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“Quote”?

The Humble Hyphen, Paragon of Sacrifice

The Serial Comma: Sentence Killer or Content Savior?

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Grammar

"Quote"?

by

Charlotte White

Recently, I had dinner with a distinctly Anglophobic friend of mine.

"What do they have against the letter 'Z', anyway?" she quipped, removing an unsightly bit of parsley from a bicuspid. "You know, 'criticise' with an 's', 'hypnotise' with an 's', 'categorise', 'theorise', and all that." For dramatic effect, she slowly hissed each sibilant to make sure that I got the point. "And what's with the word 'Zed'?"

I calmly toyed with my linguini, waiting for her outburst to finish.

"Then there's that 'no period' after appellations stuff! Where is *that* coming from? You tell me..."

I had to admit--she *did* have a point about the period. But it got me thinking about another British habit, one with which I heartily agree.

Quoted material has always been a chore. As I've discussed previously, the quotation mark is an imperious pest that has caused trouble for sentence structure since time immemorial. Throw in sarcasm, word references, titles, or quotes within quotes, and there's a punctuational labyrinth that can intimidate the hardest of wordsmiths.

In a muscle-flexing display of authority, American grammarians insist that *any* punctuation must go inside the quotation marks. This is all well and good for *spoken* material, since the punctuation is part of the speech, but it is misapplied when used otherwise.

**A delirious little waif,
lost at sea amongst the
enemy and the anemone.**

Consider the following examples.

- *The sign in the shop window said "Closed," which was somewhat unusual.* This is the punctuation required by teachers throughout the U.S. However, the sign did NOT say "Closed,". It said "Closed". We can be quite sure that the comma was absolutely nowhere to be found in the message.
- *The shopkeeper slammed the door and said, "Closed."* In this case, the period is clearly part of the speaker's rather rude remark, and it therefore belongs within the quotes.

- *The name of the shop was "Retro!"* Ah, now we get into the essence of confusion. Does the store name include the exclamation point? Or is the sentence meant to convey astonishment?
- *A shop named "Retro!?"*? Imagine the ungainly sight if we yielded to the American "experts"! We'd be looking at this hideous construction:
A shop named "Retro!?"

A punctuation mark encountering quotes is a delirious little waif, lost at sea amongst the enemy and the anemone. Not sure which way to turn or to whom it belongs, it begs for a life preserver of common sense. Simply ask yourself whether the mark punctuates the quote or the sentence. If the poor thing is part of the quotation, put it inside, but if it's a component of the sentence structure, let it go outside to play.

The Brits are sensibly fastidious when it comes to their language. It's all about clarity, as they well know, and rules should guide rather than obstruct.

But I still don't get the "no period".



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Grammar

The Humble Hyphen, Paragon of Sacrifice

by

Charlotte White

It doesn't act rough-and-tumble by announcing, "Hey, hold it right there!" the way its big brother, the dash, does. It's neither as divisive as the forward slash nor as hyper as the backward slash. And it's surely not as format-conscious as the scholarly underscore. But the hyphen has its place atop the qwerty keyboard and, hence, in our hearts.

Not to be outdone by the double-dotted dieresis (fave of the faux European set), our mighty li'l hero trundles onward, quietly shouldering the dual responsibilities of syllabification and compounding. And yet, for all its labor, the hyphen still has to contend with the everchanging (once, *ever-changing*) evolution of dictionarial whimsy, often falling victim to author laziness or reader indifference.

There's such resistance from within its own community, too--nouns who refuse to play well together, adjectives who don't see why they have to be hyphenated to form adverbs, and prefixes who insist that they aren't confusing in the vowel sense. Then there are the verbs, those snooty know-it-alls who tell hyphens to take a hike whenever they're around.

**Trouper that it is,
the hyphen stepped
up to the challenge.**

Oh sure, the quotation mark gets all the glamour and publicity. Prime parking, right next to "Enter". No one can say anything without it being around. It's even got its own hand signal, and it can convey sarcasm and irony, too. But it's a showoff, rather like a spoiled child who has everything yet still wants more. And the rest just jump right in with relentless hyphen-teasing behavior.

Perhaps it's the syllabification thing. It's a job that none of the other punctuators wanted, seeing it as merely heavy lifting (or, to put it another way, a *heavy-lifting* job), kind of an entry-level gig that would lead nowhere. Maybe our brave pal volunteered, maybe it was assigned. In any case, trouper that it is, the hyphen stepped up to the challenge.

The two-word generalizations are there (apart for a verb [*run off*], together for a noun [*runoff*]), completely ignoring the hyphen while failing to account for descriptive combinations. Take the popular phrase, "problem solving", for example. As a noun, it needs no hyphen, but as an adjective (e.g., "problem-solving skills"), it absolutely requires one. Ironically, in today's corporate argot, which seems to delight in inverting perfectly good word structure, the verb form would also require a hyphen ("He problem-solved the situation."). So there! Not that the hyphen would gloat, you understand.

We should tip our hats to the kind, unassuming punctuation mark that does

its hard work with such awe-inspiring humility. It's been a long struggle, and a little appreciation would mean so much to a good friend.

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Grammar

The Serial Comma: Sentence Killer or Content Savior?

by

Charlotte White

Some years ago, in a rented office suite replete with stale doughnuts and overly acidic coffee, the precursors of modern business consultancy made a decision of monumental consequence. These self-proclaimed arbiters of corporate format made the startling decree that punctuation was a bad thing. "Get to the point!" they announced. "Keep it simple. Use ad copy style in everything you write and say."

This ill-advised counsel led to a quixotic quicksand of confusion. Whereas 'tis true that at one time commas were sprinkled generously to imply importance, their removal creates an even larger problem. This is particularly the case in sentences containing serial phrases.

We live in a mergers and acquisitions, profit and loss, and movers and shakers world. Conglomerate words abound, and without the mighty serial comma to keep things clear, sentences become jumbles of grouped mayhem.

In a false sense of economy, it was reasoned that the "and" in a serial phrase needed no preceding comma. However, a comma is no mere squiggle of ink to be cast aside on whim. It is the visual equivalent of a pause in speech, and clarity is its concern.

Try reading this sentence:

She studied communications and marketing, audio and video and transmission and broadcast theories.

Without the serial comma, the example could have numerous meanings. The person could have studied about the following subjects:

1. Communications and marketing theories
2. Audio and video theories
3. Transmission and broadcast theories

or

1. Communications and marketing
2. Audio
3. Video
4. Transmission and broadcast theories

or

1. Communications
2. Marketing, audio and video, and transmission and broadcast theories

Rather than being a tautological redundancy, the serial comma is a clarifying necessity. Incorrect interpretation can be eliminated by using this wonderful tool, which allows the sentence to read as follows:

She studied communications and marketing, audio and video, and transmission and broadcast theories.

It is thus obvious which words join to form grouped phrases. (A further rewrite would restructure the placement of "theories" to make its reference clear, but that's another story.)

So let me suggest that henceforth we use the serial comma at all times. We'll each read a little more easily, thoroughly, and thoughtfully as a result.

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