

Personality & Punctuation

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Punctuation helps us translate an intricacy of an individual's speech into writing. As humans, we spoke long before we had developed any system of writing; as an alphabet and words were created, naturally punctuation followed. Each punctuation mark has its own inherent connotation based on how we speak, in order to associate, or disassociate, two thoughts or statements. Often to deduce how writers use punctuation or structure to imply meaning, I imagine how they might say it audibly if they were to impart the same story in person, word-for-word.

Virginia Woolf is extremely deliberate in her writing, so it is no question that each form of punctuation is used with thought and certainty. Woolf's dashes make the moment terse and concise. Sometimes the delivery is one of sarcasm or wit, other times not. I imagine that in person, this punctuation would be represented by sharper stops in speech, meant to invoke clear, unabashed juxtaposition or commentary. Her semicolons, though, play out more like a movie script, moving the plot along in a way that is both efficient and sensitive. Semicolons, for Woolf, connect ideas in a way that is more polished and neat than other forms of punctuation--not as abrupt as a dash, not as conclusive as a period, not as serene as parentheses. She has a love affair with semicolons, which appear again and again in her writing. If she were telling her story aloud, a semicolon is like a half-breath. She's not rambling, but she's got more to say and refuses to stop for a full breath.

Should she have used a period in place of a semicolon, she would not get the fluidity of thought, moving from point to point seamlessly, that a semicolon allows. The ideas would have felt

choppier, uneven. The semicolons deemphasize the pauses and emphasize connection: each thought level with the next. I had to look deeper into Woolf's work to find her use of parentheses, however. Specifically, I turned to *Mrs. Dalloway*, which my class had read in high school. She uses parentheses frequently to refer to a character's internal thoughts and to alert the reader to its intricacies. If she were to tell the story in person, the parentheses would likely be the equivalent of a spoken aside in a more hushed tone: gentler, but important nonetheless. Parentheses coyly emphasize these extra details and thoughts so they stick out in the reader's consideration of that character. As for colons, I looked again to *Mrs. Dalloway*. Woolf appears much more cordial with a semicolon than with its cousin, but I did find a few instances of the colon's usage in her writing. Woolf turns to a colon often as a segue for dialogue. More than a semicolon, dash, or parentheses, I feel like Woolf takes a breath with her colons. As Woolf is so confident and blunt in her writing, and as I imagine she would be in her speech, she seems to rarely stop for a breath from her story. That is why—although rare—that this colon is needed every so often to slow down and provide the reader with a subtle break. Its usage also allows for emphasis to be put entirely on what's being said, implying that what is said is important.

Whereas Virginia Woolf had a love affair with the semicolon, Bill McKibben has his own affair with the dash. I get the sense that if I met McKibben at a party, he would have a clear point of view and very subtle, dry sense of humor. That's why his use of the dash is so effective. It's breaks apart his words in a way that highlights his humor and intelligence rather than disguising it. Whereas Woolf relied on semicolons for connection and fluidity, McKibben relies on dashes to strengthen his argument and emphasize his points. In

person, he seems like he would be extremely persuasive. However, unlike Woolf, his use of semicolons are much more scarce. He will use a semicolon for connection once in a while, but he concerns himself less with the sinuosity of his words and more with the power of their delivery. As for usage of parentheses, he throws these in to add details to his current thought. McKibben uses parentheses firmly, as if at a normal conversation volume, as opposed to Woolf who used parentheses a little more gently, as if hushed. When McKibben uses colons, it has an air of intelligence. He mainly uses colons to list, to define, and to elaborate. Each colon emphasizes the new information that is to come.

To look at one more example of personality in punctuation, I sought out one of my favorite books, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll. I love Carroll's use of language and punctuation to help context and imagery. First, I must highlight his use of dashes. Curiously, Carroll uses dashes much differently than Woolf and McKibben. Whereas Woolf and McKibben use dashes to show connection of ideas, Carroll is a fan of using the dash to show disconnection. Especially in dialogue, he uses a dash whenever a character breaks off in the middle of their sentence or is interrupted jarringly. This is an extremely effective example of usage in this story in particular, given the storyline. Alice is lost. She's confused. She's in an unfamiliar world where everything is strange. She's disconnected from her old world; thus her broken speech full of dashes reflects that confusion. Additionally, each of the zany characters she meets appear completely disconnected from one another, stepping on each other's toes, hollering at one another, and seemingly speaking in circles:

'That depends a good deal on where you want to get to,' said the Cat.

'I don't much care where—' said Alice.

'Then it doesn't matter which way you go,' said the Cat.

'—so long as I get somewhere,' Alice added as an explanation. (Carroll)

It's just a dash and yet it breathes so much life into this interaction. Should Carroll have used an ellipsis to show this type of disconnection, it would have given each statement too much time for pause. In Wonderland things happen weird and they happen fast. With that being said, another way to keep the plot moving is with semicolons. Carroll uses them in a similar way to Woolf, by connecting ideas in a way that's more fluid, but he uses them much less frequently than she. Here is an example of Carroll's use of semicolon:

The players all played at once without waiting for turns, quarrelling all the while, and fighting for the hedgehogs; and in a very short time the Queen was in a furious passion, and went stamping about, and shouting 'Off with his head!' or 'Off with her head!' about once in a minute. (Carroll)

Here he uses a semicolon to show progression. Clearly they were playing and fighting for a while. Had he left out the semicolon entirely, it would not have communicated the passage of time as well. Lastly though, Carroll also uses parentheses a bit differently than Woolf and McKibben. For example, Carroll writes:

'Never!' said the Queen furiously, throwing an inkstand at the Lizard as she spoke. (The unfortunate little Bill had left off writing on his slate with one finger, as he found it made no mark; but he now hastily began again, using the ink, that was trickling down his face, as long as it lasted.) (Carroll)

Carroll's use of parentheses feels more personal than McKibben's and Woolf's. He uses it to tell more personal details of the story, as if in a one-on-one conversation as opposed to a piece of writing meant for a larger audience. Also by using this style with his parentheses, he can indicate and emphasize some smaller details of the story that add to the charm of the novel and the reader's experience.

Ultimately, astute readers will note that each writer's personality seeps in through his or her use of punctuation. It's the writer's job to tell a story. But the tools they use and the way they use them speaks volumes.