

17 *The Power of Punctuation*

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Punctuation (pŭngk'chōō-ā shən) *n.* The use of standard marks and signs in writing and printing to separate works into sentences, clauses, and phrases in order to clarify meaning.

The American Heritage Dictionary

One of the first rules of grammar we learn is the proper use of punctuation marks. Their application abides by traditional standards, indicated in the style guides that dictate punctuation usage in formal texts. In general writing, however, most of us use punctuation in a more flexible manner. We omit, substitute, improvise, and alter many of the given rules. Application is determined by both tradition and the writer's personal style. Because of this casual treatment, punctuation is often taken for granted.

Most punctuation marks are composed to be seen but not heard. These subtle, often understated, devices are quite important, however, for they are the meter that determines the measure within the silent voice of typography (Figure 1). Punctuation directs tempo, pitch, volume, and the separation of words. Periods signify full stops. Commas slow the reader down. Question marks change pitch. Quotation marks indicate references.

Symbols in music perform comparable functions (Figure 2). During the performance of a piece of music, each conductor interprets the intensities and durations of these notations according to his or her own style. Similarly, designers can improvise upon the standards of punctuation.

Punctuation marks have tonal value just as letter forms do; they also have mass and energy, which may vary according to their structure. The various marks can be classified as major ? ! [], intermediate ; : " ' () /, and minor - ' * in correspondence with their mass. Full-bodied punctuation marks, such as question marks and exclamation points, contain the definite characteristics of their type style. Intermediate and minor punctuation marks, although in keeping with their type style, correspond more closely with the typeface weight.

From *The Idea of Design: A Design Issues Reader* Ed. Victor Margolin and Richard Buchanan. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995. 113-117.

FIGURE 1.

,	COMMA
;	SEMICOLON
:	COLON
.	PERIOD
-	DASH OR EM DASH
-	DASH OR EN DASH
~	SWING DASH
-	HYPHEN
?	QUESTION MARK
¿?	QUESTION MARKS, SPANISH
!	EXCLAMATION POINT
¡!	EXCLAMATION POINTS, SPANISH
'	APOSTROPHE
()	PARENTHESIS
[]	BRACKETS
<>	BRACKET ANGLE
{}	BRACES
" "	QUOTATION MARKS
``	DOUBLE & SINGLE
...	ELLIPSIS

FIGURE 2.

<i>pp</i>	(pianissimo) — very soft
<i>p</i>	(piano) — soft
<i>mp</i>	(mezzopiano) — sort of soft
<i>mf</i>	(mezzoforte) — sort of loud
<i>f</i>	(forte) — loud
<i>ff</i>	(fortissimo) — very loud

FIGURE 3.



Punctuation marks vary widely from one type style to the next. A period, for example, is round in Futura, square in Helvetica, diamond shaped in Goudy, and oval in Ultra Bodoni (Figure 3).

Designers need not be confined to using only the punctuation included in a type font. They can utilize punctuation from other fonts or Pi sorts. However, they must consider compatibility between type and punctuation (Figure 4).

With punctuation marks designers can create illustrations without pictures. A single line of copy set in a light typeface contrasted with a bold, larger period creates a more dramatic stop than a period of conventional size and weight. Exaggerated quotation marks flanking a message offer another example of illustrative punctuation. The contrast in size and weight indicates to the reader, primarily through design rather than grammatical intent, that an important message is being presented (Figure 5 and 6).

FIGURE 4. Cover Design by Martin Solomon

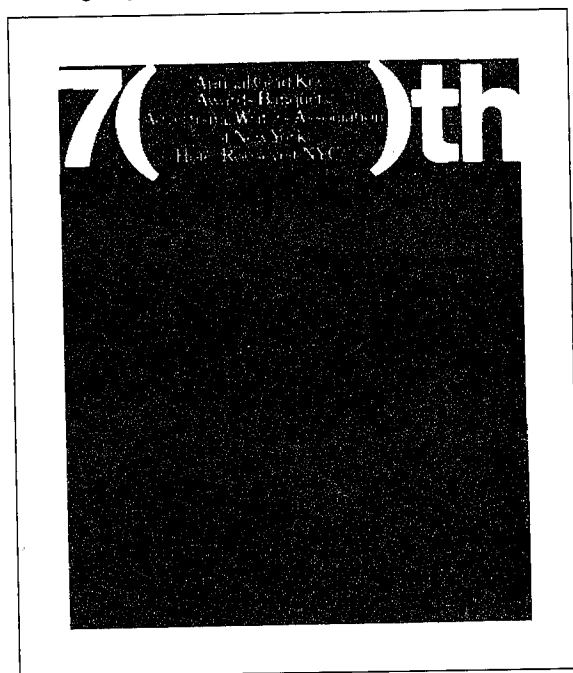


FIGURE 5. From a Poster Designed by Martin Solomon



Asterisks function as visual movers, telling the reader to go to another location for a reference or definition (Figure 7). When this direction is coupled with the energies within the asterisk's geometric design, a bold or enlarged asterisk becomes a strong statement. The area surrounding exaggerated punctuation marks should be supportive of the size and weight of these images. Exaggerated punctuation should not be used with all messages. The indiscriminate display of punctuation for the sake of design turns these marks into

FIGURE 6.

“The player must know how to relieve the soft with the loud and how to apply each of these in its proper place, for following the familiar expression in painting, is called light and shade”
Leopold Mozart

FIGURE 7. Poster Designed by Martin Solomon

c. 1683-4*

BY A TYPOGRAPHER...
B I do not mean a printer, as he is vulgarly accounted, any more than Dr. Dee means a carpenter or a mason to be an architect, but BY A TYPOGRAPHER, I mean such a one, who by his own judgement, from solid reasoning with himself, can either perform or direct others, from the beginning to the end, all the handy-works and physical operations relating to TYPOGRAPHIE.

**Mechanick Exercises, Joseph Moxon*

c. 1978- **

**Royal
Composing
Room**

387 Park Avenue South, New York, N.Y. 10016/889 6060
More than just a typographer

devices unrelated to concept; punctuation used out of context can diminish the effect of a message (Figure 8).

A greater or more interesting arrangement within any typographical composition can be created through the positioning of punctuation. An example is the abbreviation of the word *number*. By aligning the lower case *o* with the top of the capital *N* and inserting a small horizontal dash or rule beneath it, letters and punctuation work in concert to form a design unit: *N^o*. Although rules and underscores are not punctuation, they can be used to support or intensify characters or words. A period can replace the dash or rule, *N^o.* This simple usage of supporting punctuation creates a personality that can be more effective in endorsing a theme than the commonly used *No.* configuration (Figure 9).

FIGURE 8. Advertisements Designed by Martin Solomon

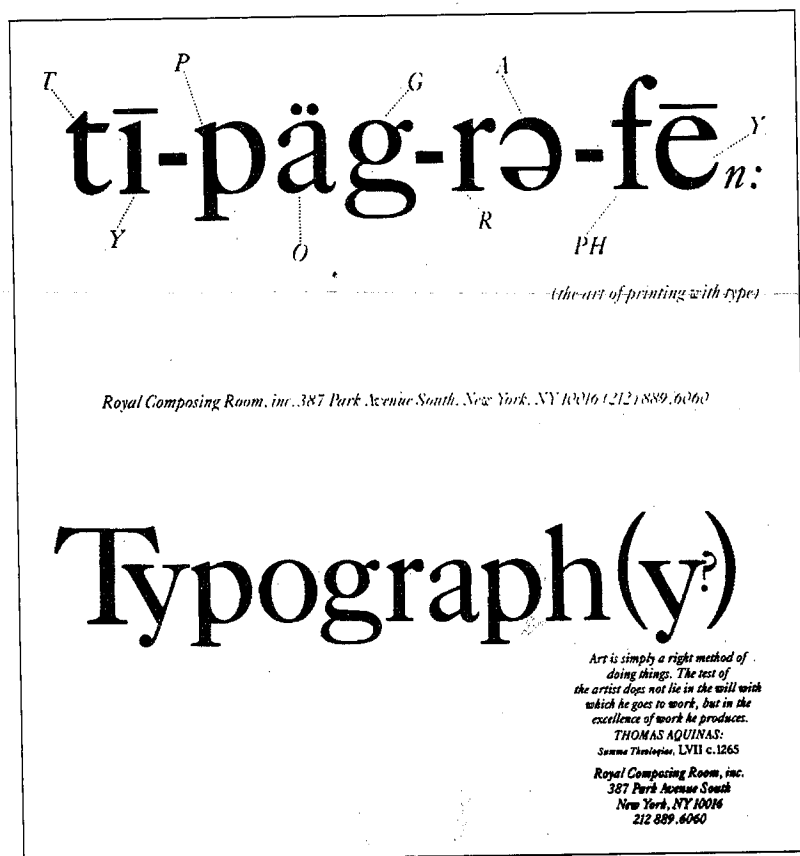
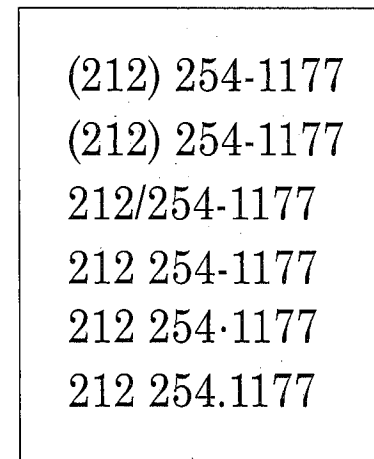


FIGURE 9.

No. N^o N^o NO.

FIGURE 10.



Punctuation marks need not be considered only in relation to texts in which they are an obvious part of the design. The sensitive application of punctuation in even the most commonplace unit changes the entire feeling of a design. One frequent application in which punctuation is taken for granted is the telephone number (Figure 10). *Telephone numbers traditionally have been indicated by parentheses enclosing the area code and a hyphen separating the next three numbers from the last four: (212) 987-6543.* Punctuation marks such as parentheses and hyphens are designed to center on the x-height letters and, as a result, sit low in relation to lining numbers, which are designed to correspond to the height of uppercase letters. Adjusting the position of such punctuation marks can be done in the type specifications. This grouping of numbers can be simplified by omitting the parentheses and inserting a slash or a word space after the area code: *212 987-6543.* The grouping can further be changed by substituting a bullet for the hyphen: *212 987•6543.* Base aligning a period is a better option, because the powerful circular shape of a bullet is noncommittal to the area it occupies and is unrelated to type style and spacing. If preferred, a wide variety of devices such as ballot boxes, triangles, arrows, and dingbats can work better in concert with respective letter form shapes (Figure 11). An additional option is to omit all punctuation or punctuation marks: *212 987 6543.*

Designers must understand the subtleties involved in working with punctuation. These subtleties include refinements in spacing and position. Spacing refinements maintain the optical alignment and tonal value continuity of a typographical composition. Hanging minor weight punctuation partially outside a flush left and right pica measure, for example, will maintain optical column alignment (Figure 12). Hanging punctuation on centered lines maintains vertical optical consistency between lines (Figure 13). Ellipses set with too much space between the dots appear too light in tonal value in relation to the

FIGURE 11.

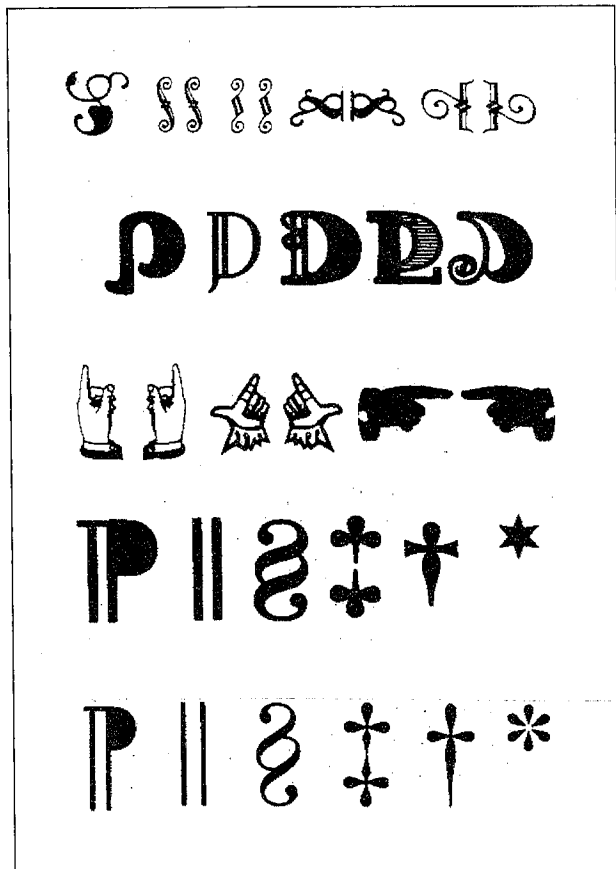


FIGURE 12.

"Formative art" is what matters most in our time, where the new means of production—the machine—has changed the whole social background of our life, depriving the old forms of their former vital expression. Only formative art can create new genuine expression. A new conception towards formative art is beginning to make itself felt. Today we insist upon the form of a thing following the function of that thing; upon its creator's desire for expression following the same direction as the organic building-up processes in nature and not running counter to that direction. We insist upon harmony again being achieved between intellect and desire.

Statement by Walter Gropius.

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FIGURE 13.

**Typography:
the art of
printing.**

rest of the copy and therefore should be specified with no additional letter space between the dots. All of these refinements contribute to the totality of a composition by creating an harmonious interrelation between punctuation and words.

Punctuation is to typography what perspective is to painting. It introduces the illusion of visual and audible dimension, giving words vitality. Whether prominent or subtle, punctuation marks are the heartbeat of typography, moving words along in proper timing and with proper emphasis.