

Hidden Influences on Clear Communication—From Punctuation to Technology...How Business Decisions Impact Print

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Abstract

The reasons for not including certain punctuation marks in print are often misunderstood and related to business decisions at the expense of clear communication.

For example, the comma is sometimes used or not used in certain situations. The serial comma (also known as the Oxford comma) has been identified since 1905 when it appeared in the style guide for the Oxford University Press, and has been there ever since, just as the newspaper industry was entering its “golden years” which lasted until the early 1980s. However, as pointed out in “HOLY WRIT” by Mary Norris of *The New Yorker* magazine, many newspapers do not use the serial comma.

A little known secret about the printing industry, and particularly the newspaper industry, is that the elimination of the serial comma was a business decision to reduce the amount of paper required, the most expensive disposable commodity in printing. There was no such thing as a “serial comma” until it was eliminated. Before then, logic would suggest that there was just a “comma.”

While I understand the economic pressures that businesses face, as an academic I profess that good scholarship and clear, accurate communication should be given a greater priority than they often are. Drawing on examples of translations of the works of pre-Renaissance classicists, and then the growth of printing in 15th century Europe, this paper provides additional evidence supporting this premise.

An article entitled “HOLY WRIT” by Mary Norris in the 90th Anniversary Edition of *The New Yorker* was an amazing contribution to the literature and knowledge of the evolution of the serial comma and removal of it. (1) The clarity of the argument for and/or against the use of the serial comma was the best I’ve read, and I’ve read numerous accounts of the matter. I will now add further from printing history and my esoteric knowledge of the printing industry, the focus of my studies and career for over 50 years. Ms. Norris astutely noted that, “The comma as we know it was invented by Aldo Manuzio, a printer working in Venice, circa 1500. It was intended to prevent confusion by separating things. In the Greek, komma means ‘something cut off,’ a segment. Manuzio, as Ms. Norris pointed out, “...was printing Greek classics during the High Renaissance. The comma was a Renaissance invention.” (2) Well, the intent of the comma was not invented during the Renaissance, but well before that in the writings of some of the great philosophers and thinkers of the ancient Greek era and beyond. It was the work of Johann Gutenberg in or about 1456 at the dawn of the Renaissance that made it possible to apply the comma in printing. Gutenberg developed a process for duplicating movable type in the form of metal slugs used in his first reproductions of the 42 and 36 line Bibles. (3) Produced in Latin, he did not need punctuation marks in the form of movable type.

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However, Manuzio did. Hence, Manuzio actualized the application of the comma to reflect writings requiring punctuation marks. This concept was then picked-up by other printers as interpreters and classicists began translating the writings of the great Greek philosophers and other prominent thinkers throughout history. (4) Those of us who studied the classics know that, for the most part, they used for accentuation what has come to be known as the serial comma as a standard punctuation. Hence, the comma might be considered the first “app!” Here are a few examples of thousands that could be presented.

John Milton Wrote in his Famed Areopagitica in 1644 in his Opposition to Licensing and Censorship

“...it will be attributed first, as is most due, to the strong assistance of God our deliverer,...” “...and thereafter to confine, imprison, and do sharpest justice on them as malefactors:...” “The Books of those whom they took to be grand Hereticks were examin'd, refuted, and condemn'd in the general Councils;...” “These are the pretty responsories, these are the dear Antiphonies, that so bewitcht of late our Prelats, and their Chaplaines with the goodly Eccho they made;...” “It may be so; yet if that thing be no such deep invention, but obvious, and easie for any man to light on, and yet best and wisest Commonwealths through all ages,...” “Who finds not that Irenæus, Epiphanius, Jerom, and others discover more heresies then they well confute, and that oft for heresie which is the truer opinion. Nor boots it to say for these, and all the heathen Writers of greatest infection, if it must be thought so, with whom is bound up the life of human learning, that they writ in an unknown tongue, so long as we are sure those languages are known as well to the worst of men, who are both most able, and most diligent to instill the poison they suck, first into the Courts of Princes, acquainting them with the choicest delights, and criticisms of sin.” “And in conclusion it reflects to the disrepute of our Ministers also, of whose labours we should hope better, and of the proficiencie which thir flock reaps by them, then that after all this light of the Gospel which is, and is to be, and all this continuall preaching, they should be still frequented with such an unprincip'l'd, unedify'd, and laick rabble, as that the whiffe of every new pamphlet should stagger them out of their catechism, and Christian walking.” (5)

In his Metaphysics in 350 BC, Aristotle wrote:

“...for some will be called what they are called because they possess it, others because they produce it, and others in other such ways.” (6)

Plato wrote in Gorgias in the Discussions among “Persons of the Dialogue”:

Chaerephon. Never mind, Socrates; the misfortune of which I have been the cause I will also repair; for Gorgias is a friend of mine, and I will make him give the exhibition again either now, or, if you prefer, at some other time.

Soc. Very good then; as you profess to be a rhetorician, and a maker of rhetoricians,

Soc. I mean to say, that the producers of those things which the author of the song praises, that is to say, the physician, the trainer, the money-maker, will at once come to you, and first the physician will say: "

Gor. I like your way of leading us on, Socrates, and I will endeavour to reveal to you the whole nature of rhetoric. You must have heard, I think, that the docks and the walls of the Athenians and the plan of the harbour were devised in accordance with the counsels, partly of Themistocles, and partly of Pericles, and not at the suggestion of the builders. (7)

St. Thomas Aquinas wrote in De Ente et Essentia (Being and Essencea):

“Thus, to avoid making mistakes out of ignorance of them, and to become familiar with the difficulties they entail, we must point out what is signified by the words “being” and “essence,” and how they are found in diverse things, and how they are related to the logical intentions, genus, species, and difference.” “And because the word “being” used in this way is used apropos of what is divided into the ten genera, as we have said, the word “essence” must signify something common to all natures, by means of which (nature) diverse beings are placed into diverse genera and species; as, for example, humanity is the essence of man, and so with other things.” “This is clear, for example, in man who has a sensitive nature, and further an intellectual nature.” “Similarly, if oneness were of its content, then the nature of Socrates and Plato would be one and the same, and it could not be plurified into many individuals.” “It remains, now, for us to see in what way essence is in separated substances, namely, in the soul, in the intelligences, and in the First Cause.” (8)

Geoffrey Chaucer wrote in *The Knight's Tale*:

"My lady whom I love and serve, and I
Shall not, in her dear presence, fear to die."
"His hair shone, long and combed behind his back,
Bright as a raven's feather, and as black."
"Exotic, rich, all wrought with great appeal,
Combining gold, embroidery, and steel;..."
"When the Prime Mover, that First Cause above,
First made the chain so fair that's known as love,
The effect was great, and high was his intent—"

And in the Miller's Tale Chaucer wrote:

"He sent her honeyed wine, some mead, spiced ale,
And cakes still piping hot." (9)

Benjamin Franklin, often Considered America's most Famous Printer, Wrote in *Positions to be Examined, Concerning National Wealth*, on April 4, 1796:

"Necessaries of life, that are not food, and all other conveniences, have their values estimated by the proportion of food consumed while we are employed in procuring them." "A large people, with a small territory, find these insufficient, and, to subsist, must labor the earth, to make it produce greater quantities of vegetable food, suitable for the nourishment of men, and of the animals they intend to eat."

(10) These are only a few example of the consistent use of the serial comma, at least in their accentuation, among some of the greatest writers and scholars throughout history. It all started with a printer, Aldus Manuzio. However:

The Printer Giveth and the Printer Taketh Away

If the printer invented the comma, the printer also took it away. It is no coincidence that the serial comma (also known as the Oxford comma) has been identified since 1905 when it appeared in the style guide for the Oxford University Press, and has been there ever since, just as the newspaper industry was entering its "golden years" which lasted until the early 1980s. (11) The peek years were from the 1920s through the 1960s. Ms. Norris pointed out, "Many newspapers, both American and British, do not use the serial comma, which underscores the idea that the news is meant to be read fast...because it's not news for long. It's ephemeral. Print—or, rather, text—should be streamlined and unencumbered. Maybe the day is coming when the newsfeed-style three dots (ellipsis) between items, like the eternal ribbon of news circling the building at One Times Square, will dominate, and all text will look like Céline. Certainly advertising—billboards, road signs, neon—repels punctuation. Leaving out the serial comma saves time and space. The editors of Webster's Third saved eighty pages by cutting down on commas." (12) Ms. Norris is onto something here; a little known secret about the printing industry, and particularly the newspaper industry, that very few people realize.

The elimination of the serial comma was a business decision. I'd venture to guess that there was no such thing as a "serial comma" until it was eliminated. Before then, logic would suggest that there was just a "comma." So how is this a business decision? I'll explain. Besides being a professor, I've been a consultant to printing companies for 47 years. This includes newspapers. I've consulted in over 250 such companies worldwide. And what is the main reason for printing companies calling in consultants? It is typically to help them cut costs to increase profits. Consider this. The largest consumable expense that printing companies face is for paper, followed by ink. Paper typically represents between 30 percent and 50 percent of the cost of printing. Granted, for newsprint the cost is on the lower end. However, this is still substantial. So, when the argument is presented that the serial comma was removed to save space and, therefore paper, this is entirely true. (13) Of course, people then started rationalizing its removal for other reasons. However, the reality is that its removal was a "bottom-line" cost-saving business decision. One might ask, "Well, how much space can a little comma take; how can it really make a difference?" Well, it does when considering every page of all editions of all newspapers. Further, the removal of the serial comma is only one ploy that newspapers and other publications have adopted to cut costs. (Recall Ms. Norris's point that Webster's saved 80 pages in doing so.) There are three others:

- The removal of the “gap” typically required on printing press cylinders over which printing cannot occur.
- Reduction in the width of newspapers.
- The use of special typefaces that reduce the amount of ink used.

I will briefly elaborate on each.

The Removal of the “gap” Typically Required on Printing Press Cylinders over which Printing cannot occur

At a 1986 meeting at a resort in France on Super Bowl Sunday, Heidelberg, a major printing press manufacturer, formalized its commitment to develop a system that could take printing to a new level. That revolutionary “Sunday Technology” from what became the Heidelberg M3000 printing press, but also called the “Sunday Press” because the idea was conceived on Super Bowl Sunday, proved to be one of the most important developments in printing history, providing quantum leaps in efficiency. Typically, blankets on printing presses that transfer the printed image from the printing plate to the paper are wrapped around a cylinder with the edges inserted and locked into a gap in the cylinder. The smallest gap is about ¼ inch wide over which printing cannot occur. What Heidelberg did was develop a gapless blanket sleeve that slips onto the cylinder as opposed to being wrapped around it. Therefore, a printed image can be transferred to 100 percent of the blanket and then onto the paper. A significant inventive uniqueness of the M3000 press was the paper savings that its technology provided because the printing area was increased. For every 40,000,000 impressions of the press, 10,000,000 inches of paper were saved. For every 10,000 rolls of paper used, there was saving of nearly 2,600,000 feet or 500 miles of paper. So significant was the technology of the M3000 “Sunday Press” that it was lauded three years in succession in Encyclopedia Britannica’s “Book of the Year” in 1993, 1994, and 1995. (14)

Reduction in the width of Newspapers

A more recent ploy to reduce the cost of producing newspapers is reducing the width of the newspaper. Newspapers worldwide have adopted this practice. Reduced width of from ¼ inch to an inch results in substantial paper cost savings. Further, type selection has moved to narrower faces to allow more characters per line. (15)

The use of Special Typefaces that reduce the amount of Ink Needed

Yet another current ploy is typeface selection that requires less ink than others. For example, fonts have been developed that has microscopic holes punched in the letters that are not visible in the printed document in standard font text sizes of 9 pt. to 12 pt. This saves money because no ink is required when printing these little holes. Reports are that as much as 30 percent in ink cost savings is enjoyed. Additionally, it was determined that typefaces with thinner strokes use less ink and save costs, another increasingly popular practice in printing newspapers and related “throwaway” publications. (16) Add to these ploys the elimination of the serial comma, and cost-savings becomes significant. My point is that whatever it takes to cut costs, regardless of how insignificant it may seem, will be considered and usually implemented. But, I ask, at what cost to good communication?

Bastardization of the English Language

So what we seem to have here is a tug-of-war between business interests and scholarship. Ms. Norris creatively noted, “The serial comma is a pawn in the war between town and gown.” (17) Bastardization of the “King’s English” is not a new thing. It happens all the time. The problem is that repeated misuse of punctuation, grammar, and spelling begins to become accepted as the norm and then becomes perceived as being correct. This is the case in the elimination of the serial comma and, hence, the loss of its practical and functional purpose in clear and concise communication. Sometimes it’s hard to explain or understand why changes in language occur. There are logical explanations for the removal of the serial comma from a business standpoint. However, other changes that have occurred over the years are not easily understood. There are many. One example I like to raise is somewhat personal. I was born and raised in Brooklyn, New York. I lived in a neighborhood known as Williamsburgh. There was no question that the neighborhood was Williamsburgh as the name Williamsburgh was conspicuously and permanently engraved in stone on the Williamsburgh Savings Bank, the Williamsburgh Library, and on the Williamsburgh Bridge, and remains that way to this day.

However, at some point over the years, the "h" was dropped at least in newspapers and other printed material. One could argue that it was to save paper space in printing, and that may very well be the case. However, I do not know for sure. I've explored the reasons for dropping the "h" but no one seems to know.

A final note: Quite some time ago, in the 1970s, I had a paper published in an industry journal. In it I used a word that not only bastardized the English language, but a word that didn't even exist. I recall it to this day—"cosmetize," meaning to me at the time something given a cosmetic effect. I soon received a letter from a British colleague, Cockney at that, and a grammarian, who pointed out the evils of my ways. It just so happened that week in one of the then weekly news magazines, I do not recall which one, was an article about the increasing bastardization of the English language. However, the article pointed out that there is only one group of people who are to be forgiven for such a practice—those born and raised in Brooklyn. My response to my English friend was swift. So, whoever dropped the "h" from Williamsburgh is duly forgiven. I cannot say the same for those who dropped the serial comma. While I understand the economic pressures that businesses face, as an academic I profess that good scholarship and clear, accurate, communication should be given a greater priority than they often are.

Endnotes

- (1) Norris, Mary, "HOLY WRIT," *The New Yorker*, Feb. 23 & Mar. 2, 2015, pp. 78-90.
- (2) Loc. cit.
- (3) Levenson, Harvey R., "Understanding Graphic Communication," (GATFPress, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, 2000), pp. 6-7, 30, 28-36; Romano, Frank J. and Richard M. Romano, "The GATF Encyclopedia of Graphic Communications, (GATFPress, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, 1998), pp. 374-376.
- (4) Aldus Manutius was an Italian printer and considered the leading figure of his time in printing, publishing, and typography. He was founder of a dynasty of great printer-publishers, and organizer of the Aldine Press. Manutius produced the first printed editions of many of the Greek and Latin classics. In 1495 he issued his first dated book, the *Erotemata* of Constantine Lascaris. During 1495–98 he printed five volumes of Aristotle; in 1495, the *Idylls* of Theocritus and *De Aetna* of Pietro Bembo; and in 1498, works by Aristophanes and Politian. The Aldine academy, founded by Manutius, was an organization of scholars to edit classical texts. Between 1503 and 1514 Manutius's productions included works by Xenophon, Euripides, Homer, Aesop, Virgil, Desiderius Erasmus, Horace, Pindar, and Plato.
Encyclopedia Britannica: <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/363258/Aldus-Manutius-the-Elder>
- (5) Milton, John, "For the Liberty of UNLICENC'D PRINTING, /To the PARLAMENT of ENGLAND," *Areopagitica*; A speech of Mr. John Milton for the Liberty of Unlicenc'd Printing, to the Parliament of England, 1644.
- (6) Aristotle, "Metaphysics," Book IV, Part 2, 350 BC.
- (7) Plato, "Gorgias," Scene: The House of Calicles, 380 BC.
- (8) Aquinas, Thomas, "De Ente et Essentia," circa 1256.
- (9) Chaucer, Geoffrey, *The Canterbury Tales*, "The Knight's Tale," circa 1387-1400.
- (10) Franklin, Benjamin, *The Works of Benjamin Franklin*, Vol. V Letters and Misc. Writings 1768-1772, "Positions To Be Examined, Concerning National Wealth," April 4, 1796.
- (11) Norris, Mary, "Between You & Me—Confessions of a Comma Queen," (W. W. Norton & Company, New York, New York, 2015, pp. 93-95.
- (12) Loc. cit.
- (13) Loc. cit.
- (14) Jaspert, Pincus W., "Printing," *1993 Britannica World Data Annual, Britannica Book of the Year*, (Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc., Chicago, 1993), pp. 194; Jaspert, Pincus W., "Printing," *1994; Britannica Book of the Year: Events of 1993*, (Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc., Chicago, 1994), pp. 194-195; Jaspert, Pincus W., "Printing," *1995 Britannica Book of the Year: Events of 1994*, (Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc., Chicago, 1995), p. 134.
- (15) Seelye, Katharine Q., "Wall St. Journal to Shrink Page Size, Joining Trend to Cut Newsprint Costs," *The New York Times*, October 12, 2005.
- (16) Anon, "Which Typefaces Use the Least Ink?" *BBC News Magazine Monitor*, April 1, 2014.
<http://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-magazine-monitor-26835560>; Anon., "Which Fonts Should You Use for Saving Printer Ink?" *Digital Inspirations*, July 19, 2012.
<http://www.labnol.org/internet/fonts-for-saving-printer-ink/12603/>
- (17 International Journal of Linguistics & Communication) Norris, Mary, "HOLY WRIT," Op. cit.