

WHAT'S THE POINT?

1

Spoken language depends for effect not just on the words used but the WAY they are used.

Pauses, emphasis and intonation mark the difference in meaning between similar groups of words.

In written language, we use punctuation to indicate such variations:

She told you what? She asked me? Last week?

She told you what she asked me last week?

She told you what she asked me last week?

She told you what she asked me last week.

* Explain the different shades of meaning in the sentences above.

* How adequately can we indicate such effects in writing?

Punctuation marks are the signposts of written language.

They point out the grammatical structure of a passage,
indicating the relationship between words
and between different parts of a sentence or paragraph.

This makes reading and understanding much easier.

* Compare the following statements. Which is clearer?

I was stuck when my car wouldnt start yesterday morning sam smith my next door neighbours son who works in a garage helped me fix it but id had to go by bus for four days

I was stuck when my car wouldn't start. Yesterday morning Sam Smith, my next-door neighbour's son, who works in a garage, helped me fix it, but I'd had to go by bus for four days.

Some punctuation use is fixed,
but some varies with personal taste.

There have also been changes in punctuation fashions over time.

CAPITAL GAINS

2

Capital letters are ALWAYS used:

- for proper names of people: John, Jenny
- of places: Dorking, Chile
- for days of the week and months of the year.
- for special days: Christmas, Easter.
- for titles of people: Ms. Hall, Professor Chalk, Captain Spock
- of books, films, etc.: Murder on the Orient Express
- at the start of a sentence - and following a full stop:
Six thirty. The alarm shrilled.
- inside speech marks: She muttered, "Late, as usual."

As in these examples, the first word of a statement is in capitals, even if it is NOT the start of a sentence.

Capital letter are OFTEN used :

- for job or role descriptions, stressing the importance of a position:
the Headteacher, the Bishop.
- for pronouns that refer to God:
He, His, Thy.

Capitals are SOMETIMES used:

- to emphasise significant words: a Very Important Person.

* Explain the difference between:

- I went to four weddings and a funeral.
- I went to Four Weddings and a Funeral.

Don't look at the sun. Don't look at The Sun.

* Collect examples from advertisements, newspapers and magazines of non-standard uses of capital letters.

* Decide in each case why they have been used.

COMING TO A FULL STOP

3

Every schoolchild knows that a sentence ends with a full stop.

Easy peasy!

BUT - how do you know what a sentence is?

We don't always write in sentences.

Sometimes we just put a full stop when we want to bring the reader to a stop:

Night. Black and dark. Night. Cold and scary.
I shivered. Again.

* What effects is the writer aiming at here?
Why are there so many full stops?

Usually, we DO need to recognise the end of a sentence.
There are several ways we can do this.

When we speak in standard English intonation, our voice goes down at the end of one sentence and up at the beginning of the next (unless it's a question).

If you read your writing aloud to yourself, you can make a good guess at where to put the full stops.

A sentence is a complete statement.

Decide whether a statement you have written is complete.
If so, it's likely to need a full stop at the end.

The best way to recognise a sentence is to know some basic grammar.

If a statement has a subject
and a complete verb
and makes sense by itself, then it is a sentence.

* The following passage needs 6 full stops. Put them in.

The match went to extra time still there was no score it would have to go to penalties excitement reached fever pitch the fans stood on their seats as the striker prepared to kick the ball a hush fell on the stadium

* Did you notice the two possible ways of dividing the passage?

STOPPING SHORT

4

Full stops have other uses besides pointing the ends of sentences.

They are used to mark abbreviations:

A.D. T.V. e.g. Dr. Rev. etc.

Fashions change.

Many abbreviations have now lost their full stops:

BBC NATO

More recent examples have never had full stops:

CD ROM

* What other examples can you find?

* Look at several different newspapers; compare their practice.

Some firms now dispense with this use of the full stop in their letterheads and use 'house styles' of writing:

P.O.box 999. Dear Mr. and Mrs. Smith

PO box 999 Dear Mr and Mrs Smith

* Look at a variety of formal correspondence.

What variations can you spot in this use of the full stop?

Which style do you prefer? Why?

Full stops are also used for dates, times, money units, etc.:

1.4.99 10.30 a.m. ú5.60 3.5%

A row of dots is used to mark an incomplete statement:

"We were wondering..."

or to show that part of a quotation has been omitted:

'Yes, they told me you were fools ... they lied.'

Ends of sentences may be punctuated with exclamation or question marks instead of full stops.

These indicate intonation and stress as well as meaning.

Formal writing has little use for the exclamation mark.

In writing dialogue it is a helpful guide to mood and tone:

"Tom's coming tonight!"

"No!" she exclaimed. "You can't be serious!"

This use of the exclamation mark can easily be overdone.

Informal writing often suffers from a surfeit of exclamation marks. Some people dot their personal letters with a whole row of them:

You'll never guess what he told me!!!! Normally one exclamation mark is more than enough.

Question marks are more important.

They indicate questions, of course, but may also be used to suggest irony or uncertainty:

So that's an example of your best work?

What time is it?

This is what we agreed?

* What is the difference in purpose of the question marks above?

* Find or write other similar examples.

Question marks are used for DIRECT questions only,

not for INDIRECT or REPORTED questions:

so we may write: How many guests are invited?

or: They asked how many guests were invited.

* How would the meaning of the sentence change if we wrote:

They asked how many guests were invited?

PAUSE FOR THOUGHT

6

It is commonly thought that a comma marks a pause for thought.
This is NOT usually the case.

There is often no punctuation in writing to mark a pause that would occur in reading aloud:
All the people in the crowd were jumping up and down
and shouting with excitement.
It is difficult to read this aloud without a pause but no punctuation mark is needed.

Commas should NEVER be used between a subject and a verb:
Whether you like it or not is irrelevant.
NOT Whether you like it or not, is irrelevant.

Many places where we pause need FULL STOPS rather than commas,
to mark the ends of sentences:
The crowd jumped up and down. They were very excited. Everyone was shouting.
The tension was almost unbearable.

* Do we need commas, full stops or no punctuation here:
All the floodlights in the huge stadium were switched on.
There was standing room only all the seats had been sold.
The noise subsided to a murmur as the anthems began.
At last the whistle sounded the long-awaited match had started.

Commas are used to separate items in a list -
between individual words: He was a tall, dark, ugly man.
between phrases (groups of words without a verb):
He wore battered trainers, a shapeless tracksuit, and trendy sunglasses.
between clauses (groups of words including a verb):
He jogged slowly round the track, raised his arms as if in triumph, jumped the
perimeter fence, and vanished.

Putting a comma before and or but is usually a question of personal choice,
though it may affect the meaning:
I'd like to thank you for your letter and note that you will arrive at six o'clock.

* How does putting a comma before 'and' change the meaning?

Commas are used in writing to mark parts of a sentence that are set aside in some way from the main statement.

They mark out people or animals addressed directly:

Poppy, come here! Please sit down, Mary.
Not now, you idiot! Do come in, boys.

Commas separate introductory phrases or clauses:

Looking lost, Stephen hesitated by the bus stop.
When the bus arrived, he spoke to the driver.

* Explain what difference the commas make:

By the way, it was obvious he was in pain.
By the way he moved, it was obvious he was in pain.

However she looked at it, nothing changed.
However, she looked at it. Nothing changed.

Commas are used before question tags:

You don't really mean that, do you?
Lovely weather, isn't it?

They introduce direct speech:

Ranjid said, "It's five o'clock."

and separate speech from speaker afterwards:

"Your watch must be fast," retorted Max.

* Insert commas where needed in the following passage:

Having waited an hour Susan was indignant. Despite this she tried to be fair when her husband finally appeared.

"Brian thank goodness you've managed to get here" she said. "Everything is all right isn't it?"

"Do stop fussing dear" he replied.

* There should be 7 commas. Have you found them all?

TWO BY TWO

8

Commas are often used in pairs, to separate words or groups of words from the main sentence.

Words placed next to a noun to give a fuller description of it are marked by pairs of commas:

Colin, my boy-friend, plays football for his local team.

His brother, a lazy slob, prefers darts.

Commas can have the effect of brackets when they separate an aside or afterthought from the main sentence:

Sometimes, to be honest, I wish football had never been invented. Even cricket, boring though it is, is preferable.

Pairs of commas may alter the meaning of a sentence:

The spectators who had paid a lot of money for their tickets were demanding a refund.

(Only those who had paid a lot).

The spectators who had paid a lot of money for their tickets were demanding a refund.

(They had all paid a lot).

* How would commas alter the meaning of the following?

T.V. sport which is deadly dull sends me to sleep.

I can't stand sub-titled films which are hard to read.

* Insert commas where needed:

The nursery teacher a timid woman in her first job worried about the picnic. The night before though warm was wet and windy. Next morning fortunately the outlook was good so she was able to relax. The forecast as it happened was wrong. The children who had come without raincoats were soaked.

* Did all the children get wet?

LEAVE IT OUT

9

The most straightforward use of the apostrophe is to show that letters have been left out.

In most cases the apostrophe simply replaces the missing letter(s):

didn't can't we're aren't o'clock

Note that the apostrophe goes where the letter would go:

wouldn't NOT would'nt

Sometimes the same abbreviated form is used for more than one word: I'd = I would or I had

it's = it is or it has

* How many similar examples can you think of?

One or two contractions are irregular:

shan't won't

* What are the full forms of these words?

There have been changes over recent years in this use of the apostrophe.

It is still sometimes used to indicate shortened forms of words:

e.g. 'phone (for telephone)

More frequent is its use for the plural form of certain letters and digits:

if's and but's in the 1990's

An apostrophe is also used to indicate particular sorts of pronunciation, and in some advertising slogans:

'ow's yer father?

huntin' shootin' and fishin'

sun 'n sand fish 'n chips

*Look for more examples of this use of the apostrophe in your reading and in magazine and T.V. advertising.

IT'S MINE!

10

Apostrophes are also used to indicate ownership
(belongs to... of the...)

This originally came from the use of an apostrophe to show that letters had been missed out.
As late as the 17th century, writers added -es to the end of a word to show possession:
break an hours promise (As You Like It)

Modern editions of Shakespeare's play write:
an hour's promise
following the modern use of the apostrophe.

In many cases the use of the apostrophe is straightforward.
We simply add 's to the end of a word where needed:
the dog's dinner Jo's boys a day's work

The rule for plural words that already end in -s
is to add an apostrophe after the s:
all the dogs' dinners six weeks' work
the babies' toys our friends' gardens

DO NOT use apostrophes when words are simply plural:
all the dogs barked we stayed for six weeks
the babies all cried our friends cut their lawn

The 3rd person singular form of a verb (with he / she / it)
does NOT take an apostrophe:
the dog barks all day he cuts the lawn well

* Insert apostrophes where needed in the following passage:

Our neighbours gardens are full of all kinds of rubbish: boys and girls bicycles,
lawnmowers, ladies shoes, broken tools and old clothes - all thrown into several years weeds
among old cars and dogs mess. No-one seems to care. Perhaps its the councils problem.

* There should be 8 apostrophes. Have you found them all?

There are exceptions to the general rules about apostrophes.
This sometimes leads to confusion.

For plural words that don't end in -s, you add 's:
men's shoes, women's coats, children's books.

For proper names that end in -es, the rules are unclear.
Traditionally 's was added after all names except those ending in -es, when an apostrophe alone was used:

Keats's poems Moses' followers

Many people now add just the apostrophe to names ending with -s.

If something belongs to two people, put the apostrophe on the last word only:
John and Mary's parents.

Where each owns something separately, put an apostrophe on each:
John's and Mary's birthdays.

Pronouns do NOT take an apostrophe (except one's):

its, his, hers, ours, yours, theirs.
NB it's = it is its = belongs to it.

*Insert apostrophes where needed:

Some childrens things are well looked after, but my kids are dreadful with theirs. Its time that cat had its bedding changed. Its basket is full of fleas. Its Petes job, as its his pet, but hes too busy with his computer games. My daughters different. That rabbits hers. Shes always fussing with its hutch. But Pams rooms like a dogs dinner.

* There should be 13 apostrophes. Are they in the right places?

Traditionally, the names of shops take an apostrophe:

the butcher's, the baker's, the candlestick maker's.

Did you go to Tesco's? No, I shopped at Boots'.

Today many firms omit the apostrophe: Harrods, Woolworths.

*How many shops in your area use apostrophes in their names or in signs inside the store?
Survey street names in the same way.

SEMI-DETACHED

12

Sometimes we need a stop for which a comma is not enough, yet a full stop seems too final. The solution is the semi-colon[;].

It can separate a series of complete, yet linked, statements:

The bride's bouquet was red roses; the bridesmaids carried carnations and freesias; the page boy had a rose in his lapel.

It is useful if the second part of a statement expands the first:

The groom was nervous; he wondered, yet again, if he was ready for this.

The semi-colon can also mark a contrast:

The bride's family were dressed with faultless elegance; the groom's were jazzy and flamboyant.

* Write your own series of sentences illustrating these uses of the semi-colon.

In the past, writers often used a series of semi-colons in complex sentences that could continue for a whole page.

* Find some examples in the work of 19th century authors.

Another use of the semi-colon is to mark off separate categories of items in a long list where commas are also used:

The car was loaded with equipment. We had two tents, with poles, spare ropes and pegs; a gas stove and a portable barbecue; pots, pans, buckets and basins; knives, forks, spoons; sleeping bags, blankets and pillows. All this for a week's holiday!

* Make up your own lists on similar lines.

The colon [:] is similar to the semi-colon, but stronger: it can be used in many of the same ways as a semi-colon; it also has other uses.

As in the sentence above, the colon is used where the second half of a sentence explains or expands the first:

The sky darkened; it was going to rain.
Thunder rumbled round the valley: the storm was coming nearer.

The colon can mark a strong contrast between two statements:
You may be dishonest if you choose: I shall tell the truth.

The colon may be used to introduce examples (as in this text) or long quotations. It can also introduce direct speech:

He spoke at last: "Do whatever you want."

The colon is also used to introduce items in a list:

Carlos spoke the following languages: Spanish, French, Welsh, Catalan and a little Greek.

*Make up similar examples to illustrate these uses of the colon.

Sometimes the use of the colon and semi-colon can introduce subtle shades of meaning. In these examples, the first statements may not be connected; the second are loosely linked; while in the third there is a very pointed connection:

Jim stayed late at work. Sal's sister was coming for supper.
Jim stayed late at work; Sal's sister was coming for supper.
Jim stayed late at work: Sal's sister was coming for supper.

* Write a similar series of statements to show the same gradations of meaning.

Some people see the dash as a universal punctuation mark, handy to use anywhere:

Sam - just a quick note - have to go and meet Mum at the station - don't forget dinner tonight - at 8 sharp - don't be late this time!! Love you - Flo.

In any more formal writing, such usage is unacceptable.

*Look at some of your own writing. How often do you substitute a dash for commas or full stops?

The dash can be used to tag a thought to the end of a sentence:

Summers are never that hot here - at least, that used to be the case.

It can also replace a colon to introduce lists:

They were all there - sightseers, reporters, police, fans.

Pairs of dashes act like brackets.

Both are used to indicate additional thoughts or comments aside from the main argument:

The ageing star's appearance - much changed since his last public airing - brought ancient trendies out of the woodwork.

All the relics of the 60's were there, complete with flared jeans and (mostly faded) flower-power shirts.

* Which of these - dashes or brackets - do you prefer to use?

Brackets are also used in formal writing to append notes, dates, references, etc:

It was felt that the present constitution (adopted in 1955) needed updating; Mr. S.F.Green (Hon. Sec.) agreed to draft an amended version.

* Look at some reference books, formal minutes, etc.
How often are brackets used in this way?

DOING THE SPLITS

15

The hyphen is closely linked to spelling.

It is used to split a word across the end of a line.

This should only be done BETWEEN syllables:

un-educated, unedu-cated, uneducat-ed.

The first and last examples are preferable because they follow the basic structure of the word.

Better still, avoid splitting words if you can.

* Some newspaper columns split words excessively.

Look for examples.

The hyphen is used in some words with prefixes.

It helps to avoid the clumsiness of a repeated vowel:

co-op, re-entry, re-educate

or two awkward vowel sounds together:

co-authors, re-align, bi-annual.

Sometimes the hyphen prevents confusion:

resign / re-sign resort / re-sort

* Compile your own list of such pairs.

Hyphens are also used where two different prefixes are applied to the same root word:

pre- and post-war; pro- and anti-disarmament

Many compound words are written with hyphens,

though the trend is to do without them.

Both multistorey and multi-storey are acceptable.

Compounds of more than two words do need hyphens:

right-of-way blood-and-thunder

as do informal compounds: get-at-able un-put-down-able

Compound words used BEFORE the noun they describe need a hyphen:

back-to-front arguments; well-behaved children

but if they come AFTER the noun, no hyphen is needed:

Your arguments are back to front.

The children were well behaved.

Inverted commas - speech marks - are used for direct speech.
They are placed round the actual words spoken:

"I'll never marry you," she said.
"Why not?" he insisted.
"Leave me alone!" she shouted.

As you can see, other punctuation (commas, question and exclamation marks) comes INSIDE the speech marks.

Unless the words spoken end with an exclamation mark or question mark, a comma is needed to separate the speech from the speaker. This is so whether the explanatory statement (he said...) comes before or after the words spoken.

Each time the speaker changes, start a new paragraph:

"It seems quite reasonable to me," said Oliver, pouring himself another drink.
Jane laughed hysterically. She spluttered, "You, reasonable! That'd be the day!"
"Now, come on, that's not fair," protested Bob.

Where there are only two speakers there is no need to keep explaining who is talking; the layout should make this clear:

"What did you think of the match, then?" asked Mike.
"Rubbish," replied Nicky.
"But that goal in the second half was magic."
"I switched off at half time."
"You missed the best shot of the season."

* Look at a number of stories with direct speech and see how the writers have set out the dialogue.

* Write several different conversations of your own, with varying numbers of speakers, to practise correct layout and punctuation.

The first word inside speech marks usually starts with a capital:

Peter asked, "When will you be ready?"

"Never, at this rate," said Wendy. "We'll just have to miss the train."

The exception is when the narrative comment comes in the middle of a spoken sentence:

"You can miss it if you want," he replied, "but I'm going now."

Here the second half of the sentence, inside the speech marks, does NOT start with a capital.

Where the break comes can indicate emphasis and tone:

"That is out of the question," she said.

"That," she said, "is out of the question."

* What is the difference in effect in the sentences above?

* Write some dialogue of your own, seeing how different emphases can be obtained from varying the break in the speech.

Where speech includes quotations or other direct speech, then both single and double speech marks are used:

"What she actually said," repeated Andy, "was 'I wouldn't see you again if you paid me a hundred pounds.'"

When a person speaks for a long time, the speech may continue across paragraphs.

If so, the speech marks BEGIN in the first paragraph but are left open at the end.

The next paragraph again begins with speech marks, to remind the reader that someone is still talking.

"... then the weather closed in, so there was nothing more we could do that day.

"Next morning, though... "

* Remember, speech marks are used only for DIRECT SPEECH, the words actually spoken. They are NOT used with reported speech.

Punctuation is used to distinguish titles of books, films, newspapers, pubs, etc.

If you meant to write 'We're meeting at The Beech Tree',
you may have a long wait if your friends are at the beech tree.

Capital letters are used for all but the smallest words (articles - a, an, the; prepositions - in, at, etc.) of a title.

Inverted commas (single or double) are used round the name.

Other punctuation goes OUTSIDE the inverted commas.

Inverted commas distinguish a person or character from the title of a book or play:

I liked 'Romeo and Juliet' best.
Did you? I preferred 'Antony and Cleopatra'.

I liked Romeo and Juliet.

Did you? I thought Romeo was badly over-acted, but I agree that Juliet was good.

To distinguish between the overall title of a book and the titles of chapters, articles, poems, etc. within it, both single and double inverted commas are used.

The convention in printing or word-processing is to use italics rather than inverted commas for book titles, etc.

Many people prefer to underline titles in handwriting.

The end of chapter 10, 'The Shell and the Glasses', is the most gruesome part of Lord of the Flies.

The most sinister poem in Roger McGough's anthology *Strictly Private* is 'You fit into me' by Margaret Atwood.

* Look at a variety of magazines and newspapers to see how they punctuate titles.

* Decide on either inverted commas or underling / italics in your own writing;
then be consistent in your use.

OPEN AND SHUT

19

Punctuation and layout in formal letters varies.

Some people and firms still follow traditional conventions, using 'closed' punctuation:

The Manager,
Page and Cover, Ltd.,
Book Road,
London,
NW1 7XY

5, High Street,
Anytown,
Blankshire,
AZ1 9XY

1st April, 2001

Dear Sirs,

Thank you for your letter of.....

Yours faithfully,

Here paragraphs and the sender's address are indented; commas are used in addresses, dates, and opening and closing remarks.

Many people use a modern 'open' convention, dispensing with commas and aligning addresses and paragraphs with the margins:

The Manager
Page and Cover Ltd
Book Road
London
NW1 7XY

5 High Street
Anytown
Blankshire
AZ1 9XY

1st April 2001

Dear Sirs

Thank you for your letter of.....

Yours faithfully

* Look at a variety of correspondence and compare styles.

* Which practice do you prefer?

SOME POINTED COMMENTS

20

Changes in punctuation indicate changes in meaning.

What! Do you really like Emma?
What! Do you really like 'Emma'?
What do you really like, Emma?

* Explain how the punctuation changes above reflect changes in meaning.

Sometimes altering just one small detail can be significant:

Did you watch the pole vault?
No, only the long jump.

Did you watch the Pole vault?
No, only the German.

That child is impossible.
That, child, is impossible.

*Explain the differences in the examples above.

*Write similar sentences of your own.

Some punctuation changes indicate a REVERSAL of meaning:

Len, said Fiona, is totally unreliable.
Len said Fiona is totally unreliable.

These sentences are reported speech.
They do not give the precise words spoken.
Len might actually have said:

"I wouldn't trust Fiona further than I can throw her."

Or the report could be more closely related to what was said:

"Len," said Fiona, "is totally unreliable."
Len said, "Fiona is totally unreliable."

Once again, changes in punctuation reflect changes in meaning.

