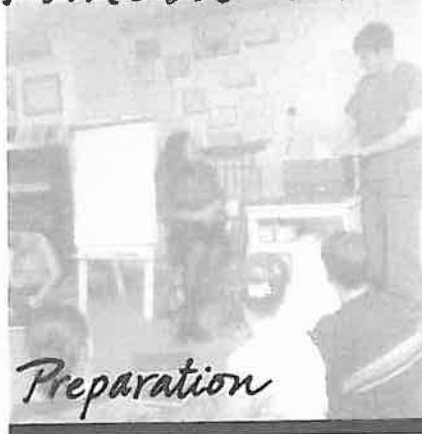


# A Brief History of Some Common Punctuation Marks



## Preparation

- ✓ Overhead transparency and trimmed photocopies of "Fascinating and True Facts about Punctuation"
- ✓ Overhead transparency of "Two Kinds of Punctuation"
- ✓ Tape dispensers

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## What I Was Thinking

To kick off a refresher course on punctuation with middle school writers, I sought an entry point that did more than regurgitate rules they'd been hearing forever. So I researched punctuation and found the roots of five frequently used marks. I wanted students to perceive punctuation as a device that's useful to writers, not an arcane system for torturing schoolkids, and to understand that the punctuation they use today is the result of a process of evolution—that it was writers who invented and changed the marks.

Where did punctuation begin? Tell me your theories. . . .

I spent most of Saturday researching this very question, and I'm here to tell you that thus far my best answer is *Aristophanes of Byzantium*.

Now, there's another, better known, ancient Greek named Aristophanes. The famous Aristophanes lived a couple of hundred years before our guy, and he wrote plays. Most scholars agree he was the greatest ancient writer of satire, or comedy.

Our Aristophanes was an ancient Greek scholar. He was the librarian at Alexandria and, supposedly, the inventor of the Greek diacritical marks, which are the ancestors of our punctuation.

I was excited to be able to trace the roots of some of the marks we use today back to ancient Greece and Rome. You'll have to excuse the high emotion, but I *am* an English teacher, and I love this stuff. Tape a copy of "Fascinating and True Facts about Punctuation" onto the next clean page of your writing handbook. And please don't color in the letters or pictures until after the lesson. I want your attention as I talk you through this. . . .

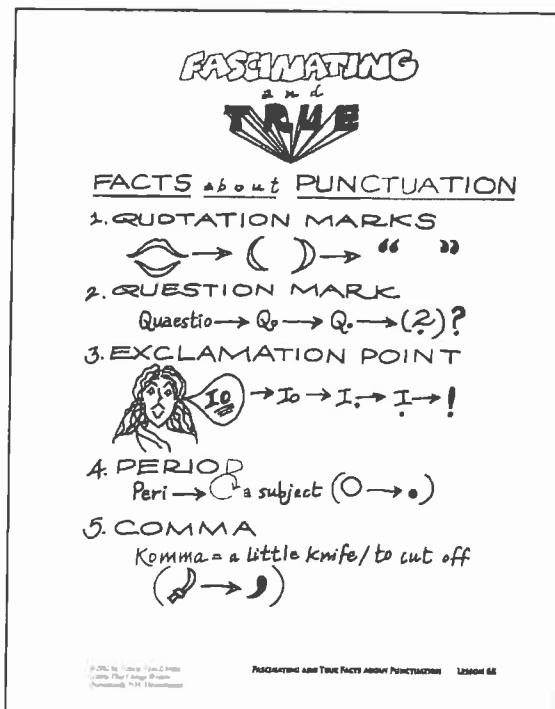
Ready? Take a look at number one: quotation marks. Did you know they began in ancient texts as lips, but turned on their sides? Early writers wanted a way to show when the words they were writing had been spoken by someone else, so they used two curved marks, which represented the lips of a speaker. One lip was put at the beginning, as a signal to the reader: *These words aren't mine; I'm telling you what someone else said.* Then the writer inserted a second lip at the end of the quote as a way to indicate *Now I've finished telling you the other person's words.* Over time the big lips evolved into the tiny set of double lips we use today—although in British texts you'll see sets of single marks around quotes: even more liplike, I think.

What about the question mark? It started out in ancient Roman texts as the Latin word *quaestio*, which means "question." Writers inserted the word *quaestio* when they asked a

question in their texts. Over time *quaestio* was shortened to *Qo*, then *Q*. Then, to save on parchment I guess, writers relocated the period to underneath the *Q*. Well, the Roman letter for *Q* looks like our Arabic numeral 2. So the word *quaestio* evolved into the question mark we use today.

I love the history of the exclamation point. *Io* was an ancient Greek word expressing excitement—an early equivalent of our *wow*. Greek writers inserted the word *io* into their texts at points where they were excited. Over time, scholars changed the *o* to a dot. And over more time, the dot came to rest under the *I*. The result was our exclamation point: *! Io!*

The word *period* comes from the ancient Greek word *peri*, which means "round." Writers inserted a small circle at the end of each sentence to show that they'd gone all around a subject, that the idea they expressed



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was now complete and well rounded. Again, writers eventually tired of drawing a circle, or maybe they wanted to save on parchment, so the *o* became the dot we use today.

Finally, the word *comma* comes from the Greek word *komma*, which means “a little knife” or “to cut off.” Writers inserted the little curved blade of a knife—that is, a comma—whenever they wanted to show a clause or phrase: a group of words cut from the body of a sentence.

Can you understand why I was psyched by my discoveries? I love it that the marks were so concrete from the start, so practical. And I think it’s fascinating how they evolved.