

## **Punctuation, punctuation, punctuation**

**A light touch with punctuation has always made sense, whether you're scratching out a sonnet on velum with a quill pen, or texting a mate on your mobile. It's meant to enhance communication, not hinder it.**

But light doesn't mean non-existent, or simplistic. There are a whole range of dots and squiggles that are worth investigating if you want to enhance the meaning and narrative flow of your text.

The English poet Samuel Coleridge had a deft way with the old semi colon, much maligned these days and often overlooked in favour of its brasher cousin, the full colon.

Coleridge wasn't just good at the rhyming stuff but could string a sentence together like nobody's business. Sometimes his sentences were so long that people were born, grew up, got married, had children and died before you got to the end of one.

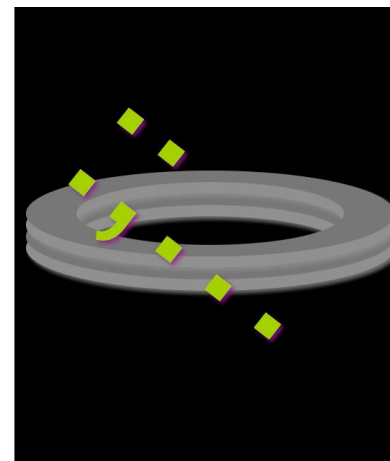
**But they were good sentences, because he did a good job with the punctuation and his special favourite, the semi colon. Punctuation allows a sentence to breathe. It gives it lightness and life and allows you to get to the end with the sense intact.**

Semi colons are a great way of stringing together a sequence of thoughts and observations linked to the same starting point; like carriages on the 9.27am out of Glasgow, they whistle along at a fair old lick and all leading the reader to their destination.

The full colon, by comparison, is more emphatic. It allows you to pause but still take the preceding part of the sentence with you. For example, you can use a full colon to introduce a list.

But punctuation was designed for a different time and space. Modern media, be it web, email or text, has a different rhyme and rhythm to it. Punctuation has to acknowledge that people see rather than read text on the web.

People do read on the web, but generally they read less. Instead they scan and flick their eyes about, searching for what they want and using links to dodge between pages.



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They read “nuggets” of text. Only seriously pausing when they’ve struck information gold. Good punctuation can explore the visual dimension of web text to good effect.

Initially, a lot of web sites threw the baby out with the bath water. You were lucky if you saw full stops in the right place, never mind the judicious use of the odd comma.

People became obsessed with bullet points, with a few full stops and the odd full colon flung in for good measure.

To wit:

- A bit of this.
- A bit of that.
- A dash of the other.

There are two things wrong with the end of the last paragraph. In punctuation terms it’s a mess and, more importantly, it’s difficult to read. All those full stops and capital letters just get in the way.

Try this:

- it’s clearer
- it’s less aggressive
- and it’s easier to read.

Full stops end sentences. After a full stop you can get stuck in with a capital letter. After a full colon you don’t need a capital letter unless you are using a proper noun, such as Glasgow or Henry.

**While on the subject of CAPITAL LETTERS, there is a tendency to overuse these on the web. Don’t.**

Like bullet points they tend to slow down the narrative flow and navigation of the text. They are also harder to read, which is why good printed material for the partially sighted tends to avoid them. (Those rightly considering the implications of disability legislation and the use of web sites by partially sighted and registered blind visitors should take note.)

Write a word in lower case and you can read it more easily because you take in the whole word - like a silhouette - and recognise it.

## **The not so small print**

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Use capital letters and you have to rely on the slower fundamentals involved in reading – recognising each character and syllable and building the word's meaning from them.

If you text a message using a mobile phone, writing something out in capital letters is interpreted by SMS cognoscenti as shouting and creates a similar visual impression on the web (where this protocol actually started out as chat room "netiquette"). You may be striving for clarity and impact but what you're giving is colder and more aggressive.

Because a line of text is more readable than a block, the simple solution might seem to be lots of bullet points. But you use up a lot of space dividing copy into bullet points.

Now look at those bullet points in that earlier paragraph again. To the scanning eye they look a bit like full stops hovering a little above the line and starting a piece of text rather than ending it. The eye hovers on them as a way of navigating text but if you use too many of them you slow the whole "flick and search" process down and trivialise their impact.

Because of the visual nature of the web people can dismiss the copy element before they have read what's in front of them, simply because of the way the copy is "constructed", or the way it looks on the page. They very quickly learn to ignore things.

**We would also point to the importance of clear – rather than clever - headings that impart information and "plain" text, where you don't have to peel away a layer of artifice (and waste time) to get at the meaning.**

That doesn't mean that you can't spend time creating good, well-written copy. Humour and character never go amiss. Just don't try too hard. A carefully crafted, well punctuated, but short, paragraph, no more than three lines, will flow well and make sense.

**Flowing text is also warmer. The web is a cold medium, you have to heat it up a bit if you want to interact and establish rapport with your readers.**