

CHAPTER EIGHT

Better Punctuation

8



TEN THINGS YOU NEED TO KNOW EVEN IF YOU DON'T READ THIS CHAPTER

- 1.** If punctuation is a problem for you, welcome to the club. Most of us, including yours truly, struggle with it, too.
- 2.** Instead of using a reference book to learn how to punctuate, you'll be better off using real books—and your own brain.
- 3.** Don't follow rules mindlessly. As Pulitzer Prize-winning writer Donald Murray suggests, we're better off when we "...follow language toward meaning, always seeking to understand what is appearing on the page...."
- 4.** To figure out if something is punctuated effectively, ask yourself four questions: How does it look? How does it feel? How does it sound? How does it mean?
- 5.** When your writing changes, your punctuation may have to change with it. So if you learn to punctuate one way at one time in your life, you may have to make adjustments down the road.
- 6.** To punctuate well, it helps to read well. Specifically, it helps to read with expression, even when you're reading silently.
- 7.** To double-check your punctuation, read your writing out loud or have someone else read it to you.
- 8.** One thing that makes learning punctuation hard is that different publications apply the rules slightly differently.
- 9.** In general, writers use less punctuation nowadays than they did a generation or two ago. This is especially true of commas.
- 10.** The best way to get better at punctuation is to ask more experienced people to help you figure out which marks you're using well and which ones you need to use more effectively.

DO RULES RULE?

Many people have problems with punctuation. Regular people have problems because they feel that they never learned the rules well in school. Writers have problems because they feel the rules don't always apply to them. Editors have problems (even though they know the rules) because the publishers they work for have additional rules of their own. And publishers have problems because they can't get the regular people, the writers, and the editors to follow their rules consistently.

So if punctuation is a problem for you, relax—you're in great company.

Because punctuation is so problematic, and even people who know the rules have problems applying them, I think it makes more sense to talk about how punctuation works in real books rather than in rule books. In fact, I think rule books might be why so many of us have so many problems with punctuation in the first place.



Miss Margot says

Because I majored in journalism, I have an entire shelf of rule books. Guess how many of them I use? None. Well, one, maybe twice a year.



THINKING RULES

So how are we going to punctuate our writing if we don't follow rules? We're going to take the advice of Pulitzer Prize-winning writer and writing coach, Donald Murray:

The writer should not follow rules, but follow language toward meaning, always seeking to understand what is appearing on the page, to see it clearly, to evaluate it clearly, for clear thinking will produce clear writing.

Rather than memorizing rules, and then relying on them to tell us whether our writing is right, we're going to rely on our brains and evaluate our writing for ourselves. We're going to read our writing carefully, ask ourselves what we think it means, and think clearly about whether or not it will mean the same thing to our readers.

Any time you want, you can put this chapter down and grab a rule book. There's certainly no shortage of them, that's for sure. I think I have twelve. And I do look at them when I'm curious about something. But I don't use them when I write. When I write, I take Mr. Murray's advice, and instead of following rules I follow language toward meaning.

I also follow Mr. Murray's advice when I teach writing. That's why I'm more inclined to rely on real books than rule books when I want students to learn something new. As we read in class, we look closely at how writers and publishers punctuate their work. And when we see something that confuses us, we don't ask, "What is the rule?" we ask "What does it mean?" By looking at all the different ways punctuation is used, we develop the rules ourselves. Occasionally, when we're curious about something in particular, we use a rule book to look it up. But we always come back to real books—and real writing—to complete our understanding of how rules are applied.

Reading is all about getting meaning from text. But meaning isn't created on the page, it's created in the minds of our readers. And because the rules of writing aren't always in our readers' minds, we can't count on rules to help us communicate effectively. Readers will be using their brains to figure out what we're trying to say. So we're better off using our brains to say it as well as we can.

Let me be clear: rule books are useful references. Every writer should own several and consult them when they have specific questions. But rule books are hard to learn from because their rules are numerous and often difficult to understand. So why not supplement our rule books with the real books we read every day? We might discover unusual

things from time to time, even things that break the rules. But we'll also discover what writing really is—communication between a writer sharing ideas through language and a reader following language toward meaning.

MEANING RULES

Since most of us are trained in school to follow the rules approach to punctuation, we might not know how to go about it any other way. What's all this “clear thinking” we're supposed to do? And what could be clearer than a rule?

Take a look at this sentence from *Eddie Takes Off*:

He felt the first blow on his back causing him to stumble and drop his bag which was promptly kicked into the bushes by another of the three.

Now compare that one with this one:

He felt the first blow on his back, causing him to stumble and drop his bag, which was promptly kicked into the bushes by another of the three.

Notice the difference? The top one has no commas, the bottom one has two. Which one is correct? What's the rule about commas? Hold on a second, I'll get one of my twelve rule books. Heck, maybe I'll get 'em all!

And that's the problem: When we punctuate by rule, we stop following language toward meaning and we start following a rule book—or twelve.

So instead of asking questions like “Which one is correct?” or “What's the rule about commas?” let's try questions like these:

- **How does it look?** At first glance, both sentences look fine to me. What I notice as I look more closely, however, is that in the version with the commas it's easier to see the three-part structure of the sentence. Without the commas, I can't tell until reading through it

what the structure is. So I'm thinking that a reader might find the commas helpful if he or she is not used to reading sentences that are so long.

- **How does it sound?** Both sentences sound good to my ear. But when I read the first one, I find that I move along just a bit faster. That makes sense because the commas in the second sentence cue me to slow down just a bit at the end of each part.
- **How does it feel?** The first sentence feels slightly better to me. Without the commas, it reads like a single uninterrupted event. I also notice that it's a surprise action sequence. Apparently, our hero, the hapless Eddie, has suffered a sneak attack at the hands of evil Alex and his high school henchmen. It happens fast and I think that's why I want it to feel fast as I read it. The second sentence with the commas moves too slowly for me. It feels like three distinct slower actions instead one faster action.
- **How does it mean?** (Normally, we say "What does it mean?" but here we want to know how the punctuation affects what the sentence means and how the meaning of the sentence is conveyed to the reader as a result.) Neither approach to punctuation changes the meaning in my opinion. But there's a subtle difference in emphasis. Using the two commas to separate the three parts makes me feel as though they are of equal importance. Because of this, I tend to focus more on the last part where Eddie's bag goes under the bushes. In the sentence without commas, I pay a little more attention to the front of the sentence and come away with a memory of Eddie being pushed from behind. In either case, the difference is so subtle it's probably not worth worrying about.

So which way would I choose? I'd choose the no-comma approach for the reason I gave about wanting the speed of the sentence to match the speed of the action. However, at twenty-eight words, this is a fairly long stretch of language. If my readers weren't used to reading sentences this long, they might have some trouble. I'm thinking of kids as young as maybe third grade. You won't find a lot of twenty-eight-word

sentences in third grade books. And if you do, they'll probably have commas in them. So if I'm writing for young readers, or for anyone who might lose their way in a long sentence, I'll take the two-comma approach.

Not surprisingly, my editor feels differently about this than I do. Here's what she has to say: "While the first sentence in your example is technically correct, most writers would choose the second sentence, simply because you can read it more easily and follow the action more clearly without getting mixed up. Most editors would say the two commas are necessary, because the second phrase is dependent on (or describes) the first clause, and the third phrase is dependent on (or describes) the second phrase."

Though I haven't looked it up, I'll bet my editor is right about the rules governing the use of commas in sentences with dependent phrases. And if you understand the concept of dependency in grammar, you may like that explanation, too. But I'm not sure she's right about most writers preferring the sentence with the two commas. In the first case, we can look in a rule book. In the second, we'd have to ask a lot of writers to know for sure. I asked five of my writer friends. Three liked the no-comma sentence, one liked the two-comma sentence, and one said that issues like this are just silly and that they don't matter to him at all.

One thing's for sure: When it comes to questions of punctuation, it seems like everyone has an answer—and that everyone is certain their answer is correct. Personally, I think it's great to have differences of opinion like these as long as everyone agrees that these are opinions, and that opinions don't become facts just because people repeat them over and over in a loud voice and bang their fist on the table. There aren't always clear right and wrong answers in the world of punctuation, especially when commas are involved. Some people think we have to play by the rules; others think rules were made to be broken. As for

me, I think we all learn more, and get along better, when we follow language toward meaning, and leave the rules to the folks who write the rule books.

WHEW! THIS IS EXHAUSTING!

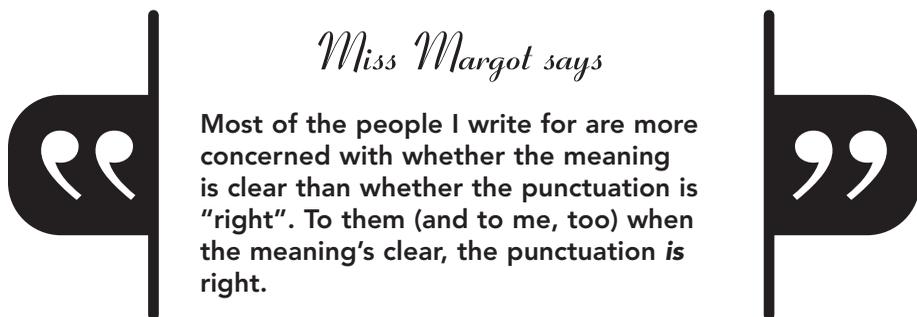
That was a lot of thinking for a couple of commas. If it's like that for every sentence we write, maybe a rule book's not a bad idea. But it's not like that for every sentence we write. In this particular case, we just solved a huge problem, one that is going to come up again and again for the rest of our writing lives.

The problem was this: Should we use two commas to separate the parts of a three-part sentence? And now we have our answer: If we want the sentence to feel like it's a single uninterrupted action, leave the commas out. If we want to slow our readers down, emphasize the three parts individually, or if we feel our readers might get lost along the way, use the two commas.

This won't cover every three-part sentence; some will require commas for other reasons. But it's a useful bit of knowledge that we'll be able to apply in many future writing situations.

Rather than following the words in a rule book, we followed the words on the page. We asked four important questions, and in the process, we learned something about commas—and about reading and readers and pacing within a sentence, as well as the relationship of punctuation to meaning, and probably several other things—that we can use for the rest of our lives. We can use our four questions for the rest of our lives, too. That's another reason why this way of doing things is probably easier than the rule book way. I know I can't remember a thousand rules. But it's easy to remember four questions.

So, yes, at any given moment, the “follow language toward meaning” approach to punctuation is harder than using a rule book. But if you're planning to write for the rest of your life, it's probably more efficient in the long run.



Miss Margot says

Most of the people I write for are more concerned with whether the meaning is clear than whether the punctuation is "right". To them (and to me, too) when the meaning's clear, the punctuation *is* right.

ORGANIZING OUR STUDY

In addition to setting aside the rule book, we might as well set aside the traditional notion of studying punctuation marks one at a time. The problem, for example, in studying a chapter on commas from your English book is that commas don't exist by themselves. They're also closely related to dashes and parentheses. Learning about commas in isolation won't prepare us very well for real-world writing. But if we study them along with the other marks of punctuation that are used inside sentences to separate the parts of an idea, we'll get a truer picture of how they work, and that will make them easier to understand.

For our purposes in this chapter, I'd like to focus on the five most important punctuation groups:

- **End-of-sentence punctuation that shows where ideas start and stop.** The capital letter that begins every sentence. The period, question mark, or exclamation mark at the end. And one unusual end mark that you've probably never heard of.
- **Middle-of-sentence punctuation that shows where parts of ideas start and stop.** The comma, of course, along with the other marks that help break sentences into parts: the dash, parentheses, the colon, the semicolon, and the mark that everyone loves to use—and overuse—the ellipsis.

- **Capitalization that indicates important words.** The basic rule is easy to remember but hard to apply: Capitalize names, places, and things that are one of a kind. But there are so many one-of-a-kind things that it's impossible to keep track of them. We'll see what we can do to sort this out.
- **Paragraphs that group related ideas together.** Like capitalization, the rules of paragraphing are simple. But figuring out how to paragraph is not. Grouping sentences together into paragraphs requires careful reading. And we can learn a lot by studying the way other writers paragraph their writing.
- **Dialog punctuation that indicates who is speaking and what is being said.** This involves several different marks: quotation marks, commas, and all the end-of-sentence marks. Also, everything has to be coordinated in just the right way. Punctuating dialog is probably the most complicated punctuation we can attempt.

Obviously, it takes time and effort to learn how to punctuate effectively. You may even have to learn things more than once. As you grow in your writing, your writing will change. And when your writing changes, your punctuation may have to change with it. That means that if you learn to punctuate one way at one time in your life, you may have to learn to punctuate slightly differently down the road. Learning to use punctuation effectively requires an on-going effort, one that develops over time as your writing develops.

This is another reason why focusing on meaning rather than on rules is a better way to learn. Every time your writing changes, the rules seem harder to follow. But to the writer who follows language toward meaning, the rules are always the same: read your writing closely, ask the four questions, analyze the work of other writers, and make decisions based on how you want your writing to be understood by your readers.



YOUR CHECKLIST FOR BETTER PUNCTUATION

To fix your own punctuation, you almost have to pretend that the writing belongs to someone else. And the best way to do that is to let your writing sit for a while—even a few days—before you try to edit it.

Effective punctuation involves using:

End-of-sentence punctuation that shows where ideas start and stop. Have you used capital letters and periods to show where your ideas begin and end? Have you remembered to put question marks at the ends of questions? Have you used exclamation marks sparingly, for excited utterances, only when you absolutely need them, and never more than one at a time?

Middle-of-sentence punctuation that shows where parts of ideas start and stop. Do you use commas to show where parts of sentences begin and end? Do you use dashes to emphasize in-between and add-on parts? Do you use parentheses to de-emphasize in-between and add-on parts? Do you use colons like an equals sign to show that one part of a sentence is an introduction to or description of another part? Do you use ellipses to show that part of a sentence is missing?

Capitalization that indicates important words. Have you capitalized the names of people, places, and things that are one-of-a-kind? Have you capitalized the word “I”? Have you capitalized the first word of each sentence? Have you capitalized first, last, and important words in titles?

Paragraphs that group related ideas together. Is your piece written in paragraphs? Have you used paragraphs to group related ideas? Have you remembered to indent if you’re using traditional indented paragraphing, or to skip a line if you’re using block paragraphing?

Dialog punctuation that indicates who is speaking and what is being said. Have you put quotation marks around only those words that are actually spoken? Have you put ending punctuation that goes with quoted words inside the final quotation marks? Have you started a new paragraph for each new speaker?

Yes, there are a lot of questions here. But I don't expect you to be able to answer all of them at once. Concentrate on one group at a time. Start at the top with end-of-sentence punctuation and get that down first. Then move on. Don't feel that you have to learn all of this immediately. You've got plenty of time over the rest of your writing life to become a proficient punctuator.

PUNCTUATION READING

Why is punctuation so hard to learn? Because it's complicated and controversial, and the way we teach it in school often makes it confusing as well. We tend to make three mistakes when introduce kids to punctuation: (1) we focus on rules rather than on meaning; (2) we teach the marks in isolation rather than in the context of how writers use them; and (3) we teach punctuation with textbooks instead of with the real books we read every day. We've already dealt with the first two problems. Now we're going to tackle the third.

You probably remember this paragraph from the previous chapter. Give it a quick read once again:

On a dark December night in 1776, as he led a barefoot brigade of ragged revolutionaries across the icy Delaware River, George Washington said, "Shift your fat behind, Harry. But slowly or you'll swamp the darn boat." He was talking to General Henry Knox (they called him "Ox" for short). There's a painting of George Washington where he's standing up in a boat scanning the riverbank for Redcoats. I always thought he just wanted a good view. But I guess the reason he was standing was because he didn't have a place to sit down.

Now read this:

[NEW PARAGRAPH] [CAPITAL] on a dark [CAPITAL] december night in 1776 [COMMA] as he led a barefoot brigade of ragged revolutionaries across the icy [CAPITAL] delaware [CAPITAL] river [COMMA] [CAPITAL] george [CAPITAL] washington said [COMMA] [QUOTE] [CAPITAL] shift your fat behind [COMMA] [CAPITAL] har [HYPHEN] ry [PERIOD] [CAPITAL] but slowly or you [APOSTROPHE]

ll swamp the darn boat [PERIOD] [QUOTE] [CAPITAL] he was talk
[HYPHEN] ing to [CAPITAL] general [CAPITAL] henry [CAPITAL] knox
[PARENTHESIS] they called him [QUOTE] [CAPITAL] ox [QUOTE] for short
[PARENTHESIS] [PERIOD] [CAPITAL] there [APOSTROPHE] s a painting
of [CAPITAL] george [CAPITAL] washington where he [APOSTROPHE]
s stand [HYPHEN] ing up in a boat scanning the riverbank for
[CAPITAL] redcoats [PERIOD] [CAPITAL] i al [HYPHEN] ways thought he
just wanted a good view [PERIOD] [CAPITAL] but [CAPITAL] i guess the
reason he was standing was because he didn [APOSTROPHE] t have
a place to sit down [PERIOD] [END OF PARAGRAPH]

Pretty weird, huh? But it's also pretty interesting, if you ask me. This is what reading is really like. Even though we don't say the punctuation marks out loud, or even quietly in our heads, we do read over these things every time we read. But we don't pay much attention to them, and that's where we miss some valuable learning.

For example, in that single ninety-five-word paragraph, we encountered:

- **Forty-eight marks of punctuation.** And that doesn't include other conventions like the correct spellings of ninety-five words and the correct use of ninety-four spaces.
- **Ten different kinds of punctuation marks.** New paragraph, indent, capital, comma, quote, hyphen, period, apostrophe, parenthesis, and end of paragraph.
- **Fifteen uses of punctuation.** Indent for new paragraph. Period at the end of a sentence. Capital at the beginning of sentence. Capital for a name. Capital for something that is one-of-a-kind. Capital for the word "I". Capital for a personal title. Capital for the name of a month. Parentheses for an aside. Quotation marks for dialog. Quotation marks for a nickname. Comma to separate parts of a sentence. Comma to introduce a quotation. Apostrophe for a contraction. Hyphen to break a word at a line ending.

Is punctuation reading a good way to read? Hardly. It's very slow, and it's difficult to understand what you're reading. But it's a great way to learn about punctuation. It helps you learn the names of all the marks, and it helps you see how real writers use them in real writing.

PUNCTUATION READING: A LITTLE PRACTICE GOES A LONG WAY

When I teach punctuation reading in school, we try to practice it several days a week. But we only practice for a few minutes each day. Often we just read a single paragraph like we did in this chapter. For a couple of weeks, we concentrate on catching all the marks as we read. But we don't spend much energy thinking about why they're there. Then, when we get so good at reading punctuation that we can do it without thinking too much, we start trying to figure out how writers use it. So the next time you sit down with a book, spend the first two or three minutes doing a little punctuation reading. You might be surprised at what you notice.



Miss Margot says

I'm used to reading my writing out loud, but I'd never include the punctuation. When Mr. Peha first asked me to do it, I felt dumb. Then I started laughing. Now I think it's fun. I bet you will, too.



PUNCTUATION INQUIRY

Punctuation reading helps us learn the names of the marks and develop a sense for where they're used. But it doesn't tell us why they're used. For that, we have to go to the next exercise: punctuation inquiry. Don't worry, it isn't as serious as it sounds.

Once you've read through a passage and figured out the punctuation, the next thing to do is to figure out why it's there. Don't worry about explaining every single mark. Instead, pick just one mark—ideally one that is used in several different ways—and focus on that.

For example, in this paragraph, we might want to focus on capitalization:

On a dark December night in 1776, as he led a barefoot brigade of ragged revolutionaries across the icy Delaware River, George Washington said, "Shift your fat behind, Harry. But slowly or you'll swamp the darn boat." He was talking to General Henry Knox (they called him "Ox" for short). There's a painting of George Washington where he's standing up in a boat scanning the riverbank for Redcoats. I always thought he just wanted a good view. But I guess the reason he was standing was because he didn't have a place to sit down.

There are several different places where different kinds of words are capitalized. Let's see if we can figure out why:

EXAMPLE	WHY IT'S USED	QUESTIONS/COMMENTS
On...	Beginning of a sentence.	Sometimes I see really big capital letters, way taller than regular size, at the start of a story. What's that about?
December	Name of a month.	
Delaware River	Something that is one-of-a-kind. This is a specific river.	What if there's another Delaware River? Is that still one-of-a-kind?

George Washington	A person's name.	
General	A person's title.	Sometimes I see titles not capitalized. I don't understand how this works.
"Ox"	This is a nickname but I guess it's still a name.	
Redcoats	This is the name of a group of people.	

Even if you can't figure out why a mark is used, just trying to figure it out will help you learn. This is also a good time to go to one of those rule books you've probably got lying around somewhere. If you know the specific mark you want to learn about, and what you want to learn about it, a rule book can be useful.

Punctuation inquiry is just what it says it is: an exercise that involves inquiring into the use of punctuation. It's the questions, not the answers, that are most valuable. That's why the third column in our table is there. As you study punctuation, you'll find many situations where the way a mark is used differs from, or even contradicts, a way you've seen it used before. When that happens, write down your thoughts in the form of a question or a comment, and save it for later.

PUNCTUATION INQUIRY: IT'S ALL IN YOUR HEAD

Most of your teachers would be thrilled if you kept a little punctuation journal and jotted down your thoughts in a three-column table every time every time you practiced punctuation reading. But if you don't want to do that, at least do the inquiry in your head. Find the punctuation you're interested in and start asking questions: Why is there a comma there? Why is that word capitalized? Why did the author start a new paragraph? And so on. You'll be surprised at how many answers come to you when you get in the habit of asking questions.

HOW DO YOU KNOW WHERE THE PERIODS GO?

If everyone knows to put a period at the end of a sentence, why are so many sentences missing their periods? Because even though we know what goes at the end, we often don't know where the end is.

Just about everything involved with sentence punctuation hangs on knowing where the end is. As we write, we give most of our attention to our words. Sometimes, however, they come pouring out so quickly that we push right on past where our sentences should end. When that happens, we have to go back and do a little detective work.

Let's see what we can do to patch up this little stretch of language:

The sun is out today and the birds are singing there are children playing in the yard.

The first thing to do is read the sentence all the way through. We can tell by how confusing it is that there may be more than one sentence here. So let's go back to the beginning and start again, this time stopping as soon as a group of words makes sense:

The sun is out

That makes sense; we could put a period here. But we don't know for sure if that's the end of the sentence, until we look at what's left over:

today and the birds are singing there are children playing in the yard.

That's just as confusing as the sentence we started with. "The sun is out" can't be right. So let's go one word farther:

The sun is out today

This works, too. But, just like last time, we need to check the words on the other side. We can call this approach "move and rock." Many times, when we're trying to split a long string of words into properly punctuated sentences, we have to move through them word by word and then "rock" back and forth over our potential period to make sure we've found the right place. "The sun is out today" sounds great. But when we rock ahead, we're left with this:

and the birds are singing there are children playing in the yard.

A new sentence certainly could begin with "and." Despite what many teachers tell us, there's no rule against it. But as we read the rest again, it doesn't seem like we've found the right spot:

and the birds are singing there are children playing in the yard.

So we need to keep moving ahead, one word at a time, until we find the next potential sentence end:

The sun is out today and (Nope)

The sun is out today and the (Nope)

The sun is out today and the birds (Nope)

The sun is out today and the birds are (Nope)

The sun is out today and the birds are singing (Wait!)

Finally, we've come to something that sounds right: "The sun is out today and the birds are singing." Now, let's rock over to the other side of that period and see if what we have left works, too:

there are children playing in the yard.

That also sounds good. We were fortunate to discover that we had only two sentences in that long string of words. Once we found the end of the first sentence, we were right at the beginning of the second:

The sun is out today and the birds are singing. There are children playing in the yard.

That's perfect.

The "move and rock" strategy may seem a little tedious, but the more you do it, the faster you get. The important thing to remember is this: Just like crossing the street, you have to look both ways to make sure you're safe.

THERE'S GOT TO BE A BETTER WAY

If you don't like the "move and rock" strategy, there's another approach that involves paying close attention to the way we read. As we read over our writing, there are four expressive reading cues we can use to find the ends of our sentences. You know you've come to the end of a sentence when:

- **You come to a full stop.** When we reach the end of a sentence, we're supposed to take a little rest before moving on. If you feel like barreling on through, you might not be ready to pop a period in just yet. But if you're unsure, go back, read it again, and this time slow way down. We can fix a lot of our mistakes just by reading slowly. Keep one thing in mind: This has nothing to do with stopping to take a breath. I don't know why some teachers tell kids to put periods where they need to stop and take a breath.

Even when we read aloud, almost no one takes a breath after each sentence. And when we read silently, we don't breathe with our reading at all.

- **The words make sense.** This may seem obvious but it's not. As we noticed in our "move and rock" example, there can be many places within a sentence where the words seem to make sense. The trick is finding the right place. And sometimes that actually involves reading slightly ahead of ourselves.
- **Your voice slopes down.** There's a nifty thing that happens with the pitch of your voice when you read a sentence. It starts up high and ends down low. In most sentences, your voice will stay near the high level most of the way. Then, right at the end, sometimes in just the last few words, it'll tail off a bit, hitting its lowest point right when you reach the end.
- **Your voice slows down.** Right at the end of a sentence, as your voice slopes down in pitch, it will sometimes slow down a little, too. Be aware that we don't do this all the time. It's more likely to happen at the ends of longer sentences and when a sentence is the last one in a paragraph.

To notice these things, you have to read slowly, carefully, and expressively. You may even have to read your writing out loud. This expressive reading strategy is probably the best way to work with sentences because it forces you to use the same techniques your readers will be using to figure out your writing. But even the best strategy doesn't work every time. Most people use some combination of the expressive reading approach and the "move and rock" approach to get their sentences right.

Miss Margot says

Have I told you that I *love* reading my writing expressively *and* out loud? I *do!* First of all, it helps me find mistakes. Second of all—and this is the good part—it’s hilarious, especially when I have dialog. Then I can *become* the characters. But even without other people’s voices in the piece, I get a kick out of being expressive. See all these *italics*? I put them in so you could hear how I’ve been reading this in my head. (Mr. Peha is working, so I can’t read it out loud.) *Shhhhhh.* It’s so much fun!

SURPRISE ENDINGS

Of course, not every sentence ends with a period. Some end with question marks and an even smaller number end with exclamation marks. How can we tell the difference? Again, our voice is the best indication:

- **Up at the end quickly for a question mark.** Normally, when we get to the end of a sentence, our voice slopes down and slows down. In a question, we do exactly the opposite. At the end of a question, our voice quickly hops up a notch. (Some people will tell you to watch for “question words” at the front of the sentence like “What” or “Why” or “How.” But that doesn’t always work. Listening to your voice works every time.)
- **Straight up for an exclamation mark.** Occasionally, when a sentence we write is packed with feelings, or when we want to show that someone is shouting or is otherwise extremely excited, we punctuate the end of a sentence with an exclamation mark. When we read a sentence with an exclamation mark, our voice shoots straight up like a rocket. Some people are fond of using double (!!)

and even triple (!!!) exclamation marks. But there's really no such thing. One exclamation mark is all you get, no matter how much you want to exclaim. (Oh, and these are not called "excitement marks". If you throw them around every time you get excited about something, they begin to lose their punch.)

There's one last ending mark that very few people use. Yet it really does exist, and it really is quite useful. There's a situation in our language where a person is asking a question at the same time they are making an exclamation. For example, have you ever been with someone who does something a little dangerous all of a sudden? As they shoot off on their bike to jump over a creek, you might find yourself yelling something like, "Are you crazy?!" And there you have it—the *interrobang*. It's a combination of a question mark and an exclamation mark. It's the perfect choice when someone exclaims a question.

THE MUDDLE IN THE MIDDLE

Life at either end of a sentence is pretty simple. But in between, things can get a little crazy. For many situations there are no absolute right or wrong answers. So it's important to wade in with an open mind.

We know from Chapter 7 that sentences are made up of parts. We use punctuation in the middle of sentences to make those parts easier to read and understand. Just as we use periods at the ends of sentences to keep our ideas from running into each other, we use mid-sentence punctuation marks, like commas, to keep sentence parts apart. (Punctuation is all about separation. Every mark, except for the hyphen, is a separator of some kind.)

THE CANTANKEROUS COMMA

Cantankerous: difficult to work with or use. That pretty much sums up the comma. It's not really the comma's fault, of course. We humans have never been very responsible about the way we use them.

As you saw in the two examples at the beginning of this chapter, it's perfectly reasonable to write the same sentence with two commas or with no commas:

He felt the first blow on his back causing him to stumble and drop his bag which was promptly kicked into the bushes by another of the three.

He felt the first blow on his back, causing him to stumble and drop his bag, which was promptly kicked into the bushes by another of the three.

But while I might feel comfortable with either of these sentences, some people might argue that one is definitely right, that the other is definitely wrong, and that it's shamefully irresponsible of me not to teach you the difference.

This contentiousness over commas seems to be a permanent fixture in the world of writing, and I don't think it will ever end. If anything, it will only get worse as more and more people publish writing on their own, and cut out the editors, publishers, and academics who have traditionally been responsible for developing and enforcing the rules.

So, once again, you could find a rule book and learn to follow it. Just be prepared for the fact that the rules may change depending who your "ruler" is at a given time. What won't change, however, are the basic reasons why commas came into being in the first place. Below you'll find six things you can do with commas. Whether or not someone else wants you to do them is something you'll have to sort out when the time comes.

Putting rules and rule books aside for a moment, you can use commas to:

- **Separate parts in a sentence.** If you zip back to the section on sentence patterns in Chapter 7, you'll notice a comma in between the parts of every model and example sentence. I did this so you could learn about commas at the same time you were learning about sentence structure. This is exactly how commas should be

learned because the most important use of the comma is to improve readability in complicated sentences by making sentence parts easier to identify. Out in the real world, you'll notice that many of these commas are now considered optional. Most commonly left out is the comma after an Intro part, or what some teachers might call an introductory phrase. Unless this part is very long, writers these days often skip the comma. For example, "All of a sudden the car in front of me swerved to avoid a huge box in the middle of the road."

- **Separate items in a list.** You probably know the argument about this one. Some people like to see a comma after the second-to-last item in a list; other people like to leave the comma off. This is called the "serial comma" issue. If you're like me, and you worry about your list items getting confused, you'll want the extra comma: "For breakfast I like Wheaties, Total, or Special K." But, to be honest, folks like me have pretty much lost this battle. Most people these days want a healthy low-fat sentence without unnecessary commas: "For breakfast I like Wheaties, Total or Special K." If you decide to adopt this more popular practice, be forewarned: There are situations where leaving off the last comma can get you in trouble. So drop it with caution and always read your writing carefully. Finally, whichever practice you choose, be consistent about it, at least within the same piece of writing.
- **Separate multiple modifiers.** Here's another big, fat, thorny controversy. If you want to describe a controversy that is big and fat and thorny, do you need to put commas in between each adjective? The traditional rule says you do. But many people will tell you that your sentence will read just fine like this: "Here's another big fat thorny controversy." On this issue, I sheepishly take the middle ground. If I'm using only two modifiers, I tend to skip the comma in between. But if I have more than two, I pop the commas in. Just like using the extra serial comma in a list, using all the commas in a list of modifiers is safer and clearer than leaving them out.

- **Separate things that might be confusing.** Commas are great for helping us avoid embarrassing moments like this: “The kids said they wanted to eat Uncle Jack before they went to the movies.” Something tells me that Uncle Jack might appreciate a couple of commas: “The kids said they wanted to eat, Uncle Jack, before they went to the movies.”
- **Separate speaking from speakers.** We use commas all the time in dialog, and whenever we’re quoting something, to keep spoken words and quotations separated from other parts of our writing: “After that unpleasantness with the commas,” Aunt Tilly informed us, “even watching movies at home makes your Uncle Jack a little nervous.”
- **Separate information to make it easier to read.** Sometimes we use commas just to make things clearer for the reader. It’s hard to tell at a glance that this number, 7000000000, is seven billion. But with a comma after each group of three zeros from the right, it’s a piece of cake: 7,000,000,000. You’ll also see commas used between days and dates (Tuesday, July 24, 1942) and cities and states (Carrboro, N.C.), among other places.

If you look at newspapers, magazines, and other contemporary information sources, you’ll probably notice that commas are left out in many places where our rule books say they shouldn’t be. Over the past 30 years or so, there’s been a trend among professional writers—especially journalists—away from using commas unless they are absolutely necessary (like when your Uncle Jack won’t come over to visit anymore, or when he gets nervous because Aunt Tilly ordered Showtime).



Miss Margot says

Guilty as charged, sir. I am one of those journalists.



Many writers feel that commas get in the way of the words and make reading harder than it needs to be. These writers prefer to make an extra effort to craft sentences that can be read reliably without commas. And while careful sentence crafting is always to be applauded, I'm going to recommend that you take a different approach, at least for the time being.

My advice to you about commas is this: Use them as much as you can while you're learning how to use them. Consistently separate the Intro, Main, In-Between, and Add-On parts of your sentences with commas. Include that last comma in a list, just as I did in the previous sentence. Separate all those adjectives. And be on the lookout for long strings of words between capitals and periods that you can break into shorter, more manageable pieces with a comma or two.

You're going to make a lot of mistakes with this approach. But you're going to learn a lot, too. Young writers often have a terrible time learning about commas simply because they rarely use them. That's what happened to me when I was in school and I don't want it happening to you.

THE DASHING DASH

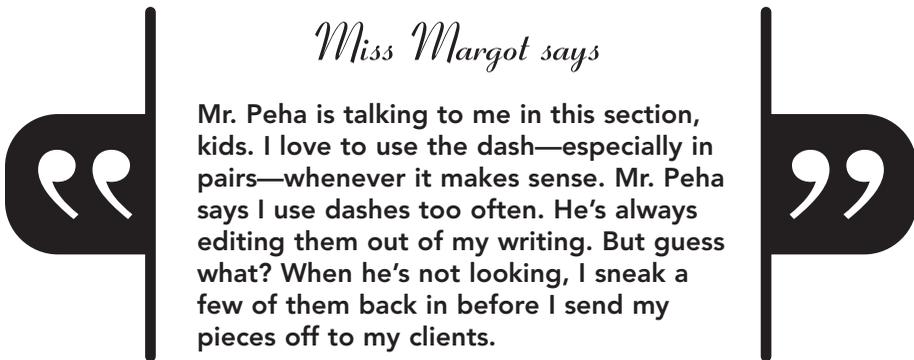
Everybody loves the dash these days—except those of us who feel it's overused.

Now why did I have to put a dash in there? Wouldn't that sentence have read just fine without it? (Yes, a comma would have been great. For example: Everybody loves the dash these days, except those of us who feel it's overused.) So what's the deal with the dash?

The dash is supposed to be used to set off part of a sentence that you want to emphasize very strongly—like this! It literally dashes your reader's attention over to the part of the sentence that you feel is much more important than anything else. It's most frequently used at the

ends of sentences like I've been using it here. But it can also be used in pairs if you want to bracket something important in the middle of a sentence like this:

It seems that writers everywhere—and you know who you are—have taken to using the dash so frequently it is beginning to lose its value.



Because the dash calls so much attention to itself, it's also used to signal an interruption, especially in dialog.

"Mr. Peha," my English teacher shouted. "Why have you been using so many dashes of late?"

"But Ms. Smith, I—"

"There are no excuses, Mr. Peha!" she bellowed. "Never use a dash where a comma will do."

"But—"

"Silence! Your teacher has spoken."

Correct or not, the dash is certainly hip and trendy. So powerful is its allure that many of us go through a period of time when we use it for just about everything. Then we realize that the more we use it, the less useful it becomes.

Even though we don't think about this, every mark has a meaning. The dash means something like, "Hey, Reader, the stuff after the dash is a lot more important than the other stuff in this sentence. Pay attention." And it works, too. What reader can resist being rocketed down that line and crashed head-on into the next idea?

But just like the boy who cried wolf one time too many, those of us who are new to the dash tend to overuse it. Why? Because we want attention—precisely what the dash is designed to get us.

However, the more we use the dash, the less it seems to work. Soon, it stops working altogether. At this point, if we're smart, we cut back or stop using it for a while. If we're not so smart, we have no choice but to move on to the exclamation mark. Just remember: Using too many exclamation marks makes you sound like a breathless teenager whose every waking moment is drenched in drama and whose every thought seems like the most urgent insight ever.

Finally, you need to know this about the dash: there are two of them, one long, the other a bit shorter. The long one is called an "em" dash (—). The shorter one is called an "en" dash (–). The really short thing that looks like a dash is not a dash at all, it's a hyphen (-). On those rare occasions when you decide to use a dash, use an "em" dash; that's the long one. Don't use two hyphens (--). It looks amateurish.

Writing an em dash is easy. Just make a horizontal line a little longer than a minus sign. If you're working on a computer, however, typing an em dash can be tricky. If you're a Windows user, you have to first hold down the ALT key, then type "0151" on the numeric keypad, and then release the ALT key. If you're working on a Mac, it's a little easier. Just type SHIFT-OPTION-hyphen.

POLITE (OR IMPOLITE) PARENTHESES

You might find it useful to think of parentheses as the opposite of the dash. We use the dash to emphasize; we use parentheses to de-emphasize. If, instead of calling attention to something, you want to sneak it in at a lower volume level, parentheses are the punctuation mark for you:

As I entered the classroom, I noticed that Mr. Funston was wearing mismatched socks and an unusually garish tie. (He must have dressed for school in the dark again.)

Parentheses are most often used for a type of remark called an “aside.” An aside is a semi-secret comment. Imagine sitting next to a friend in class. You want to make a crack about Mr. Funston’s clothes, but you don’t want everyone to hear it (least of all, Mr. Funston). So you turn to the side, cover your mouth with your hand, and whisper, “He must have dressed for school in the dark again.”

Parentheses are often used for humorous remarks. That’s why you’ll probably have occasion to use them most when you’re trying to get a laugh. Like dashes, they are easily overused, especially when writers think they’re funnier than they really are. (Come to think of it, you might have this opinion of me. But notice how I’ve de-emphasized this unpleasant thought by putting it in parentheses.) Of course, you can use parentheses to make a polite remark (Mr. Peha is a comic genius) just as easily as you can use them to sneak in something snarkily.

Miss Margot says

Mr. Peha wrote originally “snarkly” here but then his editor suggested “snarky” instead because it’s much more common. But I like “snarkly” better so I’m sneaking it back in. After all, the only way we get new words in our language is by people using them.

THE COMMANDING COLON

There's no better way to describe the colon than this: It works like an equals sign. In almost every way that a colon can be used, you'll notice that the words on the left provide an equivalent description of the words on the right. For example:

In this section, we'll be talking about six marks of punctuation: the comma, the dash, parentheses, the colon, the semicolon, and the ellipsis.

To the left of the colon, the description reads "six marks of punctuation." To the right are the names of the six marks. The colon is great for introducing lists like this. And that's probably the most common way writers use it.

But you can use the colon for another reason, especially when you want to emphasize an important point, because it really commands a reader's attention. That's why I used it in my first sentence about the colon:

There is no better way to describe the colon than to say this: It works like an equals sign.

The commanding colon stops a reader dead in his tracks and, unlike the dash, holds him there for a moment, just as a period would at the end of a sentence, before allowing him to move on. And because it functions as an equals sign, the colon gives me a chance to tell the reader the same thing two times in two different but complementary ways. When you've got an important statement to make, something you want to be certain your readers understand, try the "commanding colon" trick just like I did, either at the beginning of a piece or right at the end. It's a perfect way to make a point your readers will remember.

Finally, there's the matter of whether or not we capitalize the first word following the colon. The official rule is this: When the words that follow the colon make up a complete sentence, the first word is

capitalized. However, you may also have occasion to use a colon like this: to introduce a list, a series of short phrases, or a longer string of words that is not a complete sentence. In this situation, the first word is not capitalized.

THE SUPERFLUOUS SEMICOLON

Superfluous: more than is needed, desired, or required; not essential. And so it is with the semicolon. You can write your entire life and never encounter a situation where you absolutely have to use one. Anything you can do with a semicolon can be done with other marks of punctuation, or by simply adding or rearranging a few words. But semicolons are cool—*very* cool. And by using them, you will be cool.

The semicolon is the James Dean of punctuation, a true rebel without a cause. It knows you don't need it. And it doesn't need you either. It lurks in the lonely shadows between sentences that don't like being separated by a period and a capital letter. And it waits. Alone. It's not in a hurry. So don't use it. G'head. Stick with periods. Use commas. Throw in a conjunction. See what that gets ya.

The semicolon is the perfect punctuation mark to use when you want to show that there's a strong relationship between two complete, but otherwise independent, thoughts. For example:

Nothing impresses an English teacher more than a well-used semicolon; no other mark of punctuation earns its user the same respect.

Now, there would be nothing at all wrong with writing that as two completely independent sentences:

Nothing impresses an English teacher more than a well-used semicolon. No other mark of punctuation earns its user the same respect.

But the two ideas are so closely linked (you could probably put the word “because” in between them) that the semicolon is really the best way to go. If a period means, “This is the end of a complete thought,” a semicolon means, “This is the end of a complete thought so closely related to the next complete thought that the writer couldn’t bear putting a period and a capital letter between them.”

THE ETHEREAL ELLIPSIS

Here we are at the end of our discussion of mid-sentence punctuation. And yet I feel there’s something missing. Hmm... Oh, yes, the ellipsis.

The ellipsis, or “dot dot dot” as some people like to call it, tells our readers that we’ve left something out. You’ll see it used most often in quotations where the writer doing the quoting only wants to use part of what was said. For example, if you wanted to quote me on the use of the ellipsis, you might do it like this:

According to Mr. Peha, “The ellipsis... tells our readers that we’ve left something out.”

The stuff in the middle isn’t absolutely necessary, so you’d leave it out and put an ellipsis in its place. This saves some space and keeps your readers focused on more important information.

In dialog, the ellipsis can also be used to show the passage of small amounts of time. For example:

“Mr. Peha!” my English teacher yelled. “Where is your 5,000-word essay on the proper use of the ellipsis?”

“Well... uh... you see, Ms. Smith, I...”

“Silence!” she commanded. “I can tell by your ellipsis-strewn utterances that you haven’t even started it.”

Miss Margot says

Man, Mr. Peha's English teacher is very strict and formal. I wonder if he went to one of those fancy schmancy boarding schools where they call you by your last name and make you wear short pants and those jackets with the crests on them.

For some writers, the ellipsis seems to have the same addictive properties as the dash. People start using it and pretty soon they can't stop. If this happens to you, take a look at a novel or a newspaper article or something in a magazine, and see how often other writers use ellipses. It's not that often.

The other thing people like to do is add more dots. The thinking here is that if three dots means a brief pause, four dots could mean a slightly longer pause, five dots could mean perhaps pausing for 10 seconds, and so on up to a gazillion dots which means keep waiting until the universe collapses back into a quantum singularity—or the end of time, whichever comes first. While I like the logic here, I'm afraid I can't endorse this as good punctuation practice. The only time you'll see more than three dots in a row is when the fourth dot is a period that marks the end of the sentence.

Miss Margot says

If you want to make a newspaper or magazine editor wince, drop in an ellipsis or two when you're quoting someone. They don't like it because they think you could be leaving out something important—or worse—that you're bending the quote to make it say something you want it to that maybe it really didn't. So be careful what you leave out and make sure the omitted words don't change the speaker's true meaning.

MAKING SENSE OF THE MUDDLE IN THE MIDDLE

If you haven't already noticed, this section on mid-sentence punctuation is probably the longest section in this entire book. It's probably also the hardest material to understand and use. I've been writing professionally for almost twenty-five years, and I still struggle with this stuff. In fact, I know I'll receive dozens of corrections on my mid-sentence punctuation from my editor in every chapter of this book. (And dozens of complaints from teachers and editors everywhere on the advice I'm giving you.)

Learning how to use commas, dashes, parentheses, colons, semicolons, and ellipses is not something you can accomplish by zipping through a section of a book—even this book. Nor is this something you'll master one day and never need to worry about again. It's just that hard.

Believe me, I know how it feels. When I was in elementary school, I didn't get any of this at all. So for years, I wrote only short sentences. By keeping my sentences under ten words, I could get away without using any mid-sentence punctuation. But I couldn't write very much. And what I could write wasn't worth reading. By fourth grade or so, my thinking had outstripped my ability to punctuate my thoughts. So I just stopped writing altogether.

Don't let this happen to you.

I would have learned more had I taken more risks with my writing. If I had tried to use more marks, and then asked people for help when I was unsure of myself, I would have written more and, as a result, I would have learned more about how to punctuate.

The best way to make sense of the muddle in the middle is just to muddle through it. As much as I've told you not to overuse dashes and ellipses, I know that overusing these things, at least for a little while, is part of the natural way everybody learns. So go ahead and give it a shot. After all, you can't win if you don't play.

BE A WRITER LIKE LUCY LEDIAEV

Lucy Lediaev is a writer and web master at One Lambda, Inc., a medical technology company that makes test kits to match organ donors with transplant recipients. She writes technical instructions to help doctors and medical technicians administer the tests. In addition, she writes copy for marketing materials, content for the company web site, and software user manuals. In some ways, she's a "Jill of all trades," writing about a variety of subjects. In her spare time, Lucy enjoys blogging and writing humorous essays. She also writes web content for a site that focuses on kids.

Q

WHAT KIND OF WRITER ARE YOU?

A

Mainly, I'm a technical writer. I write about various aspects of technology. Most of my technical writing is in the computer software field or in biotechnology. I get to write about the latest technology and the latest discoveries in science. My primary job is to make complicated subjects simple. In a way, I'm a translator between scientists and people who don't have formal science backgrounds.

Q

WHY DO YOU WRITE?

A

I couldn't decide what I wanted to do when I grew up. I liked almost every field and found that I learned new subjects easily. I also like to teach and explain things to other people. I was fortunate enough to have some very good teachers in junior high and high school who encouraged me to write and who tuned up my writing skills with constructive criticism. When I was looking for a new career, technical writing was an obvious choice—I could write about things I found interesting and also explain difficult concepts to other people.

Q

WHAT MADE YOU WANT TO BE A WRITER?

A

I come from a family of readers. I learned to read and started to write before I began kindergarten. In school, I enjoyed writing compositions while my classmates were groaning about them. Even though I haven't been a writer in all of my jobs, I've always volunteered for tasks that require writing, because it was much more fun for me to write than to do routine tasks like typing and filing. I like using my brain and thinking critically.

Q

WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU GIVE TO A FELLOW WRITER WHO WAS JUST STARTING OUT?

A

Read everything you can get your hands on. Then, write, write, and write some more! Keep a journal or blog in which you just let your writing flow without thinking too much about form. Also, learn the basics of grammar, punctuation, and spelling so you have the skills you need to write solid essays, stories, or poetry. Share your writing with people you respect, and ask them to critique it. Pay attention to what they say, and use their comments to improve.

A CAPITAL IDEA

Capital letters make up less than five percent of the symbols we deal with in our writing. But the effort we expend dealing with them makes them seem much more important than that. Of course, importance is exactly what capitalization is all about.

Back in the good old days, in the seventeenth or eighteenth centuries, for example, writers would capitalize just about any word they wanted. Everything must have been really important back then. Or maybe the few people who could write considered themselves to be really important. Either way, capital letters were sprouting up faster than cotton in the Carolinas. For example, here's an excerpt from a land survey report written by a young George Washington:

By Virtue of a Warrant from the Proprietors Office I have Surveyed for Daniel Osborne a certain tract of waste and ungranted land on Potomack joining the upper Side of Daniel Pursleys Land & Bounded as followeth Beginning at two Ashes and an Elm on the river at Pursleys Corner and extended up the Meanders of the River.

Today, we'd capitalize only the names of the people and the rivers. But back in Washington's time, capital letters were used with reckless abandon. In most cases, writers used them on nouns. But here you can see that Washington even capitalized the verb "Surveyed." He must have thought the work he was doing was just as important as what he was doing it on.

Nowadays, we can't be so free and easy with our capitals. (Of course, if you know you're going to grow up to be the president of the United States, we can probably cut you a little slack.) Over the last 200 to 300 years, a wide range of customs has evolved regarding which words to capitalize and when. In my opinion, there are far too many capitalization rules now to make studying them even remotely interesting. So we'll just talk here about a few essential concepts.

ONE SIMPLE RULE, A MILLION COMPLICATED QUESTIONS

The standard rule about capitalizing things is this: Capitalize names, places, and things that are one-of-a-kind. I was in second or third grade when my teacher told us about this rule. At first, I was excited because there was only one thing I had to learn. But I quickly learned otherwise:

“For example,” my teacher said, “we capitalize the name of our school.”

“But what if there’s another school with the same name?” I asked.

“Its name gets capitalized, too,” Ms. Smith answered.

“But then its not one of a kind, right?” I said.

“Silence!”

And later on:

“Ms. Smith, do we capitalize the word ‘hamburger?’” I asked.

“No,” she responded.

“But I thought we capitalized names,”

“‘Hamburger’ is not a name,” she said with absolute confidence.

“It’s a name of a food,” I cautiously suggested.

“It has to be a specific name of something that is one of a kind,” she insisted.

“What if it’s the hamburger from McDonald’s that I ate yesterday?” I asked.

“Silence!”

(You know George Washington didn’t have to suffer through lessons like these. But I sure did. Maybe that’s why I never became president.)

Knowing what to capitalize comes down to memorizing the long list of things other people have decided need capitalizing. I can never remember it all, so when I’m in doubt, I look it up or ask someone.

This is one situation where having a rule book can be helpful.
(Although having a good editor, like I do, is even better.)

So rather than looking at a huge list of rules, many of which we'll never use, let's look at the three capitalization issues that come up for most of us on a regular basis:

- **The “Mom and Dad” Problem.** No, this doesn't have anything to do with how late you can stay up or how much allowance you get. It has to do with what you call your mom and dad and whether or not you capitalize the words “mom” and “dad.” Check out this statement: “My friend calls his mom and dad Jane and Robert. But I call my mom and dad Mom and Dad.” The first uses of “mom and dad” in both sentences are not capitalized because they refer to generic names for everyone's parents. The second uses of “Mom and Dad” are capitalized in the second sentence because I'm using the words “Mom” and “Dad” as the actual names of my parents.
- **The “Titles of Things” Problem.** The quick rule for capitalizing the titles of things is: “First word, last word, and all important words.” But you'll see all kinds of different approaches out in the world. Applying the rule, however, will keep you from getting into too much trouble. For example: “The title of my story is *I Don't Want to Talk About It: How I Really Feel About the Rules of Capitalization.*” You can see that I kept the words “to”, “the”, and “of” in lowercase. But I capitalized “It” because it was the last word in the title. (The stuff after the colon is the subtitle; it gets treated like a separate title all its own.)
- **The “Titles of People” Problem.** This is a tough one, but it's really important because making a mistake with someone's title is almost as bad as making a mistake with their name. The basic idea is this: When the title comes before the person's name, and is actually a part of the name, you capitalize it; when it comes after, and when it's being used in a generic way, you don't. For example: “Attorney General Alberto Gonzales succeeded John Ashcroft as attorney

general.” Now, if I had ended the sentence with “...succeeded John Ashcroft as Attorney General of the United States,” I would have used more capitals. Like the “Mom and Dad” problem, this one revolves around whether or not you’re using the title like the name of a person (*the* Attorney General), or whether you’re using it like a generic description (*an* attorney general). If you can’t figure this one out, you can always Google it. That’s how I got this example about Alberto Gonzales. I check all kinds of punctuation rules using Internet search engines. It’s the fastest way I know to find out how different people do the same thing.

Finally, I want to say a couple words about writing with all capital letters: PLEASE STOP! I know it’s very tempting to do this because I’m fond of doing it myself, as you just noticed. But it’s not a good idea. Writing in ALL CAPS can be interpreted by your reader as shouting, and nobody likes to be shouted at.

If you want to emphasize something in formal writing, use bold or italics. In informal writing, like an e-mail, IM, or text message, put asterisks around important words like this: “This is a really *important* word.” Better yet, in either formal or informal writing, just try to use more inventive—but still appropriate—language like we discussed in “Chapter 6: Better Words.”

As for writing with no capital letters at all, I am not concerned, as so many adults seem to be these days, that this practice may hasten the decline of literacy, accelerate global warming, compromise national security, or promote moral turpitude among our nation’s youth. In short, I just don’t think it’s a big deal.

When you’re text messaging, for example, leaving off the caps makes sense for the sake of efficiency—and relief of sore thumbs. When you’re IMing or e-mailing, all-lowercase writing looks and feels different than conventional mixed-case writing, so some people might say that it has a different meaning, too. If that’s how you feel, and if that’s the effect

you're after, then it's a reasonable thing to do. Just do yourself a favor and keep the periods at the ends of your sentences. Your friends may be able to live without capitals, but you might throw them for a loop if they can't figure out where your thoughts begin and end.

IDEAS THAT BELONG TOGETHER

Think of a sentence as a single idea. Think of an entire piece as a large collection of single ideas—maybe twenty, fifty, a hundred, or even more. Now think of your reader having to slog through all those sentences, one after another, without even the slightest break every once in a while. That's why we have paragraphs.

WHAT A PARAGRAPH IS NOT

A paragraph is not five sentences. Or four or three or two or any particular number. Some paragraphs are one sentence. We see them all the time, especially in fiction and in the newspaper. A paragraph could be 143 sentences, but that might defeat the purpose of writing in paragraphs at all. For most writers, most paragraphs contain three to eight sentences. In general, novels tend to have shorter paragraphs; non-fiction books tend to have longer ones. Newspaper articles usually have the shortest paragraphs of all.

A paragraph is not something that begins with a topic sentence. Or something that has to have at least a beginning sentence, a middle sentence, and an ending sentence. There are really no rules about the types of sentences a paragraph must contain, although a paragraph has to have at least one sentence in order to be a paragraph.

A paragraph is not something that is only about one thing. Some paragraphs are barely about half a thing. Others seem to have two or three things in them. The number of things in a paragraph doesn't matter. What matters is that sentences relating to the same thing are grouped together. That's what a paragraph is—a group of sentences that are closely related.

A paragraph is not something that is indented. In some formats, we just skip a line between paragraphs. This is called “block” paragraphing, and it’s used all the time in business writing, in technical writing, in e-mail, on the Internet, and in many other situations (like this book, for example). It doesn’t matter whether you indent your paragraphs or not, as long as you’re consistent about it within the same document. What does matter is that your writing has paragraphs, that they group your sentences together in logical ways, and that your readers can find and follow them easily.

A paragraph is not something you have to begin learning in third, fourth, or fifth grade. Kids in kindergarten and first grade are perfectly capable of creating paragraphs, just as soon as they create pieces of writing with sentences that can be put together in small groups.

A paragraph is not something you can get good at by writing them one at a time because someone tells you to. You only need to paragraph your writing when you have more than one. And the best way to learn to group your ideas into paragraphs is when the ideas you are grouping are your own.

A paragraph is not many of the things we are told it is in school. And the quicker we stop using English books, and starting using real books to learn about paragraphs, the better off we’ll be.

THE BREAKS OF THE GAME

In a certain way, paragraphing is a lot like reading: Many people can do it but few can tell you how. Most people paragraph as they compose. We write a few sentences and then get this sense that we’re about to start in on a new idea. So we start a new paragraph. Sometimes we go back later to touch things up—move a sentence out of one paragraph and into another, turn an unusually long stretch of sentences into two or three paragraphs—but mostly, paragraphing just happens for people. And if it’s not happening for you, that’s just the breaks of the game. Or is it?

While it's hard to learn to paragraph from other people, it's easy to learn from other people's writing. A few years ago, Miss Margot wrote an article for a magazine on a weird new kind of restaurant. When the article was published, it was laid out as one continuous block of text without paragraphs (left-hand column). But as you'll see, we can break it into paragraphs very easily (right-hand column):

Forget the little baggie of Cap'n Crunch you stash in your backpack every morning. The latest trend in fast food is cereal. The folks at Cereality stores in Philadelphia and Tucson stand ready to fill your bowl full of Frankenberry, Froot Loops, or Frosted Flakes. Pajama-clad Cereologists™ serve up your favorite hot or cold breakfast cereal in any combination you like. Mix Lucky Charms with Cocoa Puffs if you're so inclined. Or try the best-selling Life Experience™ blend featuring Life Cereal, sliced almonds, bananas, and a drizzle of honey. The standard serving is two scoops of cereal, one topping, and all the milk you can slurp for only \$2.95. Just looking for a snack? Child size (one scoop, no topping) is \$1.95. These people are so serious about cereal, they even have stylish “to go” bowls and boxes. After all, who wants to bop into first period bearing a box of Fruity Pebbles, inviting stares and snickers from friends? Co-founder David Roth says the company will open 12 more stores this year because, “People from all walks of life have personal bonds with cereal.” Genius? Stupid? Who knows? They said nobody'd ever pay \$4.25 for a cup of coffee, either.

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The basic rule for paragraphing is this: Change paragraphs every time you change ideas. Of course, as we've seen, rules aren't helpful in every case—they are only guidelines. To paragraph a piece like Miss Margot's, we've got to decide where the ideas are. And sometimes that's not so obvious. So let's take a look at our paragraphing rationale and see how we did:

Forget the little baggie of Cap'n Crunch you stash in your backpack every morning. The latest trend in fast food is cereal.

Changing from the introduction, which talks about the new trend in fast food, to the specific topic of the story, the new Cereality stores.

The folks at Cereality stores in Philadelphia and Tucson stand ready to fill your bowl full of Frankenberry, Froot Loops, or Frosted Flakes.

Changing from the general announcement of the stores, to what happens specifically when you enter a store.

Pajama-clad Cereologists™ serve up your favorite hot or cold breakfast cereal in any combination you like. Mix Lucky Charms with Cocoa Puffs if you're so inclined. Or try the best-selling Life Experience™ blend featuring Life Cereal, sliced almonds, bananas, and a drizzle of honey.

Changing from the kinds of cereal you can order, to the price you pay for a bowl.

The standard serving is two scoops of cereal, one topping, and all the milk you can slurp for only \$2.95. Just looking for a snack? Child size (one scoop, no topping) is \$1.95.

Changing from the price you pay for a bowl, to additional information about taking your cereal to go.

These people are so serious about cereal, they even have stylish “to go” bowls and boxes. After all, who wants to bop into first period bearing a box of Fruity Pebbles, inviting stares and snickers from friends?

Changing from taking your cereal to go, to a quote from the company co-founder about why they will be opening more stores.

Co-founder David Roth says the company will open twelve more stores this year because, “People from all walks of life have personal bonds with cereal.”

Changing from a quote from the company co-founder, to speculation about whether the restaurant is a good idea.

Genius? Stupid? Who knows? They said nobody’d ever pay \$4.25 for a cup of coffee, either.

Now, you may disagree with the way I’ve handled the paragraphs here. That’s okay. There’s usually more than one way to do it. Since this is a newspaper-style story, I tried to honor the newspaper tradition of using short paragraphs. But even if I chose to break the piece into fewer paragraphs, my point is this: Breaking long sections of text into separate paragraphs, or “smaller bites” if you like, is an effective way to make the reading—and the understanding—easier for your readers.

HOW DIFFERENT THINGS CHANGE DIFFERENTLY

If we were in school, we’d call Miss Margot’s piece expository writing. When we paragraph most expository writing, we look for changes in the ideas we’re using. This can be hard because it’s not always easy to see where our ideas change.

Finding paragraphs in narrative writing is usually easier. In narrative writing, we can often rely on the sequence of events to let us know when things have changed. In general, when you’re paragraphing narrative writing, you can change paragraphs every time you change action, time, or place.

Finally, changing paragraphs is part of writing dialog (which we’ll cover in more detail in the next section of this chapter). The rule here is very straightforward and almost always works: Change paragraphs every time you change speakers.

EVERYTHING MUST CHANGE

As we grow up, we change. And so does our writing. In kindergarten, we may write only a few short sentences at a time. But in a little while, we're filling entire pages. Any time we write eight or ten sentences or more, we probably need to do a little paragraphing. This is because most of us tend to express our ideas in small groups of sentences.

In school, many kids avoid paragraphing, year after year after year. They just don't do it. Their teachers think they forget. But I remember back when I was that age, and I know exactly why I wasn't paragraphing: I was afraid to do it wrong, so I just didn't do it at all. Of course, not doing it at all was doing it wrong, so I wasn't getting anything out of pretending to procrastinate in my writing development.

But remember, your writing will change as you grow. And your use of punctuation will grow with it. The best thing you can do right now is to be thoughtful about how you experiment with paragraphing. When you see a big block of sentences staring back at you, begging to be split in two or three or four, don't hesitate. Just ask yourself, "What idea am I changing from?" and "What idea am I changing to?"

HE SAID, SHE SAID

Let's talk about dialog. It's not a difficult concept to wrap our heads around. Sometimes, in our writing, we want to show that people are talking, so we put quotation marks around the words they say. But, unfortunately, that's only part of the issue.

I'll tell you right now that I have a terrible time remembering how to punctuate dialog correctly. So whenever I have to do it, I reach over to my bookshelf, grab a novel, and see how someone else does it. This is a great strategy because, unlike many other punctuation practices, almost everyone punctuates dialog the same way.

TAG, YOU'RE IT

There are two important things to be aware of when we punctuate dialog: the quotation and the tag. The quotation is the collection of words actually spoken in the piece. The tag is the collection of words that tell us who spoke. For example:

“I’m speaking these words,” said the speaker.
 QUOTATION TAG

(The term “tag” is used by fiction writers. Journalists call it the “attribution.” I call it the “he said, she said” part. But that’s a little clunky, so I’m sticking with “tag” right now.)

TAG AT THE END

Normally, we quote the speaker first and pop a tag on at the end, like this:

“I find punctuating dialog to be terribly tedious,” complained Mr. Peha.

Notice the quotes around the words I am actually speaking, followed by the tag. But notice also that there’s a comma inside the last quotation mark. This is used to further separate the quote from the person being quoted. Almost all additional punctuation marks like this will go inside the last quotation mark and not after it.

TAG AT THE BEGINNING

Though the tag normally goes at the end, it can just as easily come at the beginning, like this:

Mr. Peha admitted reluctantly, “Putting the tag first always looks weird to me. But I know it’s a good thing to do every once in a while.”

Here, the tag comes first, followed by the quote. You'll notice also that a comma follows the tag (though sometimes writers use a colon) and that the quote is punctuated at the end with a period.

There's a tiny exception here that you need to be aware of. If the tag describes an action performed by the speaker within a complete sentence, we punctuate it with a period rather than a comma, like this:

Mr. Peha slammed his fist on the desk. "This tag-at-the-beginning thing always gives me fits!"

I often mess this one up because I get so used to using a comma to separate the quote from the tag.

TAG IN THE MIDDLE

Just slightly more complicated is the situation where the tag falls in the middle, like this:

"Of all the punctuation tasks," Mr. Peha lamented, "punctuating dialog is to me the most challenging."

In this situation, we treat the whole thought as a single sentence, quoting the exact words that were spoken and putting the tag in the middle of the sentence, surrounding it with commas, just as we would with any middle part if there were no quoted words at all.



Miss Margot says

I decide where to put the "tag" depending on the rhythm of the sentence. This is just another reason why writing like a reader—especially one who reads out loud—can be really helpful.



PUNCTUATION IN THE QUOTATION

Further difficulty in punctuating quotations comes from the fact that we have to punctuate two thoughts at the same time. Even worse is the fact that one thought technically lives inside the other. We often don't realize this until we have to punctuate a quotation that has its own ending punctuation:

“Why is punctuating dialog so hard?” asked a distraught Mr. Peha.

In this situation, we use the normal punctuation from the quote's thought and leave out the comma before the last quotation mark because it would be superfluous. The rule in this case is simple: Never use more than one mark at the end of a quotation. So the following would be wrong:

“Why is punctuating dialog so hard?,” asked a distraught Mr. Peha.

If you look at it closely, it looks strange, doesn't it?

MORE THAN ONE SPEAKER

Of course, the real fun of using dialog is showing a conversation between two people. In this situation, all the same rules apply, plus we add one more: Start a new paragraph for each new speaker. Every time a new person talks, we give them a new line to start talking on.

“Oh me, oh my. I seem to have such a terrible time punctuating dialog,” said Mr. Peha in a weepy, self-pitying voice.

“Nonsense!” said the English teacher. “You simply fail to apply yourself.”

“What does that mean, that I don't ‘apply’ myself?” asked Mr. Peha.

“If you have to ask, Mr. Peha,” the English teacher replied, “you are *certainly* not applying yourself.”

Mr. Peha rose from his desk in frustration. “Well, I'll just go look it up, then.”

“See that you do, Mr. Peha,” said the English teacher. “And heed the definition when you find it.”

GRAB A NOVEL IF YOU NEED TO

Dialog is used so often in writing, especially in fiction, that even if you can't remember the right way to do it, you can always look it up in a book from your own bookshelf. Just turn to any scene where you find someone speaking. If you read far enough, you'll probably find an example of all the different ways of punctuating dialog that we've talked about here.



Miss Margot says

Newspaper and magazine articles can be good guides, too.



LOOK WHO'S TALKING

In this tiny piece about the beginnings of a new friendship, the writer, Ellie Davis, gives us a stretch of dialog without using tags of any kind. As long as we can tell who's talking, tags are not actually needed—and neither is a lot of that messy punctuation we often struggle with.

Meeting Becca

We pulled into the driveway of our new house. At the house next door, a girl was on her bike, riding up and down the street. I was shy, six years old, and had only three playmates. Mom turned around from the driver's seat. “Ellie, how about you go see what that girl's name is?”

I looked out the window, then shook my head. Mom stopped the car, a signal that if I did not get out, I was dead meat. Reluctantly, I did as I was told.

I stood in front of the girl's path and waited for her to stop.
Mom was watching me. I stuck out my hand.

"Hi," I said.

She frowned, but shook my hand. "Hi," she said back.

"Name's Ellie."

"Becca."

"OK."

"I'm free tomorrow."

"OK."

"Bye."

"Bye."

Nothing like a perfect conversation to get a friendship started.

Remember what I said about looking in a book of your own if you can't remember the rules for punctuating dialog? This tiny story actually has an example of almost every rule we just discussed.