

Hello! My name is punctuation. You have probably heard of me. You were likely taught about me at school at a very young age. You see me every day in every piece of text you come across. You probably don't even realize I am there sometimes. However I am affecting the way you read and interpret your text. You would probably think that something as important as punctuation would have existed since the beginning of writing. However if you look back in time you would not recognize me. How punctuation looked, and how text was written has undergone a wide range of changes since the invention of writing.

The first forms of writing were logographic or syllabic (Bolter, 2001) which means the writing was primarily made up of glyphs representing ideas or syllables. In this system of writing there is little need to worry about punctuation or the spacing between words. Each glyph is its own entity and is interpreted one glyph at a time. As the western world started moving towards alphabetic writing we begin to see experimentation in how a person was to read the text. For a period of time in ancient Greece the way you read was through a process called boustrophedon.(Bolter, 2001) To us living in the modern western world this style of reading seems very counter intuitive. Boustrophedon literally means to turn like an ox. ("Boustrophedon", 2015) This meant that the ancient Greek reader would read left to right for one line and then right to left on the next line. To add to the difficulty in reading this ancient style of writing, there was no spacing between the words. This meant that the reader would need to parse out where one word ended and another started.

Over time the Greeks eventually started to introduce punctuation into their texts. Starting with a system of dots used to tell the reader the length of pause between sections of writing. The reason this was introduced was to aide in oration. As people who are taught to read silently from an early age we tend to forget that text was born from an oral society. Text in ancient Greece was meant as a way of storing information to be recited either to a group or to oneself (Ong, 1982). Therefore they wanted their text to read how it would be spoken out loud. Since the Greeks were reading from a continuous string of letters it was very difficult to read aloud from these texts without some form of punctuation. Let's try it. I will write a couple of sentences strung together in a continuous line of letters, and you will try to read it out loud.

Did that sounds natural?

Now let's try it again and this time I will add the system of dots introduced by Aristophanes in 200BCE ("Punctuation", 2015). The height of the dot dictates the length of pause. If the dot is at the bottom it is a short pause, Equivalent to our semicolon. If the dot is in the middle it a slightly longer pause similar to our comma. Finally if the dot is at the top, it is a full pause similar to our modern day period (Wingo, 1963). So here is another string of words with Aristophanes' punctuation.

As you can see simply adding this system of dots allows you to read aloud in a more natural manner. I will allow that it is not perfect.

As time progressed more symbols were added, the "paragraphos" for instance was used to denote important parts of a passage. The romans tried experimenting with putting points between each word however eventually this practice died out and the romans moved back towards the continuous script. ("Punctuation", 2015)

The next large change to the world of punctuation was the arrival of Christianity and the fall of the western Romans. With the start of the Middle Ages we begin seeing larger changes being made to how text was written. The need for punctuation was coming from the increase in the production of bibles. You may be wondering how punctuation and the bible are linked. Once again it lies in the oral nature of reading. Since the bible was a text to be read out loud, it needed to be easy to read. This led to many new additions to these texts allowing for ease of oration. St. Jerome in the vulgate bibles introduced the idea of having every sentence be given its own line. We still didn't have word spacing however things were starting to look closer to what we see today. ("Punctuation", 2015)

As Christianity started taking root in Western Europe we come across another issue. As you move further away from Rome and its use of Latin and start encountering cultures whose principal language is not Roman Latin you start having difficulty in text interpretation. Since we are still hundreds of years away from the invention of the printing press, the process through which each new text was produced was fairly laborious. In monasteries monk would sit in scriptoriums and meticulously copy one text onto a new manuscript. This was done through carefully and quietly reciting passages aloud to themselves while copying. As more and more of these monks no longer understand the Latin they were reading aloud, it becomes incredibly difficult to decipher the passages. (Clement, 1997) Imagine the difficulty in reading aloud a passage in a language you don't really understand, without any word spacing or standardized punctuation. Remember previously in this video when we tried reading aloud from a continuous line of text, we are going to try this again. This time however we are going to be reading aloud from a continuous line of text in a different language. I have written a couple of sentences out in French using no word spacing and only using the previously mentioned punctuation marks.

Wasn't that difficult?

The monks in Ireland came up with an ingenious solution to this problem of decoding, they started to add word spacing. We will try this again with spaces between each word.

Isn't that easier.

You may not understand a word of what you just said and your pronunciation may be off, however you are able to clearly recite the passage. As the Middle Ages progress you see a move towards further systemization of punctuation. Charlemagne the famous Carolingian king from the 8th century, introduced a systemized form of writing that had punctuation, word spacing, and introduced the beginnings of upper and lower case letters. His style of writing was called Carolingian miniscule (Carolingian miniscule, 2015). this was an impressive idea as Charlemagne saw the benefits of having a standard system of writing to be used across his empire. This allowed all scholarly work to be easily read and transmitted within his kingdom. (Clement, 1997)

The next gigantic leap forward in the life of punctuation and text comes with one the most famous inventions in history. The printing press. The printing press is commonly credited with increasing the spread of ideas and kick starting the renaissance (Keep, Mclaughlin & Parmar, 2000). Importantly in the world of punctuation it gave rise to the need for standardized punctuation. It is during this time we see the rise of the modern day comma, the period, and even the semi colon ("Punctuation", 2015). By the end of the 17th century we have the stable of marks we use today.

It is fascinating to think that these little marks on pieces of paper have had a profound effect on the transmission of information and on the increase in literacy. It is only when you start looking back at the ancient texts with their lack of spacing and punctuation that you realize the drastic difference it makes in terms of the flow of words. We tend now a days to think of words as visual units (Ong, 1982) and the way we write text and use punctuation, points to that.

It will be interesting to see where punctuation moves from here. Already we are seeing a generation that is used to using emoticons in their everyday communication. Possibly these new graphical pieces will soon become common place in the texts of the future. Who knows, all I can state is that punctuation has found a way to help everytime we as humans have found a new way to view and read text.

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