

*Examples of Interesting Punctuation  
with some questions*

[1] Had there been an axe handy, or a poker, any weapon that would have gashed a hole in his father's breast and killed him, there and then, James would have seized it. [2] Such were the extremes of emotion that Mr. Ramsay excited in his children's breasts by his mere presence; standing, as now, lean as a knife, narrow as the blade of one, grinning sarcastically, not only with the pleasure of disillusioning his son and casting ridicule upon his wife, who was ten thousand times better in every way than he was (James thought), but also with some secret conceit at his own accuracy of judgement. [3] What he said was true. [3] It was always true. [4] He was incapable of untruth; never tampered with a fact; never altered a disagreeable word to suit the pleasure or convenience of any mortal being, least of all his own children, who, sprung from his loins, should be aware from childhood that life is difficult; facts uncompromising; [5] and the passage to that fabled land where our brightest hopes are extinguished, our frail barks founder in darkness (here Mr. Ramsay would straighten his back and narrow his little blue eyes upon the horizon), one that needs, above all, courage, truth, and the power to endure.

from Virginia Woolf. *To the Lighthouse*. London: Hogarth Press, 1927.

1. If you were asked to eliminate one comma in sentence 1, which one would you delete? Explain in what way the meaning of the sentence would shift because of your deletion.

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Explain the usefulness of the two commas surrounding the phrase "there and then." To do this you will have to discuss the effect or impact of the phrase on the sentence.

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2. In terms of punctuation (not just in terms of sentence grammar) describe how the semicolon in sentence 2 works.

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Explain why you think the parentheses in sentence 2 are, or are not, effective and fitting for this sentence.

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3&4. How does the punctuation in the sentences marked 3 prepare readers (or set them up) for the punctuation in sentence 4?

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4. Describe the relationship between the clauses or phrases divided by the first two semicolons in sentence 4.

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Are the first two semicolons in sentence 4 used in standard ways?

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Describe the relationship between the clauses or phrases divided by the third and fourth semicolons in sentence 4 (including the section marked 5).

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Are the third and fourth semicolons in sentence 4 used in standard ways?

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5. In section 5 of this example the phrase “one that needs” is set apart by the comma that follows the concluding parenthesis. Given the logic of this heavily punctuated section, what other word or phrase does “one that needs” describe, or to what other word or phrase is it most logically connected?

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[1] Nobility, order, measure, and the underlying feeling of peace, are primary elements in Goethe's ideal. [2] These qualities, if there be any remedy anywhere, make the antidote to the evils which, according to Mr. Lowes Dickinson, beset us. [3] They exalt the things of the intellect, and take away temptation to the "unscrupulous," "brutal" pursuit of material things. And more medicinal than all the others is Goethe's belief in inward peace. Under the impulsion of instinct, we Americans move to and fro, go up and down, and turn about. We seek satisfaction for our appetites in activity. [4] Goethe lived in the world and was of the world, and yet he sought peace of soul. He sought peace, not to escape from the world, but to gain greater dominion over it. [5] He hoped to obtain greater control over the happenings of life, — greater power to put them to use and to enjoyment, — by penetrating into the deeps of serenity; he desired mastery over self as a means to inward peace, and inward peace as a means to mastery over life.

from Henry Dwight Sedgwick. *An Apology for Old Maids, and Other Essays*.  
New York: The Macmillan Company, 1916.

1. Explain the punctuation at the opening of sentence 1, paying special attention to the use of the third comma and the fourth comma. Is that third comma a standard "American" terminal comma designating the end of a list, or is it doing additional work? Is the fourth comma necessary? Why?

"Nobility, order, measure, and the underlying feeling of peace, are . . ."

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2. Provide an alternate punctuation for the final clause in sentence 2 (below). Justify your alternate punctuation (if you can). Which punctuation do you prefer? Why?

“ . . . which, according to Mr. Lowes Dickinson, beset us.”

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3. Explain the use of the comma between “unscrupulous” and “brutal” in sentence 3.

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4. Explain why the comma in sentence 4 is not only grammatical, but also rhetorical in its effect. It is a comma of which Partridge would approve.

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5. Explain the use of double punctuation, the comma dash, in sentence 5.

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