

The Rise of "Logical Punctuation".

The period outside the quotation marks is not a copy error.

By Ben Yagoda



Conan O'Brien is a follower of logical punctuation

For at least two centuries, it has been standard practice in the United States to place commas and periods inside of quotation marks. This rule still holds for professionally edited prose: what you'll find in *Slate*, the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*—almost any place adhering to Modern Language Association (MLA) or AP guidelines. But in copy-editor-free zones—the Web and emails, student papers, business memos—with increasing frequency, commas and periods find themselves on the outside of quotation marks, looking in. A punctuation paradigm is shifting.

Indeed, unless you associate exclusively with editors and prescriptivists, you can find copious examples of the "outside" technique—which readers of Virginia Woolf and *The Guardian* will recognize as the British style—no further away than your Twitter or Facebook feed. I certainly can. Conan O'Brien, for example, recently posted:

Conan's staffers' kids say the darndest things. Unfortunately, in this case "darndest" means "incriminating".

The British style also rules on message boards and bulletin boards. I scanned four random posts in Metafilter.com (about Sony Playstation's hacking problems, the death of Phoebe Snow, the French police, and cool dads) and counted nine comments with periods and commas outside, seven inside.

I spotlight the Web not because it brings out any special proclivities but because it displays in a clear light the way we write now. The punctuation-outside trend jibes with my experience in the classroom, where, for the past several years, my students have found it irresistible, even after innumerable sardonic remarks from me that we are in Delaware, not Liverpool. As a result, I have recently instituted a one-point penalty on every assignment for infractions. The current semester is nearing its end, but I am still taking points away.

Why has this convention become so popular? I offer two reasons, one small and one big. The small one is a byproduct of working with computers, and writing computer code. In these endeavors, one is often instructed to "input" a string of characters, and sometimes (in the printed instructions) the characters are enclosed in quotation marks. Sticking a period or comma in front of the closing quotation marks could clearly have bad consequences. So, for example, the *Chicago Manual of Style* (16th edition), which otherwise endorses the American way— "This is a traditional style, in use well before the first edition of this manual (1906)"—makes an exception in the case of computer instruction, illustrated by:

name your file "appendix A, v. 10".

But the main reason is that the British way simply makes more sense. Indeed, since at least the 1960s a common designation for that style has been "logical punctuation." The best way to grasp this is to look at an example, such as what *Slate* commenter Dean Hamer wrote under a recent article about PBS and NPR:

[I]ronically, given the anecdote about "Tales of the City", PBS is the ONLY widely available channel that has any serious LGBT content; e.g. documentaries such as "Ask Not" and "Out in the Silence".

"Tales of the City" and "Out in the Silence" are units—consisting of the words *and* the quotation marks. Insinuating a period or comma within the unit alters it in a rather underhanded manner. American style is inconsistent, moreover, because when it comes to *other* punctuation marks—semicolons, colons, exclamation points, question marks, dashes—we follow British/logical protocol. Dean Hamer would pass muster in any U.S. newspaper or magazine, for example, if he were to write: *I am a big fan of "Tales of the City"; did anyone else see "Ask Not"?*

If it seems hard or even impossible to defend the American way on the merits, that's probably because it emerged from aesthetic, not logical, considerations. According to Rosemary Feal, executive director of the MLA, it was instituted in the early days of the Republic in order "to improve the appearance of the text. A comma or period that follows a closing quotation mark appears to hang off by itself and creates a gap in the line (since the space over the mark combines with the following word space)." I don't doubt Feal, but the appearance argument doesn't carry much heft today; more to the point is that we are simply accustomed to the style.

For some, though, logic is more compelling than tradition. *Language*, the journal of the Linguistic Society of North America, for instance, has adopted the British way. * The first item under "Punctuation" in its Style Sheet says:

The second member of a pair of quotation marks should precede any other adjacent mark of punctuation, unless the other mark is part of the quoted matter: The word means `cart', not `horse'. He writes, `This is false.'

By far the biggest fount of logical punctuation today is Wikipedia, which was started by two Americans but whose English-language edition is by and for all English-speaking countries. The site's style guide notes that "logical punctuation ... is used here because it is deemed by Wikipedia consensus to be more in keeping with the principle of minimal change." That is, if you put a period or comma inside quotation marks, you are wrongly suggesting that the period or comma is part of the quoted material, and thus you have "changed" it.

Thus in the Wikipedia entry on Frank Sinatra one finds:

... an FBI report on Sinatra, released in 1998, showed that the doctors had also written that he was a "neurotic" and "not acceptable material from a psychiatric standpoint". This was omitted from his record to avoid "undue unpleasantness for both the selectee and the induction service".

Logical punctuation is also the official style at the popular music site Pitchfork, where, as I write, the lead story notes that "Covers on the LP [from Iggy Pop] include the Beatles' 'Michelle', Fred Neil's 'Everybody's Talkin' ', and tracks from Serge Gainsbourg and Henri Salvador." I asked managing editor Mark Richardson why Pitchfork does it that way, and he emailed me to say that it was "partly because it makes sense when the quoted titles don't contain punctuation (which I guess is why it's called 'logical') and partly because it was absorbed from reading the UK music press."

Pitchfork is an outlier in this regard. That is, the vast majority of the legion of logical punctuators are not consciously rejecting illogical American style, or consciously imitating the British. Rather, they follow their intuition because they don't know the American rules. They don't know the rules because they don't read enough. Don't read enough edited prose, that is; they read plenty of Facebook posts and IMs that make these same sorts of mistakes.

Some shifts in punctuation practice make their way, over time, to grammar books and official acceptance. Imagine Jane Austen starting a book today with the sentence, "It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife." Her editor would take both commas out. But despite the love it gets from the masses, logical punctuation isn't likely to break through to the rule-keepers any time soon. The old way is just too established. When I asked Feal and Carol Saller, who oversees the *Chicago Manual of Style*, if there was a chance their organizations would go over to the other side, they both replied, in essence: "How about never? Is never good for you?" What's likely is a more and more pronounced separation between official and unofficial practice. That is, prose published by established entities will follow the traditional rules, while everyone else will follow logic. As a wise man once said, "You pays your money, and you takes your choice".

Correction, May 13, 2011: *This article originally misstated the name of the Linguistic Society of America. (Return to the corrected sentence.)*