

## AN ESSAY ON PUNCTUATION.\*

JUDGMENT determines the relations, whether of thought or of language, which marks of punctuation indicate; taste determines the choice, when good usage admits of a choice, between two modes of indicating those relations: judgment and taste are, therefore, the guides to correct punctuation.

Since punctuation is one of the means by which a writer communicates with his readers, it naturally varies with thought and expression: the punctuation of "Tristram Shandy" will therefore differ from that of "The Rambler;" and in a less degree the punctuation of Burke's Oration, from that of Macaulay's Essays. Hence no one writer—even were books printed correctly, as is rarely the case—can be taken as a model. Hence, too, a system of rules loaded with exceptions, though founded upon the best usage and framed with the greatest care, is as likely to fetter thought as to aid in its communication.

Assistance may, however, be obtained from a few simple rules founded upon the principle that *the purpose of every point is to indicate to the eye the construction of the sentence in which it occurs*,—a principle which is best illustrated by examples of *sentences correctly constructed* as well as *correctly punctuated*. One who knows few rules, but who has mastered the fundamental principles of construction, will punctuate far better than one who slavishly follows a set of

formulas. The latter will not know how to act in a case not provided for in any formula: the former will readily understand that the letter of a rule may be violated, in order to give effect to its spirit; that ambiguity and obscurity should, above all things, be avoided; and that marks of punctuation which are required on principle may be omitted when they are disagreeable to the eye or confusing to the mind.

Some rules are common to spoken and to written discourse: but the former is directed to the *ear*, the latter to the *eye*; and the pauses required by the ear or the voice do not always correspond with the stops required by the eye. A speaker is often obliged to pause between words which should not be separated by marks of punctuation; or he is carried by the current of emotion over places at which marks of punctuation would be indispensable: he has inflection, emphasis, gesture, in addition to pauses, to aid him in doing what the writer has to do with stops alone.

A slight knowledge of punctuation suffices to shew the absurdity of the old rules—that a reader should pause at a comma long enough to count one, at a semicolon long enough to count two, and at a colon long enough to count three. The truth is that, in some of the most common cases in which a comma is necessary, a speaker would make no pause. For example:

No, sir.

Thank you, sir.

On the other hand, sentences often occur in which a comma can at no point be properly inserted, but which

\* Reprinted from Prof. A. S. Hill's "Principles of Rhetoric."