
BBC LEARNING ENGLISH

6 Minute English

Does punctuation matter?



NB: This is not a word-for-word transcript

Alice

Hello and welcome to 6 Minute English. I'm Alice...

Neil

And I'm Neil.

Alice

So, Neil, you texted me earlier and didn't put a full stop at the end.

Neil

You're right, I never use full stops in texts – they're much too **stuffy** – or formal. Texting is like conversation and you don't need lots of punctuation.

Alice

Well, punctuation is the subject of today's show. And I know I'm a bit of a stickler about this, but I think you're letting the standards of written English language slip.

Neil

A **stickler** is someone who insists on a certain way of doing a particular thing. Surely you aren't such a stickler for punctuation rules that you want to stop the evolution of English, Alice?

Alice

No, of course not, but I am a stickler when people don't follow the rules of punctuation because this makes written text ambiguous or difficult to understand.

Neil

Ambiguous means when something has two or more meanings. Can you give me some examples of punctuation making text easier to understand?

Alice

Alright then, here you are: Let's eat Grandma.

Neil

Ugh! It brings to mind the children's story Little Red Riding Hood, about a girl, her grandmother and a hungry wolf. Is that the wolf talking to another wolf friend of his?

Alice

No, it's the girl, Red Riding Hood, talking to her grandmother. And with a well-placed comma it becomes: Let's eat, Grandma. Without proper punctuation the sentence is ambiguous. Now, before we look at more reasons why punctuation is important, let's have today's quiz question.

Neil

OK. What is another word for the keyboard sign that represents a paragraph? Is it...

a) pilcrow?

b) bodkin?

or c) pica?

Alice

I'll say c) pica.

Neil

Well, we'll find out later in the show if you got that right or not.

Alice

Moving on now, punctuation was invented by the Ancient Greeks. They used a series of dots to indicate different lengths of pauses. A short unit of text was a comma, a longer unit was a colon, and a complete sentence was a periodos. We used these terms to name our punctuation marks – although they actually refer to the clauses not to the dots themselves.

Neil

So early punctuation wasn't about grammar, then?

Alice

No, it was about public speaking. The different dots indicated different lengths of pauses: short, medium, and long. These pauses broke the text up so it was easier to read and therefore easier to understand.

Neil

OK, let's hear from the punctuation expert, Keith Houston, who is author of *Shady Characters: Ampersands, Interrobangs and Other Typographical Curiosities*. Here he's talking on BBC Radio 4's programme Word of Mouth.

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Keith Houston, author of *Shady Characters: Ampersands, Interrobangs and Other Typographical Curiosities*

Punctuation started off being all about rhetoric – about speech – but we started to assign rules, I think around about the 8th century or so. We started to associate the marks, not just with pauses, but with the actual grammatical units that were used to punctuate. So, a comma wasn't just a dot that meant, pause for this length of time. It now marked out a clause, you know, it marked out a sort of consistent logical bit of writing.

Alice

So **rhetoric** – or the art of persuasive speaking – was very important to the Greeks and to the Romans. And to be persuasive, you need to be understood. And these little punctuation marks helped the speaker to deliver their text more effectively.

Neil

Later on, these marks were given grammatical functions. The comma marks out a **clause** – or grammatical unit containing a subject and a verb – as well as telling the reader to pause briefly.

Alice

Are you beginning to see why being **sloppy** – or careless – with punctuation isn't a good thing, Neil?

Neil

Yes, I am. Though recent research into texting and punctuation suggests that people consider messages ending in full stops to be less sincere than ones without.

Alice

Really? Well, now might be a good time to hear about how it can be hard to make writing unambiguous. We can misinterpret the written word, even with punctuation to guide us. Here's Keith Houston again, talking to Michael Rosen, presenter of Word of Mouth.

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Michael Rosen and Keith Houston

MR: Quite often I notice on Twitter and places like that people misunderstand irony. I mean because we only have text in front of us not intonation. So do we need an irony punctuation – 'hello, I'm being ironic now' – do we need that?

KH: You might say that emoticons are the best way to go about that – a little winking emoticon – you know, semicolon, dash, closing parenthesis.

MR: Oh yes, yes, of course - they've invented all these with the punctuation that we have on the keyboard.

Neil

Irony means using words to mean something that is the opposite of its **literal** – or most usual – meaning. But when we're online – using email or Twitter – you don't hear the words, and that's why it can be hard to know what feelings the writer intended.

Alice

That's right. When we use **emoticons** – facial expressions made out of keyboard characters – we can signpost the feelings we intend.

Neil

Now, Alice, remember I asked you: What is another word for the keyboard sign that represents a paragraph? Is it a) pilcrow, b) bodkin or c) pica?

Alice

Yes, I said pica.

Neil

And you were wrong, I'm afraid. The right answer is pilcrow, which comes from the Greek word 'paragraphos'. The earliest reference of the modern 'pilcrow' is from 1440 with the Middle English word 'pylcrafte'.

Alice

Oh dear, sad face ☹. I hate it when I get the quiz question wrong. Now, can we hear the words we learned today?

Neil

Yes, they are:

stuffy

stickler

rhetoric

clause

sloppy

irony

literal

emoticons

Alice

Well, that's the end of today's 6 Minute English. Please join us again soon!

Both

Bye!

Vocabulary

stuffy

formal

stickler

somebody who insists on a certain way of doing a particular thing

rhetoric

the art of persuasive speaking

clause

grammatical unit containing a subject and a verb

sloppy

careless

irony

using words to mean something that is the opposite of its most usual meaning

literal

the usual meaning of a word or phrase

emoticons

facial expressions made out of keyboard characters