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the points to be made: firstly, secondly and so forth, with the implication that you haven't sense enough to keep track of a sequence of notions without having them numbered. Also, many writers use this system loosely and incompletely, starting out with number one and number two as though counting off on their fingers but then going on and on without the succession of labels you've been led to expect, leaving you floundering about searching for the ninthly or seventeenthly that ought to be there but isn't.

Exclamation points are the most irritating of all. Look! they say, look at what I just said! How amazing is my thought! It is like being forced to watch someone else's small child jumping up and down crazily in the center of the living room shouting to attract attention. If a sentence really has something of importance to say, something quite remarkable, it doesn't need a mark to point it out. And if it is really, after all, a banal sentence needing more zing, the exclamation point simply emphasizes its banality!

Quotation marks should be used honestly and sparingly, when there is a genuine quotation at hand, and it is necessary to be very rigorous about the words enclosed by the marks. If something is to be quoted, the exact words must be used. If part of it must be left out because of space limitations, it is good manners to insert three dots to indicate the omission, but it is unethical to do this if it means connecting two thoughts which the original author did not intend to have tied together. Above all, quotation marks should not be used for ideas that you'd like to disown, things in the air so to speak. Nor should they be put in place around clichés; if you want to use a cliché you must take full responsibility for it yourself and not try to job it off on anon., or on society. The most objectionable misuse of quotation marks, but one which illustrates the dangers of misuse in ordinary prose, is seen in advertising, especially in advertisements for small restaurants, for example "just around the corner," or "a good place to eat." No single, identifiable, citable person ever really said, for the record, "just around the corner," much less "a good place to eat," least likely of all for restaurants of the type that use this type of prose.

The dash is a handy device, informal and essentially playful, telling you that you're about to take off on a different tack but still in some way connected with the present course—only you have to remember that the dash is there, and either put a second dash at the end of the notion to let the reader know that he's back on course, or else end the sentence, as here, with a period.

The greatest danger in punctuation is for poetry. Here it is necessary to be as economical and parsimonious with commas and periods as with the words themselves, and any marks that seem to carry their own subtle meanings, like dashes and little rows of periods, even semicolons and question marks, should be left out altogether rather than inserted to clog up the thing with ambiguity. A single exclamation point in a poem, no matter what else the poem has to say, is enough to destroy the whole work.

The things I like best in T. S. Eliot's poetry, especially in the *Four Quartets*, are the semicolons. You cannot hear them, but they are there, laying out the connections between the images and the ideas. Sometimes you get a

glimpse of a semicolon coming, a few lines farther on, and it is like climbing a steep path through woods and seeing a wooden bench just at a bend in the road ahead, a place where you can expect to sit for a moment, catching your breath.

Commas can't do this sort of thing; they can only tell you how the different parts of a complicated thought are to be fitted together, but you can't sit, not even take a breath, just because of a comma,

## QUESTIONS

1. The title of this piece begins with the word "notes." Is that the right word? Is this a series of notes or something else?
2. How long did it take you to realize that Thomas is playing a kind of game with his readers? (For instance, paragraph 1 is a single sentence.) Is punctuation the kind of thing people usually play games with?
3. Choose one or two writers from the next section, "An Album of Styles," and describe how they employ commas, colons, and semicolons. Do any of the semicolons serve as "a wooden bench just at a bend in the road ahead" (paragraph 9)?
4. Compare Thomas's technique of illustrating his points as he explains them with Garrison Keillor's similar technique in "Postcards" (p. 525). What other forms of writing might be treated this way? Find other examples that, like Thomas's "Notes" or Keillor's "Postcards," merge form and content.

## Ellen Lupton and J. Abbott Miller

### PERIOD STYLES: A PUNCTUATED HISTORY

GREEK AND LATIN MANUSCRIPTS WERE USUALLY WRITTEN WITH NO SPACE BETWEEN WORDS UNTIL, AROUND THE NINTH CENTURY AD, ALTHOUGH ROMAN INSCRIPTIONS LIKE THE FAMOUS TRAJAN COLUMN SOMETIMES SEPARATED WORDS WITH A CENTERED DOT. EVEN AFTER SPACING BECAME COMMON IT REMAINED HAPHAZARD. FOR EXAMPLE OFTEN A PREPOSITION WAS LINKED TO ANOTHER WORD. EARLY GREEK WRITING RAN IN LINES ALTERNATING FROM LEFT TO RIGHT AND RIGHT TO LEFT. THIS CONVENTION WAS TI 2W/OJ9 XO EHT 2A 0V/H/2A/1A /MODEHHEHT2UOB DELLJAO 2AW CONVENIENT FOR LARGE CARVED MONUMENTS BUT BOUSTREPHEDON HINDERED THE READING AND WRITING OF SMALLER TEXTS AND SO THE LEFT TO RIGHT DIRECTION BECAME DOMINANT. A CENTERED DOT DIVIDED WORDS WHICH SPLIT AT THE END OF A LINE IN EARLY GREEK AND LATIN MANUSCRIPTS. IN THE ELEVENTH CENTURY A MARK SIMILAR TO THE MOD-

As leading experts in the field of graphic design, Lupton and Miller have published frequently on authorship and issues of design. This illustrative essay was published in their book *Design, Writing, Research* (1996), which is also the name of their studio.