Prince of Wales, Queen Mother, Princess Anne, the Crown.</i>
<b>Our Rulers</b>	<i>Her Majesty's Government, House of Commons, Prime Minister (PM when abbreviated), Secretary of State, Chancellor of the Exchequer.</i>
<b>Satirised References</b>	<i>In Crowd, Heavy Brigade, She Who Must Be Obeyed, Bright Young Things, Her Indoors.</i>
<b>Scouts</b>	<i>Scouts, Guides, Cubs.</i>
<b>Seasons</b>	<i>spring, summer, autumn, winter (all lc).</i>
<b>Ships</b>	<i>Curry Sark, HMS Invincible, Titanic.</i>
<b>Street Names</b>	<i>road, avenue, crescent, square etc, but Highfield Road, Spring Avenue, Eagle Crescent, Sloane Square.</i>

**Titles** *Sir Thomas More, Lord Asquith, Mr and Mrs,*

*Dr, etc.*

**Trade Marks, Names** *Hoover, Peugeot, Kentucky Fried Chicken, Gillette, Durex, Xerox, Aspro, Kodak, Persil, Jacuzzi etc.*

**Van, Von etc** When writing Dutch names, *van* is lower case

when part of the full name (*Hans van Meegeren, Vincent van Gogh*) but capitalised

when used only with the surname (*Van Gogh, Van Dyke*). One exception is former

US president *Martin Van Buren*. The same applies to *den* (*Joop den Uyl, Mr Den Uyl*).

With Germanic names, *von* is always lc.

With *Da* and *D'* prefixes (*Mayor D'Annato, Louise d'Annato*) there is often inconsistency; such names require checking.

**Wars** *World War I, Boer War, Seven Years' War etc.*

**Miscellany** *Americanisation, anglicise, bologna sausage,*

*braille, Central American, Caesarean section*

(but *caesarean* in US), *Cheshire cheese, French*

*dressing, Gothic architecture* (but *gothic*

*novel*), *lyonnaise potatoes, madras cloth,*

*melba toast, mid-Atlantic, Oxford Bags* (but

*oxford shoe*), *plaster of paris, Pre-Raphaelite,*

*the Post Office* (but *post office services*),

*roman type, Russian roulette, Southerner,*

*southern hemisphere, Spanish omelette*

(*spanish* in US), *transatlantic, Trans-Siberian*

*Railway, Union Jack.*

### Pride and Prejudice and Punctuation

When Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* was published in 1813 our system of punctuation had developed to the stage where few further changes would be made.

But one patch of inconsistency lingered: the practice of not always treating question and exclamation marks as doing the job of full stops:

*"And poor Mr Darcy! dear Lizzy, only consider what he must have suffered. Such a disappointment! and with the knowledge of your ill opinion too! and having to relate such a thing to his sister!*

*It is really too distressing, I am sure you must feel it so."*

*"What say you, Mary? for you are a lady of deep reflection,*

*I know, and read great books . . ."*

*"It is unaccountable! in every view it is unaccountable!"*

Today, of course, question marks and exclamation marks are almost always followed by capitals.

# **Devices for Separating and Joining**

## Scree-e-eech! The Full Stop.

Now we shrink from the paragraph to a minuscule dot: the full stop, stop, full point or period. Minuscule it may be but, like atoms and germs, it packs a potent power. The full stop is the most emphatic, abrupt and unambiguous of all the punctuation marks. Leave out a vital full stop and you're really in trouble:

*KING CHARLES I PRAYED HALF AN HOUR AFTER HE WAS BEHEADED.*

The full stop is probably the most used mark, partly because we need it so much, and partly because virtually everyone knows how to use it. Unfortunately not everyone knows how to use it wisely.

"Punctuation," *The Times* advises its journalists, "is . . . not a fireworks display to show off your dashes and gaspers. Remember the first rule: the best punctuation is the full stop."

The full stop is used like a knife to cut off a sentence at the required length. The rule is *that* simple: where you place your stop is up to you, but as we saw in the chapter on the sentence it is generally at the point where a thought is complete. Master this principle and you can then move on to using full stops stylistically.



Here's a typical passage displaying a variety of punctuation marks; the full stop, though, is easily the most predominant:

*With intense frustration, Giles grabbed the man, surprising him. 'No you don't!' he yelled hoarsely. The stranger recovered, fighting back. Fiercely. Savagely. Hard breathing. Curses. Grunts. The winning thud of fists. An alarming stream of crimson from Giles's left eye. Pulses racing, they glared at one another, each daring the other to make a move. A car horn in the distance. Shouts.*

That's stylised prose and could be criticised for its overuse of sentence fragments rather than complete sentences. But here the heavy-handed application of the full stop is deliberate, for we can see what the writer is getting at – the brutal punch, punch, punch of a ferocious fist fight.



We can also see from that example just how important the full stop is, although there have been numerous attempts to do without it. One of the most famous examples is the Penelope chapter in James Joyce's novel *Ulysses*:

*... a quarter after what an earthly hour I suppose they're just getting up in China now combing out their pigtaails for the day well soon have the nuns ringing the angelus theyve nobody coming in to spoil their sleep except an odd priest or two for his night office the alarm clock next door ...*

[until about a thousand words later]

*... and first I put my arms around him yes and drew him down to me so he could feel my breasts all perfume yes and his heart was going like mad and yes I said yes I will Yes!*

You did notice the full stop at the very end, didn't you? At least James Joyce decided to observe the rule that every sentence, however long, must end with a full stop or some other ending device.

Of course that's an extreme case, with Joyce chucking out all stops to achieve the effect of a stream of consciousness outpouring. At the other end of the scale is prose that goes full stop mad, such as this excerpt from Alain Arias-Misson's *Confessions*. The style was considered highly novel in the 1970s:

*Fischer shot a glance at me. Listen, Fischer, I said, is there any way out of here? You are not an initiate, he said. Of course I addressed myself to him because I hoped there might be a model in his game. I watched the pieces under his eyes.*

*Ah yes, I said, I see. How curious, I thought, as I stood up, that I hadn't realised it until now. I didn't know what move to make next. The next move may be death, he said. I moved my piece and walked out of the room. He was no longer outside of the game. He was of course a free agent. I knew it would be necessary to listen carefully, in this suspended atmosphere. The master player had shown me a trick or two. It was a matter of life and death.*

Again, the author is using punctuation for special effect, in this case to convey something of the heart-arresting tension of a an important chess game.

From these examples you can understand why it is difficult to lay down iron-clad rules for punctuation. Both examples are, by literary standards, correct, compelling and readable, but in the hands of lesser writers the extremes of 'over-stopping' and 'under-stopping' are best avoided.

More important in good writing is when and where to use the full stop. Take the following two thoughts:

- *The best store for sofas is Burton & Co.*
- *Our sofa has served us well for twenty years.*

Some writers might be tempted to link the two thoughts to make a single sentence:

*Our sofa has served us well for twenty years, and the best store for sofas is Burton & Co.*

A problem? Yes, because although the two thoughts are related by a common subject – sofas – they really make two quite

separate points, and they don't marry at all well in a single sentence. The crudest way to deal with the problem is to express the thoughts by constructing two adjacent sentences – separated by a full stop:

*Our sofa has served us well for twenty years. The best store for sofas is Burton & Co.*

But this solution feels uncomfortable, doesn't it? Although it is more logical and grammatically correct, we are left to ponder over the relationship between Burton & Co's sofa store and our serviceable 20-year old sofa. Where on earth is the connection? Was the sofa originally purchased from Burton & Co? If so, why not use this fact to link the two thoughts:

*Our sofa has served us well for twenty years. It was supplied by Burton & Co, the best store for sofas.*

Or, dispensing with the full stop:

*The sofa that's served us well for twenty years was supplied by Burton & Co, the best store for sofas.*

Fine, but what if the sofa had been purchased elsewhere? If this were the case, the presentation of the facts requires a different construction entirely. Perhaps something like this:

*Although our sofa didn't come from Burton & Co, the best store for sofas, it has served us well for twenty years.*

A trio of tips about full stops and using them to form sentences:

- Keep your sentences variable in length, but generally short.
- Using long sentences doesn't necessarily make you a good writer.
- To use *only* full stops is as unnatural as hopping on one leg.

### Full Stops and Abbreviations

Full stops have been used traditionally to shorten words, names and phrases. The convention was to use full stops for chopped-off words, or abbreviations:

*doc. Sat. Oct. Prof. Staffs. lab. Inst. Fahr.*

but not for shortenings consisting of the first and last letters of the word, or contractions:

*Mr Dr gdn mfr St yd Revd wmk*

Thus, by the rules, *per cent.* was considered to be an abbreviation because it chopped off the 'um' from *per centum*. And while the *Rev Golightly* required a full stop, the *Revd Golightly* didn't.

All this, however, has gone by the board because, increasingly and remorselessly, the stops are being abandoned in

favour of speed, economy and cleaner typography. You will still see stops used for both abbreviations and contractions (for not everyone knows the difference) and sometimes to avoid ambiguity. Here is a sampling of the new order:

<b>Formerly</b>	<b>Now (mostly)</b>
<i>6 a.m.</i>	<i>6 am</i>
<i>e.g.</i>	<i>eg</i>
<i>1472 A.D.</i>	<i>1472 AD</i>
<i>Jan. 16</i>	<i>Jan 16</i>
<i>Wm. Shakespeare</i>	<i>Wm Shakespeare</i>
<i>viz.</i>	<i>viz</i>
<i>R.S.V.P.</i>	<i>RSVP</i>
<i>Capt. Johns, D.F.C.</i>	<i>Capt Johns, DFC</i>
<i>U.K.</i>	<i>UK</i>

Full stops are still required for certain other functional expressions:

- For money units: *£6,99, \$99,89*
- For decimals: *20.86, 33.33%*
- For time (hours and minutes): *11.45am, 23.45 hrs*

## The Common, but Contrary, Comma.

The comma is the most flexible, most versatile of all the punctuation marks. Because it is the least emphatic mark it is also the most subtle and complex. And contrary. Not surprisingly, many writers feel a nagging uncertainty about using commas.

While the full stop brings proceedings to a screeching halt, the comma, with its mortar-like ability to build complex sentences, enlarges upon thoughts, joins them to further thoughts and afterthoughts, binds in extra information, and generally has a good time. A writer with full command of the comma can have a ball. Here's the English humourist and columnist Alan Coren displaying an enviable skill in a passage in which the commas are like the carefully placed hoofprints of a horse lining up for a jump, and then – a long soaring comma-less passage follows before the full stop landing!

*Until I was 40, I was utterly urban, uneasy in any surroundings more arborious than a sparsely tubbed patio, and knowing no more of wildlife than that a stalling was probably taller than a stoat. As for the horse, I regarded it primarily as something to watch out for in French casseroles.*

*But 40 is a critical age, a time for last-ditch stands, so I bought that last ditch in the New Forest, and the hovel that leaned over it, and enough land for the kids to run about and get tetanus in, somewhere, in short, which would allow me to escape into that sweet Arcadia where deer eat the rockery and mice eat the roof and ponies eat the hedges and a man can be snug in his nocturnal cot and hear naught but the soporific sound of death-watch beetles laughing at the inadequacy of creosote.*

Now that, to a comma freak, is about as good as you'll find anywhere in the language. Note, too, that Coren even gets away with a comma (after *get tetanus in, . . .*) where ordinary grammatically correct mortals would have placed a semicolon.

But back to earth. Perhaps the most resilient myth about commas is that they indicate natural breath pauses. There was a lot of truth in this, as we have seen, when the language was more orally inclined, but today commas have all but succumbed to grammatical logic.

*Every year over the British Isles, half a million meteorites enter the atmosphere.*

You can hear the speaker intoning this, can't you – with a dramatic pause before announcing the impressive statistic *half a million*. Try it. But when you write it down as a sentence you find that the comma is redundant:

*Every year over the British Isles half a million meteorites enter the atmosphere.*

Most writing today demands that commas be logical, but if you are a novelist, reporting a character's speech, you would be correct to use what are called 'rhetorical commas' when the character takes a breath.

Contemporary writing is far less rambling and rhetorical than it was in Dickens' day. Here's a not untypical sentence from Martin Chuzzlewit:

*Then there was George Chuzzlewit, a gay bachelor cousin, who claimed to be young, but had been younger, and was inclined to corpulency, and rather overfed himself – to the extent, indeed, that his eyes were strained in their sockets, as if with constant surprise: and he had such an obvious disposition to pimples, that the bright spots on his cravat, the rich pattern on his waistcoat, and even his glittering trinkets, seemed to have broken out on him, and not to have come into existence comfortably.*

Tot up the commas – twelve in all, plus a dash and a semicolon. If you were disposed to attempt such a sentence today you would probably use only five commas, six at most. Whether it would retain the magic, though, is another matter. Try it.

### **Too, many, commas . . .**

The over-use of commas still survives in sentences wrought by writers, possibly Librans, who can't make their minds up. Their sentences tend to be hedged with *ifs*, *buts*, *maybes* and pontifications:

*It is, curiously surprising when, say, you hear your name announced in a foreign language, or even in a foreign accent.*

Here's another example, from *The Times* a few years ago:

*It is, however, already plain enough that, unless, indeed, some great catastrophe should upset all their calculations . . .*

It's grammatical, but a real pain to the reader. In most cases such sentences can be written with half the number of commas or less. Here's an over-spiced sentence which can be rewritten without any commas at all:

*He had not, previously met the plaintiff, except when, in 1984, he had, unexpectedly, found himself in Paris.*

Those are bad cases of what the Fowler brothers, in *The King's English*, called 'spot plague' and fortunately, perhaps through the influence of newspaper brevity and the crispness of much modern fiction, they're a dying breed. But the injection of the single comma into a perfectly good sentence, simply because a writer feels it is lonely without one, is a growth industry:

- *The trophy presented to the winner, was the one donated by the village butcher.*
- *The gang left him, bleeding by the roadside.*
- *You can never foretell, what the weather will be like.*

Before we get too glib about unnecessary commas, here's a well-comma'd, heavily parenthesised sentence written by a craftsman, detective story writer Julian Symons. In this case you will find it rather difficult to remove any of the commas without causing confusion or disturbing the flow:

*Waugh had already perfected his technique in writing dialogue, by which fragmented, interjectory, often apparently irrelevant, but, in fact, casually meaningful conversations carry along much of the plot, avoiding the need for description.*

### **The Comma Weight Reduction Plan**

Piling on commas is as easy as putting on calories; in both cases the problem is getting rid of them. And if we do decide to slim, let's not go over the top. Here's an exercise in comma reduction, starting with a simple sentence that's gained a little too much weight:

- A** *My hobby, trainspotting, is, to many a joke.*
- B** *My hobby, trainspotting, is to many a joke.*
- C** *My hobby, trainspotting, is to many a joke.*
- D** *My hobby trainspotting, is to many a joke.*
- E** *My hobby trainspotting is to many a joke.*

Pedants might claim that all five sentences differ in nuances of meaning, but to the average reader they all mean the same thing. So we are left with choosing which one is fit and lean enough to express our thought clearly, economically and elegantly. Which version would you choose? (our choice would be C, but it is our personal preference and not one we would wish to impose on others.)

The ability to recognise where commas are needed and where they are not may be an acquired skill but it is worth pursuing. Merely scanning a sentence will usually tell you.

The writer of the following sentence was either afraid of commas or intent on speed of delivery:

*The land is I believe owned by the City Council.*

Most of us would place commas before and after the

phrase *I believe* because it is an important qualifier; it needs to be highlighted from the main statement, *The land is . . . owned by the City Council* which, without the qualification, may or may not be true:

*The land is, I believe, owned by the City Council.*

A more serious lapse occurs when the lack of commas leads to ambiguity. A well-known illustration of this involves the fate of a young warrior in Ancient Greece who, on the eve of departing for a war, consults the Oracle at Delphi. *Thou shalt go thou shalt return never by war shalt thou perish*, he was told breathlessly.

Mentally placing the commas after *go* and *return*, the warrior leapt on his chariot with brimming confidence. Unfortunately he was killed in the first battle without realising that what the Oracle meant was, *Thou shalt go, thou shalt return never, by war shalt thou perish*. Two commas could have saved his life.

One of the most common instances of the 'dropped comma' occurs when we write or utter the phrase '*No thanks*' – without separating or mentally separating the two words with a comma.

What we really mean is '*No* (I decline), *thanks*' (but thank you all the same); what we are in fact saying is '*No thanks!*' – which if you think about it is nothing less than a rude rejection!

As a general rule, where dropping a comma doesn't endanger understanding but instead helps the flow of the sentence, leave it out.

### **The Comma Splice**

Another common error is the so-called **comma splice** – the use of a comma in place of a linking word to unite two sentences in the mistaken belief that it will form a single sentence:

*The house is large, it has seven bedrooms.*

That is not a grammatical sentence, but there are several ways to make it one:

- *The house is large: it has seven bedrooms.*
- *The house is large as it has seven bedrooms.*
- *The house is large and includes seven bedrooms.*
- *The house is large, with seven bedrooms.*

Simple? You would think so, but splicing a second sentence to another with an inadequate comma is not confined to the inexperienced writer. Here's the novelist E M Forster in *A Passage to India*:

*Chance brought her into his mind while it was in this heated state, he did not select her, she happened to occur among the throng of soliciting images, a tiny splinter, and he impelled her by his spiritual force to that place where completeness can be found.*

One hesitates to correct a master, but surely a full stop is called for after *heated state*, and either a colon or semicolon after *select her*. But you really begin to wonder when you find the great stylist W Somerset Maugham scattering comma splices throughout the pages of his novel *Of Human Bondage*:

*... often he sat and looked at the branches of a tree silhouetted against the sky it was like a Japanese print ...  
You must congratulate me, I got my signatures yesterday ...  
'I looked in on my way out, I wanted to tell you my news ...'*

All three splices call for remedial action, with the commas replaced by full stops, or at the very least by semicolons. In the last two sentences linking words such as *for*, *because* or *as* could happily substitute for the commas.

### Correct Comma Placement

Despite their faulty construction, at least the meaning of those offending sentences was clear. That, however, can't be said of the following group of miscreants where commas, or the lack of them, result in ambiguity:

**Do we mean**      *They were sick and tired of the seemingly endless journey.*

OR ...      *They were sick, and tired of the seemingly endless journey.*

**Do we mean**      *Brenda and Ian didn't fall in love because they liked their privacy too much.*

OR ...      *Brenda and Ian didn't fall in love, because they liked their privacy too much.*

**Do we mean**      *At the Coronation, she heard many of the guests had to stand for over six hours.*

OR ...      *At the Coronation she heard many of the guests had to stand for over six hours.*

**Do we mean**      *My son Frederick invented the whoopee cushion.*

OR ...      *My son, Frederick, invented the whoopee cushion.*

All four examples here are slightly subtler versions of the following old chestnuts:

*The deer spun an arrow through its heart.*

*The deer spun, an arrow through its heart.*

*To be honest, cashiers don't go home late.*

*To be honest cashiers, don't go home late.*

But to return to the four sets of alternatives. In the first, the simple addition of a comma after *sick* alters the meaning of the sentence dramatically. Without the comma the travellers are merely 'fed up', but with the comma they are in a far worse state.

In the case of Brenda and Ian, the first sentence could imply that Brenda and Ian *did* fall in love, but not for the reason that they liked their privacy. With a comma after *love*, however, it is clear that their budding relationship foundered because they were protective of their privacy.

At the Coronation, the sentence with the two commas suggests that she may or may not have been present at the event but had heard anyhow that guests had to stand for over six hours. The sentence without the commas leads us to believe – although it is not absolutely clear – that she *was* present at the Coronation where she'd heard about the plight of some of the guests. Both sentences are flawed by ambiguity and would benefit from reconstruction. But either scenario is made quite clear in these versions:

*She had heard that during the Coronation many of the guests had to stand for over six hours.*

*While attending the Coronation she'd heard that many of the guests had to stand for over six hours.*

The final example illustrates a trap most of us fall into from time to time. Although superficially both sentences seem to be saying the same thing, the commas that enclose Frederick send out a signal that tells us that *Frederick* is my *only* son, whereas in the first sentence he could be one of several sons. How come?

Because this is such a common comma problem it's worth exploring the grammatical reasoning behind it. In the first sentence the information we have about Frederick is restrictive in that it defines a *kind* of son – a son named Frederick. In other words, an extended sentence might say, *Of all my sons the one named*

*Frederick invented the whoopee cushion.* The second sentence, however, is non-defining; here the fact that the son is named Frederick is incidental and non-essential information, which is why it is parenthesised between commas. What an extended sentence might say in this instance is, *My son invented the whoopee cushion; his name is Frederick, by the way.*

These are perhaps light-hearted instances of comma problems but sometimes a meaning hanging on the presence or absence of commas can be of great significance. Read the following statement, first with the comma, and then without it. Who has the violent seizures caused by thunder, the invalid or the herdsman?

*Jacob looks after a herd of cows owned by a chronic invalid who constantly yells at him ( , ) and has seizures of the most violent kind whenever there's thunder about.*



### ***All Things Bright and Beautiful***

One of the most loved hymns of the Christian church is *All Things Bright and Beautiful*. So why, since half a century ago, has one of the verses been omitted? The offending verse contains the line, referring to the rich man in his castle and the poor man at his gate, *God made them, high or lowly, and ordered their estate*. Many clergy appear to have misunderstood the role of the commas in this line, believing it to mean that God made some people rich and some poor – a fair assumption had the commas been absent. But the commas make clear that everyone, whether ‘high or lowly’, is cared for equally. Nor does *estate* mean property, as some suppose. When composing the hymn in 1848 Mrs Alexander used *estate* in the biblical sense of ‘existence or state of being’. It is moot whether the innocent verse is the victim of political correctness or a general ignorance of punctuation.

### ***The Many Functions of the Comma***

Thus far we’ve looked at how we misuse and abuse the comma. Now let’s be positive and see how commas can help us express ourselves with clarity and style.

The comma’s broad function is to separate words, phrases and clauses in a sentence to help it to be understood – to divide a sentence into easily assimilated bite-sized pieces. We soon learn to recognise that commas signal the ends of word groups, and because they are always contained *within* sentences, we know that more is to follow.

That is the basic function of the comma, but there are many others.

- **SETTING OFF NAMES AND PERSONS:**

*Are you meeting him tomorrow, John?*  
*Listen, Helen, I’ve had quite enough.*  
*And that, ladies and gentlemen, is that.*  
*Of course you can do it, you niwilt!*  
*Darling, don’t you think you’ve gone too far?*

- **ITEMISING WORDS:**

*Please place all towels, costumes, clothing, bags and valuables in the lockers provided.*

- **ITEMISING WORD GROUPS:**

*Please place any articles of clothing, swimming and sporting equipment, personal belongings, but not money and jewellery in the lockers.*

- ENCLOSING ADDITIONAL THOUGHTS OR QUALIFICATIONS:

*The occasion was, on the whole, conducted with commendable dignity.*  
*The judges thought it was, arguably, one of his finest novels.*

- SETTING OFF INTERJECTIONS:

*Look, I can't take any more of this!*  
*Blimey, isn't the beach crowded today?*  
*Stop, or I'll call the police.*

- SETTING OFF DIRECT SPEECH:

*Jill turned abruptly and said, "If that's how you feel, then go home!"*

- SETTING OFF QUESTIONS:

*You'll be going soon, won't you?*  
*She's marrying James tomorrow, isn't she?*

- EMPHASISING POINTS OF VIEW:

*Naturally, I'll look after your new car.*  
*Of course, she fully deserves the prize.*

- SETTING OFF COMPARATIVE OR CONTRASTING STATEMENTS:

*The taller they are, the farther they fall.*  
*The more he said he adored Maisie, the less they cared.*

- REINFORCING STATEMENTS:

*She's ill because she won't eat, that's why!*  
*It'll come right in the end, I'm sure.*

- REPLACING MISSING WORDS:

*If you want more time, half an hour, maximum.*  
*[you can have]*

- SETTING OFF AN INTRODUCTORY WORD OR PHRASE:

*Sausages, which are far from fat free, pose a problem for dieters.*

Omitting the opening comma required to separate a subordinate clause (*which are far from fat free*) from the main clause (*Sausages . . . pose a problem for dieters*) is a common mistake, and one that usually leads to ambiguity. With the commas correctly in place, as in our example, we are in no doubt that the description *far from fat free* applies to all sausages. But omit that opening comma and a different meaning can be conveyed: *Sausages which are far from fat free, pose a problem for dieters*. Now the statement is saying that only those sausages that are *far from fat free* are a problem. But if that is what is actually meant, the remaining comma is redundant.

Here's another example, from *The Times*:

*Overnight fans had painted messages on the road outside his home . . . "We love you Frank".*

*Overnight fans?* Are these different from ordinary fans? Obviously a comma after the introductory scene-setting word *Overnight* is required to make things clear.

### Using Commas with Adjectives

Using commas to form lists of nouns and names is, as we've seen, quite straightforward. We don't say, for example,

*Bill and Jean and Marcus and Chloe went out riding.*

or

*Bill Jean Marcus and Chloe went out riding.*

but

*Bill, Jean, Marcus and Chloe went out riding.*

A similar list of adjectives, used to modify a noun or proper noun, requires a little more care. See if you can work out, in the following two sentences, why one has the adjectives separated by commas, and the other does not:

- *The night resounded with a loud, chilling, persistent ringing.*
- *It was a large brick Victorian mansion.*

The reasons are embodied in two seemingly simple rules worth remembering:

- Where the adjectives (or other modifiers) define separate attributes (*loud, chilling, persistent*), they are best separated by commas.

- Where the adjectives work together to create a single image (*large, brick, Victorian*), the commas are often best omitted.

Two seemingly simple rules, but they can be tricky to apply. The late, great grammarian Sir Ernest Gowers was never too bothered about commas between adjectives, quoting as equally correct:

*'a silly, verbose, pompous letter'*

and

*'a silly, verbose pompous letter'*

and adding that the commas in this case merely added emphasis to the adjectives.

Nevertheless, comma placement between adjectives can lead to ambiguity. An undergraduate joke used to concern a popular song title: *What is This Thing Called Love?* Place a comma between *Called* and *Love* and you have an intriguing ambiguity. A comma can make all the difference, as in:

*A pretty smart young lady*  
*A pretty, smart young lady.*

In the first statement the adjective *pretty* attaches itself to the next adjective *smart*, to mean something between 'fairly smart' and 'very smart'; moreover it makes no reference to the young lady's appearance. The second statement, however, means that here we have an attractive young lady who is also smart. One way to deal with the ambiguity problem is to imagine an *and* between the adjectives; if an *and* can be inserted and still make sense, then a comma can normally be substituted:

*Tracy was a young and exciting photographic model.*  
*Tracy was a young, exciting photographic model.*

Now let us look at a sentence where inserting an *and* would be plainly silly:

*Tracy was a beautiful young photographic model.*  
*Tracy was a beautiful and young photographic model.*

This sentence, with or without a comma between *beautiful* and *young*, would mean the same thing, but a comma would be an irritant to eye and ear and mind because it would split what should be a single image: '*beautiful young*'.

We're not talking about grammatical exactitude here but simple logic and common sense. Often, merely 'listening' to your writing will guide you. Here's a multi-adjective construction utilising a single comma. Would you settle for that, or use more?

*She wore the eye-catching Parisian blue silk Molyneux  
 bridal dress flown in only yesterday, with her customary flair.*

### Commas with Adverbs and Adverbial Phrases

It is customary to use commas to enclose modifying adverbs and adverbial phrases such as *however*, *indeed*, *nevertheless*, *in fact*, *needless to say*, *no doubt*, *incidentally*, *anyway*, *for example*, *on the contrary*, *of course* and *as we have seen*:

*You are, nevertheless, guilty of the first charge.*

Increasingly, however, [notice the enclosing commas!] such commas are dropped when the meaning remains clear without them:

*You are nevertheless guilty of the first charge.*

But be alert for ambiguity: *The hospital informed us that both victims were, happily, recovering.* Remove the enclosing commas either side of *happily* and you'd give the impression that the victims were not only recovering but having the time of their lives! And see, in the next example, reporting on a parliamentary debate about field sports, how vital a pair of enclosing commas can be:

*Mr Douglas Hogg said that he had shot, himself, as a small boy,*

Commas are also needed for sentences beginning with adverbs:

*Curiously, the two cousins had never met.*

*Ironically, they discovered they were sisters.*

*Looking scared, Peter peered out of the window.*

and also for sentences containing adverbial clauses:

*Peter not usually given to heroics, smartly lowered his head.*

### Other Problem Comma Placements

Sometimes you will find that verbs will need enclosing by commas to help guide readers through a complex passage:

*In the daytime, sleeping, the baby was adorable, but at nights, howling continuously, she was a tyrant and a monster.*

For the same reason a clarifying comma is usually required to separate two conjunctions:

*Norma asked whether, if the register was in the church,*

*she might look up her family records.*

You can see the necessity for using separating commas in sentences such as those above. The same applies to a build-up of prepositions:

*The helicopter hovered in, around, over and finally through the eerie pink cloud.*

One of the most common sentence constructions is frequently marred by confusion about where to place a comma:

*Jeremy glanced at the clock, and abruptly closing his book, leapt up from the sofa.*

There's something vaguely amiss with this, isn't there?

What's amiss is that the comma should follow the *and*, not precede it. To understand and correct this, we must separate the two structural components of the sentence, the main clause (*Jeremy glanced at the clock and . . . leapt up from the sofa*) and the subordinate clause (*abruptly closing his book*) to discover where the *and* really belongs. When we find it belongs to the main clause we can place the comma in the correct position. So the sentence should read:

*Jeremy glanced at the clock and, abruptly closing his book, leapt up from the sofa.*

or

*Jeremy glanced at the clock, and, abruptly closing his book, leapt up from the sofa.*

Although placing commas before, after or around *and* is pretty much a matter of grammatical logic, with other conjunctions it isn't so straightforward. The American writer Margaret Mitchell had a superb ear for punctuation and her comma placements have been widely studied. Here, for example, is a sentence from  *Gone with the Wind* with three variations of comma placement around the conjunction *for*:

- A** *The mismanagement of the state road especially infuriated the taxpayers; for, out of the earnings of the road, was to come the money for free schools.*
- B** *The mismanagement of the state road especially infuriated the taxpayers for, out of the earnings of the road, was to come the money for free schools.*
- C** *The mismanagement of the state road especially infuriated the taxpayers; for out of the earnings of the road was to come the money for free schools.*

Grammatically, **A** is the more correct version; **C** would be preferred by most writers today; **B** is Margaret Mitchell's original. Yet all, except perhaps by ultra-pedantic standards, are acceptable.

### **The Oxford, or Final Comma**

The *Times* advises its journalists to 'avoid the so-called Oxford comma: x, y and z and not x, y, and z.'

What this means is that:

*Martin spoke to Edith, Lesley, Bunty and Samantha.*

is preferred to

*Martin spoke to Edith, Lesley, Bunty, and Samantha.*

Sound advice; a final comma before *and* in a list is now outmoded – unless there is the possibility of ambiguity:

*The colours of the flag are red, green and gold in stripes.*

What does this mean? Red and green, with gold stripes? Red, green and gold stripes? Red, with green and gold stripes? What the sentence needs is a comma for clarity. If, as intended, the statement was meant to describe a flag consisting of just three bold stripes, it should say so:  
*The colours of the flag are red, green, and gold, in stripes.*

## Using Commas to Parenthesise

One of the most interesting, but also perhaps the most contentious, use of commas, is to parenthesise (or place in parenthesis) relevant but not essential matter from the main part of the sentence:

*The wild hyacinths (which are at the height of the season) tint the woods with a blue mist.*

The essential message here is: *The wild hyacinths tint the woods with a pale blue mist.* But we've had a further thought – *which are now at the height of their season* – which we'd like to include in the same sentence. Sometimes we enclose such additions in parentheses (brackets) as above, but mostly we use a pair of far more convenient and less disruptive commas:

*The wild hyacinths, which are now at the height of their season, tint the woods with a pale blue mist.*

When you parenthesise it's important to remember that the commas *always work in pairs* – an opening comma and a closing comma:

**WRONG** *He wrote the year's biggest bestseller, 'Storm Over Jackdaw Bay' in just over three months.*

**CORRECT** *He wrote the year's biggest bestseller, 'Storm Over Jackdaw Bay', in just over three months.*

Although understanding the role of commas in isolating subordinate statements is easy enough, there are traps, as in this piece of nonsense:

*The two lead actors, who appear in 'Grease', won their respective roles after many gruelling years in musicals.*

The two enclosing commas here are telling us that *who appear in 'Grease'* is non-essential information. But if you rewrite the sentence without that phrase it makes no sense: we don't know who the lead actors are or what they are doing. In fact, *who appear in 'Grease'* is a defining or restrictive phrase – one that identifies, modifies or qualifies its subject. It is essential, not non-essential, information. So the sentence should read:

*The two lead actors who appear in 'Grease' won their respective roles after many gruelling years in musicals.*

This amended sentence, with an absence of any parenthesised or subordinate matter, signals to us that we must read every word to get the meaning. That's why it's important to get it right. Here's an example from a newspaper that got it wrong:

*In 1991 the witness testified he was never in this country.*

What the newspaper meant to say was:

*In 1991, the witness testified, he was never in this country.*

The first sentence tells us clearly that the witness was never in this country, ever – he testified to that effect in 1991. In fact, the man lived in this country, but claimed in court in 1996 that in 1991 he'd been abroad. Big difference.

Or take the case of the migratory salmon:

- A** *Salmon which can leap heights of up to fifteen feet scoop furrows in upstream reaches to deposit their spawn.*
- B** *Salmon, which can leap heights of up to fifteen feet, scoop furrows in upstream reaches to deposit their spawn.*

Sentence **B** tells us that all salmon – which incidentally can leap up to fifteen feet – spawn upstream. Sentence **A**, on the other hand, is concerned only with those lucky, super-sexed salmon that can leap fifteen feet to reach the spawning grounds. Bad luck about the others.

There are of course other constructions that allow us to sideline subsidiary thoughts and secondary information with commas. Sometimes we might wish to add more importance or force to a subordinate statement; this can be done by highlighting it at the front of a sentence, or adding it as a ‘sting in the tail’:

- A** *The lawn grass mixture, however fast it might grow, turns brown with the slightest drought.*
- B** *However fast it might grow, the lawn grass mixture turns brown with the slightest drought.*
- C** *The lawn grass mixture turns brown with the slightest drought, however fast it might grow.*

Of these, **A** is the blandest while **C**, with its forthright statement up front and dismissive comment at the end, is the most condemnatory of the lawn grass mixture.

To summarise:

- Where a phrase or clause does not define or qualify the subject, indicate that it is non-essential matter by isolating it with a pair of commas.
- Where a phrase or clause defines or qualifies the subject, unite it with the subject by omitting the commas.
- When you need to place more emphasis on subordinate matter, try other constructions.



## The Serviceable Semicolon

From the long pause (full stop) and the short pause

(comma) we now come to the linking pauses in between: the semicolon and the colon. Of these two the colon is the weightier, and older by a century or so than its sibling, which was introduced around 1650. Despite their age, both marks are still widely misunderstood, misused – and shunned. Let's first explore the uses of the semicolon.

It would be easy to define a semicolon as half a colon, but that's hardly a useful description. To say that a semicolon is a pause somewhere between a strong comma and a weak full stop is nearer the mark, but this still lacks precision and purpose.

A more formal and grammatical definition is Hart's: 'The semicolon separates two or more clauses which are of more or less equal importance and are linked as a pair or series: "To err is human; to forgive, divine."'

That said, the fact remains that using semicolons involves a greater degree of judgment than that required by any of the other marks. Consider the following statement in four versions:

- A** *He was once a dunce at maths. Now he's a professor of mathematics.*

- B** *He was once a dunce at maths now he's a professor of mathematics.*
- C** *He was once a dunce at maths, now he's a professor of mathematics.*
- D** *He was once a dunce at maths but now he's a professor of mathematics.*

You'll see immediately that versions **B** and **C** are grammatically incorrect: **B** lacks a break between the two separate statements, and **C** attempts to achieve it – wrongly – with a 'comma splice'. There's nothing wrong with **A** except that it's two sentences which, with a bit of work, could economically be made into one. Version **D** is fine although a stylist might pronounce it rather flat.

What, though, are the statements trying to say? The facts are that here's someone who was once hopeless at maths and who, years later, has become a professor of mathematics. Isn't that surprising? Even amazing? And not a little ironical? And that's what not one of the four versions manages to convey – the unlikely outcome, the ironical result. The facts are all in place but somehow the real point of the statements doesn't hit home.

Of course the facts could be rewritten to make the point but, before we do this, is there a form of punctuation that might enable us to project the surprise and irony? As a matter of fact, there is: the semicolon:

- E** *He was once a dunce at maths; now he's a professor of mathematics.*

Done! The semicolon not only links the two independent but related statements (which a comma can't do without a conjunction) in a grammatically correct way but it also emphasises

the incongruity as a bonus. One small step for a semicolon, one giant leap for punctuation.

### ***The Dejected, Rejected Semicolon***

Quite a few experienced writers are honest enough to admit to having never completely mastered the semicolon, finding it the most difficult punctuation mark to use correctly. Some, like George Orwell, actually developed a hatred for them. In one of his novels, *Coming Up For Air* (1939), Orwell managed to exclude the semicolon altogether, although three did creep in only to be thrown out in a later edition. More recently, Martin Amis managed to reduce his semicolon quota to a single one in his novel *Money* (1984). George Bernard Shaw complained of T E Lawrence that while he threw colons about like a madman he hardly used semicolons at all. Indeed, the heat provoked by the anti-semicolonists some years ago led to fears that the mark would become an endangered species, and a Society for the Preservation of the Semicolon was formed.

Such quirkiness is unjustified. Despite its dismissal by many writers and teachers the semicolon is a very clever punctuation tool with a number of important grammatical and stylistic functions.

### ***The Functions of the Semicolon***

- To join words, word groups and sentences.
- To separate word groups that already contain commas.

- To restore order in sentences suffering from 'Comma Riot'.
- To provide pauses before certain adverbs.
- To emphasise contrasts and incongruity.

- **Using semicolons to join words, word groups and sentences.**

Occasionally we find ourselves writing a long sentence with too many connecting words such as *and*, *but* and *also*, with the danger of getting into an impossible tangle:

*The history of the semicolon and colon is one of confusion because there are no precise rules governing their use and, furthermore, many writers would argue that both marks are really stylistic rather than parenthetical devices, and can in any case be easily replaced by commas, stops and dashes, and there the argument rests.*

There's nothing grammatically wrong with that but it is unwieldy and unappealing to both eye and mind. Many writers would, without hesitation, recast it as two or more separate sentences:

*The history of the semicolon and colon is one of confusion. There are no precise rules governing their use. Many writers argue that both marks are really stylistic rather than parenthetical devices which can easily be replaced by commas, stops and dashes. And there the argument rests.*

We have previously seen how the judicious use of full stops to achieve shorter sentences can aid understanding, and that certainly is the case here. But some writers, feeling that the original long sentence is, after all, about a single subject and should therefore be kept as a whole and not split apart, would turn to the semicolon to achieve unity of thought without making things hard for the reader:

*The history of the semicolon and colon is one of confusion; there are no precise rules governing their use; many writers argue that both marks are really stylistic rather than parenthetical devices and that they can easily be replaced by commas, stops and dashes; and there the argument rests.*

The use of semicolons to link single words is rarely called for, but here for the record is an example: *Birth. life. death. three certainties in an uncertain world.*

- **To separate word groups containing commas.**

Any sentence that is essentially a list should be crystal clear and easily read. Most 'sentence lists' adequately separate the items with commas, but sometimes the items themselves are word groups containing commas and require semicolons for clarity. These two examples illustrate how useful semicolons can accomplish this task:

- *Those present included Mr and Mrs Allison, their daughters Sarah, Megan and Sue; the Smith twins; Reg and Paul Watson; Joyce, Helen and Bill Hobson; Major and Mrs Dickson; etc.*

- *The Chicago band lineup consisted of Bix Beiderbecke, cornet; Al Grande, trombone; George Johnson and Peck Jones, tenor sax; Bob Gillette, banjo; Dick Yonnow, piano, and Vic Moore on drums.*

- **To restore order to sentences suffering from 'Comma Riot'.**



Here's a longish but reasonably accomplished sentence spoiled by 'comma riot':

*His main aims in life, according to Wilma, were to achieve financial independence, to be powerfully attractive, not only to women in general but in particular to rich ladies, to eat and drink freely without putting on weight, to remain fit, vital and young-looking beyond his eightieth birthday and, last but not least, to not only read, but fully understand, Professor Stephen Hawking's 'A Brief History of Time'.*

Many professional writers would defend that sentence, despite its eleven commas. But others, perhaps more concerned with clarity than with rhythm, would suggest that some of the thoughts at least should be separated by the longer pauses provided by semicolons:

*His main aims in life, according to Wilma, were to achieve financial independence; to be powerfully attractive; not only to women in general but in particular to rich ladies; to eat and drink freely without putting on weight; to remain fit, vital and young-looking beyond his eightieth birthday and, last but not least, to not only read but fully understand Professor Stephen Hawking's 'A Brief History of Time'.*

- **To provide pauses before certain adverbs.**

There are certain adverbs and conjunctions that require a preceding pause, but one longer and stronger than that provided by a comma. Look at this example:

**WITH A COMMA** *It was a superb car, moreover it was economical to run.*

**WITH A SEMICOLON** *It was a superb car; moreover it was economical to run.*

You can see and, more importantly, *hear*, that need for a substantial pause before *moreover*, can't you? A comma is wrong on both grammatical and rhetorical counts. Here's another example: read it aloud and note your instinctive pause before *nevertheless*:

*Joe claimed he'd beaten the bookies on every race; nevertheless he was broke as usual when he left the track.*

Watch out for *therefore*, *however*, *also*, *moreover*, *furthermore*, *hence*, *consequently* and *subsequently*; in many constructions they will require a preceding semicolon.

- **To emphasise contrasts and incongruity.**

At the beginning of this chapter we saw an example of how a semicolon was used to heighten an ironical statement. Skilled writers have long exploited this function: the semicolon's ability to administer mild shock or censure; to highlight absurdity and contradiction; to leave a self-deprecating afterthought. In the latter mode, here is Henry Thoreau in *Walden*:

*I had more visitors while I lived in the woods than at any other period in my life; I mean that I had some.*

Here's a more piquant example. For a woman to remark, 'I thought his wife was lovely, but her dress was in poor taste' would be fairly pedestrian and certainly lacking in feminine acuity. Here's what she might wish she'd said with the tart use of a mental semicolon:

*I loved his wife; pity about the frock.*

One of the most enthusiastic users of the semicolon in literature was undoubtedly Charles Dickens, who even used them, unusually, to parenthesise, usurping the role of brackets or dashes:

*Such was the account; rapidly furnished in whispers, and interrupted, brief as it was, by many false alarms of Mr Pecksniff's return; which Martin received of his godfather's decline.*

Most writers today would of course isolate the parenthetical matter with an opening bracket or dash before rapidly and a closing bracket or dash after return. More conventionally, here is Dickens in full semicolonic flight, again, in *Martin Chuzzlewit*:

*There were two bottles of currant wine, white and red; a dish of sandwiches (very long and very slim); another of apples; another of captain's biscuits (which are always a moist and jovial sort of viand); a plate of oranges cut up small and gritty with powdered sugar; and a highly geological home-made cake. The magnitude of these preparations quite took away Tom Pinch's breath: for though the new pupils were usually let down softly as one may say, particularly in the wine department, which had so many stages of declension, that sometimes a young gentleman was a whole fortnight in getting to the pump; still this was a banquet; a sort of Lord Mayor's feast in private life: a something to think of, and hold on by afterwards.*

### A Semicolon Self-test

To prove to yourself that you've grasped the principles of using semicolons, try these exercises. The recommended versions will be found on the page overleaf. Some of the test examples will need recasting while one or two invite you to choose between commas and semicolons.

1. *Everyone is wary of the cliff; the face of which has weathered alarmingly.*
2. *The couple scarcely knew anyone, and were slow to form friendships; having little enthusiasm for new faces.*
3. *It should be stressed that Stephanie's behaviour is unacceptable, it should be brought to her notice immediately.*
4. *The Austen household consisted of a cook, laundress, two maids and a butler, a groom and watchman and a head gardener and under-gardener.*
5. *Having lost his job in the recession, having had the ill-luck to lose his home and possessions to the bank, having, on top of everything, his wife leave him, Patrick was perhaps justified in feeling bitter.*

### Semicolon Self-test: Answers and Discussion

1. A comma is all that's required as the *cliff* and its *face* are so closely related. You could rewrite it as:

*Everyone is wary of the cliff-face, which has weathered alarmingly*

2. Much the same applies to this example, in which the first comma can be deleted as redundant, and a comma substituted for the semicolon:

*The couple scarcely knew anyone and were slow to form friendships, having little enthusiasm for new faces.*

3. Here you have two quite separate though related thoughts, requiring a pause longer and stronger than a comma. You could join the two thoughts economically with a semicolon but many writers might prefer to use a comma and a conjunction, such as *and*:

*It should be stressed that Stephanie's behaviour is unacceptable, and it should be brought to her notice immediately.*

4. The reader can be easily confused here. Is *a groom and watchman* one person doing both jobs, or two individual employees? Use semicolons to make the sentence clear and easy to follow:

*The Austen household consisted of a cook, laundress, two maids and a butler; a groom; a watchman; and a head gardener and under-gardener.*

5. There is nothing grammatically or stylistically wrong with this complex sentence although, if there is a weakness, it lies in the crack between *bank* and *having* where many writers might feel the need for a break more pronounced than a comma. Here's the sentence again, a little more pedantically constructed and not, in everyone's eyes, necessarily an improvement:

*Having lost his job in the recession; having had the ill-luck to lose his home and possessions to the bank; and having, on top of everything, his wife leave him – Patrick was perhaps justified in feeling bitter.*

## Trouble with your Colon?

The colon is an old punctuation mark. Introduced in the 16th century it virtually disappeared for a time during the 19th, only to be rescued from near oblivion in the 20th. Now, as we approach the 21st century, it's under threat from the dash.

It is a mark often casually tossed aside, and many people write passable prose without ever feeling the need to use it.

So why bother?

Well, you can cook without salt, too, or wear shoes without socks or stockings. Just as some relatively minor details can enrich your quality of life, so can the colon enhance the quality of your writing.

In fact the colon is a versatile workhorse, and many colon-scoffers are stopped in their tracks when confronted with the range of its functions.

But, first, there are three useful points to remember about colons:

- The difference between a semicolon and a colon is not a difference in weight or force; the two marks are mostly used for quite different purposes.

- Generally, the colon takes the reader's interest forward: from introduction to main subject, from cause to effect, from premise to conclusion.
- A colon is never followed by a capital letter, except when the following word is a proper noun or the first word of an independent quotation.

### *The Functions of the Colon*

So far, hundreds of colons have been used to punctuate the text of this book, for a variety of purposes. Here's a comprehensive list of the ways in which we can make them work for us:

- 1 To point the reader's attention forward.
- 2 To introduce a list.
- 3 To present an explanation or example.
- 4 To introduce direct speech.
- 5 To present a conclusion.
- 6 To introduce a quotation.
- 7 To introduce a question.
- 8 To link contrasting statements.
- 9 To substitute for a conjunction.
- 10 To introduce a subtitle.

There are a few more functions explained at the end of the chapter but, meanwhile, here are some examples of the colon in everyday use.

- **To point the reader's attention forward.**

In this role the colon acts as a pointing finger, as if to warn the reader about a statement ahead: *Wait for it . . . here it comes!*

Or, in the more eloquent words of the grammarian Henry Fowler, its function is 'that of delivering the goods that have been invoiced in the preceding words'. The 'goods' might be a conclusion, a summary, a list or a contrasting statement:

*Maddeningly beautiful, honey-voiced, overwhelmingly generous, owner of three luxury homes and a ranch in Texas: she was a glittering prize for any man.*

- **To introduce a list.**

This is the workhorse role of most colons:

*The hotel had everything: pool, sauna, Jacuzzi, gym, hairdresser, tanning booths and even a dietician.*

*Detective Stevens entered and took it all in: the body, the still smouldering mattress, the cigarette ends on the floor . . .*

- **To present an explanation or example.**

*The beleaguered bank closed its doors for good after just a month in business: not surprising when you saw the list of directors.*

Introductory words and phrases such as *namely*, *as follows* and *for example* (and *eg*) are often followed by colons:

*There are three reasons why Lainston House near Winchester is an outstanding restaurant, namely: excellent cuisine, superbly restored interiors, and super-attentive staff.*

- **To introduce direct speech.**

Although many stylists insist that commas are the correct marks for introducing direct speech (see chapter on the **Comma**, page 33), the use of colons for this purpose nowadays hardly earns a frown:

*The Mayor strode to the platform, opened his notes and glared at the assembly: 'You've not come here tonight just to listen to me,' he growled.*

- **To present a conclusion.**

*Fifty-five years in the business suggested to old Jake that there was only one certainty in life: the inevitability of change.*

*The fact that Ernest's right hand never knew what his left was doing had an unfortunate effect on his life: he could never hold down a job.*

- **To introduce a quotation.**

*Rachel's thoughts were neatly summed up by Swift: 'That Flattery's the food of fools . . . Yet now and then your men of wit will condescend to take a bit'.*

*Gradually, one by one, Arnold's words came back to me: 'And we forget because we must, and not because we will'.*



- **To introduce a question.**

Although commas can be used to set off a question in a sentence, the colon is preferred by most writers:

*They all agreed that the essential issue was simply this: did she or did she not seduce Sir Timothy in the stable block?*

- **To link contrasting statements.**

In this role the colon shares with the semicolon the ability to create surprise and shock, and underline irony. The choice is based on emphasis: use a semicolon when the concluding statement is more an aside or afterthought (see examples in the chapter on the **semicolon**); and a colon when it is an abrupt, unarguable conclusion:

*Jeremy had just one disconcerting fault: he was an inveterate liar.*

*Her love affair with her son's school, its history, its achievements, its famous alumni and its crumbling charm would have endured for ever but for one consideration: the £12,000 yearly fees.*

*She cooks: I eat.*

- **To substitute for a conjunction.**

In the following example, the writer preferred the punchier colon to a choice of conjunctions such as **and** or **so**:

*Rodriguez downed the champ with a dazzling left hook that came out of nowhere: Hayman did not get up.*

- **To introduce a subtitle.**

*Men at War: An Introduction to Chess.*

*Gilbert White: Observer in God's Little Acre.*

- **Other sundry uses of the colon.**

Despite all the functions described so far, we haven't yet finished with this useful mark. If you ever read a stageplay, you'll often find it laid out something like this:

GEORGE:                    *You've said enough –*

ANNA:                      *I haven't even started!*

GEORGE:                 *Enough! D'you hear me!*

Then there is the 'biblical' colon, separating chapter and verse (*Ecclesiastes* 3:12): the mathematical colon used to express ratios (*Male athletes outnumber females* by 3:2); and the time colon (*The train departs* at 12:45). In the US it is customary to use colons to open a letter: *Dear Anna: I do look forward to seeing you soon . . .*

### **Misuse of the Colon**

Perhaps because many people steer clear of colons, abuse of the mark is comparatively rare. But it does exist, not least in newspapers:

*The man was amazing and was able to play: the piano, violin, double-bass, trombone, clarinet, saxophone, harp and drums.*

This is a plain case of redundant colon: if you listen to the sentence you'll instantly agree that it reads better without any mark or pause between *play* and the *piano*.

Here's another instance where use of a colon leads only to confusion:

*Today's English cherry, however, is likely to be Canadian in origin, bred to be split-resistant and grown on dwarf rootstocks: 11 or 12ft high.*

The unnecessary colon leads us to believe that the rootstocks are 11 or 12ft high – which can hardly be described as 'dwarf'! What is apparently meant is that the *entire* tree is 11 to 12ft high, in which case the sentence ought to be reconstructed:

*Today's English cherry, however, is likely to be Canadian in origin, bred to be split-resistant, and grown on dwarf rootstocks to keep the trees down to 11 or 12ft high.*

This final example is a piece of compressed journalese:

*The desperate Prime Minister was forced to axe Nadir victim Michael Mates [from the Cabinet] despite telling him privately: you've done nothing wrong.*

The writer has, in the view of many, done nothing wrong, either; the colon is a versatile and optional mark. But its use here is ill-fitting and the sentence is clumsy.

Here is a suggested reconstruction:

*The desperate Prime Minister was forced to axe Nadir victim Michael Mates despite telling him privately, 'You've done nothing wrong'.*

## The Seductive Embrace of Parentheses [Brackets]

In our discussion of commas we saw how supplementary material in a sentence could be set apart or **parenthesised** (the term **parenthesis**, via Latin and Greek, means ‘an insertion besides’) by enclosing it between a pair of commas.

The sentence above is just such an example, except that instead of using commas we have used a pair of brackets, or **round ( ) brackets**. But because round brackets are used solely for the purpose of *parenthesising* they are more correctly referred to as **parentheses** and the *parenthetical* matter contained between them is said to be in *parenthesis*. The functions of other types of brackets – [ ], { } and < > – are discussed later.

If you look at that first sentence again you will see that the parentheses serve to set apart relevant but supplementary matter which could, if you wished to be ruthless, be dropped altogether without changing the meaning of the sentence. If you did prune away those words, the sentence would still express the same thought, with an uninterrupted flow. But by retaining the words (in parenthesis) the sentence, and the reader, gain from the additional information.

So what’s the difference between parenthesising material between commas and between parentheses? Generally, material within commas is still very much part of the sentence, and must observe the grammatical conventions of that sentence. Bracketed material, on the other hand, is rather more distanced from the sentence proper. Brackets also release the writer from a lot of responsibility as the parenthesised material, leading a separate life as it were, is not required grammatically to match the sentence into which it is inserted. Here, for example, is a parenthesised statement which possesses its own punctuation, independent of the enclosing sentence:

*Although we’ve never seen a mole, their deprivations in the garden (we counted over fifty molehills last Sunday: an increase of fifteen in just a week. And those were confined to the main lawn; there are hundreds more in the orchard) are all too evident.*

That insert is by most writing standards unacceptably long, but it does demonstrate the independence of bracketed text, and how it can play merry with grammatical rules. The first sentence begins without a capital letter and the second even dispenses with a full stop! Here’s a shorter example demonstrating the convenience of the bracket:

*Julian, Maurice and George Marcus (George is the black sheep of the family, and an actor) were all at the reception.*

To convey precisely this information without brackets would require reconstructing the sentence, using commas to parenthesise the supplementary matter:

*Julian and Maurice Marcus, and their brother George, the black sheep of the family and an actor, were all at the reception.*

We also have another option – substituting a pair of dashes for the brackets – which we'll discuss in the appropriate chapter later on.

You can see that for many writers brackets are a godsend; unfortunately these same writers are also prone to over-use them. The embrace of parentheses is seductive and promiscuous, as the following catalogue of examples of usage demonstrates:

**ADDING INFORMATION**

*One of the earliest dictionaries which sets out to explain 'difficult terms' is that of Elisha Coles (Published in London, 1685).*

**EXPLANATION**

*Unable to follow the French instructions and after nothing but trouble she returned the car (a Renault saloon) to the garage.*

**AFTERTHOUGHT**

*During the tour they visited at least a dozen cities and towns (but why not, we wondered, Paris and Marseilles?) in just ten days.*

**CLARIFICATION**

*The directive stated quite clearly (page 15, second paragraph) that the premises would be closed from March 1.*

**COMMENT**

*The women of Brayville were refused admission (why? were they drunk and disorderly?) twice in the same day.*

**ILLUSTRATION**

*The candidate spent far too long discussing irrelevancies (15 minutes on the high price of footwear; another ten on*

*the evils of tax havens) with the result that most of his audience walked out and never returned.*

**CONFIDENTIAL REMARK**

*We're finally leaving this place on Thursday (Oh, God! I can't wait!) and I'll write as soon as we reach Bombay.*

**EXPRESSING AN ASIDE**

*Sylvia promises to lose three stones in just a month (and pigs will fly, too).*

**INDICATING OPTIONS**

*Your document(s) will be forwarded to the prospective employer.*

**EXPRESSING DOUBT**

*According to the magazine, Priscilla had always been the cleverest, sportiest, most-liked (?) girl in her class.*

You'll note that all these examples conform in two important ways:

- Take the parenthesised matter away and the sentence flows on unaffected.
- The parenthesised matter assumes its own punctuation, independent of that of the surrounding sentence.

**Abusing the Bracket**

Is it possible to misuse or abuse such a straightforward, easy-to-use punctuation mark? Misuse is relatively rare but abuse abounds. How often do we see parentheses bulging with the

contents of fifty- or sixty-word mini-essays, so long that by the time we get to the end of them we've lost the drift of the main sentence? If you find yourself writing a parenthesised statement longer than a dozen or at most twenty words, stop and think about restructuring the sentence.

Here's an example of another form of bracket abuse, although more a stylistic sin than grammatical. It occurred in, of all places, a review of a book about punctuation:

*Admittedly, punctuation has changed little since the middle of the 16th century when the widespread dissemination of typefaces among the printers of Europe began to make standardisation possible. (The semicolon as we know it had taken root about 1494; the comma nearer 1520; the apostrophe in 1529.)*

So, what's wrong with that? For one thing it is difficult to justify the need for parenthesis anyway. The review ran in *The Times* which says in its *Style Guide* for journalists: 'Like capitals and dashes they [brackets] look ugly in a column of type and should be avoided wherever possible'. And, secondly, a bracketed afterthought isn't the most elegant way with which to close a sentence or a paragraph. Here's a suggested reconstruction, without the parentheses:

*Admittedly, punctuation has changed little since the middle of the 16th century; the semicolon as we know it had taken root about 1494; the comma nearer 1520 and the apostrophe in 1529; after which the widespread dissemination of typefaces among the printers of Europe began to make standardisation possible.*

Even less justified is the following parenthesised appendage which, again, occurred in a book review. You can see immediately that the brackets are wholly redundant:

*'Killing Ground' is the story of the Battle of the Atlantic, a full-scale war, with no rules and no mercy. (It is also the story of the destroyer, HMS *Gladiator*, and her company.)*

### **Some Tips on using Parentheses**

- When parenthesised matter is inserted where there is a punctuation mark in a sentence, place the punctuation *after* the parenthesis:

*The High Street (in Doncaster), Mrs May said, was typical of its kind.*

- Don't place a dash before a bracketed parenthesis.
- If question marks or exclamation marks belong to the parenthesised matter, they should go *inside* the final bracket; if they relate to the main sentence they are placed *outside*:

*Will you call Lucy this afternoon (or this evening if you are busy or away from your desk)?*

*Peter arrived home last night in a particularly happy frame of mind (and you know what I mean by happy!).*

## Square Brackets

Square brackets are not angular forms of round brackets; their function is entirely different from that of parentheses.

Words enclosed within square brackets are not usually intended to be part of a sentence, but as an editorial or authorial interjection:

*It was a matter of opinion that if offered the position, he [Professor Brandmeyer] would most likely refuse it on moral grounds.*

That sentence came at the end of a very long paragraph; the professor's name had been mentioned at the beginning, but other names and much discussion followed so that the late reference to *he* was in danger of being misunderstood. The editor therefore inserted the name [Professor Brandmeyer] in square brackets to remind readers who *he* was, and also to indicate that the intervention was the editor's and not the author's.



## THE SEDUCTIVE EMBRACE OF PARENTHESES (BRACKETS)

One of the most common uses of square brackets is to enclose the adverb *sic* (from the Latin *sicut*, meaning 'just as') to indicate that incorrect or doubtful matter is quoted exactly from the original:

*Pink and yellow concubines [sic] climbed in great profusion up the trellis.*

*The dog ran up to the car, whelping [sic] loudly and incessantly.*

*Miss Patricia Wall Wall [sic] with her fiance Mr Gerald Kleeman.*

The last example was a caption under a photograph of the newly engaged couple; *The Times* wanted to make sure that readers understood that 'Wall Wall' really was the young lady's surname and not a misprint.

Square brackets are also used to supply or infer missing words:

*Mrs Lavery insisted [that the] Council should note her objection in the official minutes.*

and to include parenthesised matter already in parenthesis:

*Leonard's work has come in for censure and has been described as 'sloppy' (notably by G R Hooke in 'Amazonian Flora' [Phoenix Press, Boston, 1991] among others) and 'deplorably unreliable'.*

**Brace brackets** {brace brackets} and **angle brackets**

<angle brackets> are used only in specialist texts, mathematics, tabulations and technical works.

## A Dash to the Rescue

The dash is a much maligned mark. Newspaper style guides get quite stropy on the subject. 'Dashes are a bad habit,' intones one, 'often used to pursue a line of thought that the writer cannot be bothered to construct in some other way.' Many grammar purists decry the substitution of the dash for the colon and pairs of dashes for parenthesising commas.

It is certainly true that dashes can be overused and misused. The Fowler brothers, in *The King's English*, quote a passage from Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* calculated to drive any reader up the wall:

— *Observe, I determine nothing upon this:— My way is ever to point out to the curious, different tracts of investigation, to come at the first springs of the events I tell:— not with a pedantic fescue, — or in the decisive manner of Tacitus, who outwits himself and his reader:— but with the officious humility . . . .*

Sterne may be excused on the grounds that punctuation marks were only a couple of hundred years old when he wrote that and he was perhaps still a little uncertain of their functions, but there can be no excuse for the following over-dashed passage in an issue of *The Spectator* from our own age:

*There are also a great number of people — many of them not in the least tainted by militarism — who go further and who feel that a man in order to be a complete man — that is, one capable of protecting his life, his country, and his civil and political rights — should acquire as a boy and youth the elements of military training — that is, should be given a physical training . . . .*

There will always be those who'll give a mark a bad name, but in the last decade or two the dash has attracted a growing band of defenders. 'It's the most exciting and dramatic punctuation mark of them all,' claims one authority. Others admire its flexibility and disdain for rules. The dash is a bit of a larrikin and a lot of fun in the often po-faced world of punctuation.

One of its defenders is the formidable Eric Partridge (and he is not alone: the Fowlers wrote a 15-page dissertation on the mark) who, in a bold exposition in his *Usage and Abuse*, pronounces full grammatical health on all these versions of the same statement:

**BRACKETS**            *He was (God forgive him!) a scoundrel.*  
**COMMAS**             *He was, God forgive him!, a scoundrel.*  
**SEMICOLONS**       *He was; God forgive him!; a scoundrel.*  
**COLONS**              *He was: God forgive him!: a scoundrel.*

Partridge did, however, have the grace to admit some discomfort with the comma, semicolon and colon versions, before commending the version with dashes:

**DASHES**             *He was — God forgive him! — a scoundrel.*

It doesn't take too much grammatical nous to see that the statement using dashes is the strongest, most fittingly dramatic and least fussy of them all.

So while the dash has versatility (two dashes can *interrupt* a sentence – as they are doing now – while one can *extend* a sentence – like this) and grammatical respectability, it can also be a trap. Too many dashes can lead to writing that jars and irritates – as in the *Spectator* example – both visually and mentally. If one were to impose rules about dashes they might look like this:

- Don't use dashes in adjoining sentences (as above).
- Restrict their use to a pair per page.
- Try not to use the dash as an all-purpose punctuation mark.

### ● Dashes for Parenthesising.

The earlier example –

*He was – God forgive him! – a scoundrel.*

is a good instance of a pair of dashes used to parenthesise a statement, and this usage is growing by the day. You could take just about any example of parenthesising brackets and substitute dashes, and today few would object. The following sentence could be constructed using brackets, but what's wrong with dashes?

*The dogs are so passive – they are virtually impossible to goad or excite – that the breed makes an ideal children's pet.*

While few writers forget to pair off brackets, many fail to add the second dash, using a comma in its place. Here's the grammar authority G V Carey, from his book *Mind The Stop* (1939):

*No wonder that in some matters the dash has fallen into disrepute, but I still maintain that, if kept in its place – and I make one here for luck, it's a very useful stop.*

Unfortunately Mr Carey's luck ran out in that sentence because he forgot to complete his parenthesis with a second dash between *luck* and *it*, where he has incorrectly and inconsistently placed a comma. It's a lesson to us all – not to be slapdash with the dash!

## The Versatile Dash

Observant readers will have noticed that dashes aren't always the same length. That's because there are two sorts of dashes, their lengths based on the *em*, the basic printers' measurement. The standard dash – is one *em* in length and is called the **em dash**. The other kind is called the **en dash** - and is exactly half the length of the *em*, and, incidentally, twice the length of the hyphen. The *en dash* is predominantly a typographic device for specific usages: *Vols I-XII; 1914-1918 War; London-Paris flight; pages 21-25; June-July; 4.00-6.00pm*, etc. So much for technicalities; all further discussion is confined to the *em dash*.

Here are some examples where the dash can be used legitimately, appropriately, and – yes – even elegantly. The first of these is perhaps also the most common of usages: substituting for colons.



**LINKING DEVICE**

*Mrs Sims had four daughters – Poppy, Iris, Pansy and Petal.*

*On that particular evening, Malcolm had one consuming passion – to drink the place dry.*

**AS A PAUSE**

*Everyone expected the speaker to be controversial – but not to the extent of swearing at the chairwoman and falling off the stage.*

**ADDING EMPHASIS**

*There is nothing – absolutely nothing – that will make me change my mind about Harry.*

**NOTING AN EXCEPTION**

*A straight line is the shortest distance between two points – when you're sober.*

**INDICATING DISRUPTION**

*'There will be, of course, er – a small charge, but if you, er –'*

**AND INTERRUPTION**

*'Hang on – you never said anything about a charge – not a word – there's no way –'*

**INDICATING HESITATION**

*'I'm sorry. It was – you know –'*  
*'Well – what –?'*

**SEPARATING LISTS**

*She assembled all the ingredients – flour, sugar, eggs, salt, lard and raisins – and started on the pudding.*

**AFTERTHOUGHT**

*They babbled on, delighted at sighting the rare parakeet – I didn't see so much as a feather.*

**SIGNALLING A SURPRISE**

*Then the adhesive gave way, the beard came adrift, and Santa Claus was revealed as – Aunt Mildred!*

*David Marquand is one of those rare commodities in British politics – an intellectual.*

The latter example demonstrates one of the most creative usages of the dash – that of signalling a surprise ahead or, in the words of H W Fowler, 'inviting the reader to pause and collect his forces against the shock of an unexpected word that is to close the sentence.' Lord Byron was particularly adept at this:

*There is a tide in the affairs of women which, taken at the flood, leads – God knows where.*

*He learned the arts of riding, fencing, gummy and how to scale a fortress – or a nunnery.*

**The Dash in Sentence Construction**

For some examples of the use of the dash by a master of the language, here are some excerpts from Shiva Naipaul's *Love and Death in a Hot Country*. First, see how he chooses to use a dash to introduce the subjects, and then a colon to set off a conclusion:

*Everything seemed more dramatic than ever – Aubrey, the woman he called his wife, himself, the hot square of garden: shadows whose actions and words he did not fully understand.*

Secondly, he prefers dashes to parenthesis, rather than commas:

*Dina had no idea what – if anything – was expected of her.*

And, again, dashes substitute for colons:

*Imagine a family – a family, if you wish, like my own.*

Finally, here's a long parenthetical passage that few writers would want to attempt. But see how, after the closing dash, Naipaul cleverly repeats his opening phrase *the surprising thing*, so that the reader, whose attention might have drifted, is smartly reunited with the main sentence:

*The surprising thing about the imminent abandonment of the Constitution – that lengthy charter so top-heavy with ringing preambles, so glutinously coated with abstract principles of right and justice and obligation, so ribboned with guarantees to minorities and special interests, so honeycombed with promises of life and liberty and happiness for all, so stiff with austere legalism, so sweetened with the codes of civility, that Constitution painstakingly fabricated and assembled over several weeks in panelled, chandeliered halls and flourished in triumph at the climax – the surprising thing was not that it was about to be unceremoniously tossed out of the window but that it had taken such a comparatively long time for that to happen.*

### A Dashed Quotation Quiz

The original quotations all contained dashes, but have been repunctuated. Can you correctly reinstate the dashes?

1. *No! No! Sentence first, verdict afterwards.*  
– Lewis Carroll
2. *The English country gentleman – galloping after a fox: the unspeakable in full pursuit of the uneatable.* – Oscar Wilde
3. *Every woman should marry. And no man.* – Disraeli
4. *Familiarity breeds contempt . . . and children.*  
– Mark Twain
5. *Don't clap too hard; it's an old building.*  
– John Osborne
6. *Sweet is revenge, especially to women.*  
– Lord Byron

**Answers:** 1. *first – verdict* 2. *fox – the* 3. *marry – and*  
4. *contempt – and* 5. *hard – it's* 6. *revenge – especially*

## Hassles with Hyphens

Did you ever see a window dressing? A worm eaten, or a cut throat? Witnessed a U turn? Or have you heard a name calling? Obviously not, but just to make sure nobody is hoodwinked we tend to hyphenate such compound words:

*window-dressing; worm-eaten; cut-throat; U-turn; name-calling*

But not always. Among punctuation marks the hyphen is the most liable to variant usage, illogical exceptions and change. To those who like this sort of situation, hyphens are the spice of life.

We've dealt with dashes and know that they are used, in various ways, to help us *construct sentences*. The hyphen helps us to *construct words* to clarify meaning. At least that's what they set out to do.

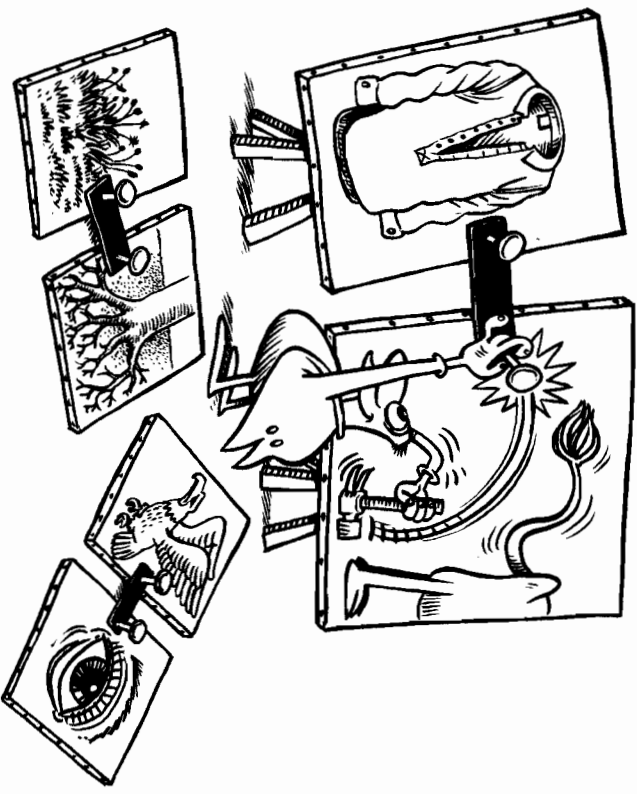
Here are two similar newspaper headlines:

MAN EATING TIGER SEEN NEAR MOTORWAY.

MAN-EATING TIGER SEEN NEAR MOTORWAY.

The first headline suggests that a hungry gourmet has decided to barbecue some choice jungle beast near a motorway, while the second could prove fatal should you be carelessly wandering along the hard shoulder. A hyphen has made all the difference.

In the same vein, a *little used car* (say a Mini) is not in the same league as a *little-used car* (say a 6-litre Rolls-Royce with only 3,000 miles on the clock). Nor is a *small businessman* necessarily a *small-businessman*, or a *French polisher* a *French-polisher*. To quote a notorious example, a consignment of *superfluous hair-remover* could have a devastating effect on someone looking for the benefits of *superfluous-hair-remover*. So beware!



## The Evolutionary Hyphen

Hyphens are used to join, temporarily or permanently, two or more associated words. Sometimes this is done to create a useful compound word to describe something for which no word exists (*double-cross*, *off-putting*, *knock-kneed*). Sometimes it is done to remove potential confusion (*tie-break*; *stick-up*, *re-cover*), or to act as a guide to pronunciation (*get-at-able*, *co-responder*).

One of the most interesting qualities of the hyphen is that, having done its job, it is often discarded and – *prest!* – a new word is born, unencumbered by punctuation. This process can take half a century or a decade. If you had lived in the 1950s you would have read words such as *motor-car*, *tax-payer* and *man-power*. Today, as we know, they are single words without hyphens. And *today* itself was *to-day* in the early 20th century; *tomorrow* was *to-morrow* and *yesterday* was *yester-day*.

This evolutionary process, however, is not consistent; some hyphenated compounds make it to respectability and some don't:

SEPARATE WORDS	HYPHENATED COMPOUND	UNIFIED COMPOUND
<i>son in law</i>	<i>son-in-law</i>	(unlikely)
<i>book seller</i>	<i>book-seller</i>	<i>bookseller</i>
<i>book keeper</i>	<i>book-keeper</i>	(unlikely)
<i>life like</i>	<i>life-like</i>	<i>life-like</i>

Sometimes the transition can be dated with great accuracy. In 1935 the American mystery novelist Raymond Chandler coined the term *cover-up*. It lost its hyphen in the early 1970s to become the very useful word *coverup*, although you may still find the

hyphenated version lingering in some dictionaries. The hyphenated compound *hand-operated* was introduced in 1936 and *child-proof* saw first light of day in 1956 to join a confused family: *child-bearing* (hyphenated); *child benefit*, *child labour*, *child's play*, *child minder* (all two words) and *childbed*, *childbirth*, *childhood* and *childlike* (unified words). But turn your back for a few moments and you may find that some of the family have shed their hyphens while others have acquired them.

Obviously, when it comes to hyphens, inconsistencies abound. Even as late as the 1960s it was the style of many institutions and publications in the UK for street names to be hyphenated: *Oxford-street*, *Parliament-street*, *Drury-lane*, *Harper-road*. And half a century ago it was not uncommon to see *publichouse* in print and on signs. Since then the single word has taken a reverse trip and is now *public house*, or *pub* for short. But that's a rare case; for most hyphenated compounds the goal is to become a 'proper' word. Here are just a few of thousands of words that began life as two or more words linked by hyphens:

*antichinax*, *bloodyminded*, *businesslike*, *contradict*,  
*contraflow*, *earring*, *hindquarters*, *lampshade*, *lifestyle*,  
*nightgown*, *nowadays*, *phoenixlike*, *postgraduate*,  
*posthumous*, *predeceased*, *predecessor*, *prehistoric*, *seaside*,  
*washbowl*.

Then there are those hyphenated partners never destined to marry because of 'letter collision' which is visually disconcerting: *shell-like* (not *shelllike*); *semi-illiterate* (not *semilliterate*); *de-ice* (not *deice*); *co-wrote* (not *cowrote*) – although we accept such unhyphenated pairs of spectacles as *cooperative* and *coordination*.

## Compound Engagements, Marriages and Divorces

As we have seen, there are pairs of words that have a hyphenated romance, become engaged, and sometimes marry.

There are others that never make the commitment although they're often seen together, even live together, and still others – a minority – that separate or become divorced. Just like life, there's a lot of promiscuity among compound words. But is there a recognisable *pattern* in this teeming sub-world of compounding?

Well, yes, despite the exceptions and inconsistencies, there is. The vast majority of compound words are constructed from a headword and a prefix (*ex-sailor*, *semi-detached*, *anti-hero*); a headword and a suffix (*shoot-out*, *phone-in*, *crack-down*) or with two or more different parts of speech (two nouns = *book-end*; noun and verb = *joy-ride*; two verbs = *dry-clean*, etc.). Most of these compounds follow group patterns, some being hyphenated and some not, as you will see, although there will be the inevitable rebels. Here's a guide to the more common problematical compound words.

### Compounds with Prefixes

- **all-** Usually hyphenated: *all-American*, *all-important*, *all-round*, *all-out*, *all-powerful*, *all-sorts*, *all-star*, *all-time*, *all-inclusive*. **Exceptions:** *all clear*, *all in*, *all fours*, *all right*, *all square*, *allspace*, *All Blacks*.

- **ante-** Invariably a single word: *antecedent*, *antechamber*, *antedate*, *antediluvian*, *antennae*, *anteroom*.

- **anti-** Always a single word; hyphenated only to avoid ambiguity: *antibiotic*, *antichimax*, *antilockwise*, *anticyclone*, *antifreeze*, *antimacassar*, *antislavery*.

**Exceptions:** *anti-aircraft*, *anti-American*, *anti-hero*, *anti-personnel*, *anti-icer*.

- **back-** Generally one word: *backache*, *backbone*, *backdrop*, *background*, *backstroke*, *backwater*. **Exceptions:** *back burner*, *back-pedal*, *back seat*, *back up*.

- **bi-** Typically one word: *biannual*, *biennial*, *bifocal*, *bilateral*, *bilingual*, *bisexual*, *biweekly*. **Exceptions:** *bi-weekly* and *bi-monthly* are also commonly seen.

- **by-** Careful – a mixed bag: *by and by* and *large*, *bye-bye*, *by-election*, *bylaw*, *bypass*, *by-product*, *bystander*, *bygone*, *bypass*, *byword*.

- **co-** Always a single word but hyphenated when meaning may be unclear. **Exceptions:** *co-opl*, *co-respondent*, *co-author*, *co-driver*, *co-op*, *co-star*.

- **contra-** Always one word: *contradistinction*, *contrapuntal*.

- **cross-** Usually hyphenated: *cross-breed*, *cross-country*, *cross-cut*, *cross-legged*. **Exceptions:** *crossbar*, *crossbow*, *crosscut*, *crossover*, *crossroad*, *cross section*, *crosswind*, *crossword*.

- **de-** Always a single word and only hyphenated where 'letter collision' occurs: *de-ice*, *de-emphasise*, *de-escalate*.

- **die-** Single word. **Exceptions:** *die-cast*, *die-cut*, *die-hand*, *die-down*.

- **ex-** Most words beginning with the prefix *ex-* are single words (*except, excise, exclamation, existential, etc*) but there are two important exceptions: (1) where the meaning is 'formerly' or the word conveys a sense of exclusion, it is hyphenated, and (2) terms derived from Latin have the *ex* separate, with no hyphen.  
**Exceptions (1):** *ex-husband, ex-convict, ex-serviceman, ex-colleague, ex-president, ex-Foreign Secretary, ex-directory*; (2): *ex dividend, ex gratia, ex libris, ex officio, ex parte*. Also *ex works*.
- **extra-** Most dictionaries now drop the hyphen (*extracurricular, extramarital, extrasensory*) but some words look clearer and cleaner with one: *extra-illustrated, extra-terrestrial*.
- **far-** Usually hyphenated: *far-fetched, far-flung, far-off, far-reaching, far-seeing, far-sighted*. **Exceptions:** *far cry, Far East*.
- **foot-** Always a single word. **Exceptions:** *foot-and-mouth disease, foot brake, foot-candle, foot-pound*.
- **full-** Usually hyphenated: *full-frontal, full-length, full-scale*. **Exceptions:** *full board, full house, full moon, full time, full stop, full toss, fullback*.
- **get-** Two separate words: *get away, get by, get off, get on, get up*. **Exceptions:** *getaway, get-at-able, get-together, get-up-and-go*.
- **go-** Either two words (*go ahead, go on, go under*) or hyphenated: *go-by, go-kart, go-getter, go-go, go-slow*. **Exceptions:** *goer*.
- **half-** Mostly hyphenated: *half-cocked, half-length, half-time*. **Exceptions:** *halfback, half board, half holiday, half measure, half term, halffone, halfway*.
- **hard-** Very little uniformity here! Nouns are mostly single words: *hardback, hardboard, hardcore, hardship, hardtop*. Some nouns, however, are two separate words: *hard copy, hard court, hard hat, hard labour, hard line*. Where the prefix forms an adjective the word is hyphenated: *hard-bitten, hard-edged, hard-headed, hard-hitting, hard-nosed, hard-pressed, hard-working*.
- **in-** Single words except when the *in-* prefix is specifically used to indicate belonging or 'within', when the word is hyphenated (*in-built, in-crowd, in-depth, in-house, in-law*) or derives from Latin: *in situ, in utero, in vitro*. **Exception:** *inpatient*.
- **lay-** Two words: *lay days, lay off, lay over*. **Exceptions:** *layabout, lay-by, layman, laywoman, layout*.
- **neo-** The trend is to drop the traditional hyphen: *neoclassical, neocolonial, neorealism*. **Exceptions:** *Neo-Darwinism, neo-Nazism, neo-orthodoxy*.
- **no-** Hyphenated: *no-claim bonus, no-good, no-show, no-man's-land, no-nonsense, no-ball*. **Exceptions:** *nobody, nowhere*.
- **non-** Traditionally hyphenated but there's a trend now to drop the hyphen: *nondelivery, nondrip, nondrinker, nonexistent, nonirritant, nonstop*. **Exceptions:** *non-navigable, non-negotiable, non-U, non-striker, non sequitur*.

- **off-** Usually hyphenated: *off-centre, off-licence, off-load, off-peak, off-white, off-putting, off-Broadway*.  
**Exceptions:** *offbeat, offcut, offhand, off key, off limits, off season, offshoot, offside, offstage*.
- **on-** Usually a single word: *oncoming, ongoing, onlooker, onset, onside*. **Exceptions:** *on-cost, on-drive, on-off, on key, on line*.
- **out-** Usually one word: *outbuilding, outcry, outlying, outpatient*. **Exceptions:** *out-and-out, out-of-doors*.
- **over-** Overwhelmingly one word: *overact, overcharge, overhear, overstate*. **Exception:** *over-the-counter*.
- **per-** Nearly always one word. The only exceptions are Latin terms: *per annum, per cent, per se*.
- **pre-** Invariably one word: *preconceive, prefabricate, preoccupy, preview*. **Exceptions:** *pre-Gothic, pre-Renaissance*, and similarly with other proper nouns.
- **pro-** Usually hyphenated when the meaning of the prefix is 'in favour or in support of': *pro-British, pro-European*, etc. But the trend is to drop the hyphen when it precedes a common noun: *probusiness, proreform*.
- **quasi-** Always hyphenated: *quasi-official, quasi-judicial*, etc.
- **re-** Single word except when 'letter collision' occurs (*re-edit, re-embark, re-engage, re-enact, re-enter, re-establish*) or when there is confusion over meaning: *re-count, re-cover, re-creale, re-entry, re-form, re-lay, re-present, re-serve*.

- **self-** Invariably hyphenated: *self-assured, self-contained, self-denial, self-evident, self-respect*. **Exception:** *selfsame*.
- **semi-** Single word except when 'letter collision' occurs: *semi-industrial, semi-illiterate, semi-intoxicated, semi-invalid*.
- **set-** Usually two words: *set off, set piece, set square, set up, set upon*. **Exception:** *set-aside* (EC farm subsidy scheme).
- **sub-** Usually one word: *subcontinent, subcontractor, subheading*. **Exceptions:** *sub-branch, sub-basement, sub-post office, sub-machine gun*.
- **super-** Always one word: *superannuated, superego, supermarket*.
- **trans-** Always one word: *transcendental, transferable, transformer*.
- **tri-** Always one word: *triangulate, trilateral, tristate*.
- **un-** Always one word: *unfulfilled, unheeded, uninvitingly*.
- **up-** Usually one word: *upbeat, upheaval, upmost, upriver, upstage*. **Exceptions:** *up-anchor, up-and-coming, up-market, up-to-date*.
- **vice-** When the prefix denotes a substitute the noun is usually hyphenated: *vice-chairman, vice-chancellor, vice-captain*. **Exceptions:** *vice admiral, viceregal, viceroys, vice president* (but *vice-presidency*).

## Compounds with Suffixes

- **-all** Usually hyphenated: *be-all, catch-all*.  
**Exception:** *hollidall*.
- **-away** The trend is to drop the traditional hyphen: *faraway, giveaway, breakaway*.
- **-back** Invariably one word: *cutback, flashback, playback, throwback*.
- **-by** One word: *whereby, standby, hereby* **Exception:** *go-by*
- **-down** Depending on the part of speech the words are playing, a variable group: the verb *back down* becomes *backdown* as a noun; *put down* as a verb becomes a *put-down*, the noun; the noun *breakdown* becomes *broken-down* as an adjective. Some single-word nouns include *meltdown, crackdown, showdown, slowdown*, while *close-down, sit-down* and *run-down* are usually hyphenated.
- **-fold** Always single word: *twofold, hundredfold*.
- **-free** Usually hyphenated: *fat-free, sugar-free, scot-free*.
- **-in** Usually hyphenated: *built-in, drive-in, sit-in, trade-in*.
- **-less** Always single word: *defenceless, lifeless, regardless*.
- **-like** Single word except when 'letter collision' occurs:  
*owl-like, shell-like*.
- **-off** Traditionally hyphenated (*lay-off, rip-off, turn-off, well-off, write-off*) but there is a trend to drop the hyphen:  
*breakoff, brushoff, kickoff, liftoff*.

- **-on** Invariably hyphenated: *come-on, follow-on, goings-on, knock-on, put-on, roll-on / roll-off, slip-on, try-on*.
- **-out** Traditionally hyphenated but succumbing to the trend of dropping the hyphen: *blackout, checkout, hideout, lookout, tryout, wipeout*.
- **-over** Usually single word: *pushover, takeover, walkover*.
- **-up** Usually hyphenated: *blow-up, call-up, cover-up, foul-up, make-up, mark-up, press-up, stand-up* (adj).  
**Exception:** *hang up*.

## Other Compounds

Apart from compound words formed by headwords with prefixes and suffixes, there are thousands of other words in which various parts of speech have been combined:

- NOUN + VERB** *ham-fisted, hand-operated*
- ADJECTIVE + NOUN** *blue-pencil, loose-leaf, long-grain, open-air*
- ADJECTIVE + ADJECTIVE** *old-fashioned, short-sighted, cold-blooded*

... and so on. Although many of these compounds stick to rules just as many have abandoned them, so it is pointless to search for helpful patterns. Overleaf, you'll find a hotchpotch of words generally accepted as requiring hyphens at the time of publication:



## A Hotchpotch of Hyphens

**accident-prone**, acid-free, aide-de-camp, aide-mémoire, anti-abortion, après-ski, argy-bargy attorney-at-law, Attorney-General, avant-garde, awe-inspiring.

**baby-boomer**, back-seat driver, ball-and-socket joint, bas-relief, big-bang theory, bird-brain, bird's-eye view, bleary-eyed, bloody-minded, blow-dry, bone-dry, bone-shaking, boogie-woogie, book-keeping, book-keeper, brain-teaser, bric-a-brac, bright-eyed and bushy-tailed, bring-and-buy, brother-in-law, bull's-eye, by-product.

**call-up**, can-opener, cast-offs, catch-as-catch-can, cat-o'-nine-tails, chef-d'oeuvre, clear-eyed, Coca-Cola, cock-a-doodle-do, cock-and-bull story, co-driver, cold-blooded, cold-hearted, come-hither, co-op, co-worker, counter-revolution, crash-landing, crease-resistant, Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease, cross-index, cul-de-sac, custom-built, cut-throat.

**daddy-longlegs**, daughter-in-law, deaf-and-dumb, deep-sea fishing, devil-may-care, devils-on-horseback, dewy-eyed, ding-dong, do-it-yourself, door-to-door, double-cross, double-dealing, double-park, Dow-Jones, down-and-out, dry-stone wall, dyed-in-the-wool.

**eagle-eyed**, ear-splitting, eau-de-Cologne, egg-and-spoon race, empty-handed, Entre-Deux-Mers, even-tempered, evil-minded, eye-opener.

**face-lift**, face-saving, fact-finding, fancy-free, far-seeing, father-in-law, fault-finding, felt-tip pen, fifty-fifty, first-day cover, first-hand, five-o'clock shadow, five-star hotel, flag-waving, fleur-de-lis, fly-by-night, follow-my-leader, foot-and-mouth disease, force-feed, forget-me-not, fortune-teller, foul-mouthed, four-letter-word, fractions (three-quarters, one-twentieth, etc.), free-for-all, French-polish, full-blown, full-bodied.

**gap-toothed**, gender-bender, get-at-able, get-together, give-and-take, glow-worm, glue-sniffing, go-go dancer, gold-digger, gold-plate (verb), good-for-nothing, good-humoured, good-looking, good-natured, good-time girl, grass-roots, great-aunt/niece/nephew, grief-stricken, grown-ups, G-string.

**habit-forming**, hag-ridden, hail-fellow-well-met, hair-raising, hair's-breadth, half-a-crown, half-and-half, half-breed (virtually all words prefixed with half are hyphenated, as noted), hand-held, hand-me-downs, hand-out, hand-pick, hands-off, hand-to-hand, hand-to-mouth, hanger-on, hanky-panky, happy-go-lucky, hard-bitten, hard-edged, hard-headed, hard-hitting, hard-nosed, hard-pressed, hard-sell, hard-wearing, head-on collision, heart-to-heart, heart-searching, heart-warming, heave-ho, heaven-sent, heavy-duty, heavy-handed, heller-skelter, he-man, hide-and-seek, hi-fi, higgledy-piggledy, high-class, high-flown, high-handed, high-spirited, high-tech/level/minded/octane/powerful/rise/risk/speed/lension, hip-hop, hit-and-run, hocus-focus, home-grown, home-made, horror-stricken, hot-air balloon, hot-dog stand, hot-water bottle, hound's-tooth check, house-proud, Hula-Hoop, hunky-dory, hurdy-gurdy, hurly-burly.

**ice-cream soda/cone** (but ice cream), ill-advised/assorted/behaved/bred/considered/dispensed/fated/mannered/natured/starred/timed/treated, in-bull, in-house.

*jack-in-the-box*, *jack-of-all-trades*, *Jack-the-lad*, *jiggery-pokery*

*Johnny-come-lately*, *jumped-up*, *jump-start*.

*kick-start*, *king-steep*, *kiss-and-tell*, *knee-deep/high/length*, *knees-up*, *knick-knack*, *knife-point*, *knock-for-knock*, *knock-kneed*, *knock-on*, *knuckle-duster*.

**Labour-intensive**, *labour-saving*, *lady-in-waiting*, *laid-back*.

*laissez-faire*, *lamb's-wool jumper*, *land-holder*, *Land-Rover*, *large-scale*, *last-ditch*, *last-gasp*, *Latter-day Saint*, *lean-to*, *left-handed*, *lèse-majesté*, *level-headed*, *lickety-split*, *life-size*, *life-support*, *light-headed*, *light-sensitive*, *like-minded*, *lily-white*, *line-up*, *lived-in*, *long-distance runner/phone call*, *long-drawn-out*, *long-standing*, *long-suffering*, *long-term memory*, *long-winded*, *look-see*, *loose-limbed*, *lop-eared*, *low-key*, *low-water mark*, *lying-in*.

**major-domo**, *make-believe*, *make-up*, *mal-de-mer*, *man-eater*,

*manage-tout*, *man-o'-war*, *man-to-man*, *mark-up*, *mass-market* (**adj**, **vb**), *mealy-mouthed*, *mezzo-soprano*, *middle-aged*, *mind-boggling*, *mind-blowing*, *mind-reader*, *mind-set*, *mix-up*, *morning-after feeling*, *mother-in-law*, *mother-of-pearl*, *mouth-to-mouth*, *multiple-choice*, *muu-muu*.

**name-calling**, *name-dropping*, *near-sighted*, *ne'er-do-well*, *never-ending*, *never-never*, *night-light*, *nit-picking*, *no-claim bonus*, *no-go area*, *no-show*, *no-hoper*, *non-starter*, *nuclear-free zone*.

**off-Broadway**, *off-centre*, *off-peak*, *off-putting*, *off-the-wall*, *old-fashioned*, *old-time dancing*, *O-level*, *one-night-stand*, *one-parent family*, *one-piece*, *one-to-one*, *one-way ticket*, *out-of-doors*.

**Pan-American**, *pari-mutuel*, *passé-partout*, *passer-by*, *pay-as-you-go*, *penny-wise*, *pound-foolish*, *penny-pinching*, *pent-up* (**adj**), *pic-a-terre*, *pile-driver*, *Ping-Pong*, *pitch-and-throw*, *pitier-patier*, *place-name*, *point-blank*, *point-to-point*, *pooh-pooh*, *pooper-scooper*, *pop-up*, *post-natal*,

*post-paid*, *pre-eminent*, *pre-empt*, *pre-natal*, *pressure-cook*, *price-fixing*, *pro-choice*, *punch-drunk*, *purpose-built*, *push-start*.

**quarter-hour**, *quarter-miler*, *Queen-Anne* (**style**), *quick-change*, *quick-tempered*, *quick-witted*.

**rake-off**, *razor-cut*, *ready-mix*, *rear-view mirror*, *red-blooded/handed/headed*, *red-letter day*, *reel-to-reel*, *right-handed/minded/thinking*, *rip-roaring*, *Rolls-Royce*, *roly-poly*, *root-canal treatment*, *rose-coloured*, *run-of-the-mill*, *rye-grass*.

**sabre-rattling**, *St Martin-in-the-Fields*, *Saint-Saens*, *sang-froid*, *savoir-faire*, *sawn-off*, *scot-free*, *second-guess*, *self-abuse* (nearly all words with the *self* prefix are hyphenated), *set-aside*, *seven-year itch*, *sex-starved*, *sharp-eyed*, *shirt-tail*, *short-changed*, *short-lived*, *short-stuffed*, *sickle-cell anaemia*, *side-splitting*, *silver-gilt*, *silver-tongued*, *simon-pure*, *single-lens reflex*, *sit-down strike*, *six-gun/shooter*, *skin-deep*, *smarty-pants*, *smooth-tongued*, *so-called*, *soft-boiled egg*, *softly-softly*, *soft-shoe shuffle*, *son-in-law*, *space-bar*, *spick-and-span*, *spin-off*, *standard-bearer*, *stick-up*, *stone-cold*, *stone-deaf*, *straight-from-the-shoulder*, *strait-laced*, *strong-arm*, *sun-dried*, *surface-to-air missile*, *sweet-and-sour*, *sweet-talk*, *swing-wing*, *swollen-headed*.

**tailor-made**, *tam-o'-shanter*, *tax-deductible/exempt/free*, *terror-stricken*, *test-drive* (**vb**), *test-tube baby*, *tête-à-tête*, *thick-skinned*, *think-tank*, *thin-skinned*, *third-rate*, *three-dimensional*, *three-piece*, *three-ply*, *three-ring circus*, *three-wheeler*, *tic-tac-toe*, *tip-off*, *toad-in-the-hole*, *ton-up*, *top-flight*, *touch-type*, *trade-off*, *trap-door spider*, *travel-sickness*, *treasure-trove*, *turbo-electric*, *tut-tut*, *tufti-fruitti*, *twin-tub*, *two-faced/handed/seater/sided/step/lone*, *two-way mirror*.

**U-bend**, *U-boat*, *ultra-violet* (but often *ultraviolet*), *up-and-coming*, *up-market*, *upside-down cake*, *upsy-daisy*, *up-to-date*, *U-turn*.

*value-added tax, vice-presidential, V-day, vis-a-vis, VJ-Day, voice-over, vol-au-vent, volte-face.*

*walk-on part, walkie-talkie, wall-to-wall, warm-hearted, wash-and-wear, washing-up, watch-glass, weak-willed, weather-beaten, well-appointed (words with the well- prefix are always hyphenated), well-to-do, whistle-blower, white-hot, white-knuckle ride, whole-wheat, wide-awake, wide-angle lens, will-o'-the-wisp, willy-willy, wind-borne, window-dresser, window-shopping, wishy-washy, witch-hunt, work-in-progress, world-beater/class/wear; worm-eaten, would-be, wrong-footed, wrong-headed, wynch-elm.*

*X-chromosome, X-ray (or x-ray).*

*Y-chromosome, yellow-bellied, year-round, yo-heave-ho, yo-ho-ho.*

*zero-rated.*

### Other Functions of the Hyphen

One of the most useful functions of the hyphen is probably the one we notice least: that of syllabification or **syllabication** (syl-lab-i-ca-tion) – the hyphen's role in enabling us to split words at the end of lines. When this is done according to the logic of word construction the reader's eye travels from one line to the next without interruption or effort. But it is apparent that some modern typesetting software follows no such rules and words are likely to be divided on rather more *laissez-faire* principles, giving rise to such unlikely compounds as *fig-urine, the-ories, leg-end, should-er, condom-inium, physiothe-rapists, hor-emen, screwd-river, mans-laughter* and so on. Fortunately most typesetting today is automatically justified (aligned to the left and right) and whole books can be printed without resorting to wordbreaks at all.

Hyphens are essential for separating certain groups of words or names (*The Conservative-Liberal Alliance; The Paris-Washington Accord*) and to make sense of double double-barrel surnames where the central dividing hyphen is more a 'short' dash: *The event of the county season was the Hywell-Jones-Craig-Thomas wedding in May.* Remember, too, that many English place-names are traditionally hyphenated:

*Burton-on-Trent, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, Slow-on-the-Wold, Weston-super-Mare.*

Hyphens are also useful for creating special effects:

*'Blimmy, it's c-c-c-cold in here!'*

*'I repeat, my name is Smyth – S-M-Y-T-H – not Smith!'*

*'I'm b-b-bloody sick of this n-n-nonsense!'* he spluttered.

Occasionally you may need to use what is called the **suspensive hyphen** to avoid repetition:

*Between Monday and Thursday there were two-, four-, seven- and five-inch snowfalls.*

But watch this usage warily: it's not pretty. Better to try to reconstruct the sentence:

*Four snowfalls were recorded between Monday and Thursday of two-, four-, seven and five inches.*

If this chapter on hyphens has seemed a touch heavy-handed you might consider the words of writer and grammatical realist Keith Waterhouse: 'If you write *second-hand* and *car salesman*,

should you write *second-hand-car salesman*, which is fussy, or *second-hand car salesman*, which suggests that the salesman is second-hand? Fruitless hours can be spent pondering such questions. It is usually better to leave all the hyphens out than allow them to pile up.'

### ***An Inadequacy of Hyphens***

Keith Waterhouse's thoughts apart, the following passage suffers from a dearth of hyphens. Can you supply them?

*We were headed cross country for Stratford on Avon, mother in law in the rear and running late for the seven o'clock curtain. It was an ill fated, accident prone journey with an hour spent on a lay by with a broken down three wheeler—ten year old cars aren't always a hundred per cent reliable — gathering forget me nots in knee high rye grass and wondering, bleary eyed, if we would ever get to the theatre.*

(Suggested punctuation below)

### ***An Inadequacy of Hyphens: Suggested Punctuation***

*We were headed cross-country for Stratford-on-Avon, mother-in-law in the rear and running late for the seven-o'clock curtain. It was an ill-fated, accident-prone journey with an hour spent on a lay-by with a broken-down three-wheeler — ten-year-old cars aren't always a hundred per cent reliable — gathering forget-me-nots in knee-high rye-grass and wondering, bleary-eyed, if we would ever get to the theatre.*

# **Symbols of Meaning**

- *You're going?* = "You're going? So soon? But you've just arrived."
- *You're going!* = "For the last time, James, whether you like it or not – you're going!"



Undoubtedly the question mark is a simple but useful punctuation device, although there are those who, inadvertently or deliberately, avoid it. One of the latter is the American comic novelist J P Donleavy who, somewhere between writing *The Ginger Man* (1955) and *A Singular Man* (1964) decided to eschew the question mark altogether. Here's a typical passage, where the hero George Smith asks his secretary to look into his eyes:

'Just tell me what colour they are.'  
 'I think they're green, Mr Smith.'  
 'I mean the whites, what are they.'  
 'White. Mr Smith.'

## Any Questions? The Question Mark

So far we've dealt with units of space, separation and connection. Now we enter new punctuation territory: the rest of our marks are symbols of expression and meaning.

The question mark and exclamation mark share a common ancestry: both are developments of the full stop. The exclamation mark consists of a hanging stroke pointing emphatically to the stop below it to make the reader screech to a halt. The question mark has a squiggle atop the stop, not unlike a 'q' (for *query?*), and its purpose is to warn the reader that the preceding word or statement is interrogative, or of doubtful validity. Furthermore, they are all prone to stray into each other's territory:

*You're going.*            is not the same as            *You're going?*  
*You're going?*        is not the same as            *You're going!*

Same words, but the three different symbols enable us to express three shades of meaning:

- *You're going.* = "James, I know you've got a bit of a cold, but not bad enough to stay home from school. You're going."

'How white.'  
 'Just white, Mr Smith.'  
 'You don't think they're going grey.'  
 'No, Mr Smith.'  
 'Or brown.'  
 'No.'

Such a passage is attributed by critics to "Donleavy's idiosyncratic style" which aside from his refusal to employ question marks includes casually dropping other marks and ending sentences at odd places. To many readers, however, such mannerisms can be intensely irritating. Moreover, playing games with punctuation has its pitfalls; in Donleavy's case his no doubt frustrated editor found that in *A Singular Man* at least one question mark was necessary to avoid confusion. Here's the passage (Chapter 10):

"We thought the guy was nuts. A friend of yours? We were going to call the cops but he was gone all of a sudden. Left an envelope. On the window sill of the office. Are you from the institution?"

### **Direct and Indirect Questions**

A sentence that asks a question directly requires a question mark, but a sentence that poses an *indirect question* does not:

**DIRECT QUESTION**     *'Are you going to the match?'*

**INDIRECT QUESTION**     *'I asked him if he was going to the match.'*

This looks fairly simple but sometimes an indirect question can be disguised. Here's a sub-headline from *The Sunday Times*:

*A hundred years after Freud, 50 after the development of potent psychiatric drugs, have our ideas of psychiatric care really progressed, asks Dr Anthony Clare.*

Not a question mark in sight! Why? Here's another example, from *The Times*:

*Why should allegations that go unchallenged in America be the subject of legal action in Britain, asks Roy Greenslade.*

Both sentences seem to be screaming for question marks – the first after *progressed*, the other after *Britain*. But if you study the sentences carefully you will see that both are just novel forms of indirect questions. Taking the second example, we could write it so that its indirect status is not the least in doubt:

*Roy Greenslade asks why should allegations that go unchallenged in America be the subject of legal action in Britain.*

Or in the form of a reported direct question:

*Roy Greenslade asks, "Why should allegations that go unchallenged in America be the subject of legal action in Britain?"*

Here's another perplexing example, this time carrying a question mark:

*I wonder how many people will be homeless this Christmas?*

Look closely and you'll see that this is an indirect question. So why is it followed by a question mark? This is because many writers fall into this error; the sentence should end with a full stop. Either that, or rewrite the sentence to include a direct question:

*I wondered, "How many people will be homeless this Christmas?"*

One of the curious and confusing characteristics of the question mark is that you have to reach the end of the sentence to be certain that a question is being asked. This isn't a problem with short questions, but when you strike an interminably long question, it can be. Don't forget that, no matter how long your sentence is, if there is a direct question contained in it, a question mark is still required:

*Is it not curious that Emile Zola's 'Lourdes', which within a year of publication sold over 200,000 copies, had critical acclaim poured over it like champagne and which provoked such a furor that it was instantly placed on the Vatican's Index of prohibited books, is not still widely read today?*

After reading that passage most of us would agree that there is a good case for placing the question mark at the beginning to signal to the reader that a question is coming, as they do in Spain.

Most of us, most of the time, use question marks at the most simplistic level. But for those who might wish to wield this mark with more panache, let's explore a little deeper into its usage. Here is the mark being used in several ways:

**INTERROGATIVE**

*Are you from Canada?*

**DECLARATIVE**

*Do you fully realise the trouble you're in?*

**EXCLAMATORY**

*Isn't this just fantastic?*

**TAG QUESTION**

*It's a great game, isn't it?*

**REQUEST**

*Would you let me know if either Monday or Tuesday next week would be suitable?*

The first of these is of course the common, simple question that a child quickly learns how to use. The second type isn't so simple; besides being a question it also carries strong overtones of frustration, curtness, even anger. The **exclamatory question**, appropriately named, could end with an exclamation mark and yet still remain a question. The **tag question** reinforces the first part of the sentence by seeking agreement from the person or persons being addressed; it is one of the most common conversational bonding devices. The **request question** is the most slippery of them all: for example, requests typically beginning with the question 'Would you . . . ' often finish with a full stop.

**The 'Semi'-question**

*Would you be good enough to ensure that in future cars and other vehicles belonging to non-staff are parked outside the gates.*

Well, what is it – a request or a question? It is in fact both, part question, part demand. A writer wishing to be polite or agreeable would add a question mark – but that would weaken the

authority of the request. Where do you draw the line? Many writers are troubled by this weasel-like quality. Look at these examples – all questions – but all reasonably comfortable without a question mark:

*I trust you're not going to give in so soon, John.*

*I hope you're not calling me a liar.*

*I wonder if I might borrow the car tomorrow.*

In these cases, the expressions of personal feeling – *I trust*, *I hope* and *I wonder* – tend to undermine the question content of the statements. If you wrote *You're not going to give in yet?* or *May I borrow the car tomorrow?* you'd unhesitatingly finish with question marks. But there are some questions that look quite strange with question marks:

*How dare you?*

*How dare you!*

Here the expression is more an angry exclamation than a query, and a question mark would, in this and most similar cases, seem inappropriate. Usage of the question mark demands a little thought sometimes; if you can't work it out logically, perhaps your ear will guide you.

### Other Questions about the Question Mark

Novel applications of the question mark are abhorred by some grammarians but there is no denying that they are useful:

*The coins were thought to be from the reign of Emperor Tiberius (?130-86BC).*

*Many of the students claimed that they owed their success in life to the loving care (?) of the college's headmaster and his wife.*

The former is considered to be acceptable while the latter – the snide question mark to indicate doubt, cynicism or sarcasm – is frowned upon by the purists. The use is brilliantly economical but there are more elegant ways to convey our scepticism of suspect assertions. Take this example:

*Our neighbours, Tessa and Derek, considered themselves to be connoisseurs (?) of supermarket wines.*

See if we can convey the same incredulity in a rewrite:

*Despite widespread views to the contrary, our neighbours Tessa and Derek considered themselves to be connoisseurs of supermarket wines.*

Too wordy? Then try this simple expedient:

*Our neighbours Tessa and Derek considered themselves to be 'connoisseurs' of supermarket wines.*

A problem for many people is whether words that follow a question mark should be capitalised or not. Their confusion may arise by occasionally seeing what is sometimes called the 'internal question mark':

*Why should she get the reward? the Daily Mail asks today*



*What will happen to the whale's carcass? is the question on the lips of most beachside residents.*

This usage is probably a carryover from common practice a couple of centuries ago. Here, for example, is a sentence from Dr Johnson's preface to his *Dictionary* (1785):

*But what makes a word obsolete, more than general agreement to forbear it? and how shall it be continued . . .*

Or, again, in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1813):

*"What say you, Mary? for you are a lady of deep reflection, I know, and read great books . . ."*

The Fowlers, in *The King's English*, are right to call this usage ugly in modern prose and suggest that a question mark should always be followed by a capital. Taking our earlier examples, it isn't too difficult to rewrite them as straightforward indirect questions requiring no question marks:

*Today the Daily Mail asks whether or not she should get the reward.*

*What happens to the whale's carcass is the question on the lips of most beachside residents.*

## The Exclamation Mark!

Exiled in Guernsey during the 1860s and desperate to find out how his new novel *Les Misérables* was selling, the French writer Victor Hugo sent a telegram to his publisher bearing a single symbol: '?'. His equally frugal publisher replied in kind: '!'. .

Today the exclamation mark is hardly known for witty usage. It is discouraged, if not banned, by modern newspapers (where it is referred to as a 'startler', 'gasper', 'screamer', and by tabloid sub-editors as a 'dog's dick'), and with a reputation for over-use, the mark nevertheless earns its keep with a surprisingly wide range of legitimate uses.

It's difficult to imagine the following examples conveying anything like the same force and feeling without the screamers:

*Shut up!      You bitch!      What a mess!      Damn!*

And literature would undoubtedly be the poorer without them. Good writers aren't afraid of exclamation marks and use them judiciously for a number of functions:

**CONVEYING ANGER,**      *You're out of your mind!*  
**SCORN AND DISGUST**      *You must be joking!*

*How dare you even breathe her name!*

**INDICATING IRONY AND***Thanks a lot!***REVERSE MEANING***That's bloody lovely, that is!***UNDERLINING INSULTS***You bastard!***AND EXPLETIVES***Shit!***CONVEYING IRONIC***You're not so smart!***TO NE***And you said we wouldn't win!**Don't do anything I wouldn't do!***COMMANDING***Come here! Right now!**Get lost! And don't ever come back!*

With all these examples, the statements would be bland and colourless without the exclamation marks. And some would be completely meaningless:

*Don't do anything I wouldn't do.*

Substitute an exclamation mark for the full stop and the statement acquires the intended 'raised eyebrow' or 'nudge, nudge' tone to become the idiomatic invitation to have a really good time. Misuse of the exclamation mark undoubtedly contributes to its overuse. None of the following examples requires it:

*When she heard the result, Shirley almost fainted!**Peter managed to get a job at the bakery!**When they finally arrived, the plants were all damaged!*

Alas, such examples are all too common. It's worth remembering H W Fowler's warning: 'Excessive use of exclamation

marks in expository prose is a certain indication of an unpractised writer or of one who wants to add a spurious dash of sensation to something unsensational'. Always think twice before using an exclamation mark, and think twenty times before using it in multiples:

*Patricia went to Venice – again! That's the second time in a year! And you'll never guess who she met there!!!*

