Four

Thou Shalt Not Pick on the Puncts

PUNCTUATION MARKS ARE GETTING MAD. They've been neglected, misused, and picked on for too long, and if we don't start treating them with respect, they'll go on strike.

A punctuation strike would be worse than an air traffic con trollers strike a janitors strike and a nurses strike combined imag ine if all of our sentences were unmarked and all our thoughts allowed to spill willynilly onto the page how would you know when one sentence ended and the next began how would your reader be able to find let alone board your train of thought our sentences would no longer communicate they would confuse the result a meltdown in communication a nervous breakdown among all human beings meanwhile the eleven marks of punctu ation twelve if you count the ellipsis would be calmly picketing in the margins of our newspapers books and essays puncts on strike puncts on strike what a sad day for humanity

Want to avoid this mess? Read on.

. (period)

There's not much to be said about the period except that most writers don't reach it soon enough.

—WILLIAM ZINSSER

When I turned four and a half, my father slapped a pair of wooden sticks on my feet and taught me how to ski. His first lesson wasn't how to plant my poles or make a turn or even ride the chair lift. His first lesson was how to stop.

"When you want to stop, turn your skis to face uphill," he advised. "Gravity will slow you down; then all you've got to do is sit." This was good advice, except that I never wanted to stop. I was a daredevil, a speed demon, a pint-size Phil Mahre—the only thing that would stop me was the warming hut, which I crashed into a few times before realizing that breaking the downhill record wasn't worth breaking my legs.

My father's technique worked. I'd hold a turn long enough to point my skis uphill and then sit down, my butt making a perfectly round hole where it landed. As seen from the chair lift above, this "sitzmark" at the end of my tracks looked like the period at the end of a sentence. My first lesson in skiing was, coincidentally, also my first lesson in punctuation.

A period ends a declarative sentence. Periods are powerful, simple, and clear. They are the red lights of writing, the traffic cop's upheld hand. When you come to a period, you stop, absorb the thought of a sentence, and then read on. If it's a very long sentence, you're glad to get to the period. If it's a very short one,

you might wish it wouldn't come so soon. (A note on typing: space twice after a period. Just as a car needs stopping distance when it comes to a red light, so the human mind needs stopping distance when it comes to the end of a sentence.)

This firm and noble mark of punctuation is also used in abbreviations. Here it acts like a retaining wall for the scrunched letters of a shortened word. *Mister* becomes *Mr.*; *Doctor* becomes *Dr.*; *Los Angeles* becomes *L.A.* If we forget the periods in our abbreviations, the letters will spill out and slide down the page, causing inestimable damage to the sentences below.

The period plays a similar role in Internet navigation. As the dot in *.com, .org, .gov,* and *.net,* it keeps all of our Web-surfing computers on a straight path.

Period Triplets: The Ellipsis (. . .)

Sometimes periods travel in threes. When they do, their function is the opposite of stopping ideas; it's to let them roll on. Three dots in a row make the *ellipsis* (. . .), the "yada, yada, yada" of punctuation. An ellipsis suggests that something has been left out or unfinished. It could mean *and so on and so forth* or *etc.* Often it indicates part of a quotation that has been skipped:

> *As it says in the Declaration of Independence, "When, in the course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume . . . the separate but equal station to which the laws of nature and of nature's God entitle them . . . they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation."*

The two ellipses above indicate that some lines from the original Declaration have been left out.

You can also use the ellipsis to recreate a stutter or to suggest hesitation in dialogue:

> *"The coat was too big for me and . . . and T. J. said it made me look like . . . like a preacher . . . and he said since it fit him just right, he'd . . . he'd take it off my hands till I grow into it, then thataway all the guys would stop laughing at me and calling me preacher."*
>
> —MILDRED TAYLOR,
> *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*

Have you ever had a thought too terrible to conclude? Maybe your parents left you in charge of your little brother or sister, and you discovered that your younger sibling had stamped the family's return address all over the silk-covered camel-back sofa. You might have turned to the guilty toddler and said, "Oh, boy! When Mom and Dad come home . . ." The ellipsis at the end of that statement shows the disappearing trail of a thought that, if carried through, would be too dreadful to pronounce, let alone print.

Notice how E. B. White, in *Charlotte's Web,* uses an ellipsis to show us that Wilbur's thought is heading for an unfortunate conclusion:

> *Wilbur heard several people make favorable remarks about Uncle's great size. He couldn't help overhearing these remarks,*

and he couldn't help worrying. "And now, with Charlotte not feeling well . . ." he thought. "Oh, dear!"

Most of your thoughts will, I hope, be printable. But when you must write something unspeakable, scatter the three dots of an ellipsis at the end of your sentence. Your reader will understand what you mean.

, (comma)

When do you use a comma? For some writers the answer is "Whenever I can." Their books tend to be over five hundred pages long. For others it's "Only when I have to." These are the Ernest Hemingways or Raymond Chandlers of the literary world—terse, tough, and popular among students the week before a book report is due. The lucky ones, those with an ear for commas, will say, "Whenever I feel one coming." These are writers like Charles Dickens, Jane Austen, E. B. White, and Roald Dahl—writers whose books may be thin or fat, easy or challenging, but whose commas always seem to hang in just the right place.

Beginning writers answer the comma question by saying they aren't sure when to use one. If *comma* were spelled *calm-a,* its purpose would be clear: to calm the reader, to slow things down just long enough for the reader to catch his breath, but not so long that he comes to a full stop. Treat a comma the way Californians treat a stop sign: roll leisurely through.

My Roommate Who Clicked

In the Kalahari Desert there are certain Bushmen who have a distinct advantage over us inhabitants of "developed" countries. They don't use just words to communicate; they click, too. Interspersed among the syllables they utter are soft clicking sounds like those a squirrel makes when chasing its mate. A typical Kalahari conversation might go something like this:

"Hey *click* brother, what do you *click* want for breakfast *click* today?"

"*Click* I'm hungry for a *click* Egg Mc *click* Muffin."

"Is the new Mc *click* Donald's open *click* yet?"

"Yes *click*. Let's go *click* right away *click*."

These could be affectionate clicks, thought-gathering clicks, angry clicks, or even questioning clicks. The possibilities are endless.

In the United States there is a tribe of suave recent college graduates who are just beginning to climb the corporate ladder, and they click, too. I know because I had one for a roommate. A typical late-afternoon conversation between us went like this:

"Hey *click* dude *click* how's it going?

"Just fine, Dave. Are you going out tonight?"

"Oh *click* yeah. I've got a date with a total babe *click* but I haven't decided where to take her yet."

"How many women are you dating these days?"

"Well *click* let me see if I can name them. There's Donna *click* Sue *click* Sabrina *click* Valerie *click* Olivia *click* Mary-Jane *click* and Mathilda."

One day I decided to transcribe Dave's speech to see if there was any pattern to his clicking. I discovered that Dave's clicks

were the verbal equivalent of commas, and the remarkable thing about them was that they all landed in the right places. In English you are supposed to put a comma before the name or title of someone whom you are addressing directly. If Dave's clicks were transcribed as commas, they would have read:

Hey, dude, how's it going?

Commas belong after interjections like *oh, hey, gee,* and so on. Dave clicked right on cue:

Oh, yeah. I've got a date with a total babe, but I haven't decided where to take her yet.

Note the click before the word *but.* That's a perfect place for a comma—before the conjunction when joining two independent clauses.

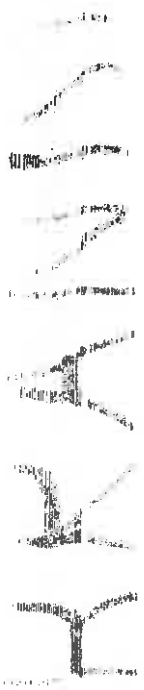
He also clicked his way through the long list of ladies he was dating. In English this is called the serial comma, not because it's wanted by the FBI but because it respects the individuality of each member of a series:

There's Donna, Sue, Sabrina, Valerie, Olivia, Mary-Jane, and Mathilda.

Of course, Dave's clicks sometimes represented more than marks of punctuation. When I asked him if he'd be coming home that night, he turned to me and, adding a wink, replied, *"Click."*

Tips on Clicking (or When to Use a Comma)

The following is a succinct list of comma tips. The best way to learn them is to start clicking when you talk. If you are uncomfortable clicking, then try saying the word *comma* every time you see one.



Use a Comma . . .

1. Right before people's names or titles when addressing them directly:

   Good afternoon, Dr. Jones.
   (one comma if the name is at the end of a sentence)
   Tell me, Bill, what did you think of the movie?
   (two commas around the name if it falls in the middle)

2. To float an interrupting phrase:

   I wanted to let you know, by the way, that you've just won a million dollars.

   The money is, however, not tax-free.

3. Before *and, but, or,* or *so* when two independent clauses are being joined:

   Othello thinks that he can trust Iago, but he is wrong.

Captain Ahab lost a leg to Moby-Dick, so he is seeking revenge.

Charlotte helps Wilbur believe in himself, and the pig wins first prize at the fair.

4. Before quotation marks when dialogue is introduced by or followed by *said, remarked, cried,* and the like:

Jem said, "Yessum, she took us."

"Folks call me Cal," explained Calpurnia.

Hint: P before Q (punctuation before quotation)

5. In a series:

For the final exam you will need paper, a pen, a dictionary, and a brain.

I love to read The Phantom Tollbooth, Great Expectations, Moby-Dick, *and* Pride and Prejudice.

6. In a complex sentence when the dependent clause comes first (see Chapter 5 for an explanation of complex sentences):

Whenever I brush my teeth before bed, my dreams smell sweet.

However confusing the rules on commas may be, they can be mastered with practice.

The Echo Comma

Use a comma between two sentences that share the same *implied* verb. The following is not a run-on sentence:

Mr. Flippersnap sleeps until six A.M., Mrs. Flippersnap until noon.

The verb *sleeps* is implied in the second half of the sentence, and since it is left out, we can join the halves with a comma. I call this kind of sentence echo writing, because the verb echoes from one part of the sentence to the next:

Mary had a little lamb, Sally a big fat one.

My father drives a jalopy, my mother a Rolls-Royce.

If echo writing feels comfortable, try to incorporate it into your own compositions; it will honor thy reader by making your sentences feel brisk.

Places You Might Be Tempted to Use a Comma but Shouldn't

1. In a complex sentence when the dependent clause comes last:

WRONG: *My dreams smell sweet, whenever I brush my teeth before bed.*
RIGHT: *My dreams smell sweet whenever I brush my teeth before bed.*

2. In a series when one of the items is a pair of Best Friend Nouns. Best Friend Nouns are nouns that normally go together:

Best Friend Nouns
(Don't let a comma come between them.)

salt and pepper
bread and butter
table and chairs
peanut butter and jelly
biscuits and gravy
rod and reel

WRONG: *When you set the table, be sure to remember the napkins, silverware, salt, and pepper.*
RIGHT: *When you set the table, be sure to remember the napkins, silverware, and salt and pepper.*

3. Between subject and verb

WRONG: *Jack climbed the beanstalk, and stole gold from the giant.*
RIGHT: *Jack climbed the beanstalk and stole gold from the giant.*

WRONG: *Cinderella went to the ball, and danced with the prince.*
RIGHT: *Cinderella went to the ball and danced with the prince.*

Note: Experienced writers sometimes break this rule, and pause for effect.

4. By itself, between two sentences:

WRONG: *Goldilocks knocked on the Bears' door, they weren't home.*
RIGHT: *Goldilocks knocked on the Bears' door, but they weren't home.*
RIGHT: *Goldilocks knocked on the Bears' door; they weren't home.*

5. Between dissimilar adjectives:

WRONG: *We wore several, red sweaters.*
RIGHT: *We wore several red sweaters.*
RIGHT: *Clifford is a big, red dog.* (*Big* and *red* are similar adjectives.)

Hint: If you can switch the order, it's okay to slip in a comma:

Clifford is a red, big dog.

If you can't, leave the comma out:

Clifford has three young friends.
Clifford has young three friends.

6. Between the two parts of a compound noun:

WRONG: *We served a delightful brunch of eggs, bagels, orange, juice, and fruit.*

RIGHT: *We served a delightful brunch of eggs, bagels, orange juice, and fruit.*

; (semicolon)

The semicolon seems to be an indecisive creature. If you turn it on its side, it looks like a confused face, half-smiling, half-sincere. In French they call it the *point-vergule,* which means "period-comma." (It's stronger than a comma but weaker than a period.) In English it's half a colon, which would be a serious medical condition if you had to digest your dinner with it. But in writing we don't use the semicolon to digest food; we use it to digest ideas.

A semicolon can join two sentences with a common theme:

In the morning I drink coffee with milk; in the evening I take it black.

The theme of the two sentences—how I take my coffee—gives them something in common, a family tie almost. Just as you and your brother might like to share a room (when you're getting along), so the two like-themed sentences desire a closer tie than the period can provide.

The Rams were an unsuccessful football team in Los Angeles; in St. Louis they won the Super Bowl.

The theme here is the success or failure of the Rams. The two sentences consider how well the team played in two different cities. We could separate them with a period:

> *The Rams were an unsuccessful football team in Los Angeles. In St. Louis they won the Super Bowl.*

The grammar here is fine, but the style feels choppy because the period brings us to a full stop when our mind wants to keep on rolling. The weaker stop of a semicolon makes a stronger tie between the two sentences and allows their contrast to sink right in.

You can also use a semicolon to link two sentences when the first one is the cause of the next:

> *I forgot to take a bath this morning; nobody wanted to sit beside me in class.*

> *Sam asked six different girls to the school dance; as a result, he left in an ambulance, and the girls became great friends.*

Those sentences could be separated by a period or by a comma and conjunction, but the semicolon speeds the reader's journey from setup to punch line. A good sentence, like a good joke, depends a lot on timing. When the first sentence causes a funny outcome in the next, the sooner your reader gets there, the better. Try linking them with a semicolon.

Like the center point of a teeter-totter, a semicolon is the fulcrum between two perfectly balanced sentences:

My aunt spent her New Year's Eve in Las Vegas; my uncle spent his in New York.

These two sentences show a contrast between my aunt's and my uncle's New Year's plans, yet their structure is in perfect harmony.

Jenny adores chocolate chip ice cream; Jason prefers pralines and cream.

The semicolon also keeps track of a long list that has commas within each item:

WRONG: *On my first trip to Europe, I visited London, England, Paris, France, Dublin, Ireland, and Rome, Italy.*

RIGHT: *On my first trip to Europe, I visited London, England; Paris, France; Dublin, Ireland; and Rome, Italy.*

Another handy use of the semicolon is to separate clauses that have commas within and a theme in common:

OKAY: *My dog is a canine of many talents. As a watchdog, she rattles our windows with her fierce barking. As a lapdog, she curls up into a tiny ball, warm and soft as a cashmere scarf. And as a retriever, she can find a tennis ball in a tangle of shrubs at the bottom of any canyon.*

BETTER: *My dog is a canine of many talents. As a watchdog, she rattles our windows with her fierce barking; as a lapdog, she curls up into a tiny ball, warm and soft as a cashmere scarf; and as a*

retriever, she can find a tennis ball in a tangle of shrubs at the bottom of any canyon.

You could put the dog's talents in separate sentences (as in the first example), but since they are all connected by a common theme, it makes sense to let them hang together by a semicolon, which allows for a smoother ride.

: (colon)

Think of a colon as a pair of binoculars: it focuses the reader's eyes on something important. The sentence before the colon introduces the sentence or list that follows it.

It is important to be quiet in a library for one essential reason: too much noise distracts the characters.

A good writer needs three basic skills: observation, concentration, and imagination.

The launchpad of a colon should be a noun. Placing one after a preposition or a verb will make the reader dizzy.

WRONG: *I received e-mails today from: the Dalai Lama, the pope, and the president.*

RIGHT: *I received e-mails today from three old friends: the Dalai Lama, the pope, and the president.*

Colons introduce long or formal quotations:

In a confrontation with the Hogwarts bully Malfoy, Harry discovers his talent for handling a broomstick:

He mounted the broom and kicked hard against the ground and up, up he soared; air rushed through his hair, and his robes whipped out behind him—and in a rush of fierce joy he realized he'd found something he could do without being taught—this was easy, this was wonderful.

—Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone

To keep certain information organized, use a colon:

1. Between hours and minutes:

   2:45 P.M.
   9:00 A.M.

2. Between chapter and verse of the Bible:

   Genesis 1:14
   Leviticus 3:12–15

3. After the salutation in a formal letter:

   The Right Honorable Mr. McGoo:
   Dear President Scooby-Doo:
   To whom it may concern:

4. To separate a main title from its subtitle:

   Poem-Making: Ways to Begin Writing Poetry by Myra Cohn Livingston
   On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft by Stephen King

— (dash)

What is the most challenging aspect of writing? Is it knowing where to start, how to end, or what to put in between? Is it getting an idea in the first place, or having to rewrite it a dozen times to get it right? For some writers the hardest part about writing isn't getting started or even finishing but maintaining a single train of thought.

Train of thought is a helpful metaphor for the writing process. A good piece of writing, like a train, carries the reader at a brisk pace along a track toward a clear destination. The only problem is that sometimes the writer gets distracted by the scenery along the way.

Not all detours are distractions. Sometimes when you are writing, a *relevant* thought will pop up and demand to be included. It could clarify your sentence or give a quick example or explanation. For these helpful intrusions our next mark of punctuation—the dash—was made.

As a verb, the word *dash* means "to move or act swiftly." If you *dash* off your homework on your way into class—and I catch you—I'll rip it up and make you do it over. If you *dash* off an essay at home—and I don't catch you—I'll probably find forty-

seven Pen Commandment violations and make you do it over. If you *dash* out of the classroom before the bell rings—and I see you—I'll haul you back in and give you janitorial duty at recess.

But if you employ the dash in its noun form, I'm liable to commend you for experimenting with this useful and friendly mark of punctuation. I like the dash because it's the perfect example of how the human mind works. You don't have to have attention deficit disorder to have an active, multitasking brain. As you write, additional, modifying, or clarifying ideas will arrive unexpectedly, and the dash is ready to help you hand them off to your reader.

The "Aside" Dash

In the theater occasionally an actor will turn to the audience and comment on the scene onstage. In *Hamlet,* for example, Polonius comments on Hamlet's madness:

HAM. . . . for yourself, sir, shall grow old as I am, if like a crab you could go backward.

POL. [Aside.] Though this be madness, yet there is method in't. Will you walk out of the air, my lord?

HAM. Into my grave.

POL. Indeed that is out of the air. [Aside.] How pregnant sometimes his replies are! (II.ii.193–211)

These asides are the dramatic equivalent of the dash. If a writer wants to break his sentence to make a side comment—I'm making one now—he uses a dash to set it off.

> *I did not remember our mother, but Jem did—he would tell me about her sometimes—and he went livid when Mrs. Dubose shot us this message.*
>
> —HARPER LEE,
> *To Kill a Mockingbird*

> *Suddenly in the wood beyond The Water a flame leapt up—probably somebody lighting a wood fire—and he thought of plundering dragons settling on his quiet Hill and kindling it all to flames.*
>
> —J.R.R. TOLKIEN,
> *The Hobbit*

The Defining Dash

You can also use a dash to give a quick definition of a word or phrase:

> Part of a teacher's training today should include a crash course in online slang. A low-tech teacher who encounters "lol"—laugh out loud—in a student's paper might embarrass himself by marking the phrase as wrong.

The Example Dash

The dash is a handy tool for giving an example:

> The most popular rides at Magic Mountain—Viper, Batman, and Superman—are best experienced before lunch, when crowds are thin and stomachs empty.

> The topic for our most recent composition in English class was bizarre animal behaviors—a dog who licks his reflection in the mirror, a cat who watches television, a bird who sings the blues.

When the interrupting thought comes in the middle of the sentence, use two dashes to set it off; when it comes at the end, introduce it with a dash and end it with a period, a question mark, or an exclamation point.

The Emphatic Dash

At times you'll want to express something emphatically—that is, you want to drive it into the reader's mind for good. The versatile dash can help. In *Rascal,* Sterling North's memoir about his unforgettable childhood companion, the author recalls his sadness over the loss of his mother:

> *It seemed to me unfair that she could not have lived to see the pets I was raising—Rascal especially.*

Because Rascal is the star of Sterling's boyhood, he wants to single him out as the most important thing in his life that he would have liked to share with his mother. He makes this point by putting Rascal at the end of the sentence and introducing him with a dash.

J. K. Rowling uses the emphatic dash to build suspense in *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*:

Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat—something alive!

The Dialogue Dash

In life, people are always interrupting each other. Just listen to a classroom or schoolyard conversation, and you'll hear one person's speech cut off by another's.

"Hey, Mr. Frank, did you read my—"

"Here's my homework, Mr. Frank. I'm sorry it's—"

"Mr. Frank, could you read my poem and tell me if it's—"

"Hey, I was talking to him first."

In literature, characters often interrupt each other too. Watch as Milo gets the words snatched right out of this mouth in *The Phantom Tollbooth:*

"We're looking for a place to spend the night."
"It's not yours to spend," the bird shrieked again, and followed it with the same horrible laugh.
"That doesn't make any sense, you see—" he started to explain.
"Dollars or cents, it's still not yours to spend," the bird replied haughtily.
"But I didn't mean—" insisted Milo.
"Of course you're mean," interrupted the bird.

The Everpresent Wordsnatcher repeatedly interrupts Milo, and Norton Juster marks the rudeness with a dash.

If all the conversations in the world were punctuated the way they are written out on the page, there would be a barrage of flying dashes knocking everybody down—and knocking some

politeness into us all. When your characters in a story are speaking, use the dash when one cuts another off. But when your friends are speaking, use a little courtesy and let them finish.

( ) (parentheses)

For a very brief interruption (and to vary the dash), try using parentheses. Parentheses are like drawers inside a sentence. They store incidental information, quick asides, and expressions:

Langston Hughes (1902–68) was a prominent poet of the Harlem Renaissance.

We arrived late to the party (since there was an accident on the highway).

On July 17, 1963, my mother gave birth to a (thank God) healthy baby boy.

Punctuating sentences that contain parentheses can be tricky. But a little common sense clears things up. As a general rule, all punctuation goes outside the closing parenthesis:

WRONG: *We used to celebrate our birthdays at a restaurant called the Swiss Echo (which is out of business now.)*

RIGHT: *We used to celebrate our birthdays at a restaurant called the Swiss Echo (which is out of business now).*

The period belongs on the outside because it has to stop the whole sentence, not just the part in parentheses. But suppose the phrase inside your parentheses ends on a question mark or exclamation point. Then you have punctuate on the inside to avoid changing the meaning:

WRONG: *Anyone who has ever bought a lottery ticket (and who hasn't) knows that the chances of winning are slim.*

RIGHT: *Anyone who has ever bought a lottery ticket (and who hasn't?) knows that the chances of winning are slim.*

Sometimes, to give special emphasis, you'll write a standalone sentence and enclose it in parentheses. In this case, since the whole sentence is a parenthetical, put the period on the inside, as Anne Lamott does in this sentence from her excellent book on writing, *Bird by Bird*:

> *We were all so thrilled and proud, and this girl seemed to think I had the coolest possible father: a writer. (Her father sold cars.)*

When you aren't certain whether to use a dash or a pair of parentheses, follow this general rule: if it's something you want your reader to know right away—and it's worth interrupting the sentence for—use a dash; if it can wait until later (or you want a gentler break in the sentence), use parentheses.

- (hyphen)

A hyphen is like a joiner in a Hot Wheels set. Instead of connecting two pieces of track, it connects two or more words to make a compound:

mother-in-law	well-known
twenty-second	president-elect
self-restraint	knight-at-arms

Knowing when to hyphenate a compound can be tricky. Is it *dog-house* or *doghouse, back-pack* or *backpack, cross-eyed* or *crosseyed, fire fighter or fire-fighter*? Some compounds are written as two words; others are run together. There are so many rules about compounds—and so many exceptions to these rules—that it's best to consult a dictionary, as I did to discover it's *doghouse, backpack,* and *boardinghouse,* but *cross-eyed* and *firefighter* (no hyphen here).

The hyphen also holds on to parts of a word that must be broken at the end of a line. When you come to the end of a line in the middle of a word, be sure to divide it between syllables and double consonants or before the suffix, but never leave a single letter stranded:

WRONG:	hyp-hen	courage-ous
RIGHT:	hy-phen	coura-geous
WRONG:	profess-or	mocc-asin
RIGHT:	profes-sor	moc-casin

WRONG:	a-bout	nois-y	
RIGHT:	about	noisy	(don't divide these)

' (apostrophe)

Being a teacher is like being a celebrity on a small scale. As captain of the classroom, you enjoy an instant mystique among the students. They observe you; they discuss you; they speculate about you. And sometime in the third week, when they're used to you, they start to ask questions.

"Mr. Frank, how'd you get that scar on your neck?"

"Mr. Frank, where'd you go to college?"

"Mr. Frank, are you married?"

"What's your first name, Mr. Frank?"

"How old are you?"

The truth about a first-year teacher is so scarce, he gets to invent it any way he wants.

"I got that scar saving a little kid from a coyote."

"I went to Cambridge University. I have two Ph.D.'s, one in astrophysics and the other in Renaissance literature. I've also got a black belt in kung fu."

"I'm not married, but it's against school policy for me to date your mom."

"My first name is Mister."

"I'm so old I can't remember my date of birth."

This last question—about my age—I haven't always answered so cleverly. Once I told a student, "I'm so old I used to play Pac-Man in the dorms at college."

"What's Pac-Man?"

"A video game where a little guy who looks like an apostrophe goes around eating dots."

"Never heard of it. You must be really old."

I *am* getting old if my video game references go back that far. (Actually, they go back to Pong.) Still, Pac-Man has a value that outlasts its primitive technology: it continues to be the perfect icon for when to use an apostrophe.

The apostrophe is a hungry little devil, like the Pac-Man guy (and his friend, Ms. Pac-Man). He has a strong appetite for condensing things, and so he goes around gobbling up expendable letters in order to make contractions. When Apostrophe Pac-Man sees *they are,* he gobbles up the *a* to make *they're.* When he sees *it is,* he swallows the second *i* and spits out *it's,* a swifter alternative for a more casual style. (Note: ***Never*** write *it's* for the possessive form; ***always*** spell it ***its—no apostrophe***—as in *the dog devoured* ***its*** *bone.*) He gulps four letters to change *they would* to *they'd,* but his bottomless stomach never seems to be sated. *He will* becomes *he'll. Will not* becomes *won't. Have not* shrinks to *haven't.*

Apostrophe Pac-Man will never eat an *s,* though. To him, that would be the equivalent of cannibalism. He and the *s* are teammates, brothers almost, as they join forces to show possession.

To form the possessive of a singular noun, add *'s*:

The ark belongs to Noah. It's Noah's ark.
The wife of Sam is Allegra. Allegra is Sam's wife.

If the singular noun ends in *s*, you still add *'s*:

Charles's pen
Ross's girlfriend
Dickens's London

The only exceptions to this rule are the names *Moses* and *Jesus* or Greek names of more than one syllable ending in *s*. Moses' task, then, was to deliver the Ten Commandments, and Jesus' teachings were that we should follow them.

Plural nouns are less confusing. If they end in *s*, just add an apostrophe. If they don't end in *s*, add *'s*.

The dogs' barking kept us up for hours.
The Joneses' marriage lasted twenty-eight days.
The men's room is located next to the women's room.

The letter *s* is one of the most important letters of the alphabet. It begins some of my favorite names. But it has an even more important task that clearly makes it the most fertile consonant of the twenty-one: it forms plurals. The trouble is, some writers—and not only young ones—have developed a bad habit of throwing apostrophes at every *s* they see, just because they think the two always go hand in hand.

They don't.

An *s* (*es* after *X, ch, sh,* and *ss*) is sufficient to make a regular noun plural. The only time you should form a plural with *'s* is for symbols, abbreviations with periods in them, words-as-words, or

letters-as-letters. In these cases it would be confusing to use the *s* alone:

CLEAR WITH S ALONE	NEEDS APOSTROPHE
In our AP English class, there were three 5s on the exam.	Six of our students went on to earn M.A.'s in literature.
The 1920s was a decade of decadence.	How many *x*'s are there in *Xerox*?
	Johnny was disappointed when he saw that his cuss words had been replaced by *'s, *!*'s, and *$*'s.
	Mr. Frank pointed out that I had used five *then*'s in one paragraph.

Sometimes Apostrophe Pac-Man gets so hungry, he can eat a century or more. Bill Clinton was elected president in 1992, but the date is often written as '92. Apostrophe Pac-Man gobbled up the 19. World War II lasted six years, from '39 to '45. The first man landed on the moon in '69, and somebody I know was born in '63.

The Apostrophe of Dialect

The apostrophe has always been the punctuation mark of dialect, or the speech patterns of a specific region. Mark Twain used it to capture the :Mississippi dialect of his characters in *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*:

"Oh, Tom, I reckon we're goners. I reckon there ain't no mistake 'bout where I'll go to. I been so wicked."
"Dad, fetch it! This comes of playing hookey and doing everything a feller's told not to do. I might a been good, like Sid, if I'd a tried—but not, I wouldn't, of course. But if ever I get off this time, I lay I'll just waller in Sunday-schools!" And Tom began to snuffle a little.
"You bad!" and Huckleberry began to snuffle too. "Consound it, Tom Sawyer, you're just old pie, 'longside o' what I am."

Charles Dickens used the apostrophe to render the particular speech patterns of the British working class. In *Great Expectations* the Convict ambushes Pip with, among other things, the apostrophe of dialect: "Who d'ye live with—supposin' you're kindly let to live, which I han't made up my mind about?" Joe Gargery doesn't just drop his *g*'s; he drops his *h*'s too, referring to Miss Havisham as "Miss 'Avisham." In *David Copperfield* Barkis is "willin'," and Ham calls David "Mas'r Davy."

The first step to becoming a good writer is being a good listener. Twain and Dickens heard their characters speaking, but the power of their writing is that we can hear them too. By dropping *g*'s, *h*'s, and even whole sections of words, they used the apostrophe of dialect to preserve a piece of real life on the page.

" " (quotation marks)

Quotation marks are shaped like ears. If they were therapists, their client schedules would be full. They'd make excellent parents, successful negotiators, fine watchdogs, and fair judges. They have the one quality essential for playing all of these roles: they're good listeners.

When you speak, words float out of your mouth escorted by quotation marks, which guide them from your lips to someone else's ears.

"Mr. Frank," I can hear you saying, "you're crazy. There aren't any quotation marks coming out of my mouth."

I say, "Look again. Go stand in front of a mirror and talk to yourself. Your spoken words will appear on the glass, surrounded by quotation marks."

Okay, fine. You didn't see them in the bathroom mirror. Then look in a book. Every time a character speaks, what do you see on either side of the dialogue? Quotation marks. Their purpose is to hold spoken words and to alert the reader to a change from narration to dialogue:

> *"What in the world ye fixin' to do, Jack?"*
> *"Well, Daddy," says Jack, "just as soon as I can find a place to ketch a hold, I'm a-goin' to take the creek back up there closer to the house to where your old woman can get her water everwhen she wants it."*

> *"Oh, no, Jack! Not take the creek back. Hit'll ruin my cornfield. And besides that, my old lady's gettin' sort-a shaky on her feet; she might fall in and get drownded."*
>
> —RICHARD CHASE,
> *The Jack Tales*

Notice how the author has enclosed the exact spoken words of the characters in quotation marks. Notice also that the dialogue is introduced by a comma so that the reader will be alerted to a change in speaker. In your own writing, remember to put your P (punctuation) before Q (quotation)—unless, that is, your P changes the meaning of your Q:

WRONG: *Joe said "I see the stars winking at night".*
RIGHT: *Joe said, "I see the stars winking at night."*

The comma introducing Joe's quote comes before the quotation mark, as does the period ending it. But if a punctuation mark would change the meaning of the sentence, then it belongs *outside* the quotation marks.

WRONG: *Did Joe say, "I see the stars winking at night?"*
RIGHT: *Did Joe say, "I see the stars winking at night"?*

When it comes to titles, use quotation marks around titles that don't weigh too much, such as those for short stories, poems, newspaper and magazine articles, and songs. Heavier items such as books, magazines, and newspapers need some-

thing stronger to support them. For these titles we use the underline, which acts like a shelf to hold them up, or *italics,* which shoulders them:

Quoted Titles	*Underlined Titles (or in italics)*
"The Lottery" by Shirley Jackson	Moby-Dick by Melville (or *Moby-Dick*)
"Imagine" by John Lennon	The Encyclopedia of American Music
"Why Johnny Can't Read"	Time

Quotation marks don't like to be crowded. Every time you change speakers, you should change paragraphs too:

WRONG: *"Unhand that damsel in distress!" commanded Quixote. "Make me, you cardboard-wearing, half-dead horse-riding, long-word-using wimp!" said the salesman, clutching a life-sized Julia Roberts doll.*

RIGHT: *"Unhand that damsel in distress!" commanded Quixote.*

"Make me, you cardboard-wearing, half-dead horse-riding, long-word-using wimp!" said the salesman, clutching a life-sized Julia Roberts doll.

—FROM A STUDENT'S STORY ABOUT DON QUIXOTE IN OUR TIME

Giving each new speaker his or her own paragraph is a nice way to share the stage. We all like to be heard when we speak, and our characters are no different. A new paragraph signals the reader that you are moving on to a new speaker. That way nobody gets ignored.

? (question mark)

Tall, curvaceous, curious, the question mark ends a sentence in the most provocative way possible: by forming a question.

Even her shape is whimsical. Curling up from a period like a genie from its bottle, she hovers slightly above the line, a balloon just beyond our reach. Unlike the genie, though, she doesn't grant our wishes; instead, she piques our curiosity, lures us into a *quest* for knowledge.

Socrates understood the power of a question. Instead of telling his students information, he would ask them a series of questions and coax them into thinking for themselves. His students felt either very stupid (if they never got the right answer) or very smug (if they often did). I've always thought the Socratic method works best when there is no right answer, just a series of questions that lead to more questions like doors in a maze. The point isn't how much you know but how much you *want* to know. Ask yourself, *What if? How? Who? When? Where? Why?* And watch where the questions take you.

Human progress is the result of asking questions. Copernicus asked questions about the night sky and concluded that human beings aren't the center of the universe after all. Newton

wondered why an apple clunked him on the head and discovered that gravity was weighing it down. Darwin pondered the differences among finches from one Galápagos island to the next; his questions led to the theory of evolution. And the questions Bill Gates asked about how people might use a personal computer led to the word-processing program I'm using right now. From Socrates to Microsoft, the question mark has led the way.

Down with Up-talk!

In recent years there has been a tendency to overuse the question mark, especially in speech. It's as though a large portion of the human population had swallowed a bar of soap in the shape of a question mark, so that when we speak, tiny interrogative bubbles come floating out of our mouths after everything we say. This phenomenon, known as up-talk, is one of the most widespread speech impediments of our time, and it's causing the question mark to have a nervous breakdown.

Question marks belong at the end of a question, not a statement? It's like, you know, they really weren't designed to be used so much? I mean, we're killing their mystery? And worse, we're making ourselves seem all unsure? Up-talk is, like, what little kids do when they're trying to get a grown-up's attention? To see if the grown-up is listening? But it's better to get someone's attention by being bold and confident instead of all tentative?

Up-talk puts you down. If everything you say sounds like a question, who's going to take you seriously? A question mark at the end of a command makes it a plea, at the end of an emotion makes it a pity, and at the end of an idea makes it a dud. Imagine a policeman shouting after a gunman, "Stop or I'll shoot?"

Imagine Jonas Salk addressing the World Health Organization by saying, "I've found a vaccine? For polio?" And imagine yourself turning to your boyfriend or girlfriend after a particularly romantic evening and saying, "I love you?"

It's likely to be your last date.

! (exclamation point)

Cut out all those exclamation marks. An exclamation mark is like laughing at your own joke.

—F. SCOTT FITZGERALD

Do you know any people who are just a little bit loud? It could be that they're feeling up when you're feeling down, or that they have a constant flow of caffeine in their bloodstream, or that nobody listens to them so they feel compelled to shout. We've all encountered these eardrum-beaters at one time or another. We wince, or we flee, or we plug our ears. Sometimes, out of politeness, we listen and nod. Most of the time we find ourselves wishing for a magic remote control that would mute them.

The exclamation point is like these high-decibel people. Tall, strident, and stiff, it lacks the elegance of the question mark or the confidence of the period. Tentative writers use it to hide their fear, lazy ones to create the missing emotion in a sentence. Greeting card writers use it on Valentine's Day to declare, "I LOVE YOU!!!!!" Department stores use it on signs announcing a SALE!!!

While an undergrad at UC Berkeley, I used to walk through Sproul Plaza with a friend I'll call Phil. Phil was always bursting with nervous energy and enthusiasm, like a windup toy that never winds down. I used to enjoy walking with him early in the morning because his presence was a jolt of electricity that helped wake me for my nine o'clock class.

At the same time Phil was an embarrassment. Exclamation points flew out of his mouth like arrows. Their target was usually someone he wanted to impress, one of his teachers or a girl in his dorm. "Hey, Professor! Great lecture yesterday! I'll see you at office hours!" The dazed and blinking professor would look around, but he would have needed binoculars to bridge the gap of three hundred yards from Phil's mouth to his own ear.

"Vanessa! Over here! It's me, Phil!" The attractive but discreet Vanessa would try to dodge the dart, but Phil would just increase the volume of his attack. "You look terrific today!!!"

After ten minutes of Phil's cross-campus salutations, I would be wide awake. The only trouble was that by the time I sat down to hear a lecture, I was completely deaf. Phil and his exclamation points became too much for me, so to get myself going in the morning, I switched from his company to a cappuccino. Don't get me wrong. I like enthusiasm—in moderation. In writing, as in speaking, the exclamation point is best used sparingly and in the right context.

It is most appropriate in dialogue. If a fire breaks out in a story you're writing, by all means have a character shout, "FIRE!" If someone is moved by the sight of fresh snow on a red barn, you can express his awe with an exclamation point:

"Look at that!" If your protagonist wins the lottery, "Hooray *period*" is a bit tame. Let her erupt, "Hooray!" But no matter how much she won, a single exclamation point will do. Leave the doubles and the triples to the managers at Macy's.

A good rule of thumb is that the exclamation point is the written equivalent of passion. Where you would raise your voice, raise an exclamation mark. But if you can be persuasive, romantic, enthusiastic, or upset without yelling, then let your words speak for themselves.

Now that we've learned to stop picking on the Puncts, I think we can avert a strike. After all . . .

A punctuation strike would be worse than an air traffic controllers' strike, a janitors' strike, and a nurses' strike combined. Imagine if all our sentences were unmarked and all our thoughts allowed to spill willy-nilly onto the page. How would you know when one sentence ended and the next began? How would your reader be able to find—let alone board—your train of thought? Our sentences would no longer communicate; they would confuse. The result: a meltdown in communication, a nervous breakdown among all human beings. Meanwhile, the eleven marks of punctuation (twelve if you count the ellipsis) would be picketing in the margins of our newspapers, books, and essays: "Puncts on strike! Puncts on strike!" What a sad day for humanity!