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The Fear of Punctuation

By Jane Straus

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If you have a sentence followed by a list, do you use a semicolon or a colon? The answer: That depends...Did you introduce the list with an introductory word such as such as? Did you have a complete sentence before you began the list? Is your list part of your sentence or did you indent the items on the list in tabular form? Those are a lot of factors to consider for one measly punctuation mark, which is why most people need help in the form of a reference book, website, or trusted associate.

People have reason to fear punctuation because the rules have changed and they continue to do so. Who has the right to change these rules? Rumor has it that the rules about placing periods and commas inside quotation marks was changed 30+ years ago by the typesetters' union because figuring out inside vs. outside for the comma or period was apparently too complicated and time consuming. So, all of a sudden, we were told to put all commas and periods inside quotation marks. The British apparently didn't buy this excuse and continue to follow logic. This makes their lives more difficult because they actually have to think. Americans can just put that period or comma inside the quotation mark with no worries. However, we Americans are not completely off the hook. We still have to use logic with quotation marks when the sentence has question marks, exclamation points, or, heaven forbid, a semicolon.

Then, of course, the advent of computers has brought numerous changes in punctuation. This is why we now have just one space after the period before starting a new sentence. The programmers' reasoning for this change is that the computer spaces every letter and punctuation mark according to its actual size. So the reader's eye sees enough space between the period and the next capital letter such that he/she is not confused. But I have people writing emails to me every day questioning this decision. They ask me, "Is it a rule?" My answer: "It is now."

We are all familiar with those annoying red and green squiggly lines we see under words and

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punctuation marks. Often, when you right-click on the squiggly line, you will receive a suggestion that is confusing or just plain wrong. The bottom line is that the English language is a living, breathing entity, much like an animal responding to its environment. It must adapt in order to survive.

I think most people feel insecure about their grammar and punctuation skills and long for the comfort of a book or website that offers quick, understandable answers to their everyday questions. Common mistakes I see are letters, reports, and websites overusing or inappropriately using commas. There are just so many rules about commas that you have to be dedicated to learning the rules or have a handy reference that gives you real-world, clear examples along with rules written for all of us who did not major in English.

This is why I wrote *The Blue Book of Grammar and Punctuation* and decided to share the contents of the book online. When I see mistakes in ads, on billboards, and on websites, I think, "These businesses have paid good money for this advertising but they're not getting their value." While driving from the San Francisco Bay Area to Sacramento, I saw two billboards with glaring errors. One read, "Your Welcome Here" (should be: You're Welcome Here). Another one read, "Its Time to Call Us" (should be: It's Time to Call Us). When potential customers see glaring English usage errors, they will inevitably question the quality of the service or product. Businesses that do not have their websites, letters, and advertising copy proofread pay a hidden price in customer confidence and profits.

I would like to leave you with a helpful tip for one of the most confusing issues for most of us: It's vs. its. It's is a contraction for it is. If you cannot substitute it is for its, then don't use the apostrophe.

Example: It's a good thing you have access to the rules now.

Example: Knowing the rules is worth its weight in gold.

Jane Straus is an entertaining teacher, lecturer, and author. Her book, *The Blue Book of Grammar and Punctuation*, is an easy-to-use reference guide and workbook for those of us who need answers to our everyday questions. You can see the entire contents of her book; order the book for your home, workplace, or school; take an interactive test; get your questions answered; or submit your documents for editing at: <http://www.grammarbook.com/>.

Where Are The Punctuation Points In Your Life?

By David Bates

We live in a very busy age with many pressures and demands on our time. Often in workplaces there is a culture of busyness, where it's important to be seen to be busy and stressed. Isn't that how you show that you're important and care about your work? Outside of work there are often enormous numbers of things competing for our time and attention: family, friends, hobbies. And if we relax in front of the TV we see adverts for things we "should" have, or see things we'd like to, or "ought" to be doing. It can feel overwhelming at times which is why many people find themselves rushing, rushing, rushing, busy, busy, busy, with barely time to draw breath.

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If you find yourself in that situation, you may want to ask yourself where the punctuation points are in your day. Think about how a book is structured: chapters; sections; paragraphs; sentences; and the sentences themselves divided up with commas, semicolons, etc. Its structured in this way to enable us to make sense of the words. The punctuation points not only provide a structure and context so that we can understand the meaning of what has been written, they also tell us where we can take a breath. To find out the truth of this, why not read this paragraph out loud twice, either to yourself, or somebody else. The first time try and read it as if there was no punctuation, in a monotone voice, continuously until you run out of breath. The second time you read it pace yourself, vary the tone of your voice, and follow the punctuation. See what difference it makes. In fact why not try it now?

That was interesting wasn't it? So in a busy day, what might be your punctuation points? In the workplace you might leave your desk to get a drink. At lunch time you could leave the building, if only for a few minutes, for a complete change of scenery. At home, does the TV have to go on automatically? Could you just sit quietly for a short while and start to notice where there is any physical tension in your body and start to release it?

And when you actively find these punctuation points you're expressing the first of the Five Elements of Personal Development © by taking responsibility for yourself

David Bates is a life coach, published author, public speaker and workshop leader. For further information and for pages of tips, tools and resources for your success, visit:

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