

# A Brief History of Punctuation

Where Do the Marks of Punctuation Come From and Who Made Up the Rules?

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*Pause and Effect: Punctuation in the West* by M.B. Parkes (University of California Press, 1993)

My attitude toward punctuation is that it ought to be as conventional as *possible*. . . . You ought to be able to show that you can do it a good deal better than anyone else with the regular tools before you have a license to bring in your own improvements.

(Ernest Hemingway, letter to Horace Liveright, May 22, 1925)

Hemingway's attitude toward [punctuation](#) sounds eminently sensible: make sure that you *know* the rules before you break them. Sensible, maybe, but not entirely satisfactory. After all, just who made up these rules (or conventions) in the first place?

Join us as we look for answers in this brief history of punctuation.

- **Breathing Room**

The beginnings of punctuation lie in [classical rhetoric](#)--the art of oratory. Back in ancient Greece and Rome, when a speech was prepared in writing, marks were used to indicate where--and for how long--a speaker should pause.

These pauses (and eventually the marks themselves) were named after the sections they divided. The longest section was called a [period](#), defined by Aristotle as "a portion of a speech that has in itself a beginning and an end." The shortest pause was a [comma](#) (literally, "that which is cut off"), and midway between the two was the [colon](#)--a "limb," "strophe," or "clause."

- **Marking the Beat**

The three marked pauses were sometimes graded in a geometric progression, with one "beat" for a comma, two for a colon, and four for a period. As W.F. Bolton observes in *A Living Language* (1988), "such marks in oratorical 'scripts' began as physical necessities but needed to coincide with the

'phrasing' of the piece, the demands of emphasis, and other nuances of [elocution](#)."

- **Almost Pointless**

Until the introduction of printing in the late 15th century, punctuation in English was decidedly unsystematic and at times virtually absent. Many of Chaucer's manuscripts, for instance, were punctuated with nothing more than periods at the end of verse lines, without regard for [syntax](#) or sense.

- **Slash and Double Slash**

The favorite mark of England's first printer, William Caxton (1420-1491), was the forward [slash](#) (also known as the *solidus*, *virgule*, *oblique*, *diagonal*, and *virgula suspensiva*)--forerunner of the modern comma. Some writers of that era also relied on a double slash (as found today in *http://*) to signal a longer pause or the start of a new section of text.

- **Ben ("Two Pricks") Jonson**

One of the first to codify the rules of punctuation in English was the playwright Ben Jonson--or rather, Ben:Jonson, who included the colon (he called it the "pause" or "two pricks") in his signature. In the final chapter of *The English Grammar* (1640), Jonson briefly discusses the primary functions of the comma, [parenthesis](#), period, colon, [question mark](#) (the "interrogation"), and [exclamation point](#) (the "admiration").

- **Talking Points**

In keeping with the practice (if not always the precepts) of Ben Jonson, punctuation in the 17th and 18th centuries was increasingly determined by the rules of syntax rather than the breathing patterns of speakers.

Nevertheless, this passage from Lindley Murray's best-selling *English Grammar* (over 20 million sold) shows that even at the end of the 18th century, punctuation was still treated, in part, as an oratorical aid:

Punctuation is the art of dividing a written composition into sentences, or parts of sentences, by points or stops, for the purpose of marking the different pauses which the sense, and an accurate pronunciation require.

The Comma represents the shortest pause; the Semicolon, a pause double that of the comma; the Colon, double that of the semicolon; and a period, double that of the colon.

The precise quantity or duration of each pause, cannot be defined; for it varies with the time of the whole. The same composition may be rehearsed in a quicker or a slower time; but the proportion between the pauses should be ever invariable.

*(English Grammar, Adapted to the Different Classes of Learners, 1795)*

Under Murray's scheme, it appears, a well-placed period might give readers enough time to pause for a snack.

- **Writing Points**

By the end of the industrious 19th century, grammarians had come to de-emphasize the [elocutionary](#) role of punctuation:

Punctuation is the art of dividing written [discourse](#) into sections by means of points, for the purpose of showing the grammatical connection and dependence, and of making the sense more obvious. . . .

It is sometimes stated in works on Rhetoric and Grammar, that the points are for the purpose of elocution, and directions are given to pupils to pause a certain time at each of the stops. It is true that a pause required for elocutionary purposes does sometimes coincide with a grammatical point, and so the one aids the other. Yet it should not be forgotten that the first and main ends of the points is to mark grammatical divisions. Good elocution often requires a pause where there is no break whatever in the grammatical continuity, and where the insertion of a point would make nonsense.

*(John Seely Hart, A Manual of Composition and Rhetoric, 1892)*

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- **Final Points**

In our own time, the declamatory basis for punctuation has pretty much given way to the syntactic approach. Also, in keeping with a century-long trend toward shorter sentences, punctuation is now more lightly applied than it was in the days of Dickens and Emerson.

Countless style guides spell out the [conventions for using the various marks](#). Yet when it comes to the finer points (regarding [serial commas](#), for instance), sometimes even the experts disagree.

Meanwhile, fashions continue to change. In modern prose, [dashes](#) are in; [semicolons](#) are out. [Apostrophes](#) are either sadly neglected or tossed around like confetti, while [quotation marks](#) are seemingly dropped at random on unsuspecting words.

And so it remains true, as G. V. Carey observed decades ago, that punctuation is governed "two-thirds by rule and one-third by personal taste." To learn more about the history of punctuation, see the authoritative study by Malcolm B. Parkes, *Pause and Effect: Punctuation in the West* (Univ. of California Press, 1993).