

What Makes Punctuation So Confusing?

When I directed a University Writing Center we fielded a lot of questions about punctuation, and we saw a lot of punctuation problems in writing produced by students, staff, and faculty. Most writers, even professional writers, feel uncertain about proper punctuation on occasion. The main problem is that we have three contradictory systems of punctuation operating at once: a breath and pause system, a grammatical system, and a system of rhetorical effects. It's normal to be confused.

Punctuation practice is rooted in oral language. Face-to-face speech is a multimodal, multichannel event that encodes a lot of redundant information. In addition to speaking words embedded in grammatical structures, we vary the intensity of our speech, we pause for effect, we modulate the intonation, making the voice rise and fall, and we use physical gestures, body language and facial expressions.

In a telephone conversation we are no longer in a face-to-face situation and we lose the visual channels. Generally, we compensate by attending more closely to words, intonation and syntax.

A Significant Disadvantage

However, in a speakerphone conference in which some of the participants are physically present to one another while another only has access to audio information, the latter party may feel that he or she is at a significant disadvantage. And when the two parties to a telephone conversation have different cultural backgrounds, or when one party doesn't speak the language of the conversation well, we feel the need of information from the missing channels to confirm our interpretations.

When we write, we lose all visual and auditory channels, leaving only words and grammatical structures to carry the message. Rather than a broad array of redundant channels to rely on, when we write, we have only two. Or perhaps I should say two and a quarter, because we also have punctuation.

These days we might also include emojis, a more recent and very interesting development in the history of punctuation. :)

Bringing Back Intonation

The punctuation system is designed to bring back into writing some of the information encoded in pauses, gestures, and intonation. As a substitute for the living voice, it is a pale shadow only. Instead of shouting and shaking a fist, we have the exclamation point. Instead of a conspiratorial whisper we have . . . well, we don't have anything, because there is no mark for whispering. In fact, there are many common devices of speech that have no equivalent in the punctuation system. What marks we do have commas, colons, semi-colons, dashes, question marks and the rest—are generally seen to indicate pauses of varying lengths and are historically associated with the breath. However, they are also associated with the grammatical structures, and thus there are grammatical rules for their use.

Contradictory Conceptions

The two traditional conceptions of punctuation—to indicate pauses for breathing and to delineate the grammatical boundaries of the text—are to a certain extent contradictory, opposing the creative, living,

breathing, individual voice with an analytical, logical, rule-driven structure. These conceptions co-exist in our society, making punctuation both difficult to teach and confusing to learn.

The earliest work on punctuation in English is the anonymous *Treatise of Stops, Points, or Pauses*, published in London in 1680. The theory of punctuation presented here is based entirely on breathing and rhetorical pauses. Clearly designed for classroom use, it contains the following verses for easy memorization:

A comma is a breathing stop: no more,
Stop at it while you may tell one, therefore.

Where semi-colon placed is; there you,
May please to make a stop, while you tell two.

A colon is a longer stop; therefore,
Stop at each colon, while you may tell four.

The author of the *Treatise* is also aware of the intonation patterns implied by certain punctuation marks, as is illustrated by the following couplet on the question mark:

When e're a question you shall propound,
An interrogation's made: but raise the sound.

Indeed, the *Treatise* is valued by linguists today more for what it says about the pronunciation and intonation of seventeenth century English than for the author's insights into the use of punctuation marks (and certainly not for the author's poetic ability!). Still, it is a good example of the relationship between breath and punctuation in the historical tradition.

Modern authors are likely to attempt a compromise between the two views. G.V. Carey, author of *Mind the Stop: A Brief Guide to Punctuation*, writes: "I should define punctuation as being governed two-thirds by rule and one-third by personal taste. I shall endeavor not to stress the former to the exclusion of the latter, but I will not knuckle under to those who apparently claim for themselves complete freedom to do what they please in the matter." Carey's position is probably an accurate statement of the case, but we might ask, "What kind of rule applies only two thirds of the time?"

The Harbrace Handbook

Even the *Harbrace Handbook* hedges its position on the comma: "The use of the comma depends primarily on the structure of the sentence and signals a small interruption. Inflexible rules governing the use of the comma are few, but there are several basic principles." So far, so good.

The *Harbrace* then lists four principles, stating that commas: a) precede coordinating conjunctions when they link main clauses; b) follow introductory adverb clauses and, usually, introductory phrases; c) separate items in a series (including coordinate adjectives); and d) set off nonrestrictive and other parenthetical elements.

A Morass of Jargon

For the average handbook consulter, in the move from the general statement to the basic principles the *Harbrace* has leapt from cogent wisdom into a morass of grammatical jargon. The four principles are constructed almost entirely of complex grammatical terminology, and one gets the feeling that those who understand this terminology probably already know how to use a comma.

For the reader with a little more understanding, the principles appear to contradict one another. For example, principle “a” says that commas precede coordinating conjunctions, while “b” puts a comma after a conjunction (which is not, in fact, “coordinating” in this instance). Similarly “c” contains a parenthetical element (set off with parentheses) while “d” says that commas will be used to set off parenthetical elements.

There is nothing incorrect here, just potential confusion. The *Harbrace* comma principles conform to the condition known in technical writing as C.O.I.K: Clear Only If Known.

The Handbooks are Wrong

In “Teaching Punctuation as a Rhetorical Tool,” John Dawkins advises us to disregard handbook advice on punctuation anyway. He says, “Manuals of style and college handbooks have it all wrong when it comes to punctuation (good writers don't punctuate that way).” He proposes that there is “a system underlying what good writers, in fact, do; it is a surprisingly simple system; it is a system that enables writers to achieve important—even subtle—rhetorical effects; it is, even, a system that teachers can teach far more easily than they can teach the poorly systematized rules in our handbooks and style manuals” (*CCC* December 1995 533). Let us hope that Dawkins' system is simpler than the punctuation he uses in that last sentence!

A Simple System

Dawkins argues that “all discourse, written or spoken, consists of independent clauses or underlying independent clauses.” What Dawkins calls “underlying” independent clauses are clauses that would be sentences on their own were it not for a subordinating word, such as “although” or “because,” or missing elements that make it necessary for the clause to be attached to a main clause, which could stand by itself. Dawkins sees the various punctuation marks as encoding different degrees of separation between independent clauses, or between elements in independent clauses. This perspective is different from either the breath-related or the grammatical perspectives already discussed, in that it is based on the writer's perception of the conceptual relationships.

Three Patterns and Three Possibilities

Dawkins argues that independent clauses either have extra words, phrases or clauses attached to them, or they don't. If they do, there are three patterns: the attachment can come at the beginning, at the end, or in the middle. In each pattern, the question for the writer is “Do I punctuate, or don't I?” If punctuation is used, it is chosen on the basis of the degree of separation or connection the writer wishes the ideas to have, or in other words, the “meaning and intended emphasis.”

There are also three possibilities. 1) If the attachment comes at the beginning, only zero, comma, dash, or colon are permissible. 2) If the attachment is at the end, all functional marks are permissible. 3) If the attachment comes in the middle, only paired marks (commas, dashes, zeros,³ and parentheses) are

possible. In this case, with the added material in the middle, the choice boils down to "two marks or none."

Raising and Lowering

Dawkins then introduces the concept of raising or lowering. By "raising" he means using a mark that is higher in the hierarchy than would normally be used. He includes a chart of the "degree of separation" each mark signifies (535):

Hierarchy of Functional Punctuation Marks	
MARK	DEGREE OF SEPARATION
sentence final (. ? !)	maximum
semicolon (;)	medium (anticipatory)
dash (—)	medium (emphatic)
comma (,)	minimum
zero (0)	none (that is, connection)

Here is a sentence with a single independent clause and material added at the end. The basic marks are zero or comma:

- 1) Gerald promised to write the paper when he had the time.
- 2) Gerald promised to write the paper, when he had the time.

Example 2 gains more emphasis for the attachment. The higher up in the hierarchy you go, the greater the separation, and the greater the emphasis for the added materials. Thus:

- 3) Gerald promised to write the paper—when he had the time.
- 4) Gerald promised to write the paper. When he had the time.

The likelihood of Gerald actually writing the paper diminishes, and the irony of the tone increases, as the punctuation marks get stronger. This is Dawkins' main point—that good writers use punctuation not to indicate breathing points, not to satisfy grammatical rules, but to create rhetorical effects. Example four creates a sentence fragment, violating a basic handbook rule that is often violated by published writers. Dawkins' system explains why this rule is so often broken.

It should be said, however, that novelists and short story writers are much more likely to punctuate in the manner Dawkins describes than writers of business correspondence or scientific reports. There is insufficient space to summarize Dawkins' whole article here. However, perhaps it is enough to know that punctuation cannot be reduced to rules of breath, counting, or grammar, and that there are good reasons to be confused about it.