

Tucholsky Wagner Zola Scott  
Turgenev Wallace Fonatne Sydon Freud Schlegel  
Twain Walther von der Vogelweide Fouqué Friedrich II. von Preußen  
Weber Freiligrath Frey  
Fechner Fichte Weiße Rose von Fallersleben Kant Ernst Richthofen Frommel  
Engels Fielding Hölderlin Eichendorff Tacitus Dumas  
Fehrs Faber Flaubert Eliasberg Eliot Zweig Ebner Eschenbach  
Feuerbach Maximilian I. von Habsburg Fock Ewald Vergil  
Goethe Elisabeth von Österreich London  
Mendelssohn Balzac Shakespeare Rathenau Dostojewski Ganghofer  
Trackl Stevenson Lichtenberg Doyle Gjellerup  
Mommssen Thoma Tolstoi Lenz Hambruch Droste-Hülshoff  
Dach Thoma von Arnim Hägele Hanrieder Hauptmann Humboldt  
Karrillon Reuter Verne Rousseau Hagen Hauff Baudelaire Gautier  
Garschin Defoe Hebbel Hegel Kussmaul Herder  
Damaschke Descartes Schopenhauer George  
Wolfram von Eschenbach Darwin Dickens Grimm Jerome Rilke Bebel Proust  
Bronner Campe Horváth Aristoteles Voltaire Federer Herodot  
Bismarck Vigny Gengenbach Barlach Heine Grillparzer Georgy  
Storm Casanova Lessing Tersteegen Gilm Gryphius  
Chamberlain Langbein Schiller Iffland Sokrates  
Brentano Claudius Schilling Kralik Katharina II. von Rußland Bellamy Raabe Gibbon Tschchow  
Gerstäcker Vulpius  
Löns Hesse Hoffmann Gogol Wilde Gleim  
Luther Heym Hofmannsthal Klee Hölty Morgenstern Goedicke  
Roth Heyse Klopstock Puschkin Homer Kleist  
Luxemburg La Roche Horaz Mörike Musil  
Machiavelli Kierkegaard Kraft Kraus  
Navarra Aurel Musset Lamprecht Kind Kirchhoff Hugo Moltke  
Nestroy Marie de France Laotse Ipsen Liebknecht  
Nietzsche Nansen Lassalle Gorki Klett Leibniz Ringelntz  
von Ossietzky Marx vom Stein Lawrence Irving  
Petalozzi Platon Pückler Michelangelo Knigge Kock Kafka  
Sachs Poe Liebermann Koroľenko  
de Sade Praetorius Mistral Zetkin



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**Stops, Or How to Punctuate A  
Practical Handbook for Writers  
and Students**

Paul Allardyce

# Imprint

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“For a reader that pointeth ill,  
A good sentence oft may spill.”

—Chaucer—*Romaunt of the Rose*



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## INTRODUCTION

*The Use of Punctuation.*—Punctuation is a device for marking out the arrangement of a writer's ideas. Reading is thereby made easier than it otherwise would be.

A writer's ideas are expressed by a number of words arranged in groups, the words in one group being more closely connected with one another than they are with those in the next group. An example will show this grouping in its simplest form:

He never convinces the reason, or fills the imagination, or touches the heart.

To understand what is written, the reader must group the words together in the way intended by the writer; and in doing this he can receive assistance in various ways. Partly by the[8] inflection of the words; partly by their arrangement; partly also by punctuation. As to inflection, we see in Latin an adjective and a substantive standing together, yet differing in gender, in number, or in case; and we know that the adjective does not qualify the substantive. But English has not the numerous inflections of Latin. More scrupulous care therefore is needed in the arrangement of words in order to bring together in position such as are connected in meaning. Yet this is not always enough. Except in the very simplest sentences there are generally several arrangements which are grammatically possible; and, though all save one may be absurd in meaning, the reader may waver for a moment before the absurdity strikes him. Some artificial aid is thus needed to prevent him from thinking of any arrangement but the right one. There is no fault, for instance, to be found with the arrangement of the following words, yet, printed without points, they form a mere puzzle:

He had arrived already prepossessed with a strong feeling of the neglect which he had experienced from the Whigs his old friends however all of them ap[9]peared ravished to see him offered apologies for the mode in which they had treated him and caught at him as at a twig when they were drowning the influence of his talents they understood and were willing to see it thrown into the opposite scale.

Of course, with a little effort the meaning can be discovered; but if such a little effort had to be put forth in every page of a whole book, reading would become a serious task. By means of points, or "stops," we are spared much of this. The groups are presented ready-made to the eye; and the mind, bent on understanding the thought, is not distracted by having first to discover the connection of the words.

The reader's task is more difficult where two or more ways of grouping the words not only are grammatically possible, but lead each to a more or less intelligible meaning. As a rule he can find out from the context which way the writer meant him to take. One politician writes to another: "I ask you as the recognized leader of our party what you think of this measure;" and nobody accuses the writer of presumption. We might even pass over the following startling sentence without observing[10] the reflection which it casts on a respectable body of men:

Hence he considered marriage with a modern political economist as dangerous.

But when we read that "the State may impose restrictions on the mothers of young children employed in factories," we may well have some doubt whether it is the mothers or the children who are employed in factories. And it would not be easy to give an answer, if we were asked to state the precise meaning of Gray's line:

And all the air a solemn stillness holds.

In longer and more involved sentences the risk of ambiguity is obviously much greater. Now by the judicious use of points ambiguous language can occasionally be made clear. "The mothers-of-young-children employed in factories" is no doubt a bold form, but it leaves us in no doubt as to the meaning. So the ambiguous word "too" does not embarrass us when we read: "This problem, too, easy as it may seem, remains unsolved." (See other examples under Rules XIV. and XV.) Only occasionally, how[11]ever, can clearness be secured by punctuation. No pointing can help us much in Gray's line, or could have given to Pyrrhus the true reading of "Credo te *Æacida Romanos vincere posse.*" And, even where it would make

the meaning clear, it is a lazy device, the over-use of which is the sure sign of careless or unskilful composition. The true remedy for ambiguity is not punctuation, but re-writing.

Punctuation, it is sometimes said, serves to mark the pauses that would be made in speaking. This is so far true; for by the pause we arrange our spoken words into proper groups, thereby enabling our hearers readily to seize the meaning. But between the punctuation of the pen and that of the voice there is a great difference in degree. By the voice we can express the most delicate shades of thought, while only in the roughest way can the comma, the semicolon, and the other points, imitate its effects. As to how far the attempt at imitation should be carried, every writer will have to use his own discretion; but, whether we point freely or sparingly, we must for the reader's sake point consistently. It should at the same[12] time be borne in mind that the lavish use of points often leads to confusion.

*General Rules.*—Keeping in view the use of punctuation, we can now form two general rules to guide us when we are in doubt which point we should insert, or whether we should insert a point at all.

(1) *The point that will keep the passage most free from ambiguity, or make it easiest to read, is the right point to use.*

(2) *If the passage be perfectly free from ambiguity and be not less easy to understand without any point, let no point be used.*

*The Relativity of Points.*—In order to decide in any given case what point ought to be used, we begin by considering the nature of the pause in itself. But we must do more. We must consider how we have pointed the rest of the passage. The pause that should be marked by a comma in one case, may require a semicolon in another case; the colon may take the place that the semicolon would generally fill. This will be best understood by means of the examples that will afterwards be given. (See Rules XXIII., XXV.)[13]

*Usage.*—Except within somewhat narrow limits, usage does not help us much. Different writers have different methods, and few are consistent. To some extent there is a fair degree of uniformity; for instance, in the placing of colons before quotations, and in the use of

inverted commas. But in many cases there can hardly be said to be any fixed usage, and in these we can freely apply the general rules already laid down. Much might be said for a complete disregard of usage, for a thorough recasting of our system of punctuation. Sooner or later something must be done to relieve the overburdened comma of part of the work which it is expected to perform. Not only is the comma a less effective point than it might be, but the habit of using it for so many purposes is exercising a really mischievous effect on English style. In the meantime, and as a step towards a better system, there is an evident advantage in giving to the existing vague usage a more or less precise form. Nothing more than this has been aimed at in the present work.

In giving rules of punctuation we cannot hope to deal with all, or with nearly all, the cases that [14] may arise in writing. Punctuation is intimately connected with style. As forms of thought are infinite in number, so are the modes of expression; and punctuation, adapting itself to these, is an instrument capable of manipulation in a thousand ways. We can therefore set forth only some typical cases, forming a body of examples to which a little reflection will suggest a variety both of applications and of exceptions.

It will be noticed that we do not take the points exactly in their order of strength. It seemed better to deal with the full stop before passing to the punctuation of the parts of a sentence. Again, it may be said that, strictly speaking, italics do not form part of the subject. But they are at any rate so intimately connected with it that to have passed them over would have been merely pedantic. Even the sections on references to notes and on the correction of proofs may not be considered altogether out of place. As few grammatical terms as possible have been made use of. Some have been found necessary in order to secure the brevity of statement proper to a little work on a little subject.

[15]

## THE FULL STOP

**I. A full stop is placed at the end of every sentence that is neither exclamatory nor interrogative.**

A penal statute is virtually annulled if the penalties which it imposes are regularly remitted as often as they are incurred. The sovereign was undoubtedly competent to remit penalties without limit. He was, therefore, competent to annul virtually a penal statute. It might seem that there could be no serious objection to his doing formally what he might do virtually.

How much should be put into a sentence is rather a matter of style than of punctuation. The tendency of modern literature is in favour of the short sentence. In the prose of Milton and of Jeremy Taylor, the full stop does not come to release the thought till all the circumstances have been grouped around it, and the necessary qualifications made. In Macaulay the[16] circumstances and the qualifications are set out sentence by sentence. So the steps of reasoning in the example which we have given are stated with that distinct pause between each of them which the reader would make if he thought them out for himself. They might be welded together thus:

Seeing that a penal statute is virtually annulled if the penalties which it imposes are regularly remitted as often as they are incurred, and seeing that the sovereign was undoubtedly competent to remit penalties without limit, it follows that he was competent to annul virtually a penal statute; and it might seem that there could be no serious objection to his doing formally what he might do virtually.

Both forms are correct in point of punctuation. Which is the better form is a question of style. Take another example:

The sides of the mountain were covered with trees; the banks of the brooks were diversified with flowers; every blast shook spices from the rocks; and every mouth dropped fruits upon the ground.

There is here an advantage in putting these four statements together, instead of making four separate sentences. We can more

easily com[17]bine the details, and so form a single picture—a picture of fertility.

**II. As a rule the full stop is not to be inserted till the sentence be grammatically complete. But some parts of the sentence necessary to make it grammatically complete may be left for the reader to supply.**

It is well said, in every sense, that a man's religion is the chief fact with regard to him. A man's or a nation of men's. By religion I do not mean here the church-creed which he professes, the articles of faith which he will sign and, in words or otherwise, assert. Not this wholly, in many cases not this at all.

**III. When a sentence is purposely left unfinished, the dash takes the place of the full stop.** (See Rule XL.)

"Excuse me," said I, "but I am a sort of collector." "Not Income-tax?" cried His Majesty, hastily removing his pipe from his lips.

**IV. A full stop is placed after most abbreviations, after initial letters, and after ordinal numbers in Roman characters.**

[18]

Gen. i. 20; two lbs.; A.D. 1883; 3 p.m.; &c., and etc.; M.D., J. S. Mill; William III., King of England; MS., LL.D. (not M.S. and L.L.D.).

Note that the use of the full stop in these cases does not prevent another point from being used immediately after it. But if they occur at the end of a sentence, another full stop is not added; or, more correctly, it may be said that Rule IV. does not apply at the end of a sentence.

"Mr," "Messrs," "Dr" — abbreviations which retain the last letter of the whole word — are written without a point.

[19]

## THE COMMA

**V. The comma indicates a short pause in a sentence. It is used when we wish to separate words that stand together, and at the same time to stop as little as possible the flow of the sentence.**

When the earl reached his own province, he found that preparations had been made to repel him.

Though it is difficult, or almost impossible, to reclaim a savage, bred from his youth to war and the chase, to the restraints and the duties of civilized life, nothing is more easy or common than to find men who have been educated in all the habits and comforts of improved society, willing to exchange them for the wild labours of the hunter and the fisher.

**VI. Where there is no danger of obscurity, the subject must not be separated from the predicate by any point.**

The eminence of your station gave you a commanding prospect of your duty.

[20]

**VII. When the subject is long, a comma may be placed after it.**

To say that he endured without a murmur the misfortune that now came upon him, is to say only what his previous life would have led us to expect.

In every sentence the subject, whether expressed in one word or in several words, must be grasped as a whole; and, when the subject is long, one is often assisted in doing this by having a point to mark its termination. The eye at once observes the separating line. Note the corresponding pause in the reading of such sentences.

**VIII. When the subject consists of several parts, *e.g.*, of several nouns, a comma is placed after the last part.**

A few daring jests, a brawl, and a fatal stab, make up the life of Marlowe.

Time, money, and friends, were needed to carry on the work.

This rule will appear reasonable if we consider an apparent exception to it. When the last noun sums up all the others, or marks the highest point of a climax, no comma is placed after it.

Freedom, honour, religion was at stake.

[21]

If "religion" be regarded as marking the highest point of a climax, the predicate is read with "religion," and with it alone. When so great a thing as religion is said to be at stake, everything else is dropped out of sight, or is held to be included. But write the three names as if they were of equal importance; the comma should then be inserted:

Freedom, honour, and religion, were at stake.

But it is not necessary to use a point in such a sentence as this: "Time and tide wait for no man." For we see without the aid of a point that the predicate is to be read with the two nouns equally.

The principle might be applied also in cases like the following, though few writers carry it so far:

It was the act of a high-spirited, generous, just nation.

It was the act of a high-spirited, generous, and just, nation.

**IX. Dependent clauses are generally separated from the rest of the sentence in[22] which they occur. The usual point is the comma.**

Be his motives what they may, he must soon disperse his followers.

This relation of your army to the crown will, if I am not greatly mistaken, become a serious dilemma in your politics.

Of course, this rule must be qualified by the rules for the stronger points, especially by those for the semicolon and the colon. It is often necessary to separate the clause from the rest of the sentence by a strong point.

Exceptions.—(I) **No point is needed if either the dependent clause or the principal clause be short.**

He would be shocked if he were to know the truth.

But if the dependent clause be inserted parenthetically, it is marked off by commas or the other marks of parenthesis, however short it may be. (See Rule X.)

If the sentence last quoted were inverted, a comma would be placed after the dependent clause.

If he were to know the truth, he would be shocked.

[23]

In the first form of this example, "he would be shocked" is a definite, finished statement, the necessary qualification to which should follow with as little pause as possible. But in the inverted form, the first part of the sentence—"if he were to know the truth"—is not a finished statement, and the mind may pause for a moment before going on to the consequence, knowing that the consequence must follow.

**(2) No point is needed if there be a very close grammatical connection between the dependent clause and some word or words preceding it.**

They had so long brooded over their own distresses that they knew nothing of how the world was changing around them.

Note that by the word "so" the clause "that they knew nothing" is joined very closely to the previous part of the sentence; and that the two clauses "that they knew nothing" and "how the world was changing around them," are even more closely joined to one another by the pre[24]position "of." For the same reason, where the object is a clause, there is no point before it.

He confessed to us that he had not thought over the matter.

A useful distinction will afterwards be drawn between the different kinds of relative clauses. (Rule XIV.)

**X. Words thrown in so as to interrupt slightly the flow of a sentence are marked off by commas.**

He resolved, therefore, to visit the prisoner early in the morning.

This, I think, is the right view of the case.

The first ideas of beauty formed by the mind are, in all probability, derived from colours.

The following are some of the words and phrases that come under this rule: *therefore, too, indeed, however, moreover, then, accordingly, consequently; in short, in fine, in truth, in fact, to a certain extent, all things considered.*

This rule of high pointing should be applied very sparingly, and might really be restricted to cases like the "I think" of the second example. Nowadays the tendency is against[25] the pointing of such words as "therefore" and "indeed."

Where the words thrown in make a very distinct break in the sentence, they should be pointed off by means of the dash or of brackets.

**XI. Where two parts of a sentence have some words in common, which are not expressed for each of them, but are given only when the words in which they differ have been separately stated, the second part is marked off by commas.**

His classification is different from, and more comprehensive than, any other which we have met.

This foundation is a nursing-mother of lay, as distinguished from religious, oratorios.

These examples come within the principle of Rule X.

**XII. When words are common to two or more parts of a sentence, and are expressed only in one part, a comma is often used to show that they are omitted in the other parts.**

London is the capital of England; Paris, of France; Berlin, of Germany.

In the worst volume of elder date, the historian[26] may find something to assist or direct his enquiries; the antiquarian, something to elucidate what requires illustration; the philologist, something to insert in the margin of his dictionary.

Though many writers constantly punctuate contracted sentences in this way, it is well not to insert the comma when the meaning is equally clear without it. It is unnecessary in the following sentence:

Saul hath slain his thousands, and David his ten thousands.

**XIII. Words placed out of their natural position in the sentence are often followed by a comma.**

(1) The object is usually placed after the verb; when placed at the beginning of the sentence, it should be separated from the subject by a comma, unless the meaning would otherwise be perfectly clear and be readily seized.

The proportions of belief and of unbelief in the human mind in such cases, no human judgment can determine.

There is the same reason for inserting the comma in such cases as there is for inserting[27] it after a long subject. Moreover, there is often need of some device to remove the ambiguities that are caused by inversion. In English, the meaning of words is so greatly determined by their position that, in altering the usual arrangement of a sentence, there is risk of being misunderstood. The danger of inserting the point in this case is that the object may be read with the words going before, and not with its own verb. If there is a possibility of this, the point should not be used.

Of course no point should be placed after the object in such a sentence as the following:—"One I love, and the other I hate."

(2) An adverbial phrase, that is a phrase used as an adverb, is usually placed after the verb; when it begins the sentence, a comma follows it unless it is very short.

From the ridge a little way to the east, one can easily trace the windings of the river.

In order to gain his point, he did not hesitate to use deception.

In ordinary circumstances I should have acted differently.

No point would be used in the above sentences,[28] if the adverbial phrases occurred in their usual position.

He did not hesitate to use deception in order to gain his point.

Nor is any point used when, as often happens in such sentences, the verb precedes the subject.

Not very far from the foot of the mountain lies the village we hope to reach.

(3) An adjective phrase, that is a phrase used as an adjective, is usually placed immediately after the word which it qualifies; when it appears in any other place, a comma is often usefully placed before it.

A question was next put to the assembly, of supreme importance at such a moment.

The phrase "of supreme importance at such a moment" is to be taken along with "question"; the comma shows that it is not to be taken along with "assembly." There is here a further reason for the point, inasmuch as the phrase acquires from its position almost the importance of an independent statement. But, where the connexion between the adjective phrase and the[29] substantive is very close, and where there is no risk of ambiguity, no point is to be used. "The morning was come of a mighty day"—such a sentence needs no point. Observe also that co-ordinate adjective phrases take a comma before them, wherever they are placed. (See next rule.)

**XIV. Adjective clauses and contracted adjective clauses are marked off by commas, if they are used parenthetically or coordinately; no point is used if they are used restrictively.[1]**

The "Religio Laici," which borrows its title from the "Religio Medici" of Browne, is almost the only work of Dryden which can be considered as a voluntary effusion.

That sentiment of homely benevolence was worth all the splendid sayings that are recorded of kings.

The advocates for this revolution, not satisfied with exaggerating the vices of their ancient government, strike at the fame of their country itself.

The ships bound on these voyages were not advertised.[30]

Chapter VII., where we stopped reading, is full of interest.

The chapter where we stopped reading is full of interest.

We must explain this distinction at some length; for, on the one hand, it is hardly ever observed, and, on the other hand, almost every sentence that we write furnishes an example of it.