

The Story of English Punctuation

Making a Point

Professor David Crystal's new book on punctuation takes a historical approach to a subject that is often hotly debated without drawing on this kind of knowledge. In this article, he gives a flavour of both the 'stories' and the arguments presented in the book.

Imagine this. You are a famous poet unsure of your punctuation, so you decide to write to the greatest scientist you know to ask him to correct the punctuation of a poetry book you're preparing for press. You've never met him. Moreover, you ask him to send on the corrected manuscript to the printer, without bothering to refer back to you. And he does it.

An unlikely scenario? Not so. This was William Wordsworth, preparing the second edition of the *Lyrical Ballads*. On 28 July 1800, at the suggestion of Coleridge, he wrote to the chemist Humphry Davy:

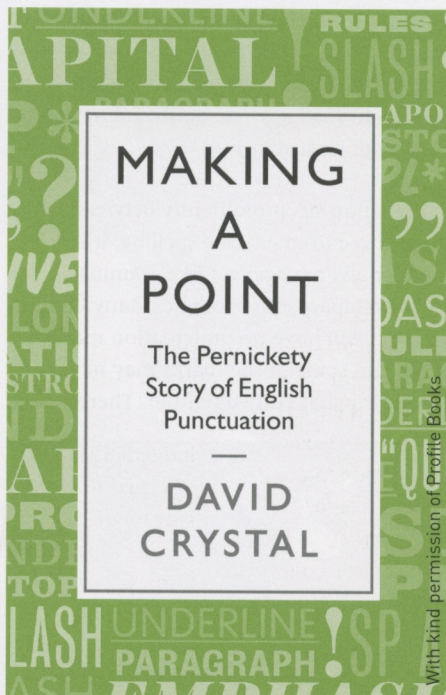
You would greatly oblige me by looking over the enclosed poems, and correcting anything you find amiss in the punctuation, a business at which I am ashamed to say I am no adept.

Wordsworth wasn't alone. Thomas Gray in a 1768 letter gives over eight pages of instructions to Foulis Press about how to print his poems, but adds:

please to observe, that I am entirely unversed in the doctrine of stops, whoever therefore shall deign to correct them, will do me a friendly office.

And Byron writes to John Murray in 1813 to ask:

Do you know any body who can stop—I mean point—commas, and so forth? for I am, I fear, a sad hand at your punctuation.



On the other hand, Ben Jonson was scrupulous about punctuation, and insisted on checking every mark for printing accuracy, getting very annoyed if a printer dared to change anything. Keats also took a keen interest in the way his publisher dealt with his punctuation. In an 1818 letter to John Taylor, he expresses his indebtedness for his suggestions:

the comma should be at soberly, and in the other

passage the comma should follow quiet...

My favourite Jonsonian is Mark Twain. Here he is in 1889:

Yesterday Mr Hall wrote that the printer's proof-reader was improving my punctuation for me, & I telegraphed orders to have him shot without giving him time to pray.

And in 1897:

I give it up. These printers pay no attention to my punctuation, Nine-tenths of the labor & vexation put upon me by Messrs Spottiswoode & Co consists in annihilating their ignorant & purposeless punctuation & restoring my own. This latest batch, beginning with page 145 & running to page 192 starts out like all that went before it – with my punctuation ignored & their insanities substituted for it. I have read two pages of it – I can't stand any more. If they will restore my punctuation themselves & then send the purified pages to me I will read it for errors of grammar & construction – that is enough to require of an author who writes as legible a hand as I do, & who knows more about punctuation in two minutes than any damned bastard of a proof-reader can learn in two centuries.

Never a calm subject, punctuation.

The more idiosyncratic the writer's punctuational style, the more editors and printers have taken it upon themselves to consistentise it. The way we read Jane Austen now is very little like the way

she wrote. Likewise, Emily Dickinson. A 1970 edition prints this stanza following her original:

**Our share of night to bear –
Our share of morning –
Our blank in bliss to fill
Our blank in scorning –**

A 2000 edition edits it thus:

**Our share of night to bear,
Our share of morning,
Our blank in bliss to fill,
Our blank in scorning.**

They are worlds apart.

Answering the Question Why?

These are just some of the fascinating stories that I discovered when writing *Making a Point*. The story of English punctuation goes back over a thousand years – from a time when texts showed no punctuation at all, to the present-day attention to detail – and I was surprised to find that it had never been told in its entirety. A historical approach is essential, because it enables us to do something traditional accounts of punctuation of the *Eats, Shoots and Leaves* type never did: answer the question ‘why’. Why did Wordsworth have such a problem? Why do people get so incensed over apostrophes? One answer lies in early differences of opinion among writers, grammarians, elocutionists, publishers, and printers about the nature of punctuation, and who was responsible for it. I explore that history in *Making a Point*. Another lies in the nature of the punctuation system itself.

I think people feel they can get to grips with

punctuation more readily than with other features of standard English, and so are more prepared to speak out about it. The standard is defined by four main criteria: grammar, vocabulary, spelling, punctuation. In each case, writers of English have to conform to the rules that educated members of society have come to recognise over the past two hundred years or so. Failure to follow these rules is considered an error that needs to be corrected if the usage is to be deemed acceptable.

Of the four, spelling is the most demanding, because every word on a page has to be spelled correctly if our text is to avoid criticism, and there are tens of thousands of words that have to be spelled. We can never get away from spelling. By contrast, it’s easy to get away from usage issues to do with grammar and vocabulary. In grammar, there are dozens of points of usage that define the difference between standard and nonstandard – *Fowler’s Dictionary of Modern English Usage* lists most of them – but none of them turn up very often. We might read an entire chapter and never encounter a split infinitive or an instance of *none is/are*. Points of disputed usage in vocabulary, likewise, are sporadic: if you’re concerned about the difference between, say, *disinterested* and *uninterested* or *decimate* meaning other than a tenth, you might read a whole book and never encounter an instance.

Punctuation sits prominently between these two extremes. Like spelling, it is there on every page; yet like grammar and vocabulary, it is sporadic. Many lines of a text will have no punctuation marks at all, and some of the marks may never appear in what you’ve written. There’s

not a single exclamation mark in this article, for instance.

Is it So Simple?

Correcting a perceived punctuation error seems like a simple task, therefore – and if everything was like *potato’s* it would be. But there are hidden depths to punctuation, thanks to those differences of opinion, and dangers lurking around corners – which of course is what makes the subject so intriguing. A few years ago, two Americans travelled all over the USA with marker pens correcting every typo they encountered. They added an apostrophe to a notice at the Grand Canyon Heritage Site, and later learned they had committed a federal offence of defacing a national monument. They were fined, received a year of probation, forbidden to enter all National Parks, and were banned from typo correcting. They were lucky. Another outcome would have been six months in jail.

David Crystal is Honorary Professor of Linguistics at the University of Bangor. *The Disappearing Dictionary* and *Making a Point: the Pernickety Story of English Punctuation* were published in 2015.

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