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WHICH WAY IS IT POINTED?

Louis Foley

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The etymology of the word *punctuation* leads us back to its remote ancestor, the Latin *punctus*, a “point” in the sense of the dot which we now call a “period” because it marks the *end* of a period. Latin did not require punctuation as our modern languages do, because the forms of words kept their construction clear independently of word-order. Even the period did not seem necessary until fairly late, since the termination of a sentence was shown by the verb which came regularly at the end.

From *punctus* evolved the word *point*, which is used in French for what we call the “period” at the end of a sentence. In the eighteenth century, and even later, punctuating was commonly called “pointing.” So that was naturally Benjamin Franklin’s name for it. In his *Autobiography* he tells how he and his friend Collins, being fond of argument, carried on debates with each other in the form of letters. When Ben’s father happened to come upon his papers and read them, he found that Ben “fell far short in elegance of expression, in method and in perspicuity,” but observed that he had the advantage of his antagonist “in correct spelling and pointing (which I owed to the printing-house).” Franklin’s parenthetical comment here is significant. Punctuation grew up largely through the usage of printers. As practical-minded people they appreciated its usefulness, whereas authors were traditionally inclined to regard it as mere mechanics beneath their notice. Interestingly enough, by coincidence the term “pointing” may be considered applicable in another sense, for punctuation *points* to the ways in which words are grouped, as we have to see them in order to read intelligently.

A great deal of misconception of punctuation has been displayed, and even systematically taught, by people who either have never bothered, or else stubbornly refuse, to understand its purpose and function. This seemingly willful attitude is remarkably represented by a recent article in an educational magazine. The author considers “how we might work with punctuation—and particularly with the comma, the most difficult punctuation mark to learn. In most classrooms it is taught by means of grammar; you know, ‘A phrase in apposition is set off by commas’—that sort of thing. If commas *were still used to indicate structural relationships* [italics ours], there might be some justification for this, but *they have not been so used since*

the last century. Punctuation now indicates speech patterns.”¹ Historically this assertion could hardly be more wrong.

The old idea of punctuation as a means of marking “pauses” for rhetorical effect appears typically in an example which that author cites, with evident disapproval, from a “once popular novel *Eric* (1871)” to represent “antique punctuation”:

“The simple truth was, that poor Mr. Lawley was a little wrong in the head.”

Now this is precisely a representation of “speech pattern,” the marking of a pause which a public speaker would be very likely to make. For the modern rapid silent reader it is merely an arbitrary and annoying separation of a subject from its predicate.

Hewing steadily, however, to the old line, which he seems to think is a brave new conception, our theorizer says that “we ought to be more concerned with sound than with structural relationships. We should tell our young writer to forget the rules and put in commas where he would naturally pause if speaking the sentence.”

It will be no problem for our young writer to forget the rules; he probably never learned them. The ones which do stick in some people’s minds are such things as outdated, complicated rules about semicolons, or statements in certain permissive handbooks that the proper punctuation of a series is “optional.”

In our age of widespread disorder and sloppiness, there seems to be a common tendency to rebel against “rules,” in punctuation as in other things. To some extent this attitude may be understandable, and even justifiable—though generally the rebellion is for the wrong reasons. For the most part at least, the compendia of rules for punctuation to be found in dictionaries and other standard books of reference are accurate and dependable. What is “wrong” with them is that they do not constitute a method of *teaching*. In the lists where they stand, they look as if they were all supposed to be equally important, as is far from being the case. They have been composed by people who were aiming at scientifically precise statements, with no more concern for being *interesting* than a writer of dictionary definitions. The fact that they go together to form an orderly system—quite distinct from the old notion of marking “rhetorical pauses”—is not made clearly apparent. They do not show *why* they are true.

(1) John Rouse, “How to Manufacture Tin Ears,” *Media & Methods*, 134 N. 13th St., Philadelphia, Pa., September 1967, p. 18.

Instead of denying the authority of well-established rules, or even thinking about “rules” at all, a more realistic and practical approach is to examine the small number of typical situations and see what they logically require. We may begin by considering the use of *and*. Far more often than otherwise, it is simply joining two words. Of course we need not take “words” too literally; two unified phrases—“in the city and on the farm”—or two predicates of the same verb amount to the same thing. For many centuries the English language has seemed to be peculiarly fond of using words in pairs: this and that, thick and thin, up and down, in and out, north and south, east and west, old and new, hither and yon, black and white, cup and saucer, salt and pepper, bread and butter, sugar and cream, day and night, men and women, hat and coat, shoes and socks—the list could go on endlessly. Quite naturally then, the innocent reader expects that *and* is being used in this commonest way unless it is preceded by a comma. Without that signal it will seem to be plausibly joining the word before it to the word after it, when actually it is doing something quite different. Eventually the reader will discover his mistake, but he will have been needlessly led astray and obliged to backtrack to understand the sentence. This simple matter of marking the true function of *and* covers a large area of punctuation. The same principle applies to *or*.

As in the case of a compound sentence, this relationship between a comma and *and* appears clearly in the proper punctuation of a series. The *and* which brings up the last member of a series is *not* joining the last two members to each other, but joining the last member *to the series as a whole*. This is a point which goes to the very heart of what modern punctuation is “all about.”

For many years, rules for punctuation in standard textbooks have called for a comma before the *and* at the end of a series, and it has been interesting to observe the steadily increasing recognition of the principle in printed matter of various sorts. Yet it still seems to be the situation which is more misunderstood or handled more carelessly and inconsistently than any other. Most newspapers and some widely-circulated periodicals are systematically lax about it, or even appear to be stubbornly unwilling to conform. In each case we may suspect that the practice results from a decision of some editor who had somehow imbibed the notion that *and* and a comma are interchangeable. This is a curious idea indeed; while “and” *joins*, a comma *separates*. The only conspicuous newspaper which regularly punctuates series correctly is *The Christian Science Monitor*—in keeping with its recognized

position as one of the best-edited papers in the United States.

No doubt many people have been influenced by commonly negligent punctuation of various cut-and-dried series such as “first, second and third,” “this, that and the other,” “men, women and children,” or “morning, noon and night.” Of course any reader, seeing at once what is coming, will read such a phrase correctly in spite of its illogical punctuation. With any really new series, however, omission of the comma before *and* is very likely to be at least temporarily misleading as to relationships.

Often in the same sentence one may see the difference in effect between *and* with a comma before it and *and* without the comma.

“Education, air and water pollution, transportation, and economic development are problems that do not respect state boundaries.”²

“Novel methods of transport, local customs, trade practices and equipment, local celebrations, local fairs and processions, and local or national oddities . . .”³

“These readings report research, discuss theory and philosophy, and analyze trends and issues pertaining to the self as a theoretical construct.”⁴

“The élite group includes the many millions of educated office-workers and technicians, professional people, the literary and artistic set, and scientific workers.”⁵

One of the places where a comma is most clearly needed is the end of an adverbial clause at the beginning of a sentence. Without that signal, the reader will often think he is still in the introductory clause after he has passed through it and into the main statement. When such a clause *follows* the main clause, however, usually a comma would be superfluous because the conjunction introducing it (*after* in the sentence preceding this, *because* in this sentence) shows the reader unmistakably where he is.

(2) *The New York Times*, editorial, October 29, 1967.

(3) *The Christian Science Monitor*, April 29, 1967.

(4) *Reading Horizons*, book review, Spring 1966, p. 107.

(5) *The Christian Science Monitor*, headline, November 1, 1967.

Exceptions are easy to understand. The conjunction *for* needs a comma before it to distinguish it immediately from the much more common preposition:

“He still worked for the same company, for no one else would hire him.”

Similarly *since* in the meaning of “because” needs to be marked as different from its ordinary time sense:

“I had not seen him since we were boys.”

“Despite our misgivings we will undertake the experiment, since that is your wish.”

Though what we have seen about *and* (applicable likewise to *or*) explains part of the general rule for punctuating compound sentences, it does not quite take care of all of it. The case of *but* is different. The comma in that situation sets off *but* as a conjunction, not the preposition as in “nothing but the best” or “everybody but me.”

The rest of the business of using commas is practically covered by the situation of “intervening” phrases or clauses, more or less parenthetical elements not vital to the coherence of the main statement. Nowadays the tendency is not to set off phrases which the reader can easily take in his stride; we avoid cluttering up sentences with commas not really helpful. Of course one should *not* set off “restrictive” clauses which are essential to the meaning of the main clause:

“He would do nothing which would embarrass his opponent.”

“We must have employees whom we can trust.”

Quite different is the relative clause which comes in parenthetically:

“That house, which had been built a generation before, was beginning to seem too old-fashioned for modern living.”

The writer with whom we took issue about “speech patterns” at least deserves credit for recognizing the importance of the comma, though when he calls it “the most *difficult* punctuation mark to learn,” that can only be because, as we have seen, it has several distinct uses. The next most important mark, the semicolon, operates very simply by comparison. More and more exclusively in modern practice, it is

used where a period might be used so far as grammar is concerned, between complete sentences closely related in thought. Characteristically, on the two sides of the semicolon, we have the same basic idea expressed in different ways as a means of emphasis.

“He felt sure that he could handle the situation; he had been through such things before.”

“Excuses don’t amount to anything; it’s results that count.”

“When the time comes, do not distress yourself; you will have done all that is possible.”

The mere *length* of a sentence has nothing to do with the matter one way or the other.

There still are, to be sure, certain special contexts in which the old system of punctuating for “rhetorical pauses” has some justification. We see it fully carried out in the Psalms in the Bible and in The Book of Common Prayer. No doubt in such places it serves a useful purpose in keeping a congregation together when they read in unison. Nowadays, however, writing is no longer thought of as primarily intended for reading aloud.