

A passion for punctuation



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Luke McBratney finds reports that the semicolon is dying much exaggerated

The semicolon is the Marmite of punctuation marks. To some, like Oliver Pritchett, it has 'a certain discreet charm' (Pritchett 2003). To others, its attractions go further. Hilary Mantel recounts the feelings of journalist, writer and revolutionary Camille Desmoulins (1760–94): 'I wonder why I ever bothered with sex; there's nothing in this breathing world so gratifying as an artfully placed semicolon' (Mantel 1992).

Not everyone shares this passion. As Lynn Truss explains in her international bestseller *Eats, Shoots & Leaves* (2003), those who develop a fondness for semicolons become 'an embarrassment to their families and friends'. Kurt Vonnegut, in a chapter entitled 'Here is a lesson in creative writing', issued the following instruction: 'First rule: Do not use semicolons ... All they do is show you've been to college' (Vonnegut 2005).

An endangered species

Now comes the news that even university students are turning up their noses at semicolons. A survey of the 500,000-strong London Student Network this year found that 67% of respondents never or rarely use the semicolon. Furthermore, the research, from the language learning app Babel, termed it 'an "endangered" punctuation mark', noting that 'Gen Z is not rejecting the semicolon; rather, they fear using it incorrectly' (quoted in Corfield 2025).

And perhaps the fear is spreading, since there seems to be a trend in contemporary novels to flee

from punctuation. For example, Sally Rooney, in novels such as *Normal People* (2018), punctuates sparingly and dispenses with quotation marks altogether. This technique blends narration and dialogue, creating an immersive reading experience and making the text flow like conversation, drawing the reader into the story.

Bernardine Evaristo goes further in *Girl, Woman, Other* (2019), adopting an even sparser, freer use. As Clare Bucknell explains, 'Evaristo uses line breaks to convey experiences that would be difficult to talk about in full sentences [...] a hybrid "disruptive" style that pushes prose towards free verse, allowing direct and indirect speech to bleed into each other and sentences to run on without full stops' (Bucknell 2019).

Punctuation through the ages

Yet before we bury the semicolon or dispense with quotation marks, it's worth remembering that language is always evolving; experiments with punctuation are nothing new. In *Money* (1984), Martin Amis wrote an entire novel with only a single use of a semicolon (in the very last sentence), and the 22,000-or-so words of James Joyce's final section of *Ulysses* (1922) contain only eight sentences, punctuated largely through rhythm and the repetition of words such as 'yes' and 'and'. Such styles of punctuation in some ways resemble those from earlier stages of the English language.

In the earliest English writings, punctuation was used not for grammatical functions but for oral reading cues. *Beowulf* (c. 975), for example, uses puncta (dots) to indicate pauses. Indeed, for William

Shakespeare (1564–1616), whose punctuation was added by editors, punctuation was still a matter of rhetoric rather than grammar. His contemporary, Ben Jonson, in *The English Grammar* (published posthumously in 1640), treated punctuation marks as guides for oral delivery. He terms the semicolon ‘a subdistinction’ and defines it as ‘a mean breathing’ — that is, a medium-length breath, between the comma and the colon in terms of duration. It was only with the writings of later grammarians, like Robert Lowth (*A Short Introduction to English Grammar*, 1762) and Lindley Murray (*English Grammar*, 1795), that the punctuation rules we learn today were standardised.

Punctuation matters

So, does this mean we should follow the lead of some of our best novelists, bid farewell to the semicolon, and abandon the strictures of grammatical rules that were formulated a mere four hundred years ago? Maybe not. Like experimental artists who excelled at representational art before they embraced abstraction, writers like Joyce, Rooney and Evaristo have mastered the rules they break, and they do so to achieve particular effects. As Picasso is said to have remarked: ‘It took me four years to paint like Raphael, but a lifetime to paint like a child.’

Furthermore, a deep understanding of punctuation enhances reading, writing and literary performance; even the humble semicolon has its part to play. And while the exact use of punctuation may not bring every writer the joys of Camille Desmoulins, it should help readers follow their ideas and appreciate more of their intended effects.

Activities

Following punctuation in poems

When reading a poem for the first time:

- Notice that verse, though arranged in lines and stanzas, is still made up of sentences.
- Pay close attention to punctuation marks — especially semicolons and full stops.
- Read clause by clause and sentence by sentence to follow meaning, rather than

becoming distracted by imagery or other figurative effects.

- Pause in accordance with the punctuation; use it in the old-fashioned way, as a guide for reading the poem aloud.

On second and subsequent readings:

- Continue to follow the punctuation for sense.
- Linger on imagery and other effects, now placing them in the wider context of the poem’s meaning.

This two-stage approach helps you understand more deeply, appreciate more fully, and write about poems more insightfully.

Develop your expertise

Reinforce your understanding of punctuation by studying the guidance from Professor Larry Trask on the University of Sussex’s website:

<https://tinyurl.com/5d47pc79>

Test your understanding

Take the semicolon quiz in the *Guardian*:

<https://tinyurl.com/ype7r62b>

Further reading

Bucknell, C. (2019) ‘Fusion Fiction’, *London Review of Books*, 24 October:

<https://tinyurl.com/4fs2x79h>.

Corfield, G. (2025) ‘Why the semicolon could die out’, *Daily Telegraph*, 19 May.

Mantel, H. (1992) *A Place of Greater Safety*, Viking.

Pritchett, O. (2003) ‘Pay attention: it’s important!’, *Daily Telegraph*, 24 November.

Truss, L. (2003) *Eats, Shoots & Leaves: The Zero Tolerance Approach to Punctuation*, Profile.

Vonnegut, K. (2005) *A Man Without a Country*, Seven Stories Press.

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