

Make Your Mark With Punctuation

BY SUSAN MCCLOSKEY

In almost every writing seminar I present, matters of punctuation provoke disgruntlement and dismay. Lawyers protest that the rules seem arbitrary, impossibly complicated, or counterintuitive. To illustrate their displeasure, they sometimes invent hypothetical problems, one of which featured a moose in need of legal counsel.

The aggrieved moose wanted an attorney to file a motion on its behalf, because a caribou had infringed its property rights. My questioner conceded that he would have no difficulty forming the singular possessive appropriate to his client. He would file the *moose's* motion. But what if several moose needed his legal assistance? The plural possessive, identical to the singular, would cause confusion about the number of plaintiffs. So should he refer to the *mooses'* motion? My suggestion that he avoid the problem by referring to *the motion of the plaintiff moose* (for the singular) and *the motion of the plaintiff herd of moose* (for the plural) did little to temper his displeasure. Nor did my observation that the practice of law is normally restricted to clients with two legs, not four.

The Matter of the Moose made me wonder why lawyers get so exercised about punctuation. Accustomed to rules, perhaps you're impatient with the merely conventional character of punctuation. It changes over time, not only guiding but responding to the practices of those who use it. For instance, writers once distinguished rhetorical questions from ordinary interrogatives by reversing the question mark so that its familiar right-hand curve appeared on the left. No one ever ruled against this procedure; it merely (and sadly) dropped out of use. And in current practice, it is entirely up to the individual writer to decide whether a comma belongs in a series linked by *and*. No rule dictates that *the butcher, the baker, and the candlestick maker* is correct, while *the butcher, the baker and the candlestick maker* is not. All a reader asks is that the writer consistently apply whichever convention he or she adopts.

Legal writers unhappy with the vagaries of punctuation might come to embrace them after considering an historical alternative. Ancient scribes produced manuscripts for a small population of literate patrons without

using any punctuation at all.¹ Nor did they indicate divisions between words or sentences. They practiced their highly specialized craft in a culture where the written word was intimately linked to the spoken, as a transcript of what a speaker had said, as a draft of what he planned to say, or as a work by another author that the patron intended, after study, to read aloud. An unmarked text left the patron free to place his own rhetorical stamp on the manuscript. He would mark it to indicate not only where but also how long he would pause in his oral delivery, which words he would emphasize for dramatic effect, how he would signal the end of one phase in an argument and the start of the next.

According to this scribal practice, known as *scriptio continua*, the first several lines of the statement of facts in *Palsgraf v. Long Island Railroad* would have looked like this:

plaintiffwasstandingonaplatformofdefendantsrailroad
afterbuyingatickettogetorockawaybeachatrainsstopped
atthestationboundforanotherplacetwomenranforward
tocatchitoneofthemenreachedtheplatformofthecar
withoutmishapthoughthetrainwasalreadymoving
theothermancarryingapackagejumpedaboardthecarbut
seemedunsteadyasifabouttofallaguardonthecarwho
hadheldthedooropenreachedforwardtohelphiminand
anotherguardontheplatformpushedhimfrombehind
inthisactthepackagewasdislodgedandfellupontherails

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A literate Greek or Roman might have marked this text in a way that would be only slightly more legible to us than the unmarked version. A hairline slash (/) would indicate the end of a sentence; a point on or above the line a greater or lesser pause:

plaintiffwasstandingonaplatforofdefendantsrailroad
afterbuyingatickettogetorockawaybeach/atrainstop
pedatthestation.boundforanotherplace/twomenranfor
wardtocatchit/oneofthemenreachedtheplatforofthe
carwithoutmishap.thoughthetrainwasalreadymoving/
theotherman.carryingapackage.jumpedaboardthecarbu
tseemedunsteadyasifabouttofall/aguardonthecarwho
hadheldthedoropenreachedforwardtohelphimin.
andanotherguardontheplatforpushedhimfrom
behind/inthisactthepackagewasdislodgedandfellupon
therails/

Perhaps the next time you're confused about whether a period belongs inside or outside a quotation mark, you should rejoice that at least you have periods and quotation marks to contend with.

It took more than a millennium for a scheme of punctuation to develop that was less likely than *scriptio continua* to induce eyestrain and headache. The punctuation marks we now recognize and use emerged slowly in the West, over centuries in which the classical link between the spoken and the written word dissolved and the written word assumed an independent status. Literate men and women in late medieval Europe were likelier than their ancient counterparts to read privately and silently. They were also likelier than their remote forebears to regard the understanding of the written word as a matter of supreme importance, one on which the salvation of their souls might depend. Scribes responded to these circumstances by developing marks to assist readers in understanding scriptural and devotional texts. Punctuation, and then word divisions, eased the task.

The invention of the printing press, which encouraged the spread of literacy, also fostered the standardization of the marks. The basic repertoire of marks that then emerged has since changed little; only the quotation mark, at least in the form we now recognize, awaited development. The upshot of this stability has been resistance to innovation. In our own lifetimes, the attempt to introduce the interrobang, a question mark overlaid by an exclamation point to indicate an astonished query ("You mean he said *that!*?"), failed almost as soon as it appeared.

No matter the form or the era, the purpose of punctuation has always been the same: to aid the reader's

task. This boon to the reader comes at a price for the writer, who must take care to use the marks properly. Proper use begins not with a list of rules and supposed rules, but with a grasp of how the various marks function. The scheme that follows divides the small world of punctuation into three parts, focusing on the editorial, rhetorical, and grammatical tasks the marks perform. It isolates the few troublemakers – the comma chief among them – and thus limits the number of marks you have to worry about when you're editing your own texts. By rationalizing the workings of the marks, this scheme may guide you even when you find yourself navigating in the punctuational equivalent of heavy weather.

Editorial Marks

Most editorial marks indicate that the writer has done something either to his own or another's text. Quotation marks, for instance, signal that the writer has imported another writer's words. If the borrowing requires the omission of part of the quotation, ellipsis points mark the canceled material. Square brackets indicate additions to the quoted text to clarify its meaning. When square brackets enclose the Latin *sic* – [sic], mean-

ing *thus* – they note an error in the original text, making the borrowing writer seem meticulous rather than careless. In their purely editorial function, round brackets or parentheses, the close kin of square brackets, enclose ancillary references, such as defined terms and cross-references in agreements; or explanations, such as brief summaries of decisions in cited cases.

These editorial marks cause difficulty only when you must deploy them in conjunction with other marks. On which side of quotation marks, parentheses, or brackets should another mark appear? The answer is, "It depends." In American as opposed to British practice, periods and commas belong inside quotation marks. Place periods inside parentheses and brackets only when these marks enclose a complete sentence; otherwise, place them outside, to close the framing sentence. Commas belong outside parentheses and brackets if the framing sentence requires them. Question marks and exclamation points go inside only if they are part of the quoted, parenthetical, or bracketed material. Semicolons and colons stay outside in all cases. If the passage you're quoting ends in a semicolon or a colon, simply drop the mark and substitute whichever form of punctuation suits the purpose of your sentence.

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The apostrophe and, as we'll later see, the comma, also work as editorial marks. The apostrophe that figured in the Matter of the Moose indicates the omission of letters within a word. The mark derives its name from the rhetorical term *apostrophe*, the invocation of an absent person or thing. If, in a moment of pique, you have ever invoked the netherworld – *O hell, what was she thinking?* – you've resorted to apostrophe. The apostrophe as a punctuation mark similarly invokes something absent. This function is apparent in contractions – *can't* instead of *cannot*, for instance, where the mark is a placeholder for an absent *n* and an *o*. The same function governs the more troublesome possessive apostrophe, which in the earlier history of our language also signaled the omission of letters. For instance, the Middle English possessive phrase *Goddes lawe* was contracted to the Modern English *God's law*, with the apostrophe marking the space once occupied by letters.

Confusion about the proper use of the apostrophe has led some writers to abandon the mark altogether or to use it to form a plural. Both errors appear in this sentence: *Defense counsels reasoning leaves ample room for the prosecutors counterargument's*. The basic convention is quite simple. Form the possessive of a singular noun by adding an 's, even when the noun ends in an *s*: *the judge's opinion, the plaintiff's motion, Jones's deposition, Davis's grievance*. Form the plural possessive by making the noun plural and then adding an apostrophe: *the defendants' claims*. If the plural ends in a letter other than *s*, add an apostrophe and an *s*: *the children's guardian*. This convention will guide you infallibly in almost every case you'll ever confront. While it's true that arbiters of usage, such as *The Chicago Manual of Style*, offer far more complicated guidance, they are dealing with cases that seldom present themselves. Only if Socrates becomes your client will you need to remember that the possessive of many classical and biblical names ending in *s* is an apostrophe alone: *Socrates'* rather than *Socrates's*.

You can also avoid error by remembering that possessive pronouns are possessive by their very form, vestiges of the time in our language's history when nouns and pronouns were inflected, with case endings indicating their function within a sentence. Now as then, *his* is the possessive form of the pronoun *he*; *her*, of *she*; and *its*, of *it*. *It's* is the contracted form of *it is*, never the possessive form of the pronoun *it*.

Rhetorical Marks

Rhetorical punctuation honors the spirit of those ancient patrons who marked their scribes' texts to indicate the pauses and emphases that would characterize the oral performance of the words. We acknowledge their legacy when we mark our texts to mirror some aspect of our own speech.

Question marks signal the upward inflection of our voices at the close of a question. Though rare in legal prose, exclamation points capture the writer's incredulity or surprise about the thought that precedes them. Commas, discussed below, can indicate a pause that would occur were the sentence spoken aloud. Dashes neatly render sudden shifts in mental direction and the tonal shifts that accompany them: *The defendant claimed – did you ever know a man more out of touch with reality? – that his car drove itself through his neighbor's garage door*. And parentheses supplement their editorial role by enclosing *sotto voce* asides: *The plaintiff wondered aloud (not for the first time) why the defendant failed to recognize his own driveway*.

Legal writers tend to overuse parentheses, usually to handle qualifying phrases and clauses. The following passage from a memorandum is a representative example:

The Company owns licenses (or other rights) to use the intellectual property necessary to conduct its business (now or in the future), free and clear of liens of any kind. It has no obligations to any person (or entity) for royalties, fees, or commissions. To the Company's knowledge, no claim is pending (and none has been threatened) against it to the effect that the Company's operations infringe upon or conflict with the asserted rights of any other person. The intellectual property (either which the Company owns or licenses or which it otherwise has a right to use) has not been challenged in any judicial or administrative proceeding.

The parentheses here are consistently misused. In every instance, the writer should have omitted them or used commas instead. As a rhetorical mark, the function of parentheses is to *de-emphasize* whatever appears between them, inviting a harried reader to skip what they bracket. They are the opposite of dashes, which summon the reader's particular attention to the material they enclose. Here, commas, which neither emphasize nor de-emphasize, suffice to guide the reader in the few instances where any punctuation is called for. Notice how much less busy the passage seems when the brackets are removed:

The Company owns licenses or other rights to use the intellectual property necessary to conduct its business now or in the future, free and clear of liens of any kind. It has no obligations to any person or entity for royalties, fees, or commissions. To the Company's knowledge, no claim is pending and none has been threatened against it to the effect that the Company's operations infringe upon or conflict with the asserted rights of any other person. The intellectual property, either which the Company owns or licenses or which it otherwise has a right to use, has not been challenged in any judicial or administrative proceeding.

Grammatical Marks

Where the rhetorical marks imitate the inflections of speech, the grammatical marks reveal the relationships

MARKS	PRINCIPAL FUNCTIONS
Editorial Marks	
Quotation marks	Indicate the borrowing of another writer's words
Ellipsis points	Mark omissions in a quoted text
Square brackets	Mark additions to or errors in a quoted text
Parentheses	Set off defined terms, cross-references, and case summaries
Apostrophe	Indicates omitted letters in contractions and possessives
Comma	Clarifies the elements of dates and place names; distinguishes original from briefly quoted material
Rhetorical Marks	
Question mark	Indicates an upward inflection at the close of a question
Exclamation point	Indicates incredulity or surprise about the point just expressed
Dash	Indicates a shift in the direction of one's thought; emphasizes an element in a sentence
Parentheses	Set off <i>sotto voce</i> asides; de-emphasize an element in a sentence
Comma	Indicates where a brief pause would occur if the sentence were spoken
Grammatical Marks	
Hyphen	Links compound adjectives and compound nouns
Period	Marks the end of a sentence
Colon	Signals the end of an independent clause but the continuation of its thought
Semicolon	Links independent clauses without the aid of conjunctions; distinguishes elements in complex series
Comma	Sets off appositives; differentiates nonrestrictive from restrictive clauses; distinguishes dependent phrases and clauses from independent clauses, independent clauses linked by conjunctions, and elements in simple series

between and among words within the structure of a sentence. The marks on which we principally rely for this purpose are hyphens, periods, colons, semicolons, and commas.

The hyphen defines the simplest of these relationships, linking the elements of compound nouns and adjectives. The words *plaintiff* and *appellant*, for instance, enjoy quite distinct meanings until a hyphen links them to designate the party appealing a lower court's decision. The phrase *fast moving van* is ambiguous until a hyphen clarifies what kind of vehicle streaked through the stoplight. Was a Ford Windstar, for instance, improbably moving at a high rate of speed (*a fast-moving van*), or was a U-Haul quickly transporting Smith's household goods from New Jersey to California (*a fast moving-van*)? It is the hyphen's job to tell us.

Periods have an equally straightforward function. Consider a simple sentence, such as *Harrison objected*. The period at the end tells the reader that the thought is complete, that this subject and verb together pass the grammatical litmus test of forming a sentence. Even

when we make the sentence more informative by telling the reader that *Harrison objected to the prosecutor's badgering of the witness*, the period is still the only punctuation we need to signal the close of a grammatically complete unit.

Closely allied to the period is the colon – in effect, a double period vertically arranged. Like the period, a colon marks the end of a complete grammatical unit; unlike the period, it introduces words that complete the thought's meaning. That is, we followed with a period the observation that *Harrison objected to the prosecutor's badgering of the witness*. But if Harrison had been put out about a number of things, we would recast the sentence: *Harrison objected to several developments at trial: the prosecutor's badgering of the witness, the judge's slowness to intervene, and the noisy spectators' cheers and catcalls*. The colon tells us that we haven't reached the end of the sentence's meaning, even though we've reached the end of a complete grammatical unit.

As soon as we start to perform more complicated grammatical operations on the original sentence – by further modifying its elements, coordinating its ideas, or

subordinating one idea to another – we need to summon marks other than periods and colons to help our readers out. Consider this modification, which provides more information about Harrison’s unhappy circumstances:

An attorney making his first appearance in court, Harrison objected to the prosecutor’s badgering of the panic-stricken witness.

We need a comma after the introductory phrase about Harrison to mark its status as an appositive, a modifying element equivalent in grammatical function and reference to the element with which it is paired. That is, the phrase *an attorney making his first appearance in court* and the noun *Harrison* act interchangeably as the grammatical subject and alike refer to defense counsel. The other addition, about the witness, requires no punctuation. A modifying adjective, its relationship to *witness* is clear by placement alone.

What happens when we add a coordinate grammatical unit, such as a complete thought?

An attorney making his first appearance in court, Harrison objected to the prosecutor’s badgering of the panic-stricken witness; the judge overruled his objections every time he rose to his feet.

Here, the writer had the options of beginning a new sentence with the new clause, or of joining the two clauses with the conjunction *but* preceded by a comma. He rejected both options, however, because he wanted us to see Harrison’s objections and the judge’s response as equivalent, intimately related actions. He therefore enlisted the semicolon to forge the connection.

It is useful to think of the semicolon as a hybrid mark – a period atop a comma. The middleweight in the world of punctuation, it indicates a break in the sentence’s unfolding meaning less forceful than the heavyweight period, more forceful than the lightweight comma. It unites what the period would divide and comes to the comma’s aid when the comma overextends its resources. For instance, consider this sentence, in which the comma, already drafted to set off a modifying phrase, cannot also perform its customary function of distinguishing items in a series: *Harrison wanted to throttle the judge; the witness he had prepped for hours to no avail; and his aggressive adversary, a snake in a three-piece suit.* The semicolon steps in to clarify that there are only three objects of Harrison’s displeasure, not four; his adversary and the snake are different names for a single target of possible assault.

Finally, what happens when we add a subordinate grammatical unit, such as a dependent clause, to the original sentence?

An attorney making his first appearance in court, Harrison objected to the prosecutor’s badgering of the panic-stricken witness; the judge overruled his objections every time he rose to his feet, although she seemed mildly amused when Harrison started to sputter.

The new information about the judge’s response to Harrison depends grammatically on the preceding independent clause, and the comma indicates that dependency. It tells us that the incomplete *although* clause is grammatically distinct from the main clause, but depends on it for its meaning. A period in the comma’s place would announce that the writer had said all he had to say about Harrison’s objections and

the judge’s overrulings. We would then read the *although* clause as the beginning of a new sentence, which the writer would then have to complete: *Although she seemed mildly amused when Harrison started to sputter, she continued to overrule his objections.* Only if the new clause were completed in this way could the writer opt to place a semicolon between the old and the new: *The judge overruled his objections every time he rose to his feet; although she seemed mildly amused when Harrison started to sputter, she continued to overrule his objections.*

The Special Case of the Comma

Although the comma is a weaker mark than the period, colon, or semicolon, it is a great deal more versatile. Indeed, it is so indispensable a form of punctuation that it has already figured prominently in the discussion of the grammatical marks. Its protean nature makes it the bane of many writers, who deploy it by guess and by golly, without fully grasping what it is good for. The essential point to remember is that its task is always to distinguish one element in a sentence from another. These distinctions can take an editorial, rhetorical, or grammatical form.

As an editorial mark, the comma prevents misreading by tidying up a sentence’s messy elements. For instance, a single comma prevents us from misreading dates as seemingly random strings of numerals, turning *June 231949* into *June 23, 1949*. The comma likewise distinguishes the elements of an address, separating the street number from the city and the state: *1507 Colfax Street, Evanston, Illinois*. When the date or address appears mid-sentence, another comma belongs after the year or the state. We also use commas to mark the point where our own words yield briefly to those of a quoted

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writer. (For block quotations, the colon is the preferred distinguishing mark.)

Writers exploit the mark's rhetorical function when they use the comma to indicate the pauses they would make if they read the sentence aloud. Parenthetical elements, for instance, call for such pauses. The following sentence, without commas, initially suggests that its subject was discussing something in general terms – and then chaos sets in: *The managing partner was generally speaking about as enthusiastic as an ice cube.* When commas mark what would be the spoken pause after *was* and *speaking*, the writer's meaning becomes clear: *The managing partner was, generally speaking, about as enthusiastic as an ice cube.* As with parenthetical elements, so with complementary and antithetical ones:

The best solution, *and the only one we should pursue*, is to avoid even the appearance of a conflict of interest. We are bound by, *not above*, the ethical strictures of our profession.

In all these instances, you can avoid error and guide your readers by asking yourself, "How would I speak this sentence?" and placing the commas appropriately.

This test can sometimes guide our practice when we deal with the comma in its grammatical role. The reason for a comma in the following sentence is essentially grammatical, not rhetorical: *Having researched her client's problem for five long days, Samantha concluded that its solution would be prohibitively expensive.* The comma here distinguishes one grammatical element – in this case, a participial phrase – from the main clause. In so doing, it clarifies the *structure* of the sentence, helping us to see that the first element depends on the second for the completion of its meaning. Even writers without a robust sense of grammar would likely place a comma after *days*, because the comma *sounds* right at the end of an introductory phrase. But while the comma's rhetorical function in this sentence coincides with its grammatical one, happy accidents make unreliable guidelines.

A different sort of test can help you cross the thicket of punctuating pairs or series of adjectives, where the grammatical question arises of what modifies what, and to what degree. Most writers routinely place commas between adjectives modifying the same noun, as in *The short, bald witness came across like a rock star.* When it would make equal sense to refer to *the short* and *bald witness*, we can be sure that a comma in the place of *and* is correct. But how should the following sentence be punctuated? *Philip found the vital*

missing index pages in his correspondence file. The three adjectives here, *vital*, *missing*, and *index*, might tempt a careless writer to place commas after the first two. But the third, *index*, modifies *pages* to define the kind of pages Philip was seeking: index pages, not the contents pages or the *Yellow Pages*. That is, the phrase *index pages* denominates the single concept that *vital* and *missing* modify, so the proper punctuation is as follows: *Philip found the vital, missing index pages in his correspondence file.* Once again, the *and* test can guide you. You would not substitute *and* between *missing* and *index*, but you would do so between *vital* and *missing*.

In some cases, when no test will aid us, grammar alone dictates the proper use of the comma. One of the mark's tasks, for instance, is to distinguish independent clauses that the writer has chosen to link with conjunctions such as *and*, *but*, *or*, *nor*, *neither*, *yet*, *for* and *so*. To use the comma correctly, a writer must recognize an independent clause – a complete thought, capable of standing on its own – when he creates one on the page or screen. If he can, then he'll realize that this sentence is mispunctuated: *Marsha filed her papers, and then drowned her sorrows at Starbucks.* All we have here is a compound verb, *filed* and *drowned*, telling us what Marsha did. No comma is needed between these elements. The mark has a job to do only if the sentence is refashioned to make each clause independent: *Marsha filed her papers, and then she drowned her sorrows at Starbucks.* Now, with the addition of the pronoun *she*, we have two complete thoughts with subject-verb pairs. In the revised sentence, the comma does its proper job, showing us where one clause ends and the next begins.

Many errors in the use of commas occur because writers have trouble with the grammatical distinction between a restrictive and a nonrestrictive clause. Re-

restrictive clauses do what their name suggests: they restrict the meaning of the word they modify to whatever the clause specifies. For instance, in this sentence, *Lawyers who handle eminent-domain cases care about justice*, the writer is using restrictively the clause *who handle eminent-domain cases*. Out of the general category of lawyers, he is singling out a certain class of litigators, distinguishing them from other kinds of litigators and from transactional attorneys. When commas set off the clause from the rest of the sentence, the clause becomes generally descriptive, rather than defining of a particular class: *Lawyers, who handle eminent-domain cases, care about justice*. Here, the writer makes a false claim about all lawyers, as if a license to practice necessarily meant a career of handling property disputes. In cases such as this one, punctuation bears directly on meaning and should be used with care.

The best way to distinguish restrictive clauses from nonrestrictive ones is to ask whether the clause in question could be canceled from the sentence without altering its meaning. If you could cut the clause, it's nonrestrictive; if you can't, it's restrictive. This guideline also helps you determine whether *which* or *that* is the appropriate introduction to a clause. *That* clauses are restrictive (*The agreement that Jamie drafted was 100 pages long*); *which* clauses are nonrestrictive (*The agreement, which Jamie drafted, was 100 pages long*). Guided by this distinction, you will know if commas belong, and where, because one of the mark's important functions is to distinguish the clauses by appearing only in the nonrestrictive sort.

The Marks in Perspective

This classification of punctuation is less concerned with the conventions that govern the use of the marks than with the editorial, rhetorical, and grammatical jobs they perform. The conventions have their value, of course, and it's good to know what they are. When you're in doubt about which mark to make or where to place it, you can consult any one of the myriad reference tools about punctuation. Those designed specifically for lawyers or for academics favor the more rigorous conventions; they recommend, for instance, that every item in a series be punctuated, including the one before the final *and*. Journalists and magazine writers, by contrast, favor minimal punctuation. Guides for their crafts encourage dropping the serial comma before *and* and the comma after a brief introductory phrase, as in *At midnight Falsworth slumped over his laptop*. If you choose a reference tool appropriate to your work, it will guide you through the maze of a sentence and bring you out unscathed.

But you can also solve your problem by asking yourself what you're trying to do. Every mark exists to ease the reader's task of understanding what you've written.

Of the 13 possible marks, one is best suited to the functional requirements of your sentence. Thinking about the job that needs doing helps you narrow the range of possibilities and select the likeliest candidate. If you need to note changes or omissions, most often in a borrowed text, you'll use an editorial mark (quotation marks, ellipsis points, a square bracket, parentheses, an apostrophe, or a comma). If you want to imitate on the page the inflections and rhythms of your speech, you'll use a rhetorical mark (a question mark, an exclamation point, a dash, parentheses, or a comma). And if you want to reveal the structure of a sentence, the way you've arranged and related its components, you'll need one or more grammatical marks (a hyphen, a period, a colon, a semicolon, or a comma). More often than not, you'll choose the right mark automatically. When an unusual circumstance baffles your instincts, you can usually solve the problem by rewriting the sentence. Recall that in the *Matter of the Moose*, we did not need to invent a new possessive plural; we needed simply to avoid the apostrophe altogether by referring to *the motion of the plaintiff herd*.

If thinking about the functions of the marks is helpful, so is a little perspective. When you're editing a document you've produced, you have more important things to consider than punctuation. Meaning only sometimes depends on the correct placement of a dot or a squiggle. It always depends on the words you select and the clarity with which you arrange them. When you litter a sentence with unnecessary commas or forget that a period belongs inside the quotation mark, you will not send your readers hurtling back to the age of *scriptio continua* to sort things out for themselves. You will simply create a little static on the line of communication between you and your reader. Only the most persnickety reader finds the occasional crackle or buzz so distracting that he simply cannot read on.

Readers, by and large, are remarkably flexible and resilient. They want to understand what you've written, and they're grateful when you make their job as easy as possible. But their desire to understand can overcome a few minor obstacles along the way. Remember this point the next time you find yourself fretting over a semicolon when you could more productively spend your time clarifying an idea. Hold this thought, too: A marooned sailor who places a message in a bottle had better tell his reader where his ship went down. No one will underestimate the urgency of his message because he omitted an exclamation point after the word *Help*.

1. For my discussion of ancient practice and the evolution of punctuation, I am indebted to M.B. Parkes's scholarly study, *Pause and Effect: An Introduction to the History of Punctuation in the West* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993).