When Your Punctuation Says It All (!)

I went out with a guy based on his use of dashes once. Within moments of our first interaction — over text message — I was basically in love.

He didn’t just use the lazy singular dash (“-”) as a pause between his thoughts, or even the more time-consuming double-dash (“--”). Nope. This man used a proper em dash.

That is, the kind that required him to hold down the dash button on his iPhone for that extra second, until the “—” appeared, then choose it from among three options. I don’t remember what his messages actually said. But he obviously really liked me.

I’m a writer; it’s natural I’d have a thing for grammar. But these days, it’s as if our punctuation is on steroids.

It’s not just that each of us is more delicately choosing our characters, knowing that an exclamation point or a colon carries more weight in our 140-character world. Or even that our punctuation suddenly feels like hyperbole (right?!?!?!?!?) because we’ve lost all audible tone.
Those things are true. But it’s also as if a kind of micro-punctuation has emerged: tiny marks in the smallest of spaces that suddenly tell us more about the person on the other end than the words themselves (or, at least, we think they do).

Take the question mark. Recently, a friend I had dinner plans with sent a text to ask “what time” we were meeting. We’d been organizing this meal for weeks; a half-dozen emails back and forth. And yet the question — sans the mark — felt indifferent, almost cold. Couldn’t she at least bother to insert the necessary character?

Of course, had she inserted too many marks, that may have been a problem, too, as there is suddenly a very fine line between appearing overeager (too much punctuation) and dismissive (not enough).

Even the period, once the most benign of the punctuation spectrum, now feels aggressive. And the exclamation point is so ubiquitous that “when my girlfriends don’t use an exclamation point, I’m like ‘What’s wrong, you O.K.? ’” said Jordana Narin, a 19-year-old student in New York.

“Girlfriends” may be a key word there, as women are more likely to use emotive punctuation than men are. Yet lately I’ve tried to rein my own effusiveness in, going as far as to insert additional punctuation into existing punctuation in an effort to soften the marks themselves.

So instead of responding to a text with “Cant wait!!” I’ll insert a space or two before the mark — “Cant wait !!” — for that extra little pause. Sometimes I’ll make the exclamation point a parenthetical, as a kind of after thought (“Can’t wait (!”) ). A friend inserts an ellipses — “Can’t wait ... !!” — so, as she puts it, “it’s less intense.”
“At this point, I’ve basically suspended judgment,” said Ben Crair, an editor at the New Republic who recently wrote a column about the new aggression of the period. “You could drive yourself insane trying to decode the hidden messages in other people’s punctuation.”

The origins of punctuation lie in ancient oration, when marks were used in handwritten speeches to advise when and for how long a speaker should pause. A period was a part of speech that had a beginning and end, a comma indicated the shortest pause, while the colon was somewhere between the two.

But there are no pauses or inflections in digital communication; we aren’t speaking the words out loud. Which means that even within the tiniest spaces, punctuation fills in the tonal holes.

So even while we may be punctuating less as a whole (a recent study found that only 39 percent of college students punctuate the end of texts and 45 percent the end of instant messages), the punctuation we do use is more likely to be scrutinized.

“Digital punctuation can carry more weight than traditional writing because it ends up conveying tone, rhythm and attitude rather than grammatical structure,” said Ben Zimmer, a linguist and the executive editor of Vocabulary.com. “It can make even a lowly period become freighted with special significance.”

And so we’ve begun to think our friends are angry when they respond with a period, or weird when they capitalize the starts of their sentences. We insert extra letters (“loooool,” “sooooo,” “hiiiiiiii”) — what linguists call “affective lengthening” — to convey intensity, and remove them when we want to be aloof.

“One girl told me she uses just ‘h’ to say ‘hi’ when she’s mad at someone,” said Rachel Simmons, a writer in Northampton, Mass., who runs a leadership program for teenage girls.

We tease in our email subject lines (“GUESS who I just ran into ... ”) and punctuate in place of words (“!!!” instead of “amazing!”). (One friend told me he types a single “...” when he wants to convey “deadpan straight face.”)

Catherine Wise, a 31-year-old lawyer in Manhattan, said her rules are simple: all lowercase letters “unless you are a narc or an old person”; emojis in threes (except when you’re trying to prove a point); ALL CAPS for emphasis; an extra “g” to OMG “depending on how excited [or] shocked I am. Like omgggggg.”
Tessa Lyons, a 25-year-old in San Francisco, said her mother uses ellipses when she wants to convey a “casual, youthful tone.” “So her emails … “ Lyons said, “… often read … like this…”

And unless you want to be viewed as straight-up “geriatric,” as one friend put it, best to avoid the comma at all costs. “The only person who still does this is my dad, who also signs his texts ‘ILY, Daddy,’ as if I didn’t know who was texting me in the first place,” said Ms. Narin. ILY, she explained, is the acronym for “I love you,” though trust me when I say that no human under 50 is using this particular shortcut.

“I don’t use commas and I don’t check my voice mail,” said Ms. Simmons, 40. “But it’s such a contradiction that you’re supposed to drop the comma after the ‘hi’ and then keep the ‘?’ after ‘what time.’ And then you insert 16 different emoji?!”

There are new forms of punctuation emerging, too: * as a corrective device, often for an autocorrect mistake. As in: “I’m hungry. Do you want prostitute?”

“LOL I mean *prosciutto”

Or there are ~these cool squiggles~ to convey, as Talia Cuddeback, 20, put it, “fabulousness/eeriness/coolness.” “It could be, ‘Come to my meeting on Thursday! There will be free ~pizza~!’ or even, ‘Come to my meeting on Thursday! There will be ~free~ pizza,’” she said. (The “/” is another one: a way to combine multiple thoughts.)

“It’s interesting that everyone seems to have a different style they’ve adopted, and the quirks in their style you find yourself passing on to others,” said Darla Massaro, a 26-year-old chiropractic therapy assistant in Columbus, Ohio. “It’s as if mini texting accents are coming out.”

But the rules are changing quickly. Even just a few years ago, Farhad Manjoo, now a technology columnist for The New York Times, argued in Slate that “two spaces after a period is totally, completely, utterly, and inarguably wrong” — causing a virtual linguistic holy war. But these days, each one of those spaces is likely to mean something very specific.

Which brings us to the hierarchy of “O.K.”

There was a time when “O.K.” was a simple abbreviation for the word. But “O.K.” became “OK” when the extra periods got to be too much work, which became “ok” as people stopped capitalizing, making the original “O.K.” (as well as “OK”) feel strangely formal. But now even “ok” feels kind of harsh, so we’ve picked up ways to soften it: “ok!,” “okieee” or “kk.”
Anne Trubek, a professor of rhetoric and composition at Oberlin College, said, “My students told me that ‘k’ without a period in a text means the person is mad at you. Also that jk doesn’t really mean jk anymore,” “Who can keep up?!”

Nobody, really. Yet in the end, it may be the very technology to create the chaos that ultimately resolves it.

“Autocorrect,” Mr. Zimmer responded. “If your smartphone is helpfully suggesting a question mark when it recognizes you’re posing a question, you’re going to be more likely to use it.”

But only after you’ve added an exclamation point ... or two.

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