

Punctuation: The Dynamics of Obscure Marks

by William J. Buchholz
Phi Delta Kappan, November 1979, 234, 227

Power. Everybody wants power — lawyers, teachers, business executives, politicians — everybody wants to exert control over others. One way to seize this control, at least in writing, is through punctuation dynamics: the subtle power to awe, even to cow, the reader into submission through adept placement of punctuation. Certain punctuation marks, if used well, signal whether the writer is a power figure. Any aspiring person, therefore, must learn to recognize the dynamics of these marks. To that end, the following analysis of parentheses, dashes, semicolons, and colons throws light upon punctuation as one of the ultimate manifestations of power.

Parentheses

Very few people today use parentheses creatively, so if one uses them at all (even incorrectly), one gains immediate respect. Imagine the awe that the following sentence inspires because of a few masterfully placed parenthetical asides:

The new machine parts (ordered in June 1979) will arrive no later than August 1979 (these parts will guarantee achieving our target date for construction) and will be ready for permanent installation by September 1979 (preventing any cost over-runs).

As one can see, the skillful use of parentheses has allowed this writer to carry on two conversations at once. This simultaneous transmission of two conversations (the dual-density effect) immediately signals the readers that they are dealing with a superior intelligence. Now, this effect can be refined easily to various degrees of complication — the only limits are the writer's ingenuity and lust for power. Here, for example, is a sentence written by an assistant vice president aspiring to the company presidency:

The power lift underscores our concern for public safety of persons not employed nor in any way associated with the Busings Company (the "company," as defined by charter, shall include all relatives of employees (especially male heirs in dominance on the paternal side (of course, with the present-day concern for affirmative action and equal employment opportunities (not to mention the impending passage of ERA), the company charter shall be revised to reflect present-day sexist sensitivities))).

Note how deftly the writer of this sentence has coiled around the reader's attention, insinuating into the piece amplification after amplification. Then, with the reader securely bound in asides, the writer inflicts the ultimate *coup de grace*: three closing parentheses in quick

succession. Can there be any doubt, after such a masterful display of power maneuvering, just who is in charge?

One thing more: the gossip potential of parentheses power. As we all know, gossip and innuendo, inconspicuously relayed, are devastating. Parentheses enhance this devastation because they graphically represent the inconspicuous relay, as they look much like hands cupped around a whisper being mouthed with subtle finesse. Subconsciously they represent two sidewise smiles, the smiles of superior cunning. Readers coming upon parentheses are sometimes snared by the embraced material simply because the sidewise smiles are subconsciously irresistible.

As people ascend in any power structure, they must gain a certain dexterity in baiting these smile traps. Everyone in the power stratosphere admires the well-baited trap — and parentheses are completely wriggle-proof containers for whispered calumny. Note:

Our field of would-be vice presidents has been narrowed to five candidates, with Jed Armbruster as the leading contender (it will be noted, by way of information only, that Armbruster wears white socks under his Brooks Brothers suit).

The quiet, almost disinterested, delivery of the parenthetical material in this sentence is what demolishes the victim. While reading this sentence, one is made to feel the confidante of the writer — and, though the material in parentheses is by definition an unimportant side item, all astute readers can see that it is this material, and this alone, that the writer wishes to insinuate into the reader's consciousness. What chance does Armbruster stand after this? In all future deliberations, every member of the board will subconsciously have the "white socks whisper" roiling around any mental deliberation of Armbruster's worth.

Dashes

Keep Armbruster in mind for a moment. Let us assume the writer is not addressing the company 5 board but a group of peers. In such cases there is less need for subtlety in denouncing Armbruster. His death blow can be delivered, in fact, with stark violence. It happens, however, that parentheses are entirely inappropriate for violence. Their soft, effeminate curves bespeak gentleness (though, of course, the feline gentleness of a panther). No, what is needed for overt violence is a signal that abruptly disarms the reader and strikes the target quickly, in a way so straightforward that the reader cannot doubt the writer's intent. What is needed now is a punctuational Errol Flynn a "thrust and cut" that will strike with definite fury and panache. That mark, of course, is the dash. Look at the difference a dash makes in the Armbruster sentence:

Our field of would-be vice presidents has been narrowed to five candidates, with Jed Armbruster as

the leading contender —it will be noted, by way of information only, that Armbruster wears white socks under his Brooks Brothers suit.

That dash is a heart-piercing thrust. It dramatically holds us at bay for a moment and then speeds the statement's shaft into the living heart of Armbruster's indiscretion. Armbruster might survive, but he is certainly to switch the metaphor — emasculated.

While the power writer should follow this example, one must also keep in mind the dangers of overuse. Note:

Bob Smith — idiot — met with his people — dolts — to figure out a solution — good luck to the problem.

This example is best left to private thoughts and diary entries. The dash is overused here, suggesting to sensitive readers that the writer is degenerating into hysteria. One must be careful to avoid the appearance of insanity.

Semicolons

The semicolon is dying. Nay, it is all but dead. Some people even claim never to have seen one used — except in grammar handbooks. Yet these very people, when introduced to the semicolon, are usually captivated by this ingenious mark. How clever that sentences can be glued together so effortlessly. And what visual impact. Little in writing commands as much respect as a construction such as this:

Refrain from analysis; turn your attention inward to meditation; and, behold, the solution will become, almost unawares, steadily more clear.

Thus the semicolon's power today derives largely from its psychological impact. Ironically, non-use has rekindled the semicolon's passionate, brooding power. The semicolon is misunderstood; it is mysterious; it is therefore held in esteem and, by some, is even feared. After all, what better demonstration of intellectual power than the authoritative placement of semicolons? The semicolon is punctuational conspicuous consumption, a "conspicuous punctuation" that gives strength where before there was weakness. Note, for example, the difference in attitude projected by these two statements:

1. The solution is simple. It requires a reanalysis of the problem. And the problem, though difficult, can be solved in minutes with computers.

2. The solution is simple; it requires a reanalysis of the problem; and the problem, though difficult, can be solved in minutes with computers.

Punctuation makes the difference here. The writer of statement one is a milquetoast, a fairly simple-minded dunderhead who thinks in staccato chops of tiny sentences that correspondingly represent a tiny mind. It is obvious that this writer is insecure. On the other hand, the second piece

clearly springs from a Herculean consciousness, a mind secure in its ability to grasp iron chains of reason, a mind that can ply paradox, disperse clouds of ambiguity, and anchor fast any number of logical abstractions. Such a mind is destined to become corporation vice president — or associate professor.

Colons

But let us not stop here; let us examine the mark of presidents and full professors, the ultimate mark of punctuation: the colon. How like a god is the writer who nimbly wields colons, brandishing this mark of deep insight as though it were the merest trifle. The colon commands obedience. Some people have been known to tremble before it; others, to glow in a kind of fearful ecstasy. Thus, in the past decade or two, the colon has been elevated to heights before unimagined. For example, the colon has become the supreme potentate of the graduate and professional school. (It has also been noted in use at some of the tonier undergraduate schools — and even, precociously, at the better prep schools — but only by the upper 20% of students with extraordinarily high IQs who come from good background.) The graduate and professional schools, no matter the discipline or student background, are very exacting in their use of the colon. Many hours of coursework, and a great deal of individual counseling, prepare students for their ultimate conquest: the dissertation title.

It is common knowledge that many dissertations are not very good. Few are published, and even fewer are read — except for the title. Therefore, it is crucial, if one is to make any scholarly mark whatsoever, to have an arresting dissertation title. And no self-respecting young scholar would think of submitting a dissertation title less the colon. Witness the title of this article, for example. It could just as well read: "The Dynamics of Obscure Punctuation Marks." But who then would take it seriously? Obviously the writer of such weak, straightforward titles could have little depth and complexity. Add the colon, however, and readers *must* defer to the writer's superior intelligence. This is a perfect example of punctuation as power play. Colon use is a matter of theatrics, of style over substance, that sanctions the writer as learned. The colon, because it reflects the highest erudition, is therefore used in any endeavor that needs style to bolster faltering substance. Today, any corporation or government report that strives for significance simply must have a colon in its title.

Conclusion

To a great extent, worldly success depends upon form and style. Thus the would-be successful person will do well to pay careful attention to the subtle trappings of intellectual power. One indubitably needs a working knowledge of the power potential in the punctuation arsenal. Strategic application of punctuation may be the key to future wealth, position, and fame. If nothing else, punctuation strategy gives one new self-esteem, catapulting the wise tactician far ahead of those left behind in the punctuation power void.