

Eschew Obfuscation: Punctuation by Faye Roberts

For lots of writers, punctuation can be a *bête noire*. If you struggle with it, you may wonder why it's even necessary, but consider this brief example:

letmetryanomelettooalma

With a bit of effort you may have been able to decipher the jammed-up mess—but trying to read a page like this would quickly give you a headache. Punctuation puts the letters into proper relationships and the meaning of the sentence becomes clear:

“Let me try an omelet too, Alma.”

The spacing shapes these 23 letters into distinct words. The capital *L* at the beginning makes it clear this is a sentence. Quotation marks tell us that someone is speaking. The capital letter beginning *Alma* identifies it as a proper name and the comma preceding it tells us that Alma is the person who is being addressed. We now have a great deal more information.

It's clear we need punctuation. But though you may be convinced of its value, you may not feel confident that your punctuation is accurate.

This column looks at some uses of punctuation—the marks that, along with capitalization and spacing, are most frequently used to clarify written English. These 16 marks are encountered often but they're not always used correctly.

period .

question mark ?

exclamation point !

comma ,

semicolon ;

colon :

single quotation marks ‘ ’

double quotation marks “ ”

apostrophe ’

ellipses . . .

en dash –

em dash —

hyphen -

parentheses ()

square brackets []

curly braces { }

Sixteen options seem a lot, but these are far from all the possibil-



ities. Other languages have their own forms of punctuation. And some marks used in English writing in the past are seldom seen these days.

Examples of older punctuation still spotted occasionally include the *pilcrow* or paragraph symbol (¶) which can be seen in the formatting of Microsoft Word documents. The *ampersand* (&) is often used in logos and business names, as in Marks & Spencer. The *octothorpe* (#) has been widely used as the pound sign or number sign but Twitter has given it an entirely new life as the hash mark. If you're interested in the

history of punctuation marks, check out Keith Houston's blog, *Shady Characters*.

Three approaches to punctuation

In *The Copyeditor's Handbook*, Amy Einsohn and Marilyn Schwartz explain that some writers tend to punctuate “by ear” while others take a more visual approach; either can lead to problems.

Those who punctuate by ear may tend to insert a comma whenever they think a brief pause is needed. What if you want a slightly longer pause? In that case, maybe drop in a semicolon. You might use a colon for a pause while others prefer it to indicate that an idea of great importance is to follow. And inserting a period brings you to a complete stop (so its British name *full stop* is apt).

A more visual approach to punctuation reflects concern for how sentences appear on the page. Unfortunately, punctuation used in this way can appear random, distort the intended meaning, and confuse the reader.

A third approach to punctuation—and the one preferred by style manuals—is what Einsohn and Schwartz describe as *analytical* or *syntactical*. Style manuals advise editors to punctuate according to grammar and syntax, the ways in which words are arranged in the sentence. An analytical approach works well for business, scientific, and technical materials. Although creative writers of fiction may chafe when their editors apply these “rules,” accurate punctuation brings clarity and accuracy to the writer's ideas.

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Eschew Obfuscation, continued

Terminal punctuation

The period, the question mark, and the exclamation mark all define the end of a sentence, i.e., its *terminus* or finishing point. The period is the most common of these and ends any statement. The question mark follows a question, of course, and the exclamation mark indicates excitement. Sometimes a dash or a set of ellipses is used to indicate the end of dialogue, whether a sudden break (the dash—) or words that trail off, indicating something left unsaid (the ellipses . . .).

Bryan A. Garner makes three helpful points about the use of periods.

1. Use a period to end a statement that is not a question or an exclamation.

Example: Lifting the lantern higher, she moved into the darkened corridor.

2. When parentheses enclose only part of a sentence, put the period outside them. When parentheses enclose a sentence, put the period inside them.

Example: Davis changed his plea to *nolo contendere* (“I will not contest”) and the judge found him guilty.

Example: We stood on the windy cliff and watched the boats return. (There must have been more than a dozen.)

3. When sentences end with abbreviations, no additional period is needed.

Not this: The next bus is due at 5:30 p.m..

But this: The next bus is due at 5:30 p.m.

Not this: Medical workers protested the lack of protective equipment: masks, gowns, gloves, etc..

But this: Medical workers protested the lack of protective equipment: masks, gowns, gloves, etc.

Commas, semicolons, and colons

Commas, semicolons, and colons create pauses of increasing length. The versatile comma indicates the briefest of pauses. It gets a lot of use in lists, with dialogue, between coordinating adjectives, and in setting off nonessential clauses or phrases. These comma tasks are discussed in detail in an earlier “Eschew Obfuscation” column (*First Draft*, Jan. 2018).

The elegant semicolon marks a separation in ideas while uniting two sentences that are closely connected.

Example: The realization of injustice spread throughout the city, among affluent and poverty-stricken alike; the former reacted with fear and the latter with rage.

A colon is often used to introduce a list but it can also connect one clause with a second one that explains the first.

Example (list): We need these items for the camping trip:

Resources

“How to Punctuate” by Russell Baker, *New York Times*, reproduced at <https://www.csus.edu/indiv/f/foxs/jour%2030/punctuate.htm>

“Shady Characters” by Keith Houston, shadycharacters.co.uk

The Chicago Guide to Grammar, Usage, and Punctuation by Bryan A. Garner

The Copyeditor’s Handbook: A Guide for Book Publishing and Corporate Communications by Amy Einsohn and Marilyn Schwartz

sleeping bags, lantern, first aid kit, rain jackets.

Example (clauses): Despite his good intentions, Carl seemed unable to manage his money: he always ran out of funds before the end of the month.

Quotation marks and apostrophes

Quotation marks can be tricky, both in themselves and in their relationship with other punctuation such as periods and semicolons. To add to the confusion, they’re used differently in the US and the UK. For a detailed explanation, see “Eschew Obfuscation” in the July 2018 issue of *First Draft*.

Apostrophes are used primarily to indicate either possession or the omission of one or more letters. To show possession with a singular noun, add an apostrophe followed by s. For possession of plural nouns, the apostrophe is placed after the s.

Example (singular possessive): Fill the dog’s bowl with fresh water.

Example (plural possessive): The Griffins’ house is on the corner.

Apostrophes are also used to form contractions, standing in the place of omitted letters, as in *can’t* (for *cannot*) and *would’ve* (for *would have*).

Horizontal and vertical dividers

Horizontal dividers (my own term) include the brief *hyphen*, the short *en dash*, and the longer *em dash*. Each has distinctive uses and the differences are sometimes subtle or a matter of style preference.

Parentheses, square brackets, and curly braces can be considered vertical dividers (again, my own term). They divide parts of the text from other portions and are used for specific purposes—which are a topic for another day.

In conclusion

When it comes to punctuation, it’s important to get it right. Some punctuation is essential, but it’s entirely possible to get too much of a good thing.