

What do you mean “Jack Skellington hijacked Christmas again”?



Punctuation is, with a grain of salt, the greatest invention since the number zero. It allows for near-limitless possibilities to express oneself, so mastering it is essential. Poor Romans who never had either. However, “near-limitless”, in my opinion, is not quite good enough. Sometimes the extensive rule set bogs one down, and sometimes the right symbols seem to be missing, especially because written text does not carry some emotions as well as spoken text.

When taking another good look at the title of this article, you will find my first complaint about English punctuation. In fiction, one can easily write *“Did the Christmas lights explode?” I exclaimed.* Although in essays one may not want to yell at your readers, consider blogging. Capitalising a statement will, as is common on the Web, be considered childish unless the culprit is J.K. Rowling. Sure, you could *italicise* or write in **bold** typeface, but perhaps your font looks pretty in neither or you want to draw yet more attention to *Did she really say “All I want for Christmas isn’t you”?*

This is where the interrobang, a combination of the question mark and the exclamation point (also known as the “bang”), comes in. Martin K. Speckter, head of an advertising firm, introduced the symbol in 1962 to replace the awkward and unappealing “?!” or “!?” (interrobang-mks.com). Though the symbol enjoyed considerable popularity in the sixties—in the form of name and design suggestions, articles, and the inclusion of the interrobang in certain typefaces—it never caught on. Partly because it was considered unnecessary by some, partly because of limitations to the number of keys on typewriters, and partly because it was

simply too expensive to incorporate an additional and most of all unconventional glyph (shadycharacters.co.uk). Although the majority of contemporary typefaces do not support the interrobang, as a vehement adversary of “?!” and its switched-up version (which one should I use anyway?), I think the interrobang would make a useful addition to English punctuation.

Even more so, with an increasing amount of communication happening through computers and text messaging (or What’s Apping for all you modern kids with your smartphones and tablets) rather than speech, a demand has arisen for symbols to indicate tone in written text. People who miss ironic remarks and take them literally can be frustrating enough in conversation, but deadpan snarkers may run into a great deal more trouble on the Internet, where you cannot make a single ironic comment without offending half of the connected world.

But it is not just modern society that could do with an irony marker: the first demand dates three centuries back to John Wilkins, who suggested an upside-down exclamation point (“¡”). Shady Characters’ webmaster Keith Houston writes:

“Wilkins’ choice of the ‘¡’ seems most appropriate. The exclamation mark already modifies the tone of a statement, and inverting it to yield an ‘i’-like character both hints at the implied irony and suggests the inversion of its meaning.”

In Ethiopian punctuation, the upside-down exclamation point, known as *Temherte Slaq*, already exists to identify sarcastic or unreal comments (“A Roadmap to the Extension of the

Ethiopic Writing System Standard Under Unicode and ISO-10646”). However, this irony mark and many of its successors, such as the *pointe d’ironie* resembling a flipped question mark, failed to make it into the English punctuation set. Regrettably, if you ask me—because I would much rather use such a symbol than add <irony> tags around my text.

Of course, irony works best when the speaker or writer does not call attention to the fact that he or she is being ironic, which I think is a strong argument *against* the use of a *pointe d’ironie* or other equivalents. Nevertheless, a way to indicate irony

would clear up many a misunderstanding on the Web, so in certain contexts it would be appropriate.

As a typography lover, I vote in favour of resurrecting the interrobang and a less artificial irony mark than a winking smiley or a pseudo-HTML tag. If not for any of the reasons stated above then because “?” is much more aesthetically pleasing than “?!” or “!?” and because I have not been able to incorporate any ironic remarks in this article.

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