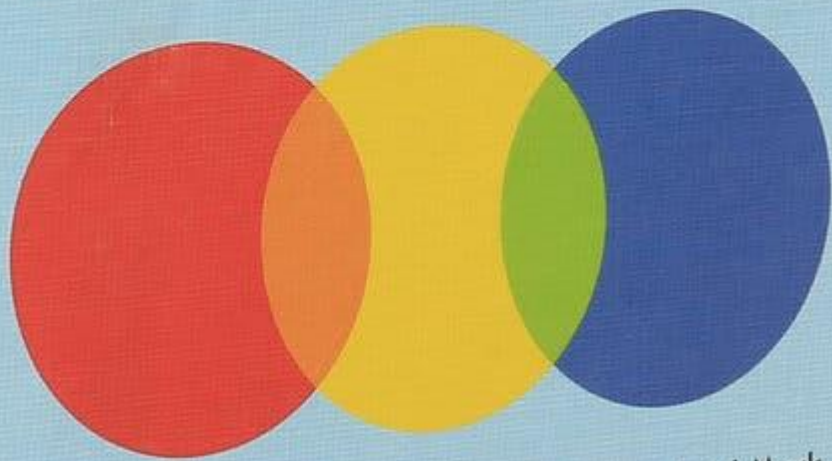


SEMICOLON



The Past, Present, and Future of a Misunderstood Mark



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Writers have their pet themes, favorite words, stubborn obsessions. But their signature, the essence of their style, is felt someplace deeper — at the level of pulse. Style is first felt in rhythm and cadence, from how sentences build and bend, sag or snap. Style, I'd argue, is 90 percent punctuation.

"Maman died today. Or yesterday maybe, I don't know." "For a man of his age, 52, divorced, he has, to his mind, solved the problem of sex rather well." "124 was spiteful. Full of a baby's venom."

Every sentence is a performance, or should be, and punctuation sets the stage. It signals the rise and fall of the curtain, provides the special effects, etches out the grain in the voices we recognize above as Camus, J.M. Coetzee, Toni Morrison — even inducting us into the themes and tone of the novels. See those ironic commas in Coetzee's "Disgrace" sequestering "to his mind" or the opening lines of Morrison's "Beloved," with one sentence sliced so suddenly, jaggedly into two.

In "Semicolon," Cecelia Watson reveals punctuation, as we practice it, to be a relatively young and uneasy art. Her lively "biography" tells the story of a mark with an unusual talent for controversy. "The semicolon is a place where our anxieties and our aspirations about language, class and education are concentrated," she writes. "In this small mark big ideas are distilled down to a few winking drops of ink."

Ink, blood and bile. In 1837, two University of Paris law professors clashed over a question of semicolon usage and decided to settle the matter with a duel. A rogue semicolon drifted into the retranscription of an early-20th-century statute, causing liquor service to be suspended in Boston for six years. In 1945, a semicolon inserted into the definition of war crimes in the Charter of the International Military Tribunal threatened to halt the prosecution of captured Nazis until the ambiguous sentence was clarified.

Why such confusion? The modern semicolon was invented in Venice, in 1494, by the printer and publisher Aldus Manutius, and, for much of history, it had no strictly defined function. It acted like a musical notation, allowing for a pause somewhere between the beat of a comma and a colon (hence its mongrel design). Only later was it systematized and given two primary uses.

The first is uncontroversial. The semicolon keeps a sentence tidy by separating items in a list already cluttered with commas. (*The band played shows in Richmond, Va.; Memphis, Tenn.; and Asheville, N.C.*). The second function has caused all the strife. Here, the semicolon takes the place of a period and yokes together two independent clauses that could function as sentences on their own. (*The band is terrible; I regret following them on tour.*)

In this second capacity, semicolons are discretionary. They add shading, allow one thought to ripen into another. Few have used the mark more liberally and eccentrically, or more beautifully described its psychological effect, than Virginia Woolf. From the Lily Briscoe section of "To the Lighthouse," describing Lily's summers with the Ramsay family: "Such was the complexity of things. For what happened to her, especially staying with the Ramsays, was to be made to feel violently two opposite things at the same time; that's what you feel, was one; that's what I feel, was the other, and then they fought together in her mind, as now." Semicolons allow these sentiments to flow together — to jostle and harmonize — in one sentence the way they would in one mind.

To a varietal of writer, often American, the technique is pure offense. “The most pusillanimous, sissified, utterly useless mark of punctuation ever invented,” the grammarian James J. Kilpatrick declared. “All they do is show you’ve been to college” (Kurt Vonnegut). “Ugly as a tick on a dog’s belly” (Donald Barthelme).

Sissified. If only the source of the anxiety weren’t so mysterious.

Semicolons are not your workaday periods and commas. They belong to the family of trills and volutes; they exist for the sake of complexity, beauty, subtle connections. Cardinal virtues, I’d say, but Watson traces the warring (and gendered) camps of prose style — a fixation on clarity and directness versus a curled sensibility, one interested in the fertile territories of ambiguity.

Watson covers impressive ground in this short book, skittering back and forth like a sandpiper at the shores of language’s Great Debates. There are fascinating forays into how grammarians “created a market for their rules,” the strange history of diagramming sentences and the racial politics of so-called standard English. Watson is sharpest when acting a bit like a semicolon herself, perceiving subtle connections and burrowing into an argument. Whatever her subject, her targets are always pedants, those acolytes of “actually,” all those who profess to love language but seek only to control it.

Self-appointed grammar “sticklers” and “snobs” “want so much to get back to that point in the past where the majority of people respected language and understood its nuances,” she writes. “That place is a mirage. There was no time when everyone spoke flawless English and people punctuated ‘properly.’”

Does this mean anything goes? Not in the least. Watson opposes conventions only as they exist to spare us from thinking. Don’t just learn the rules, her clever, curious book prompts us; learn to ask, *whose rules* (and to admire that semicolon while you’re at it).