

# 2 Misused Punctuation Marks that Make Even the Smartest Marketer Look Like a Total Idiot

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Welcome to Copy Corner, your place for tips, tricks and strategies to make your copy rock.

This month I want to tackle a subject that makes even the strongest, fiercest marketers tremble in their boots and hide under their desks. A subject that can trigger the PTSD of high school English for many of us. A subject that terrifies many writers – even good writers.

## **Punctuation.**

Don't freak out. I'm not going to go all pedantic or professorial on you. I want to make the subject easy, accessible, and user-friendly. I want to show you that punctuation is easy if you'll stop and read out loud what you've written -- before you publish it.

That way you can avoid looking like a total idiot to your readers.

## **First, a pop quiz.**

(Now, now. There will be no whining or complaining in this article.)

Read the following sentences out loud and ask yourself if the punctuation makes sense. (I'll provide the answers at the end of the article).

1. *Sheila walked on her head a little higher than usual.*
2. *At the costume ball were the strippers, Barbara Bush and Rush Limbaugh.*
3. *Let's eat grandpa.*
4. *The Australian koala eats, shoots, and leaves.*
5. *These special report's and e-book's are for marketing newby's and seasoned veteran's alike.*
6. *Its time for your writing to make it's mark.*
7. *Make sure your giving all you can to improving your copywriting skills.*

How'd you do? Could you spot where misused punctuation confused the sentences?

See, punctuation is really just a kind of shorthand for what occurs in normal human speech. It's code for pauses, emotions, and tones of voice. It's like a collection of "traffic signals" that convey all kinds of non-verbal information to your readers.

When you misuse those traffic signals – by leaving them out, putting them in the wrong place, or using them for the wrong reasons -- you end up confusing your readers, making them stumble or trip over your words as they read them. If readers are tripping over your copy, they're more likely to get confused

and distracted from your sales message. And they'll end up thinking you're an idiot, leaving you to wonder why your copy isn't converting

As we go along, I'll show you how the "code" works best. At the end of the article, I'll give you some great references to use if you're "punctuation challenged."

After all, you want to make your copywriting as clear and powerful as it can be.

Ready? Here we go.

## The comma: the "pause that refreshes"

Commas are code for natural pauses in speech. They're typically used to separate parts of a sentence, provide clarifying information, and separate more than two things on a list.

Let's take a look:

### 1. Separating parts of a sentence

*The driver managed to escape from the vehicle before it sank, and swam to the riverbank.*

How would that sentence read without the comma?

### 2. Providing clarifying information

*Mrs. Jones, my next door neighbor, is a grouch.*

Without the commas, it isn't clear if you're talking TO Mrs. Jones or ABOUT Mrs. Jones.

### 3. Listing more than two things

*The ice cream flavors like best are chocolate, French vanilla, and cherry.*

Grammar geeks as diverse as the University of Oxford in England and the Associated Press in the United States disagree about whether to put in a comma before the "and." Here's my humble opinion: you'll never confuse people if you put the comma in before the "and." But leaving it out can produce all kinds of confusion.

*This book is dedicated to my parents, Ayn Rand and God.*

*My favorite cookie recipes are oatmeal, peanut butter and chocolate chip and coconut.*

### 4. Avoiding the "Shatner" comma

Many people, afraid they're not using enough commas, put WAY too many in. Their writing ends up sounding overly dramatic -- like William Shatner (Captain Kirk in the original Star Trek). And

using these “Shatner commas” makes their readers stumble and struggle to find out what the heck the writer means. Here are some of the best of the worst:

This one, from a church signboard: *In Jesus the hopeless, find hope.*

Or these: *The truth is, you’re not prepared to enter this contest. I’m here to tell you, that you need this special report. I went to the No Excuses Summit, and met, some of my heroes.*

The best common-sense advice about figuring out where the comma goes is to read your sentence out loud. Notice where it’s natural or “feels right” to pause, and put a comma there. Then read it again. If it feels awkward or doesn’t sound natural to you to pause, don’t use the comma.

### The apostrophe: a mark of “ownership”

Most frequently misused and obviously misunderstood of all the punctuation marks in existence is the apostrophe.

Let me be as clear as I can possibly be about what it’s for:

#### 1. The apostrophe indicates ownership or possession.

*This is John’s book.* The ‘s describes a book belonging to John. John owns the book. *These are John’s books.* (John owns these books).

But...

*Every dog has its day.* (Wow, look at that! “It” doesn’t get an apostrophe to describe ownership!)

#### 2. The apostrophe DOES NOT indicate the plural (more than one) of anything. (Well, hardly ever).

*Apples and Oranges for Sale.*

But...

*Make sure to dot your i’s and cross your t’s. Mind your p’s and q’s. Learn your abc’s.*

#### 3. The apostrophe indicates a “contraction” – two words smashed together.

*It’s = it is.* \*The ONLY time there’s an apostrophe with “it” is when you want to say “it is.”

*Can’t = can not*

*You’re = you are*

### Great references even beginning copywriters should have

#### Books

**Sabin, William. The Gregg Reference Manual: A Manual of Style, Grammar, Usage, and Formatting 11<sup>th</sup> Edition. March, 2010. Career Education.** This reference book is for anyone who writes, edits, or prepares material for distribution or publication. It's recognized as the best style manual for business professionals or for students who want to master the professional standards of business.

From the editors at Yahoo: **The Yahoo! Style Guide: The Ultimate Sourcebook for Writing, Editing, and Creating Content for the Digital World [Paperback]. July, 2010. St. Martin's Griffin.** The rapid growth of the Internet has left most writers relying on style guides used for traditional print publishing. These print guides don't much address the unique challenges of communicating online. Considered "the definitive reference" on the essential elements of Web style for writers, editors, bloggers, and students, covered topics include not only the basics of grammar and punctuation but also Web-specific ways to improve your writing.

### Websites

[APStylebook.com](http://APStylebook.com) is a subscription-based website featuring a searchable database of virtually anything related to grammar, style, and usage. At \$25 a year, it's a bargain for the reference most used by journalists, publishers, and many colleges and universities. And if you're stuck on a particularly picayunish grammar issue, you can "ask the editor" for a detailed, specific answer.

[ChicagoManualofStyle.org](http://ChicagoManualofStyle.org) is also a subscription-based website based on the *Chicago Manual of Style* used most by academics, researchers, and traditional book and magazine publishers. You can subscribe for a free 30-day trial, which allows you to use tools like sample letters and templates, articles about fair use and copyright, avoiding bias in language, and firm rules to help anyone who works with words.

[Styleguide.yahoo.com](http://Styleguide.yahoo.com) is a free portal giving you access to all sorts of tools, resources, and recommendations to help you write better for the web. It's also a great place to ask for a specific answer to a sticky grammar or usage problem.

### Last but not least...the answers to the pop quiz!

1. *Sheila walked on her head a little higher than usual.*

This sentence clearly needs a comma to clarify that Sheila is not walking upside-down under the influence!

*Sheila walked on, her head a little higher than usual.*

2. *At the costume ball were the strippers, Barbara Bush and Rush Limbaugh.*

Without the comma before "and," this sentence creates a disturbing visual image of Barbara Bush and Rush Limbaugh pole-dancing in the buff.

*At the costume ball were the strippers, Barbara Bush, and Rush Limbaugh.*

3. *Let's eat grandpa.*

So the grandkids have resorted to cannibalism? Ew. Better pop in that comma!

*Let's eat, grandpa.*

4. *The Australian koala eats, shoots, and leaves.*

Unless you're talking about the Ozzie version of Rocky Raccoon – a gun-toting furry animal who flees the scene of the crime, better take the commas OUT!

*The Australian koala eats shoots and leaves.*

5. *These special report's and e-book's are for marketing newby's and seasoned veteran's alike.*

There is not one apostrophe required in this sentence. None. Zero. Zip. Nada. Why? Because the words that contain them are **plural**, not **possessive**!

*These special reports and e-books are for marketing newbies and seasoned veterans alike.*

6. *Its time for your writing to make it's mark.*

Okay – the “it” problem. It's **it's** when **it is**. It's **its** when it's possessive. Got it? Good!

*It's time for your writing to make its mark.*

7. *Make sure your giving all you can to improve your copywriting skills.*

Remember – apostrophes can be used to create smashed-together words called contractions. In this case, “you are.”

*Make sure you're giving all you can to improve your copywriting skills.*

That's enough for this month. Go forth and punctuate...with the goal of helping your reader understand and follow your message without tripping, stumbling, or thinking you're an uneducated yokel.

Until next month...

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Join the conversation ---here---. Let us know how you're doing...and how we can help you reach your goal of improving your copywriting by 1% every month.