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## PUNCTUATION POWER

If you are feeling unsure about punctuation rules and uses, you are in the majority. Even grammar nerds feel intimidated by the National Punctuation Day contest.<sup>1</sup> Still, punctuation skills are vital to clearly communicating the context and structure of our ideas. To see how important punctuation is, let's look at an unpunctuated text that Morgan sent to Tracy.

What Morgan sent:

dear tracy there is no love without you i have all that i want when you are near i am sad after you go joy fills my life morgan

How Tracy read it:

Dear Tracy,  
There is no love without you. I have all that I want when you are near. I am sad after you go. Joy fills my life.  
Morgan

<sup>1</sup> National Punctuation Day was founded by Jeff Rubin. It is celebrated on September 24th. Further information is available at <http://www.nationalpunctuationday.com/>

What Morgan meant:

Dear Tracy,

There is no love. Without you, I have all that I want. When you are near, I am sad. After you go, joy fills my life.

Morgan

If punctuation is so important, why is it so confusing? According to M. B. Parkes, part of the confusion is caused by the two philosophies involved; each interprets punctuation's purpose differently. The first (and original) punctuation philosophy contends that the purpose of punctuation is to record speech patterns and to evoke emotional responses in the reader. We encounter this philosophy most often in passages replicating dialogue and in creative writing. The other philosophy asserts that writing is intended to transfer information directly into the reader's mind. We see this philosophy, primarily, in academic writing. Academic writing is usually intended to be read silently and is less reliant on emotional appeal.<sup>2</sup> We can eliminate some of the punctuation confusion by recognizing the audience's expectations for the type of work we are producing and punctuating with those expectations in mind.

Another major source of confusion is found in the names for punctuation marks. These symbols perform the function indicated by their Greek or Latin name, but most of us do not speak Greek or Latin. This problem may be addressed by employing a benefit of our living language; we can (and do) change the names we use to describe things. As example, the capitulum became the pilcrow (¶)<sup>3</sup> and is now becoming the paragraph marker. Computer language calls periods "dots" and virgules (/) "forward slashes." Changing the marks' names made their physical descriptions and/or functions clearer to us and easier to remember.

<sup>2</sup> Parkes, M. B. *Pause and Effect: An Introduction to the History of Punctuation in the West*. Berkeley: University of California, 1993. Print.

<sup>3</sup> Hoefler & Frere-Jones. *H&FJ News*. 12 Mar. 2008. Web. 20 Mar. 2012. <http://www.typography.com/ask/showBlog.php?blogID=84>.

Let's apply this logic to some commonly used punctuation marks by renaming them according to their most frequent uses.<sup>4</sup> I have proposed new names that works for me. There is plenty of space for you to add names of your choosing.<sup>5</sup> Can we really assign new names to words? Yes, gentle reader. Yes, we can.

Punctuation is a power tool that shapes our writing and hones the way our ideas are received. Knowing the punctuation philosophies associated with academic and creative writing helps us to discern which punctuation will be most useful in communicating our ideas. Whether we are writing a stream-of-consciousness novel (like James Joyce's *Ulysses*) or a scientific case study, punctuation allows our meaning to be understood by the reader. If remembering how to use punctuation is made easier by renaming the marks, rename them. The goal is to enjoy the benefits of clearly communicating our ideas by mastering punctuation's power.

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<sup>4</sup> Other uses are described in books on punctuation. These books are available through your local library and often display only minimal signs of use.

<sup>5</sup> Use any name that makes the mark's purpose clear to you. This is your tool. Make it work for you.



**Name****New Name****Apostrophe'****Possessor**

Use when showing a noun's possession of something, to indicate a contraction (as in: we don't use an apostrophe in *its* unless we mean *it is*) or to show where letters are missin' from a word.

**[Brackets]****Clarifier**

Use when making the meaning of quotations clearer by inserting [clarifying] words and explanations (or when including a parenthetical inside another parenthetical [like this]).

**Colon:****Namely**

Use to focus the reader's attention on the importance of the idea or item that follows. There is an easy way to decide where to place a colon: by placing namely or thus in the sentence where the colon should go. Also...

Q: Can it be used in place of quotation marks in dialogue/Q & A?

A: Yes!

**Comma,****Plus**

Use to separate items in a list. Also use to separate two complete sentences when used with a conjunction. Think  $x + y + z = x, y, z$ . If a sentence starts with a subordinating clause (like this one), a plus (a.k.a. a comma) is used.

**Ellipsis...****Omit**

Use an ellipsis when... omitting some words does not alter the meaning of the statement.

**Exclamation!****Cry Out**

Use after an exclamation (Duh!) to denote a command or to identify a strong emotion.

**Name****New Name****Hyphen-****Joiner**

Use when connecting last names and words that form clarifying terms. By using a hyphen, we make clear that the Smith-Jones wedding was attended by small-business owners, and not by business owners who are small.

**(Parentheses)****Also**

Use parentheses to add material that wouldn't normally fit into the flow of your text (in a de-emphasized way); to indicate plural or singular: rabbit(s); add a personal comment (I did that here); or when creating an acronym: International Liver Extractors (ILE).

**Semicolon;****Super-plus**

Use when emphasizing the close connection between two complete sentences or to create order in a list with many pluses (a.k.a. commas [see listing above]), e.g., I travelled by train this summer; I visited several cities: New York, New York; Jersey City, New Jersey; and Walla Walla, Washington.

**Period.****Stop**

Use to indicate the end of a complete thought. The shortest complete thought in English: I am. It is also used to abbrev. a word.

**Question mark?****Ask**

Use when asking for or about something. Who doesn't know how to ask for or about things?

**"Quotation marks"****Said**

She said, "They indicate where dialogue begins and ends." They are also used to note a title like "Punctuation Power" in *Inkwell*.