

# Ask a linguist

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## Is the use of the return key in chat applications a new kind of punctuation?

I wasn't surprised to see the development of a punctuationless style in Internet settings where the electronic boundaries suffice to mark sentence-ending. Users sense this, so that even those who would routinely use a period in other writing find themselves dropping it when engaged in a written exchange where there are pressures of space (as in texting and tweeting) or time (as in the quickfire interactions of instant messaging). The line-break has taken over the function of the period. Internet users, voting with their fingers, seem to be saying: "We don't need both".

This isn't because they are ignorant about punctuation, as some media pundits have suggested. On the contrary. When short messages contain more than one sentence, the first one is almost always separated from the second by some sort of mark. It isn't just a young-person's thing, either, nor is it especially recent. I've got examples of a punctuationless style between adults dating from the 1990s in chatroom interactions. But it certainly seems to have become more widespread in the past decade.

If zero punctuation is the norm, then the use of a period immediately takes on a new semantic value. Traditionally,



This issue's expert: David Crystal © Hilary Crystal

the period is the 'neutral' mark, conveying the least amount of emotion. If zero becomes the neutral mark, then the role of the period will change. As Ben Crair put it, in an online report for *New Republic* in 2013: 'The Period Is Pissed: When did our plainest punctuation mark become so aggressive?' What did he mean?

If a writer uses a line-break to mark the sentence end of a short message, then using a period must convey to the reader that something semantically extra has been added. And this 'extra' is some indication of seriousness or finality, which can be interpreted in a variety of ways.

A: I can't remember when the exam is

B: Tuesday [=neutral]

B: Tuesday. [=I've told you already. You should know, stupid!]

And in instant-message exchanges, it's a useful mark to show one is ready for the exchange to end. The period is

a way of saying 'I'm finishing' or 'I'm winding up'.

What we are seeing, then, is a stylistic shift. A new variety of English is emerging in these Internet settings, and motivating new patterns of usage, which include a realignment of some semantic values in punctuation. That doesn't happen very often, in orthographic history, so it'll be worth keeping an eye on the period to see what happens next. The above examples are just some of the meanings that are currently being conveyed. I'm sure there are others awaiting description. It's an interesting time for graphologists. ¶

**David Crystal** is honorary professor of linguistics at the University of Bangor, and works from his home in Holyhead, North Wales, as a writer, lecturer, and broadcaster. The subject of this article is developed further in his *Making a Point: The Pernickety Story of English Punctuation*, and other recent books include *The Disappearing Dictionary* and *The Gift of the Gab: How Eloquence Works*. His current research is chiefly in applied historical English phonology, with particular reference to Shakespearean original pronunciation.

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