

Excerpt from:

A Dash of Style

By

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Contents

PART I: THE TRIUMVIRATE

Chapter 1: The Period (the Stop Sign)

Chapter 2: The Comma (the Speed Bump)

Chapter 3: The Semicolon (the Bridge)

PART II: INTO THE LIMELIGHT

Chapter 4: The Colon (the Magician)

Chapter 5: The Dash and the Parentheses (the Interrupter and the Advisor)

Chapter 6: Quotation marks (the Trumpets)

Chapter 7: The Paragraph and Section Break (the Stoplight and the Town Line)

PART III: PROCEED WITH CAUTION

Chapter 8: The Question Mark, Exclamation Point, Italics, Points of Ellipses
and the Hyphen

Epilogue: The Symphony of Punctuation

{EXCERPT}

Introduction

"Of all the subjects which engage the attention of the compositor, none proves a greater stumbling-block, or is so much a matter of uncertainty and doubt . . . as the Art of Punctuation."

—Henry Beadnell, *Spelling and Punctuation*, 1880

This is not a book for grammarians. Nor is it one for historians. They can turn to Lynne Truss's *Eats, Shoots & Leaves* or a host of other excellent punctuation books written for them. This book is for the audience that needs it the most and yet for whom, ironically, a punctuation book has yet to be written: creative writers. This means writers of fiction, non-fiction, memoirs, poetry, and screenplays, and also includes anyone seeking to write well, whether for business, school, or any other endeavor.

Most writers do not want to know the 17 uses of the comma, or ponder the 4th-century usage of the semicolon. Most writers simply want to improve their writing. They want to know how punctuation can serve *them*—not how

they can serve punctuation. They have turned to books on punctuation, but have found them painfully mundane. Unfortunately, many of these books tend to ignore anyone hoping to use punctuation with a bit of style.

This book will offer a fresh look at punctuation: as an art form. Punctuation is often discussed as a convenience, as a way of facilitating what you want to say. Rarely is it pondered as a medium for artistic expression, as a means of impacting on the content—not in a pedantic way, but in the most profound way, where it achieves symbiosis with the narration, style, viewpoint, and even the plot itself.

Why did Ernest Hemingway lean heavily on the period? Why did William Faulkner eschew it? Why did Edgar Allan Poe and Herman Melville rely on the semicolon? Did Emily Dickinson embrace the dash, Gertrude Stein avoid the comma? How could the punctuation differ so radically between these great authors? What did punctuation add that language itself could not?



There is an underlying rhythm to all text. Sentences crash and fall like the waves of the sea, work unconsciously on the reader. Punctuation is the music of language. As a conductor can influence the experience of a song by manipulating its rhythm, so can punctuation influence the reading experience, bring out the best (or worst) in a text. By controlling the speed of a text, punctuation dictates how it should be read.

A delicate world of punctuation lives just beneath the surface of your work, like a world of micro-organisms living in a pond. They are missed by the naked eye, but if you use a microscope you'll find they exist, and that the pond is, in fact, teeming with life. This book will teach you to become sensitive to this habitat. The more you do, the greater the likelihood of your crafting a finer work in every respect. Conversely, the more you turn a blind eye, the greater the likelihood of your creating a cacophonous text, and of your being misread.

This book is interactive. It will ask you to make punctuation your own, to grapple with it by way of numerous exercises in a way that you haven't before. You'll discover that working with punctuation will actually spark new ideas for your writing. Writing a new work (or revising an old one) with a fresh approach to punctuation opens a world of possibilities, enables you to write and think in a way you haven't before. You'll find this book is not about making you a better grammarian, but about making you a better writer.

Along these lines, I will not exhaustively catalogue every punctuation mark, nor will I examine every usage of every mark discussed. Apostrophes and slashes can be left to grammarians. What interests me are the most important uses of the most important marks, those that can impact on a text creatively. I am not concerned here whether an apostrophe goes before or after an 's', or whether a colon precedes a list; I am concerned, rather, with whether adding or subtracting a dash will alter the intention of a scene.

The benefits of punctuation for the creative writer are limitless, if you know how to tap them. You can, for example, create a stream-of-consciousness effect using periods; indicate a passing of time using commas; add complexity using parentheses; capture a certain form of dialogue using dashes; build to a revelation using colons; increase your pace using paragraph breaks; keep readers hooked using section breaks. This—its impact on content—is the holy grail of punctuation, too often buried in long discussions of grammar and history.

As a literary agent I've read tens of thousands of manuscripts over the past few years, and I've come to learn that punctuation, more than anything, underlies clarity—or chaos—of thought. Flaws in the writing can be spotted most quickly by the punctuation, while strengths can be extolled by the same medium. Punctuation reveals the writer. The end result of any work is only as good as the method used in getting there, and there is no way there without these strange dots and lines and curves we call punctuation.



{EXCERPT}

from Chapter 3:

The Semicolon (The Bridge)

“When a writer is taking pains to write for his reader rather than to impress him, semicolons can seem like the grammarian’s happiest invention.”

—John Trimble, *Writing With Style*

Between the comma and the period you’ll find the semicolon. Pausing more strongly than the comma, yet dividing more weakly than the period, it is a mediator. The semicolon does not have as many functions as the comma, yet it has more than the period. As Eric Partridge says in *You Have a Point There*, “By its very form (;) [the semicolon] betrays its dual nature: it is both period and comma.” As such, it is best thought of as a bridge between two worlds.

The primary function of the semicolon is to connect two complete (thematically similar) sentences, thereby making them one. But when and how to do that is open to interpretation. The semicolon has been overused (Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*) and questionably used (Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*) throughout its existence, and has been the subject of endless debate. Compounding the debate is the fact that, grammatically, the semicolon is never necessary; two short sentences can always coexist without being connected. Artistically, though, the semicolon opens a world of possibilities, and can lend a huge impact. In this sense, it is the punctuation mark best suited for creative writers.

The semicolon is a powerful tool in the writer's arsenal. It is probably the most elegant of all forms of punctuation (it has been dubbed "a compliment from the writer to the reader"), and can offer an excellent solution to balancing sentence length and rhythm. Yet, ironically, it is often overlooked and underused by writers today. So in this chapter we'll focus on how—and why—to use it. We'll learn what we gain from its presence, and what we lose when we don't invite it into the symphony of punctuation.

How to use it

The first thing to realize is that one could always make a case for not using a semicolon. As an unnecessary form of punctuation, as the luxury item

in the shop, we must ask ourselves: why use it at all?

We use the semicolon for the same reason we replace cement floors with marble: cement floors are equally functional but not as elegant, not as aesthetically pleasing as marble. The semicolon elevates punctuation from the utilitarian (from punctuation that works) to the luxurious (to punctuation that transcends). Business memos do not need semicolons. Creative writers do.

The semicolon's functions are all essentially creative, and are connected with a writer's sensibility. Some ways to use it:

- To connect two closely-related sentences. Sometimes two (or more) sentences are so closely related that you don't want the separation of a period, yet they are also so independent that they need stronger separation than a comma.

Consider:

He ran with his shirt over his head. He had forgotten his umbrella once again.

Grammatically, the above is correct. Yet these two thoughts are so closely linked that they don't feel quite right standing on their own. Yet a comma won't do, since they are each complete sentences:

He ran with his shirt over his head, he had forgotten his umbrella once again.

Thus, we need the semicolon:

He ran with his shirt over his head; he had forgotten his umbrella once again.

The semicolon lends an appropriate feeling of connection, while allowing each clause its independence. It functions in a position where both the period and comma cannot. Notice how, by connecting these two sentences with a semicolon, each sentence helps explain the other. “He ran with his shirt over his head” is technically complete and correct, yet is somewhat cryptic on its own. The subsequent sentence brings it to life.

Another example:

The wind knocked over two trees in my street alone. The clean-up operation would be atrocious.

Once again a comma won't do, as these clauses are too independent:

The wind knocked over two trees in my street alone, the clean-up operation would be atrocious.

Thus, the semicolon:

The wind knocked over two trees in my street alone; the clean-up operation would be atrocious.

You'll notice that the first example is grammatically acceptable. Yet adding a semicolon extends the thought, and allows a richer overall sentence.

- The semicolon can enhance word economy, since its appearance often allows surrounding words to be cut. For example:

She couldn't dance in her favorite ballroom because it was being renovated.

She couldn't dance in her favorite ballroom; it was being renovated.

As John Trimble says in *Writing With Style*, “The semicolon is efficient: it allows you to eliminate most of those conjunctions or prepositions that are obligatory with the comma—words like whereas, because, for, or, but while, and.”

Edgar Allan Poe used the semicolon often and with great skill. Consider this excerpt from his story “The Unparalleled Adventure of One Hans Pfaall”:

His feet, of course, could not be seen at all. His hands were enormously large. His hair was gray, and collected into a queue behind. His nose was prodigiously long, crooked, and inflammatory; his eyes full, brilliant, and acute; his chin and cheeks, although wrinkled with age, were broad, puffy, and double; but of ears of any kind there was not a semblance to be discovered upon any portion of his head.

The semicolons here are used well not only sentence to sentence but also in the context of the paragraph. Poe begins with complete, simple sentences, using only commas and periods, as he describes the man's feet, hands, and hair. But

as he switches to describing the man's face, he switches to semicolons. This is not by chance. The pace increases as he does, as if he's revving up in his description of this man, racing toward a conclusion. It enables us to take in this man's entire face at once, as one grand unit, as opposed to the feet, hands, and hair, which are given their own sentences.

Here's another example, perhaps one of the most famous in literature. This comes from the opening paragraph of Melville's *Moby Dick*. Melville relied heavily on the semicolon to create *Moby Dick*, and there has been some debate over whether he used it properly or not. Some of his usages are certainly questionable. But this one is not:

Whenever I find myself growing grim about the mouth; whenever it is a damp, drizzly November in my soul; whenever I find myself involuntarily pausing before coffin warehouses, and bringing up the rear of every funeral I meet; and especially whenever my hypos get such an upper hand of me, that it requires a strong moral principle to prevent me from deliberately stepping into the street, and methodically knocking people's hats off—then, I account it high time to get to sea as soon as I can.

This single sentence encapsulates the entire rationale behind the book, behind “Ishmael’s” taking the adventure he does. Melville could have used commas here instead, but if he had, the pauses would not have been as long, and the reader wouldn’t have had the opportunity to digest each thought. Or he could have, alternatively, with minor word adjustments, used periods; but doing so would have made the reader pause too long, and not digest all of this as a single idea. Semicolons allowed the reader to pause and also created tension, capturing ‘Ishmael’s’ own tension, his own feeling of building restlessness and need to get on board a ship.

“Sometimes you get a glimpse of a semicolon coming, a few lines farther on, and it is like climbing a steep path through woods and seeing a wooden bench just at a bend in the road ahead, a place where you can expect to sit for a moment, catching your breath.”

--Lewis Thomas



{EXCERPT}

Epilogue

“Intellectually, stops matter a great deal. If you are getting your commas, semicolons, and periods wrong, it means that you are not getting your thoughts right, and your mind is muddled.”

—William Temple, Archbishop of York,
as reported in *The Observer*, 1938

By this point in the book, if you’ve applied yourself and worked with the exercises, you will have a good handle on the marks of punctuation a creative writer needs. Now the work begins. Now you must see if you can make them all work together in one grand symphony of punctuation. It is time to put your knowledge to the test, and take a giant, first step into the world of punctuation.

As you do, remember to keep in mind two important principles. The

first is that there is great merit to punctuating scarcely, only when you absolutely must. Just as word economy should be strived for, so should punctuation economy.

The second is to let your punctuation unfold organically, as the text demands. Punctuation should never be forced on a text, never brought in to rescue you from confusing sentence construction. It is not here to save—it is here to complement. This is an important distinction. The sentence itself must do the work. If it does, the punctuation will co-exist seamlessly, and you will never have an awkward struggle to squeeze in a dash, or make a semicolon work. If you find yourself having such a struggle, re-examine your sentence structure, your word choice. More likely than not, you will need to rewrite, not repunctuate. As we have seen many times throughout this book, in the best writing the punctuation is seamless, invisible, at one with the text. It will never stand out. You know you are punctuating the best you possibly can when, ironically, you don't even know it's there.

Punctuating masterfully is an ongoing struggle, and the destination will always be somewhere off on the horizon. But it is a journey worthwhile. If you cultivate awareness and are willing to learn, punctuation will perpetually teach you something new about yourself. As we learned throughout the book, punctuation reveals the writer, and revelation is the first step toward self-awareness. If you are willing to listen to what the page is telling you about

yourself, and humble enough to change, you will become a better writer.

Punctuation is here to point the way.

