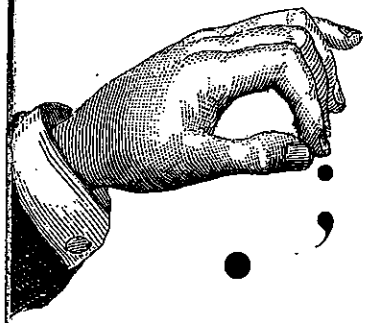
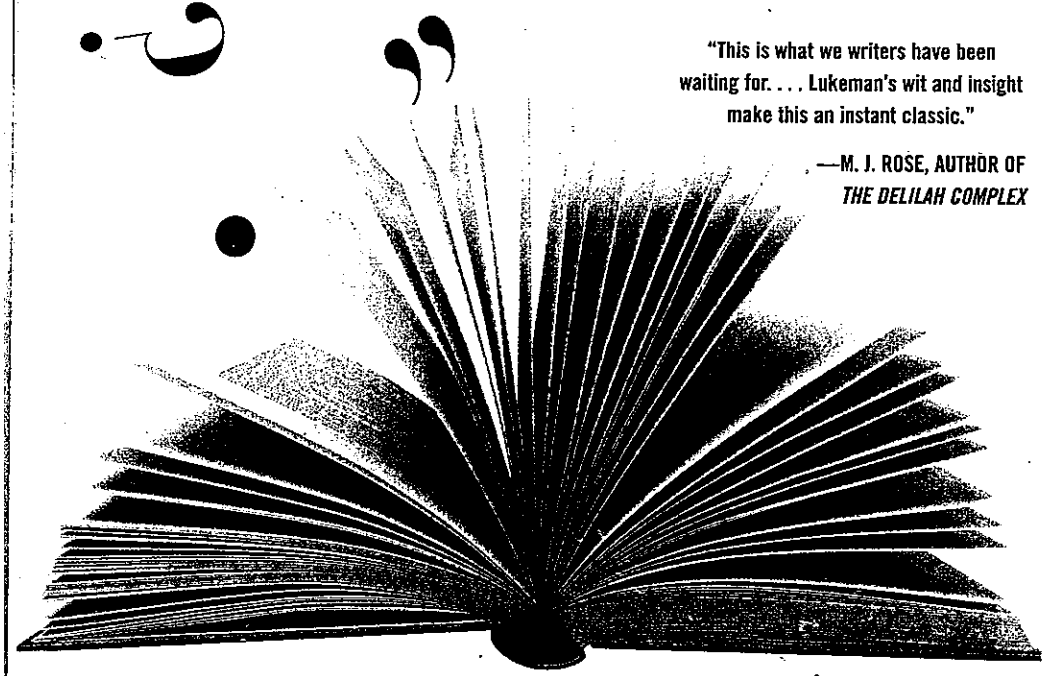


A DASH of STYLE

THE ART AND MASTERY OF PUNCTUATION



"This is what we writers have been waiting for. . . . Lukeman's wit and insight make this an instant classic."

—M. J. ROSE, AUTHOR OF *THE DELILAH COMPLEX*

NOAH LUKEMAN

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INTRODUCTION

> Intellectually, stops matter a great deal. If you are getting your commas, semicolons, and full stops wrong, it means that you are not getting your thoughts right, and your mind is muddled.
>
> —WILLIAM TEMPLE, Archbishop of York,
> as reported in *The Observer*, 1938

THIS IS not a book for grammarians. Nor is it one for historians. They can turn to Lynne Truss's *Eats, Shoots & Leaves* or a host of other excellent punctuation books written for them. This book is for the audience that needs it the most and yet for whom, ironically, a punctuation book has yet to be written: creative writers. This means writers of fiction, nonfiction, memoir, poetry, and screenplays, and also includes anyone seeking to write well, whether for business, school, or any other endeavor.

I believe most writers do not want to know the seventeen uses of the comma, or ponder the fourth-century usage of the semicolon. Most writers simply want to improve their writing. They want to know how punctuation can serve *them*—not how they can serve punctuation. They have turned to books on punctuation, but have found most painfully mundane. Unfortunately, many of these books tend to ignore anyone hoping to use punctuation with a bit of style.

This book will offer a fresh look at punctuation: as an art form. Punctuation is often discussed as a convenience, as a way of facilitating what you want to say. Rarely is it pondered as a medium for artistic expression, as a means of impacting the content—not in a pedantic way, but in the most profound way, where it achieves symbiosis with the narration, style, viewpoint, and even the plot itself.

Why did Hemingway lean heavily on the period? Why did Faulkner eschew it? Why did Poe and Melville rely on the semicolon? Why did Dickinson embrace the dash, Stein avoid the comma? How could the punctuation differ so radically between these great authors? What did punctuation add that language itself could not?

There is an underlying rhythm to all text. Sentences crash and fall like the waves of the sea, and work unconsciously on the reader. Punctuation is the music of language. As a conductor can influence the experience of a song by manipulating its rhythm, so can punctuation influence the reading experience, bring out the best (or worst) in a text. By controlling the speed of a text, punctuation dictates how it should be read.

A delicate world of punctuation lives just beneath the surface of your work, like a world of microorganisms living in a pond. They are missed by the naked eye, but if you use a microscope you'll find they exist, and that the pond is, in fact, teeming with life. This book will teach you to become sensitive to this habitat. The more you do, the greater the likelihood of your crafting a finer work in every respect. Conversely, the more you turn a blind eye, the greater the likelihood of your creating a cacophonous text, and of your being misread.

This book is interactive. It will ask you to make punctuation your own, to grapple with it by way of numerous exercises in a way you haven't before. You'll discover that working with punctuation will actually spark new ideas for your writing. Writing a new work (or revising an old one) with a fresh approach to punctuation opens a world of possibilities, enables you to write and think in a way you haven't before. Ultimately, you'll find this book is not about making you a better grammarian, but about making you a better writer.

Along these lines, I will not exhaustively catalog every punctua-

tion mark, nor will I examine every usage of every mark discussed. Apostrophes and slashes can be left to grammarians. What interests me are the most important uses of the most important marks, those that can impact a text creatively. I am not concerned here whether an apostrophe goes before or after an "s," or whether a colon precedes a list; I am concerned, rather, whether adding or subtracting a dash will alter the intention of a scene.

The benefits of punctuation for the creative writer are limitless, if you know how to tap them. You can, for example, create a stream-of-consciousness effect using periods; indicate a passing of time using commas; add complexity using parentheses; capture a certain form of dialogue using dashes; build to a revelation using colons; increase your pace using paragraph breaks; keep readers hooked using section breaks. This—its impact on content—is the holy grail of punctuation, too often buried in long discussions of grammar and history.

As a literary agent I've read tens of thousands of manuscripts, and I've come to learn that punctuation, more than anything, belies clarity —or chaos—of thought. Flaws in the writing can be spotted most quickly by the punctuation, while strengths extolled by the same medium. Punctuation reveals the writer. Ultimately, the end result of any work is only as good as the method in getting there, and there is no way there without these strange dots and lines and curves we call punctuation.

CHAPTER

1

THE PERIOD

(*the Stop Sign*)

> No iron can stab the heart with such a force as a period put just at the right place.
>
> —Isaac Babel,
> "Guy de Maupassant"

The period is the stop sign of the punctuation world. By providing a boundary, a period delineates a thought. Its presence divides and its absence connects. To employ it is to make a statement; to leave it out, equally so. All other punctuation marks exist only to modify what lies between two periods—they are always restrained by it, and must act in context of it. To realize its power, simply imagine a book without any periods. Or one with a period after every word. Consequently, the period also sets the tone for style and pacing.

HOW TO USE IT

Some authors, like Camus, Carver, and Hemingway, used the period heavily. Although short sentences tend to be dismissed as amateur or juvenile, there are times when short sentences work well, when a work can even demand such a style. In some instances, to achieve a certain effect, it is more natural for a period to be used heavily. Here are a few:

CHAPTER

2

THE COMMA

(the Speed Bump)

If you can master the uses of the comma—or even the basic ones—no other mark can hold any terrors for you.

—HARRY SHAW,
Punctuate It Right!

THE COMMA IS the speed bump of the punctuation world. With its power to pause, the comma controls the ebb and flow of a sentence, its rhythm, its speed. Based on frequency alone, the comma wields tremendous influence, outnumbering the period by at least three to one, and outnumbering other punctuation marks by at least five to one. And yet, paradoxically, it is also the mark most open to interpretation. The comma has few hard rules, and as a result is the mark most often misused.

The comma can be used to divide. "The word comma is derived from Greek *komma* (clause), which came from *koptein* (to cut off). Indeed, a comma normally does 'cut off' one part of a sentence from another," says Harry Shaw says in *Punctuate It Right!* In this sense, the comma can control meaning itself, since the same sentence cut in different ways takes on entirely new meaning.

Yet the comma can also connect. Two sentences can become one by virtue of a comma, and a sentence can be made longer in its own

right by tacking on a comma. In this capacity, the comma is a people person, a middleman. It likes to be connected, and to make connections. Both divider and connector, the comma is schizophrenic.

The comma is supremely important if for no other reason than its relationship to the period. Without the comma, the period is often left in the cold, waiting at the end of a long sentence without a rest stop. To grasp the comma's influence, imagine a long sentence without any commas:

> A sentence like this without any commas makes it nearly impossible for the reader to know when to pause if not when to stop and also makes him feel as if the period cannot come soon enough indeed should have come several moments ago.

You have to reread it several times just to figure out its natural rhythm and grasp its meaning. Why would you, as a writer, want to make the reader work twice as hard? With the proper use of the comma, you won't have to.

HOW TO USE IT

The comma is probably the hardest of all punctuation marks to master. Not only is it the most flexible, not only are its uses the most varied, but it also carries few rules and has been used (and not used) by great authors in many different ways.

That said, you can learn to master the comma. Its creative uses are many, and they must each be examined carefully:

- To connect. The comma can connect several half ideas (or clauses) into one grand idea (the sentence). It is the glue that holds a sentence together. If a short sentence is lacking in fullness of

CHAPTER

3

THE SEMICOLON

(*the Bridge*)

When a writer is taking pains to write for his reader rather than to impress him, semicolons can seem like the grammarian's happiest invention.

—JOHN R. TRIMBLE,
Writing with Style

BETWEEN THE comma and the period you'll find the semicolon. Pausing more strongly than the comma, yet dividing more weakly than the period, it is a mediator. The semicolon does not have as many functions as the comma, yet it has more than the period. As Eric Partridge says in *You Have a Point There*, "By its very form (;) [the semicolon] betrays its dual nature: it is both period and comma." As such, it is best thought of as a bridge between two worlds.

The primary function of the semicolon is to connect two complete (and thematically similar) sentences, thereby making them one. But when and how to do that is open to interpretation. The semicolon has been overused (Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*) and questionably used (Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*) throughout the centuries, and has been the subject of endless debate. Compounding the debate is the fact that, grammatically, the semi-

CHAPTER

4

THE COLON

(*the Magician*)

What is one man's colon is another man's comma.

—MARK TWAIN

THE COLON is the magician of the punctuation world. It holds its audience in suspense, waits until just the right moment, then voilà: it pulls back the curtain to reveal the result. It sits on the very peak of drama, with all that comes before building to it, and all that follows a denouement. As such, it is one of the most effective punctuation marks to propel a word or clause into the limelight. (This is why the colon comes first in this section of the book.) Indeed, it is impossible to follow a colon in an inconspicuous way.

Like the semicolon, the colon tends to be underused by creative writers, and when used, not used well. Most writers seem intimidated to use it creatively, perhaps because they equate it with its mundane usages (such as heralding a list, or a letter, or separating minutes from seconds on a clock). Other writers use it once or twice but find themselves overwhelmed by its dramatic power and are unsure where to go from there. The avoidance of the colon is unfortunate, since it is one of the most powerful tools in the arsenal of a creative writer.

every page in the first chapter? What is the average number of colons per page? If more than two, cut back. Of course, that's only a first step. You must also ask yourself why you overused them to begin with. Are you writing in an overly dramatic way? Are you relying on punctuation to take the place of content?

- Take a close look at the instances when you do use a colon. Is it always truly necessary? Do the two halves of the sentence truly depend on each other? Does one build and the other reveal, or conclude? If not, remove the colon, or reconstruct the sentences so that each portion inherently feeds off the other.

CHAPTER

5

THE DASH AND PARENTHESES

(*the Interrupter and the Advisor*)

When a narrative employs parenthesis, it lends depth. The reader is aware that there's more than one layer at work, whether it be as pleasing as a lover's whisper, or as disconcerting as a Shakespearian aside.

—JOHN SMOLENS,
critically acclaimed author of
Cold, The Invisible World, and *Fire Point*

THE DASH is built to interrupt. It can strike with no warning, cut you off, stop conversations in their tracks, and redirect content any way it pleases. It is perhaps the most aggressive of all punctuation marks, and will grab the spotlight whether you like it or not. In fact, the word "dash" aptly derives from "to dash," or to shatter or strike violently.

When discussing the dash, most grammarians find it significant only inasmuch as it should not be confused with a hyphen; often it is relegated to a sign of carelessness. What a shame. The dash is a beautiful, striking mark of punctuation, which can enhance creativity, and which is crucial for capturing certain forms of dialogue. The dash can, of course, indicate haste and sloppiness (as

we'll see below), but it must first be taken seriously before it can be dismissed.

Parentheses, on the other hand, respectfully interrupt you, so that you needn't cease speaking or change your train of thought. Their interruption is more of an enhancement, like a trusted advisor whispering in your ear. Like the dash, parentheses are often dismissed as a mere technical appliance. As with the dash, this is not where the discussion ends. Misused, of course, parentheses can be a terrible blight on a work, one that can make it nearly unreadable. But in the right hands, they can be a great creative tool, adding a layer of complexity to your text without interrupting its rhythm, one that could not exist any other way.

No creative writer is complete without knowing how to call upon and master these two marks.

HOW TO USE THEM

To truly grasp how to use dashes and parentheses, we must examine them together, comparing and contrasting their similarities and subtle differences. They are both interrupters; they both propel their subjects into the spotlight; are both used to digress, elucidate, or explain; and they perform a nearly identical function when the dash is used in pairs. To consider these marks separately (as many punctuation books do) is a mistake. Not only do they perform overlapping functions, but we learn more about each by holding them side by side.

- Dashes and parentheses are commonly used to indicate an aside or digression. Sometimes asides need to be interjected midsentence, whether to clarify or enhance. These asides could be removed and transformed into sentences of their own, but then you wouldn't achieve the same effect. Sometimes one needs to digress in the *midst* of a thought, in order to make the thought fuller or more

complex. Such an aside takes a simple, straightforward thought and gives it a new dimension. Consider:

> Buffaloes roamed freely in the Midwest in the 1800s.

This is a simple sentence. Using dashes or parentheses, though, we can enhance it, without requiring a new sentence. Consider:

> Buffaloes roamed freely in the Midwest (some say in the Southwest, too) in the 1800s.

> Buffaloes roamed freely in the Midwest in the 1800s—some say in the Southwest, too.

The asides add something; at the same time, while they pull us in another direction, they are also close enough to the main thought that they wouldn't work as sentences on their own. They are really sentence fragments, half ideas, looking for a place to land and needing the assistance of a dash or parentheses to give them a home.

In the above examples the parentheses and the dash, while serving the same purpose, went about it a different way. The parentheses allowed the aside to come in the middle of the sentence, while the dash demanded it be relegated to the end. This is implicit with the use of the solo dash, as it forces a clause to a sentence's end. Consequently, its effect is not exactly the same, since the aside following the dash feels more like an afterthought, and also prevents the sentence from carrying on. More importantly, it is not entirely appropriate. The aside in this case, for example, belongs in the middle of the sentence. The fact that buffaloes might have roamed "in the Southwest" is an aside to the fact that they roamed "in the Midwest" and thus needs to follow on the heels of that thought. By

CHAPTER

6

QUOTATION MARKS

(*the Trumpets*)

The quotation mark distinguishes between what's thought and said, between the interior and exterior of a character's mind. And since Joyce blurred that distinction in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, it can be used to help orient the reader, but should never be used to intrude or dumb down the narrative. Hemingway and Carver use quotation marks to brilliant effect; their dialogue crackles and snaps, but their quotation marks never slow the reader down, nor make the dialogue feel written. One always feels with them that you're in the room, listening to real people talk, and you cease to see the quotation marks. That finally is the great use of this piece of punctuation—that you don't notice it's there.

—PAUL CODY,
critically acclaimed author of *Shooting the Heart*

QUOTATION MARKS are the most visible marks in the world of punctuation. They are raised above the text, dangling conspicuously; they come in pairs, offering twice the impact; and their presence often demands the indentation of a paragraph, allowing them to be roomily indented from the margin. As if all this were not dramatic and eye catching enough, they also often work in a pack, with one pair of quotation marks following another, cascading down the

CHAPTER

7

THE PARAGRAPH AND SECTION BREAKS

(*the Stoplight and the Town Line*)

Look to the paragraphs, and the discourse will take care of itself.

—old maxim

FEW PEOPLE would think of the paragraph break as a punctuation mark, but it certainly is. In ancient times there were no paragraphs—sentences simply flowed into one another without interruption—but over time text became segmented into paragraphs, first indicated by the capital letter "C." During medieval times this mark evolved into the paragraph symbol [¶] (called a pilcrow or a paraph) and this eventually evolved into the modern-day paragraph break, which is, of course, indicated today by only a line break and indentation. The indentation we use today was originally there for early printers, so that they would have space for the large illuminated letter that used to herald paragraphs. The illuminated letter no longer exists, but, luckily for tired readers, the spacing does.

Today the paragraph break is indicated only by absence, which is perhaps why it is glossed over in discussions about punctuation. This is a shame, because it is one of the most crucial marks in the punctuation world. It is used thousands of times in any given book, and it alone can make or break a work. Few places are more visible than

the beginnings and endings of paragraphs: with their ample spacing, they are eye catching. As such the paragraph break has an unparalleled ability to propel into the limelight, offering perpetual opportunities to grab readers with new hooks. It has the unique power to frame a cluster of sentences, to give them shape and meaning, to resolve the theme of the current paragraph and set the stage for the paragraph to come. Indeed, this is why some speed-reading courses teach readers to read merely the beginnings and endings of paragraphs.

The paragraph break is a big brother to the period: the period divides sentences, while the paragraph break divides groups of sentences. Just as a sentence must have a beginning and appropriate ending, so must a paragraph. Yet while the period is paid homage to as the backbone of punctuation, the paragraph break is largely ignored. This is ironic, since its role could be considered even more pivotal than the period, as it effects not just one sentence, but many. If the period is a stop sign, then the paragraph break is a stoplight at a major intersection.

The section break (also known as the line space) is the most subjective of punctuation marks. It is rarely discussed, and there is not even a consensus on how to indicate it. In manuscript form, this mark is generally indicated by a blank line followed by text set flush left, or by a single asterisk, or by a set of asterisks running across the page, centered and evenly spaced with a tab between each. In a bound book, it is usually indicated by a line space between two paragraphs, but you'll also find it indicated by a wide variety of symbols, from a star, to some small graphic in line with the theme of the book, such as a miniature ship in a book about the sea. Regardless of the visual, they all serve the same purpose: to indicate a section break.

The section break is used to delineate sections within chapters, which might range from several paragraphs to several pages. It signifies a major transition within a chapter, usually a change of time, place, or even viewpoint. It indicates to the reader that, although the chapter isn't finished, he can comfortably pause and digest what he's read. Make no doubt about it: it is a significant break, carrying nearly the weight of a chapter break. The only difference is that the section break defines a transition that, while significant, must fall under the umbrella of a single chapter.

Stronger than a paragraph break yet weaker than a chapter break, it is the semicolon of breaks. It is a big brother to the paragraph break, and a big big brother to the period. If the period is the stop sign and the paragraph break is the stop light, then the section break is the town line.

HOW TO USE PARAGRAPH BREAKS

The chief purpose of a paragraph break is to define and encapsulate a theme. One of the first rules of composition is that every paragraph must have an argument or thesis, must begin with an idea, carry it through, and conclude with it. The opening sentence should set the stage, the middle sentences execute, and the final sentence conclude. A neat, little package. This is easy to do when writing essays or academic papers, but when it comes to fiction or creative nonfiction, you cannot blatantly allow your work to progress so neatly, jumping from argument to argument, without being accused of writing in too linear a fashion, or in an inappropriately academic style. For example, creative writers are told to avoid beginning paragraphs with "thus" or "finally"; the neat building blocks of an academic paper are too linear for the creative world. Which is understandable: readers don't want to feel as if they're progressing from one argument to the next. They want to get caught up in a story.

This leaves the creative writer with a quandary: he must keep his paragraphs focused, yet without appearing to do so. When he opens

CHAPTER

8

THE QUESTION MARK, EXCLAMATION POINT, ITALICS, POINTS OF ELLIPSIS, AND THE HYPHEN

> My attitude toward punctuation is that it ought to be as conventional as possible. The game of golf would lose a good deal if croquet mallets and billiard cues were allowed on the putting green. You ought to be able to show that you can do it a good deal better than anyone else with the regular tools before you have a license to bring in your own improvements.
>
> —ERNEST HEMINGWAY

I RECEIVED hundreds of letters in response to my first book on writing, *The First Five Pages*. Many readers loved the book, some hated it, and others told me with a dark satisfaction that they didn't read past *my* first five pages. Accustomed to receiving thousands of query letters a year, some truly bizarre, none of this really surprised me.

What did surprise me was the number of readers who wrote asking me to elaborate on what I'd said about the question mark. I had touched on the subject of punctuation briefly in *The First Five Pages*, devoting a mere two pages to it. Within those two pages were a mere three sentences devoted to the question mark. But for some reason readers fixated on these three sentences.

In this final chapter I will fully address the usage of the question mark, along with other punctuation marks that should be used sparingly, or not at all, in creative writing.

USE SPARINGLY

The Question Mark

There is nothing wrong with the question mark in its own right. It is a perfectly fine punctuation mark, and even necessary in many cases. Obviously, it serves a purpose that no other punctuation mark can: to indicate a question. It can also be used creatively to capture a certain form of dialogue, where the character speaks with a rising inflection. This is often found in casual speech, where the speaker is stating a fact yet also trying to discern whether his listener is listening (or understanding). For example:

"I was walking to the store? You know, the one on 8th street?"

That said, you must remember that a publishing professional is looking to reject a manuscript as quickly as he can. This entails scrutinizing the first five pages, particularly the first page. And an abundance of question marks in the first pages—particularly in the first paragraph—nearly always indicate amateur or melodramatic writing. For some reason, the poor question mark gets seized upon by the writer who is desperate to immediately hook the reader in a cheap way. For example, I have seen too many opening lines like this:

Did I kill my wife?

Or:

Did I think I'd get away with it?

Or:

Did she really do it?

It feels gimmicky, and actually distances a reader more than entraps him. These writers don't realize that readers, when beginning a book, are prepared to make a mental effort; they don't need to be treated as if they'll put the book down if they don't like the first sentence. It is overkill.

Never use the question mark to create drama. Let it fulfill its role organically, when (or if) it needs to. Always ask yourself if a sentence can somehow be paraphrased. For example, some "questions" might be indicated with periods:

"You didn't really think you'd get away with it?"

Could also be:

"You didn't really think you'd get away with it."

The latter is more subtle, indicating a flat intonation; it is more of a statement than a question. Always consider the desired inflection of the speaker.

Also realize that there is less license for the question mark in creative writing. Practical nonfiction and self-help books can get away with it more easily, particularly if they are prescriptive or directly questioning the reader, for example in an exercise section.

The Exclamation Point

So many people have beaten up on the poor exclamation point (including myself) that I feel bad delivering it yet one more punch. The exclamation point has been referred to as "the period that blew its top," is known as a "screamer" by journalists. Harry Shaw says,

EPILOGUE

THE SYMPHONY OF PUNCTUATION

> Punctuation is ruled two-thirds by rule and one-third by personal taste.
>
> —G. V. CAREY,
> *Mind the Stop*

THE WORLD of punctuation is a complex one, each mark having its own needs and rules. Sometimes marks will complement one another, at other times they will be in conflict. A period won't feel the same when preceded by a semicolon. A comma won't do as well near a dash. A colon won't allow a semicolon in the same sentence. Quotation marks need paragraph breaks in order to shine. And the slightest change to any of these marks will reverberate throughout the work, affecting sentence, paragraph, section, and chapter. Punctuation marks are skittish. A rock isn't needed for a ripple effect—a pebble is.

Grasping how to use a mark in its own right is difficult enough; mastering how to use it in context of the content, and in context of all the other punctuation marks, is a lifelong endeavor. It is truly an art. But it is worth the effort. When we look at punctuation collectively, we begin to see that punctuation marks, in the right hands, can truly bring out the best in one another. A period used with a dash becomes so much more than a period on its own could ever be. We begin to see that punctuation marks by themselves are like colors in a palette: it is only through the collective that they become all they were meant to be.

But this is abstract. In order to better understand the symphony of punctuation, let's look at what the masters have done over centuries. We return to E. M. Forster's brilliant novel *A Passage to India:*

> Houses do fall, people are drowned and left rotting, but the general outline of the town persists, swelling here, shrinking there, like some low but indestructible form of life.
>
> Inland, the prospect alters.

In the first sentence, Forster uses commas to capture the feeling of a town ebbing and flowing; he also gives us a long sentence, asking us to take it all in at once. He follows this with a paragraph break and a short sentence, which allows the next sentence to provide a sharp contrast. This furthers the purpose of his content, showing the contrast between his two settings. Best of all, he is subtle: the punctuation weaves itself seamlessly through the text, might even be missed if you were not looking for it.

Here's an example from Henry James's "The Tree of Knowledge":

> Such a triumph had its honour even for a man of other triumphs—a man who had reached fifty, who had escaped marriage, who had lived within his means, who had been in love with Mrs. Mallow for years without breathing it, and who, last but not least, had judged himself once for all.

Notice how he avoids commas in the first portion of the sentence, which allows us to rush headlong into a dash, which in turn sets us up for a grand summary, an elaboration. That elaboration is carried out with an abundance of commas, which breaks up the style of the sentence and helps contrast the second portion of the sentence to