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Some people write well but feel disabled by a fear of punctuation and grammar. Punctuation and grammar are merely conventions of standard written English, just as red lights and stop signs are conventions of road behavior: they move the traffic. Similarly, conventions of standard written English moves communication.

Punctuating Prose

Punctuation is simple. Most everyone uses them in one form or another in everyday vocal communication. In fact, English teachers do not make the rules: you do, educated speakers and writers, such as yourself, have established practices that are more commonly known as rules of punctuation. In other words, writers use punctuation to make their messages especially clear and effective.

As an analogy, think of the traffic signs that govern the rules of the road. A red blinking light or an octagonally shaped red sign says, "Stop!" A blinking yellow light means to proceed with caution. These traffic rules help make driving safe and efficient. But nothing says that a *red* blinking light signifies a complete stop; it well could have been any other color. The caution light, too, could very well have been another color, but *drivers* have *agreed* to follow these signals and to do certain things when they come upon them. The same is true with punctuation marks: writers have agreed that certain marks signify specific things in written communication.

The rules of punctuation are not static; they have changed throughout the years and will continue to change. What once might have been considered improper punctuation may now be considered correct. Exact meanings have changed over time, just as traffic rules evolve. At any point in time, a particular punctuation mark means what writers agree it means; as consensus shifts, so does its meaning.

SO, remember that punctuation rules have been established by writers such as

yourself; they are generally flexible. Don't be intimidated by the conventions of punctuation.

"Punctuation Made Simple" discusses several of the most useful punctuation marks to establish a *sense* of how they work. Of course, grammar handbooks as a reference tool. You will still want to refer to such a book when you come upon a particularly difficult punctuation problem. Here, however, we are most concerned with helping you develop a *feel* for the way punctuation works.

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