

# Punctuate, Punctuate; Punctuate!

 [chronicle.com/blogs/linguafranca/2018/01/18/punctuate-punctuate-punctuate/](https://chronicle.com/blogs/linguafranca/2018/01/18/punctuate-punctuate-punctuate/)

Geoffrey Pullum

Punctuation is really an elementary and intuitive idea. Sentences are written down as a linear sequence of characters that (mostly) represent speech sounds. Punctuation marks are inserted in the sequence to signal certain aspects of the structure of their covert grammatical structure; they do what those little musical interludes do in NPR's *Morning Edition* program.

However, punctuation does not have a direct or simple relation to phonological, grammatical, or semantic structure. Take clause type. For example, you might assume that question marks go on all (and only) grammatically interrogative clauses, signaling that the meaning is a question; but that's not true. Interrogatives take no question mark if they are subordinate clauses (*I wonder what else they took*) or if they are of certain rhetorical kinds (*Why take chances*). And question marks can end sentences of declarative form if they seek confirmation (*So you're not coming?*).

Don't commas signal pauses in spoken sentences? Sometimes, but not always (consider how you would normally pronounce sentences like *He actually said, "I hate you", That, I can tell you, In the morning, you'll feel better*).

Don't commas always mark the end of a grammatical unit? Yes, mostly; but that's no use as a guide to where you should put them. Consider *Paul, George and Ringo were shocked at the news of John's death*. The comma just separates off the first of the three names linked by *and*. The first major unit is the subject (*Paul, George and Ringo*); and putting a comma after that would be actually ungrammatical (it's a strict rule that you never put a comma between subject and predicate in contemporary standard English).

A recent book by Stephen Spector of Stony Brook University, *The Quotable Guide to Punctuation* (Oxford University Press, 2017), is entirely devoted to the deployment of punctuation marks. It is a well-written and often entertaining student-oriented book that will be useful for anyone who teaches writing. It very sensibly teaches some crucial grammatical terminology as a prerequisite (adjectives, adverbs, clauses, conjunctions, nouns, phrases, prepositions, pronouns, and verbs) — there is no hope of teaching punctuation explicitly without making reference to such concepts. Yet although Spector's book runs to 322 pages, it deals with only two-thirds of the 18 punctuational devices described in the 40-page Chapter 20 of *The Cambridge Grammar of the English Language* (Rodney Huddleston and Geoffrey K. Pullum, 2002, henceforth *CGEL*).



It is interesting that punctuation is so complex when examined in detail. Suppose we set aside spaces and capitalization (though *CGEL* correctly treats both as punctuational), and also a slew of miscellaneous typographical devices like italicization, boldfacing, small capitals, braces (curly brackets), and asterisk masking of taboo words. Suppose we also set aside word-level devices like the apostrophe, the hyphen, and the long hyphen or en dash, since in my opinion, as I argued here, they are really just a matter of spelling. Even then, the bare minimum that college students need to become familiar with includes all of these:

<b>Sentence terminators</b>	
period (full stop)	.
question mark	?
exclamation mark	!
<b>Right boundary markers</b>	
comma	,
semicolon	;
colon	:
<b>Paired boundary markers</b>	
em dash	—
single quotation marks	‘ ’
double quotation marks	“ ”
parentheses	( )
square brackets	[ ]
<b>Miscellanea</b>	
slash (solidus)	/
ellipsis dots	...

Look through the detailed treatment of the rules for the use of these devices in Chapter 20 of *CGEL* (written by Geoffrey Nunberg and Ted Briscoe in collaboration with Huddleston), and you may find yourself thinking that a system of this complexity would be just too complex to be presented to all undergraduates with an expectation of 100-percent mastery.

For it is not a matter of simply learning the above character shapes and simple instructions for where to put them; there are all sorts of special mutually interacting rules. A sentence-terminating period is suppressed if the last word of a sentence ends with an abbreviatory period. In a pair of dashes the second is suppressed immediately before a sentence terminator or a right-boundary marker. The left member of two paired boundary markers immediately

follows a space, while all right boundary markers (paired or not) immediately precede a space. Commas generally don't appear between independent clauses, but there are exceptions (see Ben Yagoda [here](#) and [here](#) on comma splices). And so on.

To learn it all from a standing start would be like learning the syntax of a programming language. (Some computer scientists say that the factor that best correlates with success in a programming course is a student's ability to write careful and accurate sentences in their native language.)

Yet we think of punctuation as if it were second nature, a corollary of being able to read and write words, something as basic as multiplying integers. When we see that our students can write with broadly correct punctuation, we hardly even notice; we expect nothing less.

Intensive study of syntactic phenomena in English always reminds me of the awe-inspiring feat that most of my first-year students have already accomplished before day one of their very first class.

[Return to  
Top](#)