

Punctuation With Attitude



Do you really know the comma? The period is easy to understand, a no-nonsense dot lying low at the baseline. A period is a full stop, the end. That's a piece of punctuation a person can trust, with no little tail to confuse the writer or the reader. That little hook makes me wonder what sort of devious prank it will play. Is it going to hook a careless and non-attentive letter and move it somewhere it was never meant to be?

The colon looks like two periods were wrestling. The stronger and faster took the other down, jumped on top of his adversary, and stayed there. You might think that two periods in one character should make an even more definitive stop, but ambiguity crept in. Instead of stop, stop—it's more of a stop, maybe. History tells us it was introduced into English some four hundred years ago to signify a pause longer than a comma and shorter than a full stop. In modern English (since nothing seems to stay the same), the colon stands placed at the end of a

complete sentence, followed by a list or explanation. It also serves as a separation between hours, minutes, and seconds; it also separates chapters and verses in Bible references. While the colon isn't quite as clear and simple as the period, it still makes sense.

Semicolons seem to be something of a hybrid. Perhaps a period and a comma decided to start a family. Can't you just hear the parents saying, "Why couldn't you find a nice girl of your own kind? Mixed marriages don't work!" The children may have looked funny, but they had talent. A semicolon connects two independent clauses without using a conjunction. This character also serves as a super comma when it separates items listed in a compound list.

The question mark has a certain elegance of form with its graceful, and one might even say sensuous curves. Its lithe body arched downward to a delicate dot, an understated but solid foundation—all this beauty with no hint of subterfuge. You can trust a question mark. They're consistent, unlike the comma, meaning one thing and then another. A question mark identifies something asked, nothing more and nothing less. The comma resembles a fishhook, and rightly so; it is barbed and tossed by the waves.

Jesse Hulse

Dashes are a small but loving family. We can see the family resemblance, but there is no need for confusion. Each family member has his or her duty to perform, related to the others, but consistent. The son, known as Hyphen, ties individual words into couples almost like a marriage officiant. Hyphen is progressive, sometimes joining three or even four in the union, but we don't talk about that. The mother, En, inserts herself between numbers or words to hold them together, dates, times, and page numbers. She also slips into complex hyphenated groups when her son isn't quite up to the job. Moms are always there to help. Em, the father, is bigger and stronger than the other. I suspect he was a stevedore when he was younger, but that's not substantiated. He answers to Em, but Dash works just as well; he's proud of his family and the family name. Dash has a big persona, and he isn't afraid to enter the fray. If you want something interrupted, he's your guy, which makes him the most versatile member of the family. He can set off clauses that explain or amplify, and he is especially good at making an abrupt break in writing. With all his manly strengths, one of his most interesting and endearing traits is his sensitivity and thoughtfulness. He often guards the privacy of others by masking their names or intimate details. He's careful not to offend, often hiding expletives. Dash goes where he's needed—when he's needed. He isn't afraid to jump in to help, and he's tough enough that nobody tries to throw him out.

Commas, on the other hand, are picky. They'll only give a pause if all their conditions are met, and if anything is missing, they skedaddle, leaving you high and dry.

Apostrophes and quotation marks are related somehow, but they tend to hold things close to their chests. They weren't as open as the Dash family and were reticent to define their relationship. However, when I asked about their jobs, they were happy to tell me all I wanted to know. The apostrophe is used to show letters dropped to form a contraction or to identify the possessive case. That's pretty simple. Quotation marks delineate a direct quote. We put a quotation mark at the beginning and the end of what someone said. That's fairly easy to understand as well. Sometimes there is a quote within a quote, and the apostrophe jumps in to guard against ambiguity—still, no problem. Things don't get confusing until a comma comes in and starts making rules. A comma stands before the question mark, but not if the quote is preceded by that, whether, or similar conjunction.

There's another family group I've noticed: the Brackets. The exact relationship is uncertain, and I don't like to pry into their personal lives. So, like most Americans, I don't ask; I just listen for gossip and make stuff up to fill the gaps. At first glance, I thought the Parentheses were the mother, Square Brackets the father, and Curly Brackets the daughter. But as I watched them, I realized that they were all paired. Two daughters, I can

understand, but can any family have two mothers and two fathers? I know of no culture with that family structure. Treating them as individual pairs without trying to understand their personal relationships is probably a prudent course.

The earliest Brackets used in the English language were angled Brackets or chevrons. Later, rounded Brackets were used. Erasmus of Rotterdam coined the word *lunula* to describe them because of their crescent moon shape. These, whom we call Parentheses, are the dominant member of the family. Parentheses delineate sections of ancillary information that add clarity but are not part of the flow of the sentence. Any punctuation within Parentheses is independent of the rest of the sentence. Square Brackets have a more boring job; they usually enclose words or letters changed from the original text. Curly Brackets have even less to do. Unless you are a musician, mathematician, or computer programmer, you rarely see them, which is sad because they are the most beautiful.

Possibly my favorite piece of punctuation is Exclamation Point. It is a period on steroids. This character has one job and does it very well, with no ambiguity and no messing around. This is a case of form following function. There is a period signifying a complete stop, the end of the statement. There is also a streak coming down like power from the heavens, endowing the period with effectiveness. Nobody ignores an exclamation point.

All this brings us to the comma, for me, the most confusing piece of punctuation in our language. I learned English by listening and speaking. By school age, I was proficient at spoken communication, but the hurdles of the written language were much higher. I learned to read enough to bluff my way through school; none of my teachers would have guessed my low reading skills. Once in high school, I checked into a remedial reading course, but it was offered in only one time period, and it conflicted with Physics. In college, I nearly failed the writing proficiency exam required for graduation. The adjudicators who looked at spelling and punctuation gave me a failing grade. Still, those who prized thought processing and conveying ideas graded my paper high enough for me to graduate, which I did with honors.

So why do commas cause me so much trouble? Most of the confusion comes from the many different ways a comma can be used. In lists, the comma jumps in between each item. I understand that the English (those people who say they invented the language but somehow can't use it correctly) leave out the last comma, the one before the conjunction. Even with that small issue, the use of commas in a list is rarely problematic.

The separation of clauses creates a minefield. To use commas correctly and consistently, I would have to understand clauses.

When I looked at Wikipedia for clarity, I found this statement: “In language, a clause is a constituent that comprises a semantic predicand (expressed or not) and a semantic predicate.” That definition did not make it clearer. With a little more digging, I found that the predicand is usually the subject. “Usually” is a word included to let the reader know they can’t be sure of anything. When I was a quality assurance manager, I called that a wiggle word. Manufacturing people liked to put it into procedures so that QA couldn’t pin them down. Linguists seem to use the word for the same reason.

What seems to be the most frequent way a comma separates clauses is to join a dependent clause to an independent clause, assuming the dependent clause comes first in the sentence. So, you can put what would be an incomplete sentence in front of what would be a complete sentence and join them with the wily little comma—no foul. It turns out you can put two independent clauses (groups of words that would make a complete sentence if you just put a period after them) if you put a comma before the conjunction. I swear, I’m not making this up.

Commas are also used (apparently always used) after the following words if they are the first words of the sentence including: however, in fact, therefore, nevertheless, moreover, furthermore, and still. If these words appear in the middle of a sentence, the show-boating comma jumps in before and after

the word. Oh, in case you thought the rules were finally making sense, you can use commas after: then, so, yet, instead, and too, but it's optional.

Parenthetical words or phrases in a sentence can be set off by commas. I would have thought, with a word like parenthetical, they would be enclosed by, oh, I don't know, maybe parentheses. But I don't make the rules here.

Commas have been accused of gossip. It seems they always want to eavesdrop on conversations, elbowing their way in just in front of the first quotation mark.

When coordinate adverbs are next to each other, they sometimes quarrel. It seems the coordinated ones should get along, but apparently, that isn't the case. Anyway, when this happens, commas—always eager to throw their minuscule weight around—are quick to interject themselves between the adverbs to mediate the potential for a war of words.

All glib humor aside, I have great respect for linguists who have studied and codified our language. Languages are complex and change with use. The people who spend their time trying to explain how all the moving parts of a language work deserve our gratitude.

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Personally, I do struggle with the consistent encoding of the English language and have worked to hide it as well as possible. Now, an old man is trying to learn what he should have mastered in grade school. This little bit of whimsy endeavors to make punctuation silly enough for me to understand and remember. Maybe you too can laugh at it and even learn something from the wily comma.