



The A-Z of writing

P-q

From P to q. This week, punctuation. When used with care, it gives clarity and grace to your writing. Next in the series revisiting John Simmons' book *The Invisible Grail*. Follow our weekly series for a workout in writing agility that will influence and improve your words for work. Next week – Q to r, published on Friday 31 July.

Punctuation is the cause of many problems. Some people get irritated by it because they see it as pedantry. Do they they do. It's not pedantry – it's fundamental to meaning. I liked the novelist Donna Tartt saying that she could happily spend a morning just moving a comma around.

There were periods in the 20th century when you needed to play with punctuation if you were to be considered a serious writer. Writers like James Joyce were interested in achieving a closer approximation of real thought processes through abandoning the normal rules of punctuation, to which Molly Bloom said yes yes yes. But something else happens that is interesting: new ambiguities are exposed through changes in punctuation. There is a pub game example: 'woman without her man is nothing.' Add punctuation of your choice. Do all the women do this? 'Woman. Without her, man is nothing.' Do all the men fail to spot the possibility at all?

It seems we're living in an age of short, sharp, punctuated messages. *Stay home. Protect the NHS. Save lives.* When you saw this on the podium, the > sign became a visual equivalent of a full-stop. What happens when you read it without punctuation Or with commas replacing the full stops, Or with question marks? *Stay home?* Punctuation changes meaning so you can use it creatively as part of your writing palette.

When writing for business, we need to be relatively strict about punctuation because a missed comma, full stop, apostrophe or question mark can change the meaning of what is read. Clarity needs to be a fundamental principle of business writing, even though we might want to do so much more. Establish clarity first; in doing so, you might find that you have gone a step beyond clarity towards grace. You need considered punctuation to achieve either clarity or grace. And you might even end up playing with punctuation to reinforce meaning, when you find yourself backed into a crowd and wanting to get out of the q...

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With a new chapter released weekly, look out for the next in the series, Q-r, arriving with you on Friday 31 July. Follow us on [Linked In](#) or via our [Insights page](#) to find your weekly dose of writing inspiration.

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