

The following excerpts from five essays written by William A. Sabin deal with a number of points that cause difficulty for those who work with words. These essays attempt to draw broader conclusions about the nature of style and the art of tailoring one's use of language to fit the needs of each situation.

**MASTERING NUMBER STYLE:  
ONE (OR 1?) APPROACH**

A number of years ago, while making a presentation on the subject of style, I asked the audience to select the preferable form in each of the following pairs of examples:

- |                       |    |  |
|-----------------------|----|--|
| \$87 525              | OR | eighty-seven thousand five hundred and twenty-five dollars |
| \$49.5 billion        | OR | \$49 500 000 000   |
| 4:30 p.m., January 19 | OR | half after four o'clock, on the nineteenth of January      |

No one could see any use for the forms in the second column. Those in the first column were far easier to read and simpler to write and were clearly to be preferred in business writing. However, after some discussion, we tended to agree that a jeweller had had the right idea in a recent ad, where beneath a picture of an elegant diamond necklace was the legend "Eighty-seven thousand five hundred and twenty-five dollars." Somehow, we felt, if they were going to charge that elegant a price, the least they could do was spell it out. Moreover, we tended to agree that a liberal in fiscal matters might readily dismiss the federal debt as "only \$49.5 billion," whereas a fiscal conservative who wanted to emphasize the enormity of the amount might well have written "The federal debt now stands at \$49 500 000 000" and thereby have forced upon us a sense of the magnitude of the amount by making us calculate it for ourselves. Finally, we agreed that we would much rather be married at "half after four o'clock, on the nineteenth of January" than at "4:30 p.m., January 19."

These, admittedly, are extreme examples of occasions on which an unusual number style could be justified, but they tend to throw light on the more customary style for expressing numbers and on the notion of style in general. At the very least, these examples suggest that style should not be thought of as a rigid set of rules but rather as a set of principles for adjusting one's means of expression to fit a particular set of circumstances. We express our style in clothes through a varied wardrobe that suits the needs not only of everyday situations but also of formal and informal occasions. It is the impoverished person who meets every situation with the same set of clothes. By the same token, it is an impoverished writer who meets all situations with a rigid set of rules. The writer of the jeweller's ad, who chose words instead of figures to express an amount of money, in this instance had some true sense of how to vary style for best effect.

Manipulating principles of style for specific effect ought not to be a random, hit-or-miss exercise but should proceed from some coherent notion about style itself. In the case of numbers, an intelligent control of number style proceeds from an awareness of the difference in effect that results from using figures or words to express numbers.

Figures are big (like capital letters); when used in a sentence, they stand out clearly from the surrounding words. As a result, they are easier to grasp on first reading, and they are easier to locate for subsequent reference. Thus whenever quick comprehension and fast reference are important (and this is true of most business writing), *figures are to be preferred to words*.

But the very characteristics of figures that make them preferable to words can be disadvantageous in certain circumstances. Figures stand out so sharply against a background of words that they achieve a special prominence and obtain a special emphasis. Not all numbers warrant that kind of emphasis, however, and in such cases words are preferable to figures. Keep in mind, too, that figures have the conciseness and the informality of an abbreviation. Thus the more formal the occasion, the more likely one is to spell numbers out (as in the wedding announcement cited on page x).

Given these basic differences between using figures and using words, it is quite clear why figures are preferred in ordinary business letters. These are typically straightforward communications that pass between business firms and their suppliers or their customers, containing frequent references to price quotations, quantities, shipping dates, credit terms, and the like. Frequently, these numbers represent data that has to be extracted from the letter and processed in some way: they may have to be checked against other numbers or included in some computation or simply transferred to another document. The advantage of figures to words in these ordinary cases is so clear that the point does not need to be argued.

But there is another kind of business writing in which the writer is not typically dealing with the everyday transactions of the business. It may be a special promotion campaign with an air of elegance and formality; it may be a carefully constructed letter with special stylistic objectives in mind; or it may be a special report that involves community relations and will have a wider distribution than the normal technical business report. This kind of writing tends to occur more often at the executive level, and it tends to occur in the more creative departments of a business (such as sales promotion, advertising, public relations, and customer relations). In this kind of writing, numbers don't occur very frequently; when they do, they are usually expressed in words.

Once you have grasped the basic difference between using words and figures to express numbers, *be consistent in context*. Just remember that the conventions of number style were meant to be applied, not as an absolute set of dogmas, but as a flexible set of principles that help to fit the form to the occasion. When manipulated with intelligence and taste, these principles of style can enhance and support your broader purposes in writing.

## **A FRESH LOOK AT CAPITALIZATION**

The rules on capitalization give most people fits. First of all, there are a seemingly endless number of rules to master; second, the authorities themselves don't agree on the rules; and third, the actual practices of writers often don't agree with any of the contradictory recommendations of the authorities.

A frequent solution is to pretend that disagreements on capitalization style don't exist; instead, people are given one fixed set of rules to be applied under all circumstances. Yet all too many people never do remember the full complement of rules, and those they do remember they apply mechanically without comprehension. As a result, they never get to see that capitalization can be a powerful instrument of style if it is shrewdly and knowingly used.

To understand the basic function of capitalization, you should know that capitalization gives importance, emphasis, and distinction to everything it touches. That's why we capitalize the first word of every sentence—to signify emphatically that a new sentence has begun. That's why we capitalize proper nouns like *Marianne* and *Calgary* and *April*—to indicate distinctively that these are the official names of particular people, places, or things. Moreover, when we take a word that normally occurs as a common noun and capitalize it, we are loading into that word the special significance that a proper noun possesses. The *first of July*, for example, is just another day in the year; when it signifies a national holiday, it becomes the *First of July*.

This process of giving special significance to a common noun and transforming it into a proper noun explains why we capitalize names coined from common nouns—for example, *Hall of Fame*, *Queen City*, *Parliament Hill*, *Picture Province*, *Labour Party*, *Man in Motion*, and *King of Swing*. And it also explains why manufacturers who coin trade names try to register them whenever possible. As long as they can get legal protection for these names, they are entitled to capitalize them. The owners of such trade names as *Acrilan*, *Rollerblades*, *Scrabble*, *Q-Tip*, and *Xerox* are likely to take legal action against anyone who uses such words generically. They are determined to protect their rights zealously because they don't want to lose the distinctive forcefulness that a capitalized noun possesses. In this respect they demonstrate an understanding of the function of capitalization that few of us can compete with.

Once it becomes clear that capitalization is a process of loading special significance into words, it's easier to understand why capitalization practices vary so widely. Individual writers will assign importance to words from their own vantage points. The closer they are to the term in question, the more inclined they will be to capitalize it. Thus it is quite possible that what is important to me (and therefore worthy of capitalization) may not be important to you and thus will not be capitalized.

One could cite any number of examples to prove the point. A retail merchant will take out full-page ads so that he can exclaim in print about his *Year-End Clearance Sale*. The rest of us can respect his right to capitalize the phrase, but we are under no obligation to share his enthusiasm for what is, after all, just another *year-end clearance sale*. In legal agreements, as another example, it's customary to load such terms as *buyer* and *seller* with the significance of proper nouns and thus write, "The *Buyer* agrees to pay the *Seller* . . ."; in all other contexts, however, this kind of emphasis would not be warranted.

When it is understood that it is appropriate to capitalize a given term in some contexts but not necessarily in all contexts, a lot of the agony about capitalization disappears. Instead of trying to decide whether *Federal Government* or *federal government* is correct,

you should recognize that both forms are valid and that depending on the context and the importance you want to attach to the term, one form will be more appropriate to your purpose than another. If you are a federal employee, you are very likely to write *Federal Government* under all circumstances, out of respect for the organization that employs you. If you are not a government employee, you are more likely to write *federal government* under ordinary circumstances.

Once you come to view capitalization as a flexible instrument of style, you should be able to cope more easily with ambiguous or conflicting rules. For example, one of the most troublesome rules concerns whether or not to capitalize titles when they follow a person's name or are used in place of the name. According to many authorities, only the titles of "high-ranking" officials and dignitaries should be capitalized when they follow or replace a person's name. But how high is high? Where does one draw the line? You can easily become confused at this point because the authorities as well as individual writers have drawn the line at various places. So it helps to understand that the answer to how high is high will depend on where you stand in relation to the person named. At the international level, a lot of us would be willing to bestow initial caps on the *Queen of the Netherlands*, the *Premier of France*, the *Pope*, the *Secretary General of the United Nations*, and people of similar eminence. At the national level in this country, many of us would agree on honouring with caps the *Prime Minister*, Cabinet members (such as the *Attorney General* and the *Minister of Finance*), the heads of federal agencies and bureaus (such as the *Deputy Minister of Fisheries*), but probably not lower-ranking officials in the national government.

What about titles of high-ranking officials in your own organization? They certainly are important to you, even if not to the outside world. Such titles are usually capitalized in formal minutes of a meeting or in formal documents (such as a company charter or a set of by-laws). In ordinary written communications, however, these titles are not—as a matter of taste—usually capitalized, for capitalization would confer an excessive importance on a person who is neither a public official nor a prominent dignitary. But those who insist on paying this gesture of respect and honour to their top executives have the right to do it if they want to. (And in some companies this gesture is demanded.)

In the final analysis, the important thing is for you to establish an appropriate capitalization style for a given context—and having established that style, to follow it consistently within that context, even though you might well adopt a different style in another context. Though others may disagree with your specific applications of the rules, no one can fault you if you have brought both sense and sensitivity to your use of capitalization.

## THE COMMA TRAUMA

Consider the poor comma, a plodding workhorse in the fields of prose—exceedingly useful but like most workhorses overworked. Because it can do so many things, a number of writers dispense the comma to cure their ailing prose the way doctors

dispense aspirin: according to this prescription, you take two at frequent intervals and hope the problem will go away. Other writers, having written, stand back to admire their handiwork as if it were a well-risen cake—and for the final touch they sprinkle commas down upon it like so much confectioner’s sugar. And one writer I know, when pushed to desperation, will type several rows of commas at the bottom of her letter and urge you to insert them in the copy above wherever you think it appropriate.

It’s too bad that commas induce a trauma in so many writers. Despite the seemingly endless set of rules that describe their varied powers, commas have only two basic functions: they either separate or set off. Separating requires only one comma; setting off requires two.

The separating functions of the comma, for the most part, are easy to spot and not hard to master. A separating comma is used:

1. To separate the two main clauses in a compound sentence when they are joined by *and, but, or, or nor* (sometimes *for, so, and yet*).
2. To separate three or more items in a series (*Tom, Dick, and Harry*)—unless all the items are joined by *and* or *or* (*Bob and Carol and Ted and Alice*).
3. To signify the omission of *and* between adjectives of equal rank (as in a *quiet, unassuming personality*).

Writers get into trouble here mostly as a result of separating things that should not be separated—for example, a subject and a verb (*Bob, Carol, Ted, and Alice* decided to see a movie) or an adjective and a noun (*a quiet, unassuming* personality). Yet this is not where the comma trauma begins to set in.

The real crunch comes with the commas that set off. These are the commas that are intended to set off words, phrases, or clauses that (1) provide additional but non-essential information or (2) are out of their normal order in the sentence or (3) manage, in one way or another, to disrupt the flow of the sentence from subject to verb to object or complement. What makes it so difficult for people to use these commas correctly is that they have a hard time analysing the difference between an expression used as an essential element in one context and as a non-essential element in another.

Consider the following example. I would venture that most people have been taught to punctuate the sentence exactly as it is given here:

It is, therefore, essential that we audit all accounts at once.

To be specific, they have probably been taught that *therefore* is always non-essential when it occurs within a sentence and that it must therefore always be set off by commas. What they probably have not been taught is that commas that set off (unlike commas that separate) usually signal the way a sentence should sound when spoken aloud. For example, if I were to read the foregoing sentence aloud the way it has been punctuated, I would pause slightly at the sign of the first comma and then let my voice drop on the word *therefore*:

IT IS, therefore, ESSENTIAL . . .

Now if this is the reading that is desired, then the use of commas around *therefore* is quite correct. Yet I would venture that most people would read the sentence this way:

It is THEREFORE essential . . .

letting the voice rise on *therefore* to give it the special emphasis it demands. If this is the desired reading, then commas would be altogether wrong in this sentence, for they would induce a “non-essential” inflection in the voice where none is wanted.

If people have been mechanically inserting commas around *therefore* and similar words where commas do not belong, it is because they have not been encouraged to listen to the way the sentences are supposed to sound. Certainly once you become aware of the differences in inflection and phrasing that accompany essential and non-essential elements, it becomes a lot easier for you to distinguish between them and to insert or omit commas accordingly. Given this kind of approach, sentences like the following pair are simple to cope with.

Please let me know *if I have remembered everything correctly.*

He said he would meet us at three, *if I remember correctly.*

Although it would be possible, by means of a structural analysis, to establish why the first *if* clause is essential and why the second is not, you would do well to be guided by the inflection implied in each sentence. In the first instance, the voice arcs as it bridges the gap between *Please let me know* and *if I have remembered everything correctly.* In the second instance, the inflectional arc embraces only the first part of the sentence, *He said he would meet us at three;* then comes a slight pause followed by the *if* clause, which is uttered in a much lower register, almost as if it were an afterthought.

As you gain confidence in your ability to detect the inflectional patterns characteristic of essential and non-essential expressions, you should have no difficulty in picking your way through a variety of constructions like these:

I must report, *nevertheless*, that his work is unsatisfactory.

I must *nevertheless* report that his work is unsatisfactory.

The location, *I must admit*, is quite attractive.

The location is one *I must admit* I find attractive.

There are, *of course*, other possible answers to the problem.

It is *of course* your prerogative to change your mind.

This awareness of inflectional patterns is especially helpful when it comes to coping with appositives, a frustrating area in which the use or omission of commas often seems illogical. When the appositive expression is truly non-essential as in:

Ed Brown, *the president of Apex*, would like to meet you.

the customary pause and the characteristic drop in voice are there. And when the appositive expression is essential, as in phrases like *the year 2000* and *the term “recommend,”* you can hear the single inflectional arc that embraces each group of words in

one closely knit unit. You can also hear the same continuous arc in the phrase *my wife Marie*. By all that is logical, the name *Marie* should be set off by commas because it is not needed to establish which of my wives I'm speaking about; unlike an Arabian sheik, I have only one wife. Yet according to today's standards, *my wife Marie* is considered good form. Although not essential to the meaning, the name *Marie* is treated as if it were essential because of what style manuals call "a very close relationship with the preceding words." Although it is difficult, if not impossible, to state in concrete terms what constitutes "a very close relationship," you can tell by the sound when it exists. There is a subtle but very real difference in the phrases *my sister Florence* and *my sister, Florence Stern*. Once the second name is added, there tends to be a slight pause after *sister* and the voice tends to drop while uttering the full name. Yet it is not safe to conclude that adding the second name accounts for the difference in the inflection, for when one speaks of *the composer David Foster* or *the author Margaret Atwood*, one hears the same inflectional pattern as in *my wife Marie* or *the year 2005*. So in the case of appositives, it is wise to be wary of simple generalizations and to listen attentively in each case to the way the expression ought to sound.

In stressing, as I have, the significance of inflection and phrasing as a guide to the use of commas, I do not mean to suggest that one can punctuate by sound alone and can safely ignore structure and meaning. What I am suggesting is that in a number of cases, such as those I have cited, an awareness of the sound of sentences can help you grasp relationships that might otherwise be obscure.

There are many other problems involving the comma that should be discussed here, but someone else (Ogden Nash, perhaps) will have to take over . . .

And now if you'll excuse me comma  
I must lie down and have my trauma . . . . .

**THE PLIGHT OF THE COMPOUND ADJECTIVE—OR,  
WHERE HAVE ALL THE HYPHENS GONE?**

The hyphen, it grieves me to report, is in trouble. Indeed, unless concerted action is taken at once, the hyphen is likely to become as extinct as the apostrophe in *ladies aid*. The problem can be traced to two dangerous attitudes that are afoot these days. One is revolutionary in tone; its motto: "Compound adjectives, unite! You have nothing to lose but your hyphens." The other attitude reflects the view of the silent majority. These are the people who don't pretend to know how to cope with the "hyphen" mess; they just earnestly wish the whole problem would quickly disappear. It may now be too late to reverse the long-range trend. For the present, however, the hyphen exists—and anyone who expects to work with words at an acceptable level of proficiency needs to come to terms with the noble beast. Here, then, is a last-ditch effort to make sense out of an ever-changing and possibly fast-disappearing (but not-soon-to-be-forgotten) aspect of style.

As a general rule, the English language depends largely on word order to make the relationships between words clear. When word order alone is not sufficient to

establish these relationships, we typically resort to punctuation. It is in this context that the hyphen has a service to offer. The function of the hyphen is to help the reader grasp clusters of words—or even parts of words—as a unit. When a word has to be divided at the end of a line, the hyphen signifies the connection between parts. Whenever two or more words function as a unit but cannot (for one reason or another) be written either as a solid word or as separate words, the hyphen clearly establishes the relationship between these words and prevents a lapse in comprehension.

If hyphens are typically required in compound adjectives, it is that there is something “abnormal” about the word order of such expressions. Other kinds of modifiers, by contrast, do not require hyphens. For example, if I write about “a *long, hard* winter,” I am actually referring to a winter *that will be long and hard*; so I need a comma—not a hyphen—to establish the fact that *long* and *hard* modify *winter* independently. If I write about “a *long opening* paragraph,” the word order makes it clear that *opening* modifies *paragraph* and that *long* modifies the two words together; so no punctuation is needed to establish the fact that I’m speaking about “*an opening paragraph that is long.*”

However, if I write about “a *long-term* loan,” an entirely different relationship is established between the elements in the modifier. I am not speaking of a *loan* that is *long* and *term*, nor am I referring to a *term loan* that is *long*. I am speaking about a loan “that is to run for a *long term* of years.” The words *long-term* (unlike *long, hard* or *long opening*) have an internal relationship all their own; it is only as an integral unit that these two words can modify a noun. Thus a hyphen is inserted to establish this fact clearly.

For a better understanding of the internal relationship that exists between the elements in a compound adjective, one has to go back to its origins. A compound adjective is actually a compressed version of an adjective phrase or clause. For example, if I describe a product as carrying “a *money-back* guarantee,” I am actually talking about “a guarantee *to give you your money back if you are not satisfied with the product.*” Or if I refer to “a *take-charge* kind of guy,” I am really speaking of “the kind of guy *who always takes charge of any situation he finds himself in.*” One can easily see from these examples why compound adjectives are so popular, for these expressions are usually a good deal crisper and livelier than the phrases or clauses they represent. These examples give further evidence of why a hyphen is needed. In each case we have zeroed in on a couple of words, we have wrenched them out of context and out of their normal order in a descriptive phrase or clause, and we have inserted them before a noun as if they were an ordinary adjective—a role these two words were never originally designed to play. Deprived of all the other words that would clearly establish the relationship between them, these elements require a hyphen to hold them together.

**T**he two factors of compression and dislocation are all the justification one needs to hyphenate a compound adjective. However, there are often additional clues to the need for a hyphen. In the process of becoming a compound adjective, the individual words frequently undergo a change in form: “a contract for *two years*” becomes “a *two-year* contract”; “a blonde with *blue eyes*” becomes “a *blue-eyed* blonde.” Sometimes the words are put in inverted order: “lands *owned* by the government” becomes “*government-owned* lands.” Sometimes the elements undergo a change both in form *and* in word



order: “an employee *who works hard*” becomes “a *hard-working* employee”; “bonds *exempt from taxation*” becomes “*tax-exempt* bonds.” The change in form or the inversion in word order is an additional signal that you are in the presence of a compound adjective and ought to hyphenate it.

If the compound adjective is so simple to understand in theory, why is it so difficult to handle in practice? A good deal of the problem can be traced to that neat but now-discredited rule, “Hyphenate compound adjectives when they precede the noun but not when they follow the noun.” It was indeed a very neat rule but not a very precise one. Let’s take it apart and see why.

It is quite true that compound adjectives should be hyphenated when they occur *before* a noun—for the most part. There’s the catch—“for the most part.” The exceptions seem to occur in such a random, hit-and-miss, now-and-then, flip-a-coin, make-it-up-as-you-go-along fashion that one begins to lose respect for the rule. Yet there is a very definite pattern to the exceptions. Keep in mind that the hyphen serves to hold a cluster of words together as a unit. If, through some other means, these words make themselves clearly recognizable as a unit, the hyphen is superfluous and can be omitted. There are at least three such situations where a hyphen is unnecessary: when the compound modifier is a proper name, when it is a well-recognized foreign expression, and when it is a well-established compound noun serving as a compound adjective.

When compound adjectives occur *after* the noun, according to the traditional rule, they should not be hyphenated. Yet this traditional formulation is somewhat misleading. If we aren’t supposed to hyphenate a “compound adjective” when it follows a noun, it’s for the simple reason that the words in question no longer function as a compound adjective—they are playing a normal role in a normal order. It’s one thing to use hyphens in the expression “an *up-to-date* report,” for a prepositional phrase doesn’t normally belong before a noun. However, if I said “This report is *up to date*,” there would be no more justification for hyphenating here than there would be if I said “This report is *in good shape*.” Both expressions—*in good shape* and *up to date*—are prepositional phrases playing a normal role in the predicate.

However, if the expression still exhibits an abnormal form or inverted word order in the predicate, it is still a compound adjective—and it must still be hyphenated. For example, whether I speak of “*tax-exempt* items” or say “these items are *tax-exempt*,” the hyphen must be inserted because regardless of where it appears—*before* or *after* the noun—the expression is a compressed version of the phrase “exempt from taxation.”

It does no good to pretend that compound adjectives are an easy thing to master. They aren’t. And for that very reason people who have to cope with these expressions need more guidance than they get from a simple “hyphenate before but not after” kind of rule. In the final analysis, what becomes of the hyphen over the long run is of little consequence. What does matter is that we express ourselves with precision, verve, and grace. If the hyphen can help us toward that end, why not make use of it?

## THE SEMICOLON; AND OTHER MYTHS

In certain circles that I move in, the fastest way I know to start a quarrel is to attack the semicolon. If I knocked my friends' politics or sneered at their religious beliefs, they would simply smile. But attack their views on the semicolon and they reach for a bread knife. Why this particular mark of punctuation should excite such intense passion escapes me. The semicolon has always been a neurotic creature, continually undergoing an identity crisis. After all, it is half comma and half period, and from its name you would think it is half a colon. It is hardly any wonder, then, that a lot of people are half crazy trying to determine who the semicolon really is and what its mission in life is supposed to be.

In the course of this brief essay, I am going to explore three myths that have grown up over the years about the semicolon and about some other marks of punctuation.

**Myth No. 1: If either clause in a compound sentence contains an internal comma, use a semicolon (not a comma) before the co-ordinating conjunction that connects the clauses.** According to this line of reasoning, it is all right to use a comma in a compound sentence like this:

The regional meeting in Sarnia has been cancelled, but all other meetings will go on as scheduled.

However, if I use commas for a lesser purpose within either clause (for example, by inserting *Ontario* after *Sarnia* and setting it off with commas), then the comma before the conjunction must be upgraded to a semicolon.

The regional meeting in Sarnia, Ontario, has been cancelled; but all other meetings will go on as scheduled.

It is harsh, I concede, to dismiss this rule as a myth when it has been taught for years in various classes and various texts. But the unhappy fact is that outside those classes and those texts, almost no one punctuates that way anymore. The trouble with using a semicolon in such sentences is that it creates a break that is too strong for the occasion. It closes down the action of the sentence at a point where the writer would like it to keep on going. So contemporary writers see nothing wrong with using commas simultaneously to separate clauses and to perform lesser functions within the clauses—unless, of course, total confusion or misreading is likely to result. But in most cases it doesn't. In the following sentence, commas are used both *within* clauses and *between* clauses without any loss of clarity and also without any loss of verbal momentum.

On March 16, 1999, I wrote to your credit manager, Mr. Lough, but I have not yet heard from him.

This simultaneous use of commas within and between clauses may look offensive to anyone accustomed to the traditional rule. The fact remains that we have been using commas for both purposes in *complex* sentences all along, and it has never occasioned any comment.

Although I wrote to your credit manager, Mr. Lough, on March 16, 1999, I have not yet heard from him.

It should be clearly understood that the use of a semicolon before the conjunction in a compound sentence is not wrong. If you want a strong break at that point, the semicolon can and should be used. But you ought to know that the reason for using it is the special effect it creates—and not the presence of internal commas. For example:

I have tried again and again to explain to George why the transaction had to be kept secret from him; but he won't believe me.

**Myth No. 2: Always use a semicolon before an enumeration or an explanation introduced by *for example*, *namely*, or *that is*.** In many cases this rule is quite true, but in other cases either a colon or a comma is better suited to the occasion. Let's look at some examples.

There are several things you could do to save your business (?) namely, try to get a loan from the bank, find yourself a partner with good business judgment, or pray that your competitor goes out of business before you do.

If you put a semicolon before *namely*, you will close the action down just when the sentence is starting to get somewhere. Because the first part of the sentence creates an air of anticipation, because it implicitly promises to reveal several ways of saving the business, you need not a mark that closes the action down but one that supports the air of anticipation. Enter the colon.

The colon is one of the underrated stars in the firmament of punctuation. It would be more widely used, perhaps, if its sound effects were better understood. The colon is the mark of anticipation. It is a blare of trumpets before the grand entrance; it is the roll of drums before the dive off the 30-metre tower. It marks the end of the buildup and gets you ready for "the real thing." Thus:

There are several things you can do to save your business: namely, try to get a loan . . .

Consider this example, however:

Always express numbers in figures when they are accompanied by abbreviations; for example, 4 p.m., 8 cm.

The first part of this sample sentence expresses a self-contained thought. If the sentence ended right there, the reader would not be left up in the air. The examples that follow are unexpected, unanticipated, added on almost as an afterthought. We're glad to have them, but they aren't anything we were counting on. The semicolon here is quite appropriate; it momentarily closes down the action of the sentence after the main point is expressed.

In other situations a comma may be the best mark to use before *namely*, *for example*, or *that is*. Consider this sentence as an example:

Do not use quotation marks to enclose an *indirect quotation*, that is, a restatement of a person's exact words.

In this case, a semicolon would be inappropriate before *that is* because it would close off the action just as we were about to get a definition of a term within the main clause.

Moreover, a colon would be inappropriate because it would imply that the sentence up to that point was a buildup for what follows—and that is not true in this case. Here all that is needed is a simple comma to preserve the close relationship between the term *indirect quotation* and the explanatory expression that follows it.

**Myth No. 3: When a polite request is phrased as a question, end it with a period.**

This is another statement that does not, unfortunately, always hold true. In fact, once a period is used at the end of some requests, they no longer sound very polite. I once posted the following note in my home: “Will you please close the door.” My children knew this was not really a polite request but a firm parental command. When they chose to ignore it, I amended the sign to read, “Will you please close the door!” (I was relying on the exclamation point to carry the full force of my exasperation.) That approach failed too, so I tried a new tack in diplomacy, amending the sign once again: “Will you please close the door?” My children now knew they had broken my spirit. They now sensed in the sign a pleading note, a petitioning tone, the begging of a favour. They also knew that now I was asking them a real yes-or-no question (or at least I was creating the illusion of asking). Then, in the paradoxical way that children have, once they knew they had the chance to say no, they began to answer my question with tacit affirmations, tugging the door after them on the way out or kicking it shut behind them on the way in.

My problems with my kids are, of course, my own, but learning how to express and punctuate polite requests tends to be a problem for all of us. Consider, for a moment, the wording of those three signs, alike in all respects except for the final mark of punctuation. The version that ends with a period is really a quiet but nonetheless firm demand. There is no element of a question in it at all. The voice rises in an arc and then flattens out at the end on a note of resolution. In the version that ends with an exclamation point, the voice rises in a higher arc and resounds with greater intensity and force of feeling, but it, too, comes down at the end—this time with something of a bang. In the final version, the one with the question mark, the voice starts on an upward curve and then trails off, still on an upward note. Three different readings of the same words, each with a different impact on the reader—all evoked by three different punctuation marks at the end.

Once you become sensitive to the effects produced by these marks of punctuation, handling polite requests becomes quite simple. All you have to do is say the sentence aloud and listen to the sound of your own voice. If you end the sentence with your voice on an upward note, you know that a question mark is the right punctuation to use. If your voice comes down at the end, you know that you need a period. (And if you really feel forceful about it, you probably want an exclamation point.)

If there is any potential danger in so simple a rule, it is this: we sometimes express our requests orally as flat assertions (“Will you please do this for me.”) when, as a matter of good taste and good manners, we ought to be asking a question (“Will you please do this for me?”).

Now it is true that in the normal course of events we all make demands on one another, and though we tack on a “Will you please” for the sake of politeness, these are still

demands, not questions. As long as your reader is not likely to consider them presumptuous, it is appropriate to punctuate these demands with periods:

Will you please sign both copies of the contract and return the original to me.

May I suggest that you confirm the departure time for your flight before you leave for the airport.

Will you please give my best regards to your family.

As opposed to these routine demands, there is the kind of polite request that asks the reader for a special favour. Here, if you really want to be polite, you will punctuate your request as a question so as to give your reader the chance to say no.

May I please see you sometime next week?

May I please get an advance copy of the confidential report you are doing?

Will you please acknowledge all my correspondence for me while I'm away?

In these cases you are asking for things that the reader may be unable or unwilling to grant; therefore, you ought to pose these requests as questions. (If you try reading them as statements, you will observe how quickly they change into peremptory demands.) Suppose, however, that these requests were addressed to your subordinates. Under those conditions you would have the right to expect your reader to make the time to see you, to supply you with an advance copy of the confidential report, and to handle your mail for you; therefore, you would be justified in ending these sentences with periods. But even when you have this authority over your reader, you ought to consider the alternative of asking. The inspired public official who replaced the "Keep Off the Grass" signs with a simple "PLEASE?" understood people and how they like to be talked to. If a question mark will get faster results or establish a nicer tone, why not use it?

**T**here are other myths that one could discuss, but these three are sufficient to permit me to make one central point. Mastery over the rules of punctuation depends to a considerable extent on cultivating a sensitivity to the way a sentence moves and the way it sounds.

Punctuating by ear has come to be frowned on—and with much justification—for it has come to mean punctuating solely by feeling, by instinct, by intuition, without much regard for (or knowledge of) the structure of the language and the function of punctuation. Yet the solution, it seems to me, is not to abandon the technique of punctuating by ear but to cultivate it, to develop in yourself a disciplined sense of the relationship between the sound and the structure and the mechanics of language. Many authorities on language, if pressed, have to concede that they often consider first whether a thing sounds right or looks right; only then do they utter a pronouncement as to why it is right. If they rely on their ears for this kind of assurance, then why don't you cultivate the same skill?