

Chapter 15 Stop, Pause, Consider: The Role of Punctuation

Additional paper or project ideas

1. In chapter 15, we discussed how some constructions are actually interrogative in their function but aren't formed up with interrogative syntax or a question word (e.g., How, Why, When, What). Similarly, some interrogatives in conversation do not actually have a rise in intonation at the end and instead show falling final intonation (e.g., Can you give me a call later on.) Record a conversation between two of your friends. Transcribe the questions. Analyze the different types of constructions. Are they yes/no-interrogatives, declaratives that function like questions, wh- information seeking, wh- open ended? Does the speaker's intonation rise at the end of the sentence? Design a data sheet with your findings. Then, write up your report to share with your fellow students. What does this mean? Perhaps your findings help us understand punctuation for dialogues within stories or screenwriting? Maybe it helps us understand how punctuation patterns are conveyed in both written and spoken English.
2. The following letter is taken from Lynne Truss's book *Eats, Shoots & Leaves: The Zero Tolerance Approach to Punctuation* (2004). Decide what kind of letter it is. Add punctuation to clear up the meaning of the letter.

Dear Jack I want a man who knows what love is all about you are generous kind thoughtful people who are not like you admit to being useless and inferior you have ruined me for other men I yearn for you I have no feelings whatsoever when we're apart I can be forever happy will you let me be yours Jill

Depending on how you punctuated the letter, it could be a break-up letter or a declaration of love. Here are Truss's two versions:

*Dear Jack,
I want a man who knows what love is all about. You are generous, kind, thoughtful. People who are not like you admit to being useless and inferior. You have ruined me for other men. I yearn for you. I have no feelings whatsoever when we're apart. I can be forever happy – will you let me be yours?
Jill*

*Dear Jack,
I want a man who knows what love is. All about you are generous, kind, thoughtful people, who are not like you. Admit to being useless and inferior. You have ruined me. For other men, I yearn! For you, I have no feelings whatsoever. When we're apart, I can be forever happy. Will you let me be?
Yours,
Jill*

Now it's your turn: Compose two texts moving where moving around punctuation marks changes the meaning. Are you up to this challenge? Alternatively, you can create a series of sentences for which their meaning changes due to punctuation choices. Use the following as models:

- I love my parents, God and Taylor Swift versus I love my parents, God, and Taylor Swift
- Let's eat, Grandma versus Let's eat Grandma.

3. Read Richard Gonzalez's account of Maine dairy drivers who won a large settlement (\$5 million!) over the placement of the Oxford (or serial) comma within their contract at NPR's website from February 8, 2018, [*Maine Dairy Drivers Settle Overtime Case That Hinged on an Absent Comma*](#). Use Chapter 15 to create a handout for attorneys to use when they are writing contracts to help them choose carefully the punctuation. Make sure to include sample sentences to illustrate meaning differences in punctuation placement.
4. Create a survey about the serial comma (aka the Oxford Comma). Come up with five sentence pairs that differ only in whether or not the Oxford Comma is used, such as this one (Chapter 15 will give you more ideas as you create your sentences, too!):
 - We invited my friends, Johnathan and Taylor to the party.
 - We invited my friends, Jonathan, and Taylor to the party.

Then, poll participants about which of the sentences in each pair they prefer. Next, ask your participants how they would rate their knowledge about grammar (excellent, very good, good, fair). Then, collate your results. Does a higher rating of one's grammar correlate with a preference for the Oxford comma? Why? Why not? Compare your results to the results reported here and discuss how they differ and/or are similar.

Hickey, W. (Jun. 17, 2014). Elitist, Superfluous, Or Popular? We Polled Americans on the Oxford Comma. <https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/elitist-superfluous-or-popular-we-polled-americans-on-the-oxford-comma/>

5. Analyze how you and your friends use punctuation marks in text messages. Review your own text messages and list all examples of question marks, periods, exclamation points. Make sure to also include examples where there is no punctuation mark at all (for instance, no final period). Do you and your friends use punctuation marks in the same ways? How about people you text with who are older than you? Can you discern a different pattern of how they use punctuation in text messages? Finally, compare your results to Gretchen McCulloch's findings in *Because Internet*.

McCulloch, G. (2019). *Because Internet*. Penguin Publishing Group.
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