





PUNCTUATION

MAKING A POINT

Si scrive Harrods o Harrod's? King's Cross o Kings Cross? Se ritenete di sapere la risposta, ripensateci. La verità è che entrambe le versioni sono accettabili. E anche il famigerato apostrofo usato per il plurale (*potato's for sale*) che fa rabbrivire i puristi ha il suo perché. Ce lo spiega il guru della lingua inglese, David Crystal. By Mark Worden

ADVANCED **C1**SPEAKER
MARK WORDEN TRACK 17 

GLOSSARY

- 1 **pernickety**: pignolo, (esageratamente) particolareggiato
- 2 **semi-colon**: punto e virgola
- 3 **intelligibly**: in modo da capire
- 4 **and indeed so it is**: e infatti è proprio così
- 5 **has gone out**: si è perso
- 6 **I want you to... t's**: voglio che metta i puntini sulle i e i trattini sulle t
- 7 **italics**: corsivo
- 8 **printers**: stampatori
- 9 **within... laid down**: entro 50 anni da quando gli stampatori hanno stabilito quelle regole
- 10 **major store**: grande negozio
- 11 **a bit of a mess**: un po' un casino
- 12 **it can't be sorted**: non può essere risolto

Punctuation may not sound like the most exciting subject in the world, but in 2003 British author Lynne Truss had a surprising best seller with her book, *Eats, Shoots and Leaves: The Zero Tolerance Guide to Punctuation*. And last year linguist David Crystal published a book called *Making a Point: The Pernickety¹ Story of English Punctuation*. He says that people are fascinated by punctuation for the simple reason that it is incredibly complicated:

DAVID CRYSTAL

(STANDARD BRITISH ACCENT)



Here's an exercise that any teacher can do. Present a piece of written text in front of a group of others with no punctuation marks in it

all, take them all out, and then say to the people, "Punctuate it for me." No two people will punctuate it in exactly the same way, absolutely, I've done this many times: never! There'll be differences: "Do I put a comma in here or not? Do I put a semi-colon² in there or not?" You know, that sort of thing. And the reason why there are so many differences is because there are two big views driving punctuation: one is the view that punctuation is there to

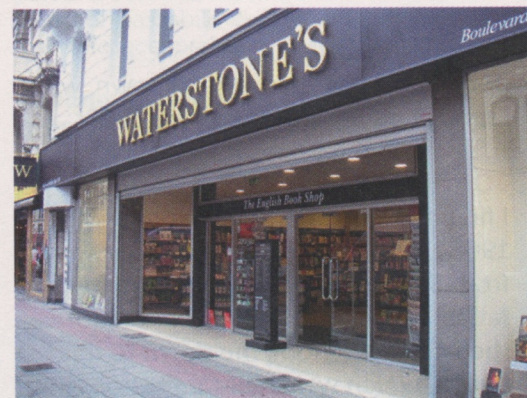
represent the voice, represent speech, represent the tone of voice, it represents the way you would say the sentence. And the other point of view says, "Punctuation is there to help the reader, so that you can read easily and intelligibly³ and comfortably." Now, the two views, unfortunately, don't coincide.

PERSONAL CHOICE

And the rules governing punctuation are often vague:

DAVID CRYSTAL

Punctuation is totally a matter of convention. There are differences between British and American English, there are differences between formal and informal punctuation: look at emails, for example, and tweets and



things like that which use punctuation in a totally different way from the way you'd expect to see it in the newspaper or a magazine and so on. There are differences between individuals, different preferences. Some writers hate the semi-colon and never use it: other writers love the semi-colon and always use it! All of these things happen. It's important not, I think in the first instance, to be confused by big regional differences because these differences operate within a community. So within British English – forget American English for a minute – within British English we encounter these variations, these differences.

THE GROCER'S APOSTROPHE

He gave us an example:

DAVID CRYSTAL

People go around noticing that on shop signs people confuse the use of the apostrophe, so you will see a sign saying, "Potato's for sale" and there'll be an apostrophe before the s marking the plural, in other words, and they will say, "This is wrong because the apostrophe should only be used to show possession and, as the potatoes are not possessing anything, this is completely wrong, this is just a mistake." And indeed so it is⁴ because in modern English we do not use the apostrophe to mark a plural: they did in Shakespeare's day. In Shakespeare's day the apostrophe was used to mark a plural, as well as being used to mark possession, but that usage has gone out⁵, but not entirely! There are still cases in modern English where the apostrophe is used to mark a plural. For example, if I say to you, "I want you to dot your i's and cross your t's"⁶, how are you going to write that down? You're going to write it down "i asprostrophe s" and "t apostrophe s," usually. I mean, you could use italics⁷ or something, but that's the usual way.

GRAMMAR NAZIS

One of the problems with punctuation is that many of its rules were created by

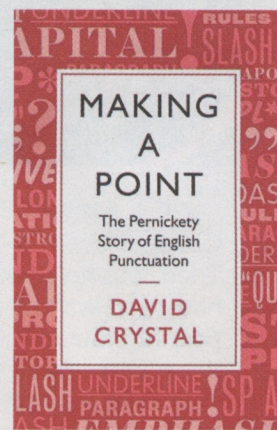


printers⁸ whose knowledge of grammar was limited:

DAVID CRYSTAL

And within 50 years of those rules being laid down⁹ by the printers, there were huge debates going on in the country about whether an apostrophe should be used or not. Famous discussion at the end of the 19th century about whether Harrods, the big store in London, should have an apostrophe at the end or not, and since then virtually every major store¹⁰ and bank like Lloyds and indeed bookstores like Waterstones very recently changing its policy about the apostrophe because it's an issue, and if you go online to places like King's Cross railway station in London, do you get King's with an apostrophe or don't you? You will find both! And if you go around the London Underground to Earl's Court, and then to Barons Court, you will find one with an apostrophe and the other without an apostrophe! So the whole system is still a bit of a mess¹¹, and it can't be sorted¹² because it's too well established, all these different traditions of use.

All you can do is try to understand the reasons behind it, learn what the exceptions are, learn to manage the system, but those people who go around trying to change it and correcting everybody's usage and putting in apostrophes when they're not there and crossing them out when they shouldn't be there and all that sort of thing, well, they're wasting their time because the system is now too complex to be individually manipulated anymore. The best you can do, I think, is write a book explaining all about it, and that's what I did! ☹



The cover of *Making a Point*, one of many books about the English language by David Crystal. As the pictures on these pages show, the apostrophe can be a problem for grocers, major retailers and even London Transport!

Speak Up EXPLAINS

Making a Point.

Attenzione al titolo: non significa 'fare il punto' ma far notare una questione, sottolinearne l'importanza etc. Nel campo della punteggiatura invece il punto si dice *full stop* in BrE e *period* in AmE. Mentre *.com* si legge *dot com*.