

appendix: punctuation

The uses of punctuation marks are so numerous and the abuses so varied that the following is offered only as a very general guide to the most common errors. For those who wish to dig more deeply, I recommend the excellent *Mind the Stop*, by G. V. Carey.

apostrophe. The principal functions of the apostrophe are to indicate omitted letters (*don't, can't, wouldn't*) and to show the possessive (strictly, the genitive) case (*John's book, the bank's money, the people's choice*).

Two types of error occur with some frequency and are worth noting. They involve:

1. *Multiple possessives.* This problem can be seen here: "This is a sequel to Jeremy Paul's and Alan Gibson's play" (*Times*). The question is whether both of the apostrophes are necessary, and the answer in this instance is no. Because the reference is to a single play written jointly, only the second-named man needs to be in the possessive. Thus it should be "Jeremy Paul and Alan Gibson's play." If the reference were to two or more plays written separately, both names would have to carry apostrophes. The rule is that when possession is held in common,

only the nearer antecedent should be possessive; when possession is separate, each antecedent must be in the possessive.

2. *Plural units of measure.* Many writers who would never think of omitting the apostrophes in "a fair day's pay for a fair day's work" often do exactly that when the unit of measure is increased. Consider: "Laker gets further thirty days credit" (*Times* headline); "Mr. Taranto, who had nineteen years service with the company . . ." (*New York Times*). Both *days* and *years* should carry an apostrophe. Alternatively we could insert an *of* after the time elements ("thirty days of credit," "nineteen years of service"). One or the other is necessary.

The problem is often aggravated by the inclusion of unnecessary words, as in each of these examples: "The scheme could well be appropriate in twenty-five years time, he said" (*Times*); "Many diplomats are anxious to settle the job by the end of the session in two weeks time" (*Observer*); "The government is prepared to part with several hundred acres worth of property" (*Time* magazine). Each requires an apostrophe. But that need could be obviated by excluding the superfluous wordage. What is "in twenty-five years' time" if not "in twenty-five years"? What does "several hundred acres' worth of property" say that "several hundred acres" does not?

colon. The colon marks a formal introduction or indicates the start of a series. A colon should not separate a verb from its object in simple enumerations. Thus it would be wrong to say, "The four states bordering Texas are: New Mexico, Arkansas, Oklahoma, and Louisiana." The colon should be removed. But it would be correct to say, "Texas is bordered by four states: New Mexico, Arkansas, Oklahoma, and Louisiana."

comma. The trend these days is to use the comma as sparingly as form and clarity allow. But there are certain instances in which it should appear but all too often does not. Equally,

it has a tendency to crop up with alarming regularity in places where it has no business. It is, in short, the most abused of punctuation marks and one of the worst offenders of any kind in the English language. Essentially the comma's use is compulsory in three situations and recommended in a fourth.

1. *When the information provided is clearly parenthetical.* Consider these two sentences, both of which are correctly punctuated: "Mr. Lawson, the energy secretary, was unavailable for comment"; "The ambassador, who arrived in Britain two days ago, yesterday met with the Prime Minister." In both sentences, the information between the commas is incidental to the main thought. You could remove it and the sentence would still make sense. In the following examples, the writer has failed to set off the parenthetical information. I have provided slashes (the proper name, incidentally, is virgules) to show where the commas should have gone: "British cars/says a survey/are more reliable than their foreign counterparts" (editorial in the *Evening Standard*); "Operating mainly from the presidential palace at Baabda/southeast of Beirut, Habib negotiated over a sixty-five-day period" (*Time* magazine); "Mary Chatillon, director of the Massachusetts General Hospital's Reading Language Disorder Unit/maintains: 'It would simply appear to be . . .'" (*Time* magazine). It should perhaps be noted that failure to put in a comma is particularly common after a parenthesis, as here: "Mr. James Grant, executive director of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)/says . . ." (*Times*).

Occasionally the writer recognizes that the sentence contains a parenthetical thought but fails to discern just how much of the information is incidental, as here: "At nine she won a scholarship to Millfield, the private school, for bright children of the rich" (*Evening Standard*). If we removed what has been presented as parenthetical, the sentence would say: "At nine she won a scholarship to Millfield for bright children." There should be no comma after *school*, because the whole of the last statement is parenthetical.

A rarer error is seen here: "But its big worry is the growing evidence that such ostentatious cars, the cheapest costs £55,240, are becoming socially unacceptable" (*Times*). When the incidental information could stand alone as a sentence, it needs to be set off with stronger punctuation—either dashes or parentheses.

2. *When the information is nonrestrictive.* The problem here—which is really much the same as that discussed in the previous three paragraphs—is illustrated by this incorrectly punctuated sentence from the *Daily Mail*: "Cable TV would be socially divisive, the chairman of the BBC George Howard claimed last night." The writer has failed to understand the distinction between (1) "BBC chairman George Howard claimed last night" and (2) "The chairman of the BBC, George Howard, claimed last night." In (1), the name George Howard is essential to the sense of the sentence; it defines it. If we removed it, the sentence would say, "BBC chairman claimed last night." In (2), however, the name is nonrestrictive. In effect it is parenthetical. We could remove it without altering the sense of the sentence: "The chairman of the BBC claimed last night." When a name or title can be removed, it should be set off with commas. When it cannot be removed, the use of commas is wrong.

Two hypothetical examples may help to clarify the distinction. Both are correctly punctuated. "John Fowles's novel *The Collector* was a bestseller"; "John Fowles's first novel, *The Collector*, was a bestseller." In the first example the name of the novel is restrictive because *The Collector* is only one of several novels by Fowles. In the second example it is nonrestrictive because only one novel can be the author's first one. We could delete *The Collector* from the second example without spoiling the sense of the sentence, but not from the first.

When something is the only one of its kind, it should be set off with commas; when it is only one of several, the use of commas is wrong. Thus these two sentences, both from *The*

Times, are incorrect: "When the well-known British firm, Imperial Metal Industries, developed two new types of superconducting wires . . ."; "The writer in the American magazine, *Horizon*, was aware of this pretentiousness . . ." The first example would be correct only if Imperial Metal Industries were the only well-known British firm, and the second would be correct only if *Horizon* were America's only magazine. The same error in reverse occurs here: "Julie Christie knows that in the week her new film *The Return of the Soldier* has opened . . ." (*Sunday Times*). Since *The Return of the Soldier* was Julie Christie's only new film of the week, it should have been set off with commas.

The error frequently occurs when a marriage partner is named: "Mrs. Thatcher and her husband Denis left London yesterday" (*Observer*). Since Mrs. Thatcher has only one husband, it should be "and her husband, Denis, left London yesterday."

3. *With forms of address.* When addressing people, you must use commas around the names or titles of those addressed. "Hit him Jim, hit him" (*Sunday Times*) should be "Hit him, Jim, hit him." The television program *Good Morning America* should really be *Good Morning, America*. The film *I'm All Right Jack* should have been *I'm All Right, Jack*. The lack of a comma or commas is always sloppy and occasionally ambiguous. In 1981, for instance, the *Sunday Express* illustrated a novel serialization with the heading "I'm choking Mr. Herriot" when what it meant was "I'm choking, Mr. Herriot"—quite another matter.

4. *With interpolated words or phrases.* Words such as *moreover*, *meanwhile*, and *nevertheless* and phrases such as *for instance* and *for example* traditionally have taken commas, but the practice has become increasingly discretionary over the years. In Britain they have been more freely abandoned than in America; Fowler, for instance, seldom uses them. I would recommend using them when they suggest a pause or when ambiguity might result. This is especially true of *however*. Consider these two sentences:

"However hard he tried, he failed"; "However, he tried hard, but failed." To keep from confusing the reader, if only momentarily, it is a good idea to set off *however* with commas when it is used as an interpolation. Much the same could be said of *say*: "She should choose a British government stock with [,] say [,] five years to run" (*Daily Mail*).

dash. Dashes should be used in pairs to enclose parenthetical matter or singly to indicate a sharp break in a sentence ("I can't see a damn thing in here—ouch!") or to place emphasis on a point ("There are only two things we can count on—death and taxes"). Dashes are most effective when used sparingly, and there should never be more than one pair in a single sentence.

There are two common errors with dashes:

1. Failing to mark the end of a parenthetical comment with a second dash: "The group—it is the largest in its sector, with subsidiaries or associates in eleven countries, says trading has improved in the current year" (*Times*). Make it "countries—says."

2. Allowing a word or phrase from the main part of the sentence to become locked within the parenthetical area, as here: "There is another institution which appears to have an even more—shall we say, relaxed—attitude to security" (*Times*). Removing the words between the dashes would give us an institution with "an even more attitude." *Relaxed* belongs to the sentence proper and needs to be put outside the dashes: "There is another institution which appears to have an even more—shall we say?—relaxed attitude to security." See also PARENTHESES.

ellipsis. An ellipsis (sometimes called an ellipse) is used to indicate that material has been omitted. It consists of three periods (. . .) and not, as some writers think, a random scattering of them. When an ellipsis occurs at the end of a sentence, a fourth period is often added.