

Making a point:

the pernickety story of English punctuation

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A preliminary dialogue

There are two extreme views about punctuation.

the first is that you dont actually need it because its perfectly possible to write down what you want to say without any punctuation marks or capital letters and people can still read it youdontevenneedspacesbetweenwordsreally they dont exist when we speak to each other after all and yet we nonetheless or should it be none the less understand what people are saying

The second is that it's essential because it aids legibility. It's much easier to read if there's punctuation. Also, the marks show us how to read aloud in a way that reflects the pauses, rhythm, and melody that we use in speech. They help us see the grammar of complex sentences. And they help us sort out ambiguities – otherwise nobody would ever have got the joke in *Eats (,) Shoots & Leaves*.

but that joke was funny precisely because its so unusual we dont encounter that sort of ambiguity most of the time when we write and its crazy to have to learn a complicated system that nobody agrees about just so that we can sort out rare cases of ambiguity

But punctuation isn't only about ambiguity and intelligibility. It also shows our identity as educated people. For historical reasons, society expects people to spell correctly and to punctuate correctly.

how can anything be correct if theres so much disagreement

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about it there's an example already in what you've written you put a comma in after the word rhythm in your first comment that's something a lot of people including some ministers of education would disapprove of

There are historical reasons for that, too.

what are these historical reasons you keep going on about
Read on ...

A traveller's introduction

If you walk along the main shopping street in Belgrade, in the direction of Kalemegdan Park, and turn left just before you reach the end, you will find yourself in Kralja Petra street. Towards the bottom, opposite the Serbian Orthodox cathedral, is the oldest traditional *kafana*, or tavern, in the city. And its name is a punctuation mark.

A question mark, to be precise. And that is how everyone knows it. People say they will meet 'at the question-mark tavern' – *znak pitanja* in Serbian. You can't miss it, as on the outside wall is a prominent lantern with a large question mark on it. And inside you are surrounded by menu question marks. It is a typographical paradise. If there were a Question-Mark Protection Society, this is a place where its members would surely wish to end their days.

Behind every punctuation mark lies a thousand stories, and nowhere is a story more interesting than in the case of number 6 Kralja Petra. In 1892, the owner wanted a new name for his tavern and looked for the nearest landmark, which was the church across the street. So he called it 'By the Saborna Church'. But he hadn't taken into account the likely reaction of the Church authorities, who were furious at the thought of the name of their cathedral being associated with a pub. Temporarily at a loss for an alternative, he put a question mark on the door. And it stayed.

A question mark as the name of a pub. It's a function of



The author admires the question-mark tavern.

(inset) The tavern menu cover.

punctuation that would never have been dreamed of by those who first thought of adding marks to their writing to make it easier to read. But the story of English punctuation is littered with such personal preferences, unusual practices, and arbitrary decisions – as well as occasional linguistic reasoning. For such a tiny system – only a dozen or so marks in common

use, after all – there's an amazing amount of uncertainty over usage.

And an even more amazing amount of personal involvement. What other area of language has generated motivation of the kind shown by the two enthusiasts who went hunting for punctuational errors all the way across America, correction-pens in hand, risking jail in the process? What other area of language has produced as specific an organization as the Apostrophe Protection Society? What other account of a language topic has achieved anywhere near the remarkable 3-million-plus sales of Lynne Truss's punctuation manifesto, *Eats, Shoots & Leaves*?

When a language is written down for the first time, the writer has to perform two apparently simple tasks: spell the words, and punctuate the sentences. Both turn out to be unexpectedly complicated. I've told the story of how writers solved the spelling task in *Spell It Out*. This book tells the story of how they solved the second – or rather, didn't entirely solve it, judging by the furious rows over what counts as correct punctuation which still surface in the media. One only has to write *potato's* to elicit an emotional reaction of biblical proportions.

There is something really special about punctuation, and its story needs to be told. Who were the people who introduced punctuation to the English language? Why did they do it? How did their invention evolve over the centuries? When did the enthusiasms and uncertainties originate? What is happening to punctuation today? And what is its future? That is what this book is about.

In the beginning ...

Up on the second floor in the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, in a gallery displaying artefacts from early England, there is a beautiful teardrop-shaped object. A decorated golden frame surrounds a colourful enamelled design protected by a flat panel of polished rock crystal. It shows the picture of a man dressed in a green tunic, and holding a flowered sceptre in each hand, his wide eyes gazing intently at something we do not see. And around the rim of the object, just a few millimetres thick, is an Old English inscription in Roman letters:

AELFREDMECHEHTGEWYRCAN

There are no spaces between the words. Inserting these, we get

AELFRED MEC HEHT GEWYRCAN

Alfred me ordered to make
= Alfred ordered me to be made

This is King Alfred the Great, and the object has come to be called the Alfred Jewel.

It was found near Athelney Abbey in Somerset in 1693, the place where Alfred launched his successful counter-attack against the Danes in 878. There has been much debate about the identity of the man, and what the purpose of the jewel was. An important clue is the base of the object, which is in

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The Alfred Jewel in outline, showing (left) the location of the inscription on the object, and (right) the way the inscription surrounds the figure.

the form of a dragon-like head with a cylindrical socket in its mouth. What did that socket hold? Probably a pointer, used to help a reader to follow the lines of text in a manuscript, which would often be placed on a stand some distance away from the reader. It's now thought the large-eyed figure represents the sense of sight. His eyes are wide open and focused because he is reading.

For people interested in English punctuation, the jewel inscription provides an important opening insight. There isn't any. This is a sentence, but there's no full stop. All the letters are the same, capitals, so there's no contrast showing where the sentence begins or that Alfred is a name. And the inscription lacks what to modern eyes is the most basic orthographic device to aid reading: spaces to separate the words.

Sixty miles away, in another museum, there's another remarkable object from Anglo-Saxon times: the Franks Casket. This is an intricately carved whalebone box that was presented to the British Museum by one of its curators, Augustus Franks, in 1867. Each side of the box displays

scenes from Roman, Jewish, Christian, and Germanic traditions, accompanied by an explanatory inscription in English and Latin. The English words are written in runes, and if I transcribe a few in their Roman letter equivalents, they would look like this:

HERFEGTAP+TITUSENDGIUPEASU

Once again, there are no word-spaces. Inserting them, we get

HER FEGTAP +TITUS END GIUPEASU

Here fight Titus and Jews

It is a description of the capture of Jerusalem by Emperor Titus in AD 70. (The letter Þ represents a ‘th’ sound.)

This state of affairs is common in the inscriptions of the period. Many have no spacing or punctuation marks at all. Today, word-spaces are such an obvious and universal feature of the written language that we can easily forget they are there, and ignore their role as a device of punctuation. But a word-space is just as much a punctuation feature as is its close relative, the hyphen. And one of the topics I’ll discuss later in this book will be the uncertain trading-relationship between spaces and hyphens. Should a word be written spaced, hyphenated, or solid? Is it *flower pot*, *flower-pot*, or *flowerpot*?

Word-spaces are the norm today; but it wasn’t always so. It’s not difficult to see why. We don’t actually need them to understand language. We don’t use them when we speak, and fluent readers don’t put pauses between words as they read aloud. Read this paragraph out loud, and you’ll probably pause at the commas and full stops, but you won’t pause between the words. They run together. So, if we think of writing purely as a way of putting speech down on paper,

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*The back of the Franks Casket, showing the Titus inscription.
The sequence of runes begins at the bottom left-hand corner
and continues across the top up to the mid-point.*

there's no reason to think of separating the words by spaces. And that seems to be how early writers thought, for unspaced text (often called, in Latin, *scriptura continua*) came to be a major feature of early Western writing, in both Greek and Latin. From the first century AD we find most texts throughout the Roman Empire without words being separated at all. It was thus only natural for missionaries to introduce unspaced writing when they arrived in England.

Writing in antiquity was viewed by most people as a guide to reading aloud. Today, we tend to read silently, privately, rapidly. We can skim through text if we wish, omitting portions. In early Greek and Roman civilization, people routinely read aloud to audiences in displays of oratory, every syllable was valued, and eloquence was highly rated. No skimming then. A text would have been well prepared before being read in public, so that it became more like a musical

score, reminding the reader what to say next. In such circumstances, experienced readers wouldn't need word-spaces or other marks. Some influential writers, indeed, poured scorn on punctuation. Cicero, for example, thought that the rhythm of a well-written sentence was enough to tell someone how to bring it to an effective close. Punctuation marks were unnecessary.

But without punctuation of any kind, readers would have to do their homework to avoid unexpected miscues. We would have to do our homework too, if we had no word-spacing today. Faced with the sentence

therapistsneedspecialtreatment

we need to know if this is a text about sex crimes or about speech pathology before we can correctly read it aloud. Early writers on oratory and rhetoric, such as Aristotle and Quintilian, often illustrated the dangers of misreading an unpunctuated text, and stressed the need for good preparation. Familiarity, they hoped, would breed content.

We can carry out an experiment to show how familiarity with a text helps our reading of it, even if it is unspaced. Take a text you know well, and write it down without word-spaces, then try reading it aloud. Like this:

tobeornottobethatisthequestion

ourfatherwhoartinheavenhallowedbethyname

jackandjillwentupthehilltofetchapailofwater

Our knowledge of the content enables us to read it quickly. But with a bit more effort we can do this even if we don't know the text in advance. In fact, this is something we're increasingly doing these days, as a result of the Internet.