Introduction

This book is for those of you who have to write at work and want clear, commonsense guidance on punctuation. It concerns the usages that are simple, useful, and appropriate in workplace writing, where the chief goal of any document is to convey information as efficiently as possible. Other sorts of writing may seek to enthrall, beguile, amuse, or contribute to the body of human knowledge. But busy executives are not hoping to be enraptured or moved to giggles by an audit report. They want to know, right away, whether they need to take action. And one reason why corporate policies aren't written in Shakespearean verse is that readers of policies are neither seeking nor expecting a literary experience. They simply want to know, in the clearest language possible, what their rights and responsibilities are.

Certainly, in the writing we do at work, our readers deserve this "clearest language possible." I think it's healthy to take pride in your writing, and sensible to care about it, but wise to realize that the main aim of style in workplace writing is to make things easy for the reader. I'm going to show you how punctuation can contribute to simplicity of style. In practical terms, the marks are nothing more than tools for tightening the nuts and bolts of the airy stuff we call meaning. They're as unglamorous and mundane as any collection of wrenches and screwdrivers—and once we get rid of the stupefying half-truths and fallacies about them, they're just as easy to use.

Why So Many Professionals Are Befuddled by Punctuation

No one is born with a sense of where to put a comma. The kitten knows how to pounce, but the child lacks instinct for hyphenating his compound adjectives. We all have to learn how to punctuate, and that means we're at the mercy of those who teach us.

After a quarter-century of teaching writing in the workplace, I'm no longer surprised by the sloppy and confusing punctuation I see in most business, technical, scientific, and regulatory writing. What still surprises me is the number of people who insist that they never received any instruction in the matter. They do not say they never got any "good" instruction or any "reasonable" instruction; they do not say they were confused to the point of paralysis by inconsistencies in what they were taught. What they say is that they were never taught how to use the marks. And the frequency of this complaint is increasing. In the United States it is possible these days to proceed through high school, college, and graduate school with one's instructors encouraging the joys of expression and assuming that teaching clarity of expression is someone else's responsibility.

This is not to say that punctuation is never taught along the way, because it usually is—in ways that make a practical man's hair stand on end. Often, instructors explain only a few crude and elementary usages, leaving unexplored the numerous options essential to a good writer. (I may be expert at wielding a sledgehammer, but if that's the only tool I know how to use, what do I do when I have to extract a splinter?) The guidance writers receive from one year to the next can be slapdash and whimsical, governed by the individual instructor's personal preference, taste, and overall feel for what constitutes good writing. From one year to the next, this guidance can be conflicting and even contradictory. As a freshman one may learn that using parentheses is practically an immoral act; as a sophomore that parentheses are useful, but that dashes are villainous; and as a junior that dashes are

the cat's meow, but that semicolons are the footprints of a chucklehead, or at least evidence of careless thinking.

It should come as no surprise that some instructors, ham-handed or not, simply do not know the conventions of meaning and form. Others may be unaware of important distinctions of usage. Such instructors, often with great force, insist that *however* must always be followed by a comma, that *which* must always be preceded by a comma, that items in any bulleted list must be followed by semicolons, and so on. There are plenty of English teachers and composition instructors who are either mistaken about certain conventions or who were taught the British conventions. In either case, what they plant in fertile and impressionable young minds are the seeds of confusion and error.

And then we have those who learned correct usage decades and decades ago, when (for example) *cooperate* required a hyphen, and it was considered the pinnacle of good taste to introduce abbreviations with great formality, as in *American Telephone and Telegraph Corporation (hereinafter referred to as "AT&T")*. Usage has changed since then. We have all been annoyed by the weather reporter on the radio who tells us there is a zero chance of rain while we have the windshield wipers on maximum. That reporter is reading from a script, not looking through the window to see what's really going on. And instructors who do not bother to read well-written current stuff—to read it with their eyes open, noticing how the marks are truly used—continue to report from the 1960s and to insist that archaic conventions remain in force.

To this bubbling stew of misguidance, we add the two absurd methods of instruction that have victimized writers for decades. The first of these methods is what I call the "sound-bite" method. An example is the famous "Put in a comma where you'd take a breath." The second is one we might call the "I-can't-explain-it-simply-so-I'm-going-to-use-jargon" method. An example of this one is the terrifying and ultimately meaningless rule "A non-restrictive appositive used as a summative modifier is set off with a comma." Ninety-nine percent of

the people I work with day in and day out do not remember the jargon of grammar, if indeed they were ever exposed to it. Is it any mystery why people need help with punctuation?

It seems to me there is a middle ground between the breezy impressionism of the sound-biters and the religious jargon chanted by English teachers, Freshman Composition instructors, and others (including managers in the workplace) who cannot fathom the expressions of perplexity, despair, and infinite boredom on the faces of their victims. I have attempted to occupy that middle ground here. Avoiding the sound-bite approach means using a few more words to explain the matter; refusing to use jargon also has the inevitable effect of increasing length. Assuming that you want the complete picture, and not a fragment of it, and assuming you would like to read clear thought in plain English, I take my time and use as many words as my meaning requires.

I intend to show you, explaining as necessary along the way, not only how to use the marks correctly, but how to choose the marks that best clarify your intention and best suggest how much emphasis you want to place on an idea. You'll probably have to throw out (or at least reconsider) some advice you've accepted as rule, but you'll come away with a complete understanding of the "final polish" that good punctuation provides to your structures of thought.

This book explains punctuation in the way I wish it had been explained to me: patiently, thoroughly, systematically, and in words I understand. You will not encounter such terms as "adverbial participle" or "interruptive infinitive" here; and when I refer to a sentence, I call it a sentence, and not, in the new fashion that pretends to be more precise, a "clause complex." There is no need to make the matter more complicated than it is. What I do need to do is overcome the wild guidance you've received over the years and replace it with sensible advice.

Of Ugly Semicolons and Hideous Hoes

I'm a practical man. If I have a hammer and a monkey wrench and I need to tighten a bolt, I'll use the monkey wrench. And I won't spout a lot of philosophy while I do. I just want to get the job done as efficiently as I can.

With my hammer and wrench, I'm able to perform a number of tasks quite well—but if I have only those tools and need to remove a screw, I'll make a great mess of things. If I had a screwdriver, I could get the job done in a flash. It's the same with punctuation. Each of the marks has functions it is best suited to perform. We should know what those functions are and use whichever mark best accomplishes the job at hand. But to use a mark, we must first feel comfortable using it. And if I believe, because someone once told me so, that parentheses are signs of laziness and that semicolons indicate a careless mind, what am I going to do when clarity requires parentheses instead of commas, or when emphasis calls for a semicolon rather than a period?

Now if someone said to you, "Pliers are never necessary" or "Hoes are hideous," you'd probably assume the speaker was either kidding or mentally ill. You'd assume this because your experience has taught you that pliers are often useful—and you might, with good reason, wonder what anyone could find hideous about a hoe. But what if a person of great renown and authority were to make such an asinine statement? When that happens, many people accept the remark as gospel, simply because it comes from the hero. "Spoons are for weaklings," says the hero, and instantly the congregation begins eating porridge with forks. And here we have Winston Churchill saying, "One must regard the hyphen as a blemish to be avoided wherever possible." We have the novelist Donald Barthelme remarking, "The semicolon is ugly, ugly as a tick on a dog's belly." What was that about the hideous hoe?

You don't have to be famous or formally published to voice your opinions as fact. On a casual stroll through the bustling bazaar of the World Wide Web, we encounter dozens of hucksters hawking their aesthetic preferences as revealed truth. "Use parentheses sparingly," says

one website devoted to better writing. "Like dashes, they make a page ugly and give the impression of carelessness. If something is worth mentioning, it deserves a sentence of its own."[1] So now parentheses have been indicted as "ugly," and dashes apparently are too. We must put both marks onto the pile with Churchill's hyphen and Barthelme's semicolon. It's probably best not to use them, since they make our pages ugly. "Question marks are just ugly," says another possible expert.[2] "Remember," says another, "slashes are ugly, so use them sparingly."[3] No mark escapes indictment on charges of ugliness and criminal mischief. Meandering online, you find people howling that they are disgusted by commas, sickened by hyphens, nauseated by apostrophes, and revolted by brackets, quotation marks, and exclamation points.

Yes, on the Web it is child's play to find overexcited remarks about anything under the sun. But the sentiments quoted here are hardly exceptional. And they demonstrate nothing we don't already know: that many people are thoroughly frustrated by punctuation, and that what people actually say about the marks can be so utterly impressionistic and overgeneralized as to verge on the insane. It is ludicrous to hate the wrench and preposterous to call it ugly.

Where the Advice in This Book Comes From

The way we use punctuation is governed by convention. Everyone agrees that we end a declarative sentence with a period, use quotation marks to indicate we're citing exact words, and so on. Where there are disputes about usage, these disputes are not terribly harmful to clarity. How much difference does it make, really, that the *New York Times* prefers *I.B.M.* (with periods) and the *Washington Post* prefers *IBM* (without them)? Is it truly a cause for concern that the *Times* prefers *Davis' house* (adding only the apostrophe to make *Davis* possessive) and the *Post* considers *Davis's house* to be better?

The usages presented here show punctuation as it is practiced in the United States by newspapers and magazines that have a wide read-

ership. We must take our standards from somewhere, and it seems to me that periodicals such as *Science, Newsweek*, and *National Geographic* do more than simply communicate well to people of all levels of education—they also confirm and reinforce what punctuation conventions are. By reading these periodicals (and the *Dallas Morning News*, the *Boston Globe*, the *Wall Street Journal*, and so forth), we unconsciously acquire a sense of how punctuation contributes to meaning. Without thinking about it, we recognize the distinction between *When do we eat, Mom?* and *When do we eat Mom?*

Where there is disagreement about usage, I take the side of the reader and—possibly boldly—recommend that we neither insult her intelligence nor complicate her getting what we mean. I believe that in terms of handling the mechanics of the language, it's best to be conservative: to honor convention where convention holds, and where there is disagreement, to select the option that most economically conveys our intent.

How to Get the Most out of This Book

Start by reading "Definitions." That short section explains the few terms necessary to simplify the discussion. We cannot make much headway if we don't agree on what "intention" means, and knowing what a dependent clause is takes the guesswork out of punctuating some very common constructions. I encourage you to read that section, and for two reasons. First, people use different terms to refer to the same concept: for example, "non-essential language," "non-restrictive expression," and "parenthetical expression" all denote stuff you could cut from the sentence. Second, I am going to use particular definitions precisely and consistently when discussing how to use the marks.

Next, read "What You Need to Know First." Here you'll find 19 short essays that, together, provide the conceptual framework that skilled writers use intuitively when they punctuate. Read them, and you'll know what you're doing when you choose a mark, rather than hoping that the choice makes something clear. You'll also come away with

much more flexibility in suggesting subtle shades of meaning. This section explains, one principle at a time, what you need to know before you decide whether and how to punctuate a structure of language. It also digs underneath the surface of "rules" and shows you how and why the marks signal certain nuances of emphasis. (This is useful to know when you have alternative ways of punctuating an expression.) Finally, it addresses several important issues in punctuation that require more than a paragraph to explain. This stuff is essential to understand, and no one ever bothers to explain it. I put it in a separate section so that I don't need to repeat it over and over.

In "The Marks," all of the marks are listed alphabetically, beginning with the apostrophe and ending with the slash. For each mark, every use pertinent to workplace writing is covered, and each usage is illustrated by several business-related examples. But the guidance will make much more sense if you read the two preliminary sections first.

The last section, "Punctuating Common Sentence Structures," shows exactly how the marks work in the heat of battle. It mirrors the guidance from the previous section, but its focus is on the language structure itself, not on the many uses of the individual marks. The repetition is intentional: I know from experience in the classroom that certain concepts require reiteration, and this is especially true when we first have to scrape off the thick crust of half-truths and generalizations you've picked up over the years.