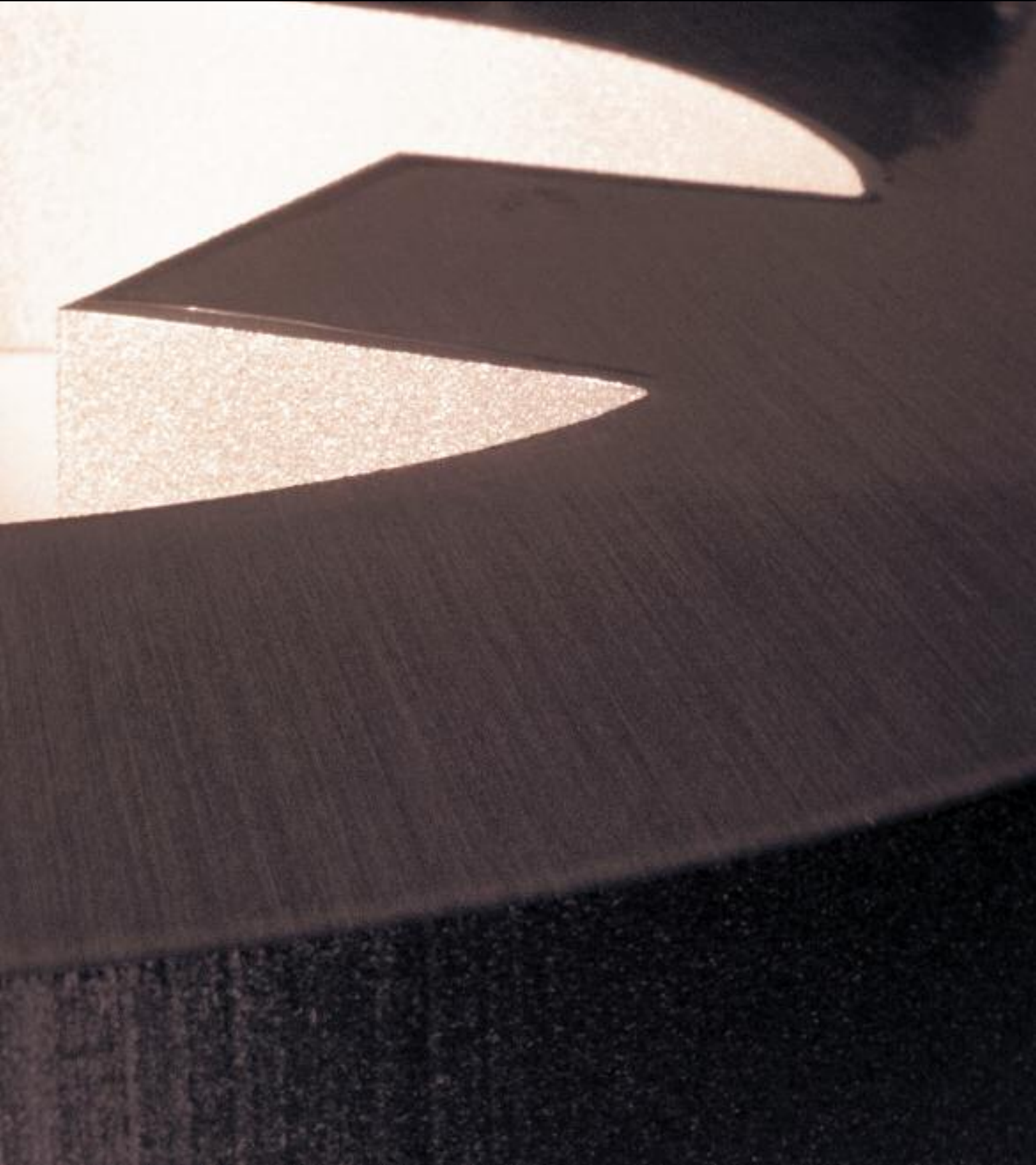


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From Interpunct to Interrobang:

The Evolution
of Spacing,
Punctuation,
and Typographic
Symbols in the
Western World

BY TOM KELLY

Today we expect written
or printed prose to give
us some kind of indication
of how it is spoken.



Read the following examples:

THEFIREMANEXCLAIMEDGETOUTOFHERETHISPLACEISONFIRE

The firefighter exclaimed, "Get out of here, this place is on fire!"

In the first example we need to hunt for each individual word in the string of characters and assemble on our own. Only when we comprehend the meaning of the entire phrase can we guess at the author's intention in conveying emotion and dramatic pause.

Unbelievably, our literate Greco-Roman ancestors would find modern text unfamiliar. Their manuscripts, tablets, and monumental inscriptions were rendered as a series of characters representing words with no space or punctuation. These ancient readers most likely read aloud to themselves sounding out letters and inserting pause and intonation after they grasped the meaning of phrases.

Just as our Western alphabet has evolved to meet the needs of readers and writers, so has the way we intersperse space and alphabetic symbols (those that do not represent a sound) in our written and printed text. Additionally, a sort of shorthand was slowly added to our character set. Special symbols, sometimes what we might consider a ligature, were developed to convey a specific meaning.



Ancient readers most likely read aloud to themselves sounding out letters and inserting pause and intonation after they grasped the meaning of phrases.

Early spacing and insertion of dots and dashes was not what we would consider punctuation, but rather stage directions for a reader. In a world where literacy was a privilege of royalty and the wealthy, many texts were written for oral delivery to those who could not read. As the Western world became united by the Roman Empire, and subsequently under the proselytizing influence of the Roman Catholic Church, accuracy in stage direction became more important.

Spacing and Early Punctuation

Around 200 BCE the Greek scholar and librarian, Aristophanes, introduced a system using dots placed at varying heights in strategic places to represent a short pause, a long pause, and a full stop. Aristophanes' system was not widely adopted. By the first century BCE, it had fallen out of fashion. Around this time the Romans began to use a small dot, or midpoint, called an interpunct to mark a division between words. Soon after, however, a renewed interest in Greek language and scholarship swept through the Roman Empire, and the lowly interpunct disappeared as well.

Interestingly, the privileged children of the Roman Empire were taught to read and write Latin with grammar manuscripts employing word spaces so these young students could learn the language. Consequently, spaces between words were considered childish and illiterate. Some language scholars will also argue that the Latin language has such uniform grammatical constructions that spacing and punctuation was not as critical as it is to the languages it spawned.

With the Roman Empire in decline during second and third centuries CE, the Roman Catholic Church is credited with keeping literacy alive in a chaotic Europe. Through its network of bishops based throughout the former empire, bibles, religious commentary, and other manuscripts were traded between monasteries for duplication for the purpose of converting the barbarians of Europe. In the 6th century CE, the aforementioned children's grammar manuscripts made their way to monastic scribes in Britannia and Ireland who were just learning the Latin language. It is these monastic scribes who first began to use word spacing in any consistent way.

Eternal Damnation for a Typo

Severe punishment, or worse, the threat of an afterlife in hell, was motivation for medieval scribes. Moreover, these religious men believed that every word they wrote was a *strike against Satan*, and each work they produced brought them one step closer to a life in heaven after death. How do we know that monks were our early typesetters? Why did they join these religious organizations and how did they live? The scribes themselves left us clues in religious manuscripts and plenty of detail on the histories of monasteries they crafted.

Monasticism and the scribal tradition were not inventions of early Christians, however they employed them to establish their early church. In the first few centuries CE, Christian leaders realized they needed a common doctrine in order to establish their burgeoning religion. Literate Christian monks, devoting their lives to solitude, prayer, and contemplation, supplied the written documentation. One of the most famous leaders of these early monasteries was St. Jerome (340–420 CE) who declared that copying texts was one of the most appropriate tasks of monastic life. By the sixth century, scribes were toiling at every monastery in the Christian world.

Men joined a monastery out of a religious conviction, or out of a need to escape poverty, or the chaos of a Europe ravaged

by invading Germanic tribes. Those who had a facility for pen on parchment became scribes. We can't assume all monks could read and write—some were mere copyists. Their lives were humble and regimented. The scribe's work was not only a religious avocation; it meant revenue for the monastery, especially when rich patrons from the secular world began to pay for handsomely produced manuscripts for their private libraries.

A scribal monk usually worked about six hours a day in a writing room with a window and desk. Artificial light was prohibited as it could destroy the work being copied or other manuscripts stored in the room. Complete silence was required for concentration and prayerful attention to the task at hand. As a monastery's production increased, a larger light-filled scriptorium was constructed with small work areas, called *carrels*, for each scribe. The scribe received his assignment from the boss of the scriptorium, the *amarius*. The *amarius* would oversee his scribal team, and in smaller operations he may have proofread the material. He was also responsible for doling out severe punishments for mistakes in the copy.

To begin his assignment, the scribe cut parchment to size according to the specifications supplied to him by the

amarius. The parchment, made of animal skin, was scored to produce baseline guides for the script. The score marks were deep enough to appear on the opposite side of the parchment as well. Ink produced at the monasteries was applied with a broad-nib pen. When sinful mistakes and typographical errors were made, the parchment skin was scrubbed clean. In fact, with modern scientific methods, manuscripts that were scrubbed cleaned to be reused for other texts have been discovered. Scribes generally worked on a text from start to finish. Other monks specialized in applying the ornate initial capitals we have come to associate with medieval manuscripts. The jobs of creating book covers from parchment-covered wood or metal and binding the finished works were assigned to monks specializing in these tasks.

The monastic scribe did enjoy some artistic freedom. We know that monks produced these manuscripts because at the conclusion of the text, they would often note their name and the monastery they came from. In place of a name, the more humble would conclude with the phrase *graphetis; oide theos*, translated from Latin: *Who wrote this? God knows*. These scribes also had a sense of humor. Some concluded the text with a simple *amen* or *explicuit feliciter*, thank goodness it's finished.

Around this time, our modern-day romance languages were developing. The local vernacular was merging with Latin, the *lingua franca* of the day. Latin grammatical constructions were not as easily adapted. Consequently, a need for transcription with clear stage direction was arising.

The Carolingian Empire, begun by Frankish kings originating in modern-day Germany and Northern France, became a dominant power in Europe from about 750 to 900 CE. They subsequently converted

to Christianity and held some power over the Roman Catholic Church. One of these later kings, Charlemagne (hence Carolingian), established a centralized scriptorium for his empire. It was from here that space between words, along with capitalization of the first word of a phrase, use of paragraphs to indicate a new train of thought, and the beginnings of uppercase and lowercase letterforms were standardized and popularized throughout Europe.

Beginnings of Punctuation: Period, Comma, Slash, and Colon

Although the word-separation issue had been resolved to some degree, the representation of natural pauses, emphasis, and halt of the spoken word in written form was left to the discretion and style of the scriptorium producing the manuscript. Aristophanes' system was rediscovered and was introduced into medieval manuscripts. Aristophanes' dot, called a *komma*, was placed at the top of line, mid-level, or at the bottom to represent what we now think of as a colon, comma, and period. However the *komma* was not universally used. Some scribes employed the slash to indicate pause: one slash mark indicating a comma, two indicating a dash.

Eventually the *komma* on the baseline became our modern-day period. The slash however took two different routes; the single and double slash were used interchangeably. Eventually the double slash became horizontal (like an equal sign) and finally evolved into a single slash on the horizontal — the dash, as we know it today. In the 16th and 17th centuries our modern-day colon and semicolon were developed to further convey an author's intention in written text.

Medieval scribes, whether for speed, economy, or artistic license, also began to employ a small dash for a continuation of a word (hyphen) and invented abbreviations for frequently used words. The ampersand is one of their creations. It is the amalgamation of the lowercase letters E and T, the Latin word for *and*. The E and T letterforms can easily be discerned in the ampersand of some fonts, while it is stylized in other faces looking like a kind of uppercase backward S (the simple cross form is theft of the addition sign from mathematical notation). These innovations in transcribing alphabetic characters and use of space were by no means universal. Writing, like any communication system, needs wide adoption.

The monastic scribe also had a sense of humor. Some concluded the text with a simple *amen* or *explicuit feliciter*, thank goodness it's finished.



Evolution of Early Standards and Precursors to Punctuation Marks

Transcribed language did not become widely standardized until the invention of movable type and the innovation of printing in the early Renaissance period. It stands to reason that transcribed works that are essentially duplicated and distributed to a wide audience would help popularize writing standards.

For example, Renaissance printer Aldus Manutius is credited with popularizing the use of a dot on the baseline to indicate a full stop (period) in prose, and one slash to indicate pause. Eventually, Manutius' single slash dropped down to the baseline with its cousin, the period, and took on a little hooked form differentiating itself to become our modern-day comma. Moreover, the common slash, also known as a *solidus*, begat the *virgule*. The solidus is correctly used to note separation of words (such as in and/or). The virgule however, a slash with a more horizontal slope, is used between numbers when expressing a fraction.

Prior to the introduction of the quotation mark, the reader had no visual cue and assumed direct quotation from the context of the text. Quotation marks began to appear in printed works in 17th century England. However, there was no standardization for the use of these marks. In early works readers would find quotation marks, distractingly, at the beginning of each line of a long quote. Eventually this typesetting style was abandoned and the quote marks were removed, but not the space they occupied. Today's experienced typesetter cum desktop publisher will see the relation to our modern-day style of setting block quotes, indented text following the paragraph above. Even today quotation mark use is not standard. Many of our European brethren use *guillemets* (angle quotes, or "crows feet") to denote a quotation, and depending on the language, the guillemets face into the phrase or out of the phrase. Even within the same language, use is not consistent. Opening and closing quote marks, particularly in long passages, are handled differently in North America as opposed to the way they are in the United Kingdom.

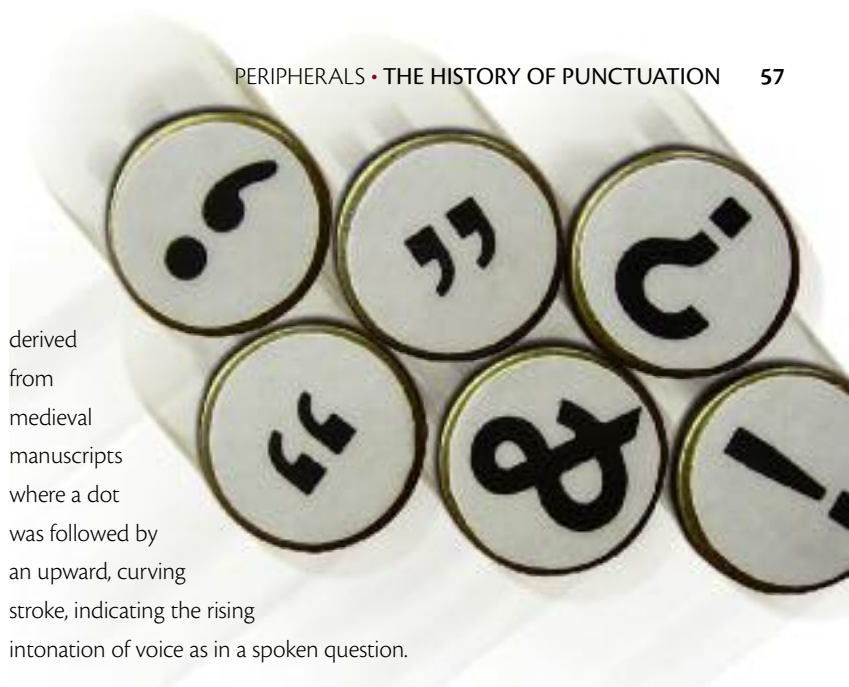
The question mark, also known as the interrogation point, developed in England in the 16th century, and is believed to have derived from the Latin word *quaestio*, meaning question or simply, *what*. With its Latin abbreviation of Qo, it is easy to see how this punctuation mark was developed. Another explanation is that it

derived from medieval manuscripts where a dot was followed by an upward, curving stroke, indicating the rising intonation of voice as in a spoken question.

Like the question mark mentioned above and the ampersand noted earlier, many of our typographic symbols could be considered abbreviations or even ligatures. The pound sign (#), as it is called in the US and known as the hash mark in most other countries, may have been an abbreviation for the French term *pound avoirdupois* a term dealing with weight and volume, or a refining of the abbreviation for pound (lb.) with a line on the lowercase L. In either case we use this symbol to indicate a number, as in #2 pencil, or for weight, as in 5# bag of potatoes. Some symbols were created from scratch. Printers of family trees in Feudal times needed a simple symbol to indicate that a date was a year of birth, the cross usually indicated date of death. These printers are attributed with inventing the asterisk, a small, usually six-sided star shape.

Just like fads and styles come and go, the way we present written language changes too, but at a slower pace.

Of special interest is the at (@) symbol. Its origin is easy to see for English readers and writers—a quick notation for the word *at*. This abbreviation, or perhaps more accurately ligature, is commonly used by grocers and accountants to note phrases such as 120 buttons @ \$1.00/dozen. Others postulate that the at symbol has much older origins—from Greek or Latin word abbreviations concerning weights and measures. However, most 21st century readers recognize this symbol as an important component in an email address. A programmer, Raymond Tomlinson, working on the world's first email system is credited with using this sign to separate the name of the computer user from his network's location, but because its former modern-day use is limited primarily to English speakers, it has various



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names throughout the world. Some of the more interesting names for the at symbol: the Dutch call it an *apestaart* (monkey's tail); Czech people christened it *zavinac* (pickled herring); and Danish named it *alfa-tegn* (elephant's trunk).

One of our most emotional alphabetic symbols is the exclamation point. Often over used and inappropriately placed, its origins have several possibilities. Some postulate that this symbol represents a Roman stylus over an interpunct, inserted by the scribe when stirred by the emotion of the text or when finished with a particularly difficult manuscript. Others suggest this mark represents a miniature scepter over an interpunct to stress the importance of the preceding line or phrase. It is even suggested that the exclamation mark is a phallic symbol connoting a feeling of braggadocio or to indicate a virile growl. Perhaps the most logical explanation of this character's origin is that this symbol is an abbreviation, or ligature, of the letters for the word *io*, a Latin exclamation of joy.

By the 17th century, printing had a two-hundred-year history. Experiments with spacing, signs, and symbols had settled down to a system we recognize today. There is a space between each word, the first letter of a sentence is capitalized, a sentence ends in a period, and paragraphs are organized as trains of thought and indicated by indentation or line space. However the finer points, much to the chagrin of modern-day elementary school students (and adult writers such as this one), are not as clear or easily understood. The correct use of serial commas, colons, and semicolons are the domain of editors and English teachers.

20th Century Developments

In the early 1960s, the head of a New York advertising agency thought a new punctuation mark was needed. Martin K. Speckter proposed a new symbol that would convey a surprised question or emotional declaration such as in, "You've got to be kidding me?!" The resulting character is called an *interrobang*, a combination of the word *bang*, printer's slang for an exclamation point, and the Latin word *interrogatio*, meaning rhetorical question. The glyph is a combination of the exclamation and question marks (!?). Much excitement surrounded this new character. Type foundries included the symbol in their fonts. Typewriter manufacturers included it on their keyboards. The interrobang was featured in newspapers and magazines. Obviously the interrobang

did not catch on, but, curiously, you can find this character in Wingdings 2.

More than sixty years before the interrobang, the French proposed a *point d'ironie*. This irony mark looked like a sloped, backward question mark. Later on, French punctuation to convey authority, doubt, and love, among other emotions, were suggested. None of these French punctuation marks made it past the conceptual stage of artists and authors.

Today's quick-fingered emailers and compulsive senders of text messages have developed their own lexicon of abbreviations, ligatures, punctuation (or lack thereof), and spacing adapted for speed and economy for a small viewing area. Combining the letterforms and symbols from our standard alphabet, our cyber-scribes have created pictograms to convey a wide variety of emotions. These *emoticons* convey some very specific emotions (although you may have to turn your head to see/read them). Like the grammar students of classical Rome, this form of writing is shunned for formal written prose and documentation.

Written language, like its spoken counterpart, adapts to the culture that employs it. The written/printed part usually lags behind. We can pronounce things just fine. Recording it in writing is another matter. For instance, editors debate over new words such as the expression of the phrase most common for electronic mail. Most have finally settled on this spelling: e-mail. (*X-Ray Magazine* conforms to its own style guide.) Marketers, especially in the hi-tech arena, throw capitalization and spacing conventions to the wind in order to convey a modernity or innovation. This author's employer provides a great example: QuarkXPress (X and P capitalized, no space after the K).

Just like fads and styles come and go in design and use of typefaces, the way we present written language changes too, but at a slower pace. The adoption of punctuation and spacing depends on two things: many readers seeing and reading it, and then accepting that it makes the task of reading comfortable and comprehensible. Editors will chime in that there is a third, maybe most important, point: that any change or innovation in spacing, punctuation, or alphabetic character use should only be employed when it aids the reader in understanding the author's intentions.

Explicuit Feliciter! 📧

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tongue in cheek

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mocking humor

>:-(
annoyance

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confusion

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