



Pause for Thought

We're in a cosy little tearoom, appropriately named the 'Stop-Gap', and Ms Semicolon is reclining on a luxuriously upholstered chair. Her curvaceous bottom half folds elegantly over the front edge and her full round head rests gently against the back. It seems incredible that some have called this fantastic punctuation mark old fashioned, but this is precisely the reason we are here. Ms Semicolon has cause for complaint; she is slowly being wiped out.

Q: It has been said that you are unnecessary. How do you feel about that?

“Well, understandably, I’m quite hurt by that kind of talk. For centuries I’ve been providing an important service to mankind in their efforts to compose eloquent prose, and how am I repaid? I get slandered and ignored! Do you know what that George Orwell said about me? He said, and I quote, ‘I have decided about this time that the semicolon is an unnecessary stop and that I would write my next book without one’, and you know what? He did! He completely eradicated my existence from his prose. Unbelievable! Me, I’ve been around for hundreds of years, and some upstart writer thinks he can just will me away!”

Q: So, how old are you precisely?

“Let’s see, the Greeks have been making use of me since they started writing things down; but they only used me as a question mark, so I’m not sure if that’s applicable to a modern context. Oh, and of course medieval scribes stuck me onto the end of Latin words to show where letters were missing in abbreviations, but again, that’s another situation. I suppose if I were to name a birth year it would be the year I was first set in a printing press. That was 1494 and it was Aldus Manutius who presided over my debut. That makes me 514 years old! Hmm, perhaps we should move on to the next question.”

Q: Why do you think people are so hesitant to make use of you in their work?

“I think there are two schools of thought on that topic. On the one hand, we’ve got writers who want to pretend that I am a nuisance, an imposter punctuation mark that is either a weak cousin of the colon or a glorified comma. These are the people who, in my opinion, have no sense of balance. On the other hand, I think most people are just confused and don’t know exactly how to handle me. For those poor souls, at least, there is hope.”

Q: What would you like to say to our readers?

“My dearest hope is that your readers will take the time, after reading this interview, to go and get themselves a good book on punctuation and read up on me and the many valuable services I can provide. I am more than capable of fulfilling my functions in modern prose and I’m sure that after a few pointers, even the most hesitant of penpushers will come to welcome the assistance I can give them.”

And there we have it; the semicolon has spoken! So, next time you’re struggling through that essay or re-reading that thesis, and you get the feeling that it reads a little disjointedly, remember the semicolon! She’d be more than happy, and more than willing, to add a little more flow to your sentence structure.

by Jodie Mann

Suggested further reading:

Truss, Lynne. *Eats, Shoots and Leaves.*

Carey, G.V. *Mind the Stop: A Brief Guide to Punctuation.*