

Approaches to Acting

Using Punctuation

Punctuation is a key to understanding the personality of a character

When a dancer dances, they follow a series of precise movements. Together the movements connect to mean a greater whole. In between the movements are breaks, momentary or longer, which define the movements by separating them or connecting them in a particular manner. These defining breaks are as critical to the meaning of a dance as the movements themselves. In fact, they are movements also, or the absence of movement. They are part of the language of dance.

Similarly, when a choreographer begins to map out a sequence of movements, they use a system of notation. Different systems of notation allow the choreographer to express human movement, and emotion, on a piece of paper. This notation can then be transformed into expressive human movement on the stage.

In music, a singer follows, or chooses to break away from, the notes in a melody. A song, like dance, is a sequence of organized steps designed to express and evoke human emotion. In a song, there are various signs which indicate to the singer how long they should hold a note, whether they should glide from one note to another, or sharply break off the note before starting the next. There are indicators when a note is to be held, and bar measurements which tell the singer about the essential rhythm of the song. This is the language, or notation system, of music.

So it is with written text in drama. Characters speak collections of words which have been organised by the writer in a specific manner (syntax). The writer's notation system is called *punctuation*. A playwright may add other signs to this notation to establish meaning and a direction for interpretation, such as italics, bold-face, or stage directions, but it is with punctuation that the emotional language of a play is passed on from playwright to actor to spectator.

An actor who ignores the punctuation of the text is like a singer who ignores the beats and measures of the music and just sings the melody. Once in a while it may be brilliant, but more often it's just confusing. Like a dancer who performs the movements while ignoring how they are strung together, the actor is indulging his or her ego at the expense of the creation, and of the art.

What do punctuation signs mean? A **period** ends a statement. If a character has a lot of periods in their speech, the actor can observe one of several choices in analysing the personality of the character. Perhaps it indicates confidence, certainty, anger; it can mean certainty or simply the desire to be certain. Combined with an understanding of *syntax* – word order and phrases—the actor can understand the playwright's intention. Short phrases might indicate a decisive mind or one given to command, or simply one who is not comfortable speaking for long periods of time. The *context of the scene*, the situation in which the character is found, will help to narrow these choices further.

A **comma** separates independent clauses, which are joined by a conjunction. These *coördinating conjunctions* are extremely useful in interpreting text. Words like “but”, “however”,

Approaches to Acting

“still”, and “yet”, among others, indicate doubt or qualification in a character. Commas are separators—they separate phrases, which can indicate, on a technical level, where an actor should breathe as the character. They can also highlight words: a comma used after the name of the person one is addressing serves to emphasise the fact that the object of the speaker is being identified clearly by name. This is the verbal equivalent of a pointed finger or a gesturing hand.

The comma itself is an indicator of the *flow* of a character’s thought. A character who speaks without commas is either extremely certain or speaking a rehearsed text (which is another variation of certainty). The presence or absence of *hesitation devices*, such as “um”, “er”, “ah” and others, helps the actor narrow their analysis of the character’s mindset. A character who uses a lot of commas, one might observe, is a speaker who likes speaking, who prefers to speak and complete their thought without interference from another speaker, and who prevents the other speaker from breaking into their thought by connecting their thoughts through commas. A comma indicates that the speaker *is not yet finished*; as such, this requires a different intonation from the actor than, say, the end of a statement.

A **semi-colon** separates two main clauses which lack a coördinating conjunction (like “but”, “and”, or “still”). It indicates that the two sides of the sentence are *related*. Therefore an actor is required to use a different intonation than with a period, and to continue their breath through the end of the thought. A semi-colon, like a comma, indicates “I am not finished yet” and is a verbal gesture to the other character that the speaker is to continue speaking. This is a *physical act* on the part of the character; it can be taken as a tactical choice, one which replaces or qualifies gestural expression. (Note the use of the semi-colon.) A character who uses a lot of semi-colons (which is unusual) might be pedantic, someone who *orates*, rather than speaks naturally, a lover of logic and order and completeness. Again, the actor goes to the syntax and the circumstances of the scene to narrow his or her choices.

A **colon** is used when an independent clause is explaining a second independent clause as in: *There is only one thing to say: he did not deserve it.* (Note the use of the colon in the statement and the example.) Colons also introduce appositives, which may be taken as a list. (This is where writers often confuse the use of the semi-colon with the use of a colon.) *There are three sources of belief: reason, custom, inspiration.* Few characters use many colons, so it’s especially important to take note of them when they are used. A colon says: *I’m about to say something in a specific order, so listen until I’m finished.*

A **dash** (or *caesura*) indicates a break in thought. This is extremely useful for an actor in perceiving the rhythm and thought process of a character. A character who uses a lot of dashes is one who lacks certainty in some way, who feels the need to qualify, or re-state, a thought, or whose thought is interrupted by other thoughts or distractions. This is rich material for the actor. Again, circumstance and syntax will aid the actor in narrowing down her choices for the character’s mindset.

Quotation marks are markers of indirect speech, something said by another that is reported by the speaker. In drama, quotation marks may not refer to actual speech spoken by another, but may be a kind of imagined commentary. Quotation marks as reported speech are not common in theatrical text, but when they are present, they acquire extra emphasis. A character who uses the exact words of another is pinning those words to the speaker.

Approaches to Acting

Parentheses are also not common in theatre, but are occasionally used by playwrights to indicate a character who interrupts or qualifies their own thought process to include a complete thought which acts as a clarification. *The car (I'd only purchased it the day before) needed new brakes, a tune-up, and new tires.* For the actor, this might indicate a thoughtful character, one who takes care in what they say, who tries to be accurate or complete, or one who is simply engrossed in telling a story and wants to embellish every detail.

The **question-mark** is the most self-evident and least understood of punctuation marks. There are, after all, many types of questions: some that are really statements, some that are not truly directed at another (rhetorical), some that are really much bigger questions hidden in the text of a small, simple question. *Did you remember my birthday?* We may take a question-mark as it is indicated in a sentence, that the character is asking a question *of some kind*, and that therefore a different intonation from a declarative statement is required. When a character thinks they know the answer to a question they ask, s/he might remove the question mark and replace it with a period. The structure of the sentence is still a question, but the question mark has been removed, which changes the tone from interrogative to accusatory. *Are you really that stupid.* A question may only be the tip of what is really being asked.

Many question marks in a character's text may indicate a doubtful or curious mind, someone who probes herself or others, who is not satisfied. Look to the context to narrow your choices. A character who uses a lot of *tag questions*, on the other hand, is a particular kind of person: *you were out with the boys last night, weren't you?* or *I'm sure we'll be great friends, won't we?* This is the verbal equivalent of poking someone. Remember that *any repetition acts as emphasis*, a kind of verbal bold-face and underlining. A tag question is a repetition.

Ellipsis is used by characters who lose track of their thought process, either intentionally or unintentionally. The actor's main task is to discern the intention, or the lack of it, in their character's mindset. Is the character a dreamy or absent-minded type, one who trails off when confronted by the reaction of another? Do they trail off for effect, to see what kind of response they're getting before they continue? The actor chooses, based on what they can glean from earlier scenes and the context of the scene itself. Often trailing off indicates a *loss of force*. This loss of force, in acting terms, is a diminishment of the character's will to enact their intention. It's an acknowledgement of loss on the character's part, which they inflict upon themselves, based on what they see and feel. People who trail off lose their will to act. They may regain it, but an *obstacle* to their intention has been created by this loss of force and must now be overcome by the character. Intentional ellipsis, of course, is the other side of the coin. The character creates their own obstacle to achieving understanding for effect, to make it sound more important.

Actors often ask whether analysing punctuation for its emotional content can be used with any playwright. The answer is "yes", though with qualifications. Some playwrights lack the grammatical skills to use punctuation precisely. Many playwrights write instinctively and fail to edit their work for clarity of expression. Nonetheless, even a good instinctive playwright will use grammar and punctuation in an effective way—it may simply not be consistent. **The actor must make use of what is there.** All playwrights punctuate their text in some way. Punctuation *must* be analysed in classical text. I recommend using only the first folio for Shakespeare – it may not strictly be his punctuation but it's as close as we can get.

Approaches to Acting

Subsequent editors added their own interpretations for what they thought was the purpose of clarity. If an actor is faced with the situation where a later text of Shakespeare is being used, their task remains the same. Use what is there. There is always good interpretation that can come out of punctuation.

The same principle applies to works that have been translated. Often the punctuation renders the text very differently in a second language than in its original. The actor, however, is not performing the original. The actor performs the text with which they are presented. The new punctuation has been chosen by the translator with the playwright's original intention in mind, and then adjusted to the demands and structures of a new language. **Use what is there.**

This is also true for poetic text which is written without punctuation, as in the work of Sarah Kane. The lines break off at points where the playwright feels there is some kind of emotional nuance. This is a form of punctuation, and the actor's task is to interpret it, use it as a material way of expressing character. In text that lacks punctuation the actor must work with the director to interpret this seemingly blank sheet correctly.

There is a purpose to removing punctuation, not only in poetic text, but in all written dramatic text. This speaks to the playwright and actor's understanding of the character's *rhythm*. A character who speaks with little punctuation may be a motor-mouth, someone who likes or needs to talk, someone who has been bottling up their thoughts until they explode outward, or someone who is afraid to stop speaking because of what they will feel or what another might say. Such characters are clearly *competing to speak*. This competitiveness is useful for the actor faced with a long unbroken text. Similarly, characters who use a lot of punctuation of different kinds likely have a slower speaking (and operating) rhythm. The reasons will be found by the actor in analysing the rest of the play.

This sense of the character's speaking rhythm has implications for a character's *physical rhythm*. Most often, they are similar (if they are not, that's a choice, too.) So a fast-talking character will probably have a physical expression that is also quick. From such small indicators as punctuation, therefore, an actor can gain an understanding of the character's internal and external expression.