# The Well Bred Sentence
# Chapter 7: Punctuation

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## The basic fact

The basic fact about contemporary English punctuation is that its markers can be placed only at the syntactic junctures of a text (as external sentence-markers) and at the syntactic junctures of a sentence (as internal sentence-markers).

## The syntactic junctures of a text

The syntactic junctures of a text are the points between sentences. Those points are necessarily marked by external sentence-markers:

- the full stop [ **.** ]
- the question mark [ **?** ]
- the exclamation mark [ **!** ]
- the colon [ **:** ]
- the semi-colon [ **;** ].

## The syntactic junctures of a sentence

The syntactic junctures of a sentence are the points where its parts meet. Those points are marked, or left unmarked, in accordance with the part-of-speech function of the coinciding parts. The internal sentence-markers are:

- the comma ...... **,** ......
- the semi-colon ...... **;** ......
- the colon ...... **:** ......
- the En dash ....... – ........
- the double dashes ... – ................... – ..........
- the brackets ......... ( .......................... ).........
- the square brackets ....... **[** .................... **]** ...........

## Markers that are not real punctuation marks

### *Apostrophe and hyphen*

Two markers, the apostrophe [ **'** ] and the hyphen [ **-** ], are not punctuation marks because they are morphological, as distinct from syntactic, markers: They are markers of words, not of sentences:

- It's [*abbreviation*] time to grow up.
- Cats' [*genitive case*] whiskers twitch when they're [*abbreviation*] annoyed.

- Too many people uses anti-depressants [*prefix*]. The project is a polito-psychological [*conjoining conceptual words*] one.

### Em dash

There is also the Em dash: It is twice the length of the En dash: —, and no space is left either side of it in a text. This is not a real punctuation mark. Rather, it is a kind of literary device, beloved of writers with a bent for stream-of-consciousness writing. Here is an example of it:

> I, Clem, on the road—this private roads malarky, cheeky swine. I walk where I want—going nowhere. One stride. Shoulders squared. Back straight. Next stride—army-taught idiot poncy stuff—whiskey swillers, cigar puffers, killers— Look at that one**.** Thinks I'm taking the micky—I am too— Stiff cheese old bean. No solute for you!

In short, the Em dash is a totally informal marker: It has no rules or conventions. It is slapped in as the writer feels appropriate to draw the picture he wants, express a feeling he wants to convey, capture a mood, *etc.* The trick of its sensible use is to have a fine 'ear' for where one thought-segment interrupts another, and use the Em dash to demarcate those thought segments such that the reader knows that this is the purpose of the demarcation.

### The En and Em dash are not related

The only point in talking about the Em dash is to allay the concerns of people who agonise about when one should use an En dash, and when an Em dash. (The internet is full of such agonising, and of woefully wrong information.) People should relax on this point. The En and Em dash are in no way related. So we are never called-upon to choose between them when we want to parenthesise.

Indeed, a set of two En dashes has exactly the same function as a set of two brackets. So brackets and the En dash *are* related. But the En and Em dashes are not. Never use an Em dash in formal writing. Whenever you think you might need one, turn to the En dashes instead:

> Walking is said to be a health-giving activity. And it is – the poor chap with injured ham strings is unlikely to agree! – if you go about it sensibly.

And never believe anyone who tells you that you 'should be' using an Em dash in any formal-writing context. Keep that marker for your stream-of-consciousness writing.

**Punctuation marks perform syntactical roles**

Every punctuation mark has a specific syntactic role in a sentence. The use of each is governed by the sense a writer wants to make. The common tenet that punctuation is a matter of style is misguided: Writers who consider using or not using a comma are making more than a stylistic decision. They are checking the validity of the sentence they have composed. A common outcome of their deliberation is that they reconstruct the sentence under review.

**The full stop**

The full stop declares that a sentence is complete. Writers experience difficulty with the full stop only when they do not know when to stop a composite sentences. This issue is discussed in Chapter 6: The Composite Sentence.

**The exclamation mark**

The exclamation mark declares that an expression is used as an expletive:

> Hey! Drat that! You fool!

or that it marks a statement that is uttered in an emotionally heightened way to express surprise or pleasure, or to give an order:

> So this is the famous clown!
> Give me that!

**The question mark**

The question mark follows a sentence in interrogative mood:

> Is he the Prime Minister of Canada?

or a sentence in the indicative (statement) mood that is used interrogatively, e.g., to register surprise/disbelief:

> *He* is the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom?

The only problem that crops up with this marker is the inexperienced writer's misuse of it to mark a statement. Misled by the presence of the word *asked*, this writer wrongly assumed that he is dealing with a question:

> MISUSED QUESTION MARK
> The man asked whether this is the Prime Minister of Australia?

***The strange case of the question mark as an internal sentence marker***

A popular contemporary practice uses question marks followed by lower-case letters to list a colon-introduced set of query items:

> Can you: manage new authors? deal with illustrators? proofread copy?

This is a good listing practice. It is certainly better than the next one, which misuses the semi-colon as a question mark:

> MISUSED SEMI-COLONS
> They had to contend with the practical difficulties of literacy problems: what exactly did the agreement they just signed mean; how much change should the milk bar owner have given them; how obviously does their writing on the latest application forms show up their weakness?

**The colon and the semi-colon**

A very common mistake among writers is to think that the colon and the semi-colon are much the same thing. They are not. Indeed, they are related only in that both can be external sentence markers. As such, they can both be used between sentences instead of the full-stop. But in their roles as internal sentence-markers, they are not even remotely related.

*The semi colon as external sentence marker*

The sentence that follows the semi-colon must begin with a lower-case letter, and it must be a sentence. The particular role of the semi-colon is to indicate that two consecutive sentences relate more closely than do sentences separated by a full stop. Such a relationship exists between the next two sentences.

The first says something about the position of *Patrick* in the matter of *understatement*. The writer's semi-colon emphasises the humorous dichotomy of *would be* and *is*:

> To say that Patrick was relieved would be an understatement; understatement is one thing our flamboyant friend is not famous for.

In the next sentence, the semi-colon highlights the irony in being told that one may use something that is not in evidence:

> We were told that people may use the paper towels; we saw none.

A full stop can be used wherever a semi-colon is used as an external sentence marker. So there is no point in arbitrarily preferring a semi-colon to the full stop. It should be used instead of the full stop only when the writer seeks to emphasise the special relatedness of two sentences.

*The semi colon as internal sentence marker*

It is not necessary to use the semi-colon as an internal sentence-marker. As such a marker, it usurps the role of the comma. Its only

necessary use as an internal marker is in demarcating the colon-introduced items of a displayed list:

> This would have meant:
>
> (i)     clear terms and conditions of employment;
> (ii)    ward-rated pay;
> (iii)   a definite career structure.

An old-fashioned belief lingers to the effect that a list must be marked by semi-colons if any part of it is marked by a commas:

> UNNECESSARY COMMA
> Among these considerations are the size of the house, or the area to be heated; the position of the heater in relation to the positions of windows; the efficiency of the insulation; the height of the ceilings.

This sentence could simply have done without the comma that interrupts the first item of its list: *the size of the house, or the area to be heated*:

> Among these considerations are the size of the house or the area to be heated, the position of the heater in relation to the positions of windows, the efficiency of the insulation, the height of the ceilings.

**The colon as external sentence-marker**
The function of the colon as an external sentence-marker is to indicate that the statement made by one sentence, though complete in itself, is also an introduction to the statement to be made by the next sentence:

> One thing tends to nag the mind: what are the professor's own views on this vexed question?

> Perhaps that is not so surprising: This government is rapidly losing its ambiguity on privatisation.

> (As the above examples show, we can but need not capitalise the first letter of the second sentence.)

There are only two structures that are not sentences but are nevertheless properly followed by a colon to introduce another sentence. One is the introducing *to*-led sequence:

> To hazard a guess: You are the real king.
> To coin a phrase: Practice makes perfect asses.
> To begin at the beginning: Mary was born in Ireland.
> To put it plainly: You bore me.

The other is the 'referring-back' phrase:

> With reference to the argument you expounded in your
> lecture: We do not concede its validity.

> On the question of the twins: They are not up for adoption.

These two structures inevitably introduce a sentence that begins
with an upper-case letter.

### The colon as internal sentence-marker

As an internal sentence-marker, the colon appends a sequence to
clarify a point made in the sentence that precedes it. The appended
sequence must begin with a lower-case letter:

> COLON-APPENDED CLARIFIER
> I want to suggest that success in schools is a language
> matter: a matter, that is, of achieving control of the patterns
> of discourse in which significant meanings are made.

The dash and the comma can each perform exactly the same
function that the colon performs in the sentence above:

> I want to suggest that success in schools is a language
> matter – a matter, that is, of achieving control of the
> patterns of discourse in which significant meanings are
> made.
> I want to suggest that success in schools is a language
> matter, a matter, that is, of achieving control of the patterns
> of discourse in which significant meanings are made.

### The colon and letter case

Contemporary convention allows the lower-case letter to begin
either the sentence or the appended point that follows the colon:

> There was room in the Directorate for the satiric and the
> fantastical: it proved to be the hothouse in which gorgeous
> Ern Malley was born.

> There was room in the Directorate for the satiric and the
> fantastical: It proved to be the hothouse in which gorgeous
> Ern Malley was born.

Apologists for the lower-case letter of the colon-introduced
sentence point out that it is consistent with the introducing-
function of the colon. If you want the upper-case letter, they argue,
opt for the full-stop. If you want the colon to declare that one
sentence is introducing the following one, then lay off the upper-
case letter; the upper-case letter presumes the full stop.

Sound counter-argument is that colons always introduce quotations that are sentences beginning with an upper-case letter, and there is no compromise of their power of introduction in such instances:

> He began to speak: 'My dear friends, it is delightful to see you all again. ...'

Writers make their own decisions, here. Some insist upon an upper-case letter for the word that follows a colon, others upon a lower-case one.

### The dash and the colon as internal sentence markers

The dash appends a point in exactly the same way as the colon:

> DASH-APPENDED POINT
> I want to suggest that success in schools is a language matter – a matter, that is, of achieving control of the patterns of discourse in which significant meanings are made.

> COLON-APPENDED POINT
> I want to suggest that success in schools is a language matter: a matter, that is, of achieving control of the patterns of discourse in which significant meanings are made.

The dash, and the colon when it behaves like a dash, can append a point only to a sentence. This writer did not have a sentence, yet he attempted to append a point:

> MISUSED DASH
> The main proposition – made yesterday, was that we should not revalue.

Wanting to say when *the main proposition was made*, and what that proposition *was*, this writer had no use for the dash, for he had only one sentence, so there was no appending (nor colon-like introducing) to be done here. He needed a comma:

> The main proposition, made yesterday, was that we should not revalue.

In the next sentence, the writer was not appending a point at all. He had two sentences. The dash cannot append one sentence to another:

> MISUSED DASH
> The only evidence against Wallace was his affair with Jane – for he and Jane had denied their affair.

He should either have written two sentences:

> The only evidence against Wallace was his affair with Jane. He and Jane had denied their affair.

or one compound sentence:

> The only evidence against Wallace was his affair with Jane, for he and Jane had denied their affair.

**The parentheses**

The role of parenthesis is to interpose explanatory comment without making that comment an integral part of the sentence it embeds. Parenthesis is performed by:

- brackets ( ... );
- the double dash – ... – ;
- the square brackets [...];
- a set of two commas. ......., .........., ........

*Brackets and the double dash*

Parenthesis is achieved by brackets in the first of the following sentences, and by the double-dash in the second:

> The suggestion that his secretary, Marcia (now his wife), had not been positively vetted and was therefore a security risk was not made publicly until today.

> When Vue Thaow asked his parents when he was born – meaning his birthday – they replied: 'When the French were leaving.'

The parenthesised sequences *now his wife* and *meaning his birthday* can be removed from both sentences without damaging their meanings the basic sentence makes. (The humorous irony in the second sentence would be lost. But that merely denudes meaning: it does not damage it.) That the parenthesis can be removed without adverse consequence to the sentence into which it is embedded is the basic criterion of its correct use.

The second criterion of correct use is that the parenthesised sequence immediately follows the element of the sentence that is to be given explanatory comment. Failure to insert a parenthesis after the element to be commented upon is a drastic failure, as the next sentence will illustrate:

> MISPLACED PARENTHESIS
> The plan advanced no solution of the twin problems of rising unemployment and inflation in this country (commonly known as stagflation).

This writer cannot have meant to say that *this country* is *commonly known as stagflation*. He should have placed the parenthetical expression thus:

> The plan seemed to have no answer for the twin problems of rising unemployment and inflation (commonly known as stagflation) in this country.

### *A substantive bracketed sequence*

A remark parenthesised by brackets is a remark that it very much an 'aside'. It is *additionally* informative, and thus expendable, in the sentence. But when the purpose of a sentence is to make two statements about the subject, there is no expendable remark. Parenthesis by brackets or the double dash is wrong in it:

> WRONGLY USED BRACKETS
> Worried doctors – told that the Olympic competitors were using six giant packs of loo rolls a day – feared an outbreak of dysentery.

Parenthesis here demarcates the sentence: 'Doctors were told that the Olympic competitors were using six giant packs of loo rolls a day', which is foreshortened as: *told that the Olympic competitors were using six giant packs of loo rolls a day*. Such a demarcation must be performed by commas. It is unreasonable to foreshorten a sentence and embed it into another only to parenthesise it by brackets that declare it a mere 'aside':

> Worried doctors, told that the Olympic competitors were using six giant packs of loo rolls a day, feared an outbreak of dysentery.

A substantive comment is properly parenthesised by brackets rather than by the comma only when the parenthesised sequence is secondary in a statement. In this sentence the statement made by the relative phrase:

> *which those of us in politics at the time remember with a bitterness that the years have not healed*

is secondary to the statement made by the compound sentence. Given the length of the sentence and its complicated compounding framework, the writer helps his readers by bracketing his secondary remark:

> All these stories, absurd and false though they were, ***found*** their way into the minds of visiting journalist and ***laid*** the ground for the theory (which those of us in politics at the time remember with a bitterness that the years have not

healed) that our very timid Labour ministers were agents of the Kremlin.

Sometimes whole sentences are bracketed. Such parenthesised sentences pick up a detail in a statement in order to expand upon it without interfering with the main thrust of the statement:

> Jenkins did not give up. Jenkins never gave up. (There was a tradition of giving up in his family which Jenkins completely failed to respect. His brothers rather resented him for it.) He decided to put his case to the Top Man.

**The square brackets**

Contemporary print is quite sparing in its use of square brackets. It is in standard use only as the container of acronyms and in drama scripts.

*acronym container*

Acronyms are used to alert the reader to a fact that a cumbersome, longish name will be referred to in a text by its initials. They immediately follow the full name:

> That Annual General Meeting [AGM] was held when the whole nation was in turmoil. The AGM should be remembered in the light of this, and we should not think of it as this Company's typical AGM.

There is no point in providing an acronym unless the noun it abbreviates will be referred to on several occasions in a text. Also, the ordinary bracket is nowadays more commonly used to contain the acronym:

> That Annual General Meeting (AGM) was held ...

*Drama-script square brackets*

In drama scripts, the square brackets enclose directions that interrupt the text to be spoken by actors. The text they contain (highlighted below) is usually rendered in italics:

> PEDLAR [*Waxing boredom, but his eyes scan the room methodically.*] If you wish.

> YOUNG MAN But surely you want to sell this thing? Surely you're keen to show me how it works ... that it works ... that it works better than anything else of its kind! [*Stops short, suspicious, and eyes the pedlar sternly.*] You are an accredited salesman with this firm? Hey! [*alarmed now*] Who sent you?

A closely related and highly practical use of the square brackets is where the writer interpolates the sequence he quotes with a remark of his own:

> He said: 'I think our campaign is going extremely well, and [his embarrassed little laugh betrayed his unease] I know we will win the day.'

> He wrote to say that I am his sole [*sic*] mate. Do you think I should ask which boot of his wants me attached [*very sick*]?

Linguistics, Philosophy and other language-intensive disciplines sometimes use square brackets to distinguish words that establish a template of meaning from the actual words of the sentence under analysis:

> [If] He goes, [then] I go.

**Several parentheses together**

Some writers use square brackets to distinguish neutral explanations from remarks. The brackets in the following sentence enclose the writer's remarks (yellow highlighting), and the square brackets his neutral explanations (green highlighting).

> Within the hour he had his answer ready (as expected) and though he did not actually say as much, it was clear that he thought the Alliance [Only-Under-Eighteens' Alliance for Dignified Independence] little more than a joke (a bad one).

There is also a practice, fortunately not a common one, of embedding a parenthetical statements into a statement that is already made parenthetically. It is quite hard on the reader:

> She barely touched upon the real issues, though [her 'theme is that children (American-born children of Greek extraction) have a right to an effective bilingual-lingual and bicultural education' (as Greek Americans – not only as Greeks nor only as Americans – ) ].

This writer enclosed with square brackets(green highlighting) everything that is *her theme* and his commentary upon it. Within this enclosure he put a first parenthesis by means of brackets (yellow highlighting) to explain what *her theme* means by *children*. A second parenthesis by means of brackets (yellow highlighting) explains what *her theme* means by *bicultural education*. A third parenthesis enclosed by the he double dash (blue highlighting) explains what *her theme* means by *Greek Americans*. At the end of the sentence, all three sets of parentheses are conscientiously closed. There is, as a result, this accumulation

of markers: – )]  when this sentence finally stops. This sort of antic is fine if the writer is preparing a text for encoding in mathematical language. But *for the purpose of writing in order to be read, it is sheer nonsense*.

**The hyphen and morphology**

The morphological functions of the hyphen are:

- to make one described noun (compound noun) of two or more nouns;
- to make one adjective of two or more words;
- to attach a prefix *re-*, *anti-*) or a suffix (*-wise, -like*) to words.

### *The hyphen and compound nouns*

The compound noun is rapidly dying out in English. Some time ago, a noun made up of two nouns was hyphenated as a matter of course: *business-man*, *stock-broker*. But frequent use has seen them become single-word nouns: *businessman*, *stockbroker*, *hairdresser*, *seaman*.

Other compound nouns simply remain two words, such that the first of them becomes the adjective that describes the second: *work clothes*, *regulation gear*, *freedom fighter*, *fortune hunter*, *Christmas tree*. Despite the occasional claims to the contrary, it is never obligatory to hyphenate these 'noun-turned-adjective + noun' combinations:

> The *work clothes* we wear are strictly *regulation gear*.

Obligation to hyphenate occurs only when a sequence of words compounds to make one noun:

> bric-a-brac; lady-in-waiting; jack-of-all-trades; know-it-all; stick-in-the-mud,

and when words string in a way that makes it difficult to tell which is functioning as a noun and which as an adjective. Of this string: *a happy news reader*, one cannot tell whether the named entity (the noun) is a 'happy reader of news' or a 'reader of happy news'. The hyphen eliminates the ambiguity:

> a happy news-reader
> a happy reader of news

> a happy-news reader
> a reader of happy news.

Arguably, *news-reader* and 'news reader' should always be written as one word: newsreader. But that solves the ambiguity problem

only in the first sentences. Since there is no word 'happynews', the same solution does not apply in the second sentence.

### *The hyphen and adjectives*

The hyphen makes adjectives in several ways. It enables a compound noun to perform as an adjective:

> My *man-scalper* instinct is as good as new.
> Her *freedom-fighter* brother was warmly welcomed.
> *Christmas-tree* lights twinkled in every room.

The hyphen compounds also a word that can perform like an adverb with a word that can perform like an verb, and makes this compounding the first of a series of adjectives:

> That <u>*happily-married*</u> *eye* surgeon retired to spend more time with his family.

But the hyphen is not appropriate when an adjective of this formation is the only adjective:

> That *happily married* surgeon retired to spend more time with his family.

And predicate adjectives may not be hyphenated:

> This surgeon **is** *happily married*.

The hyphen also compounds an adjective that quantifies (measures size, extent, *etc.*) with a noun:

> For him these are *larger-than-life* values.

or with a word that can perform like a predicate adjective:

> The *long-awaited* event is to take place tomorrow.
> Only *English-speaking* people were able to take part.

The hyphen is not appropriate in a predicate adjective:

> The event to take place tomorrow **is** <mark>*long awaited*</mark>.
> The only people able to take part **were** <mark>*English speaking*</mark>.

There is a practice, frowned-upon by some, that will make a compound adjective of the subject and what would have been the verb (*led*), and thus construct a copula sentence:

> This <mark>girl-led</mark> march **was** a huge success.
> [COPULA SENTENCE]

> Girls **led** a march that was a huge success.
> [VERB SENTENCE]

Another practice is to contract what would have been a relative adjective phrase [who were frowned upon] into a compound adjective [frowned upon]:

> The frowned-upon smokers **_did not mind_** at all.
> [VERB SENTENCE]
>
> The smokers who were frowned upon **_did not mind_** at all.
> [VERB SENTENCE]

Exactly the same thing happens in the next sentence:

> The purpose-betraying paragraph of the document **_amused_** us.
> The paragraph that betrayed the document's purpose amused us.

Those who like sentence constructions that produce hyphenated adjectives are entitled to them, so long as they keep them in check. This, for instance, really is a bit much:

The by-then-gone-over-the-top part of her performance damaged her reputation.

## The prefix and running together

There is consternation about when prefixes such as *anti-*, *pro-* and *counter-* are run into a noun or hyphenated with it. Advice to consult a dictionary in this matter is not much use to the irritable. ('Hang it, it is just a hyphen!') Their attitude hardens when they find the dictionary apparently inconsistent with itself. For instance, why 'counterirritant' but 'counter-intelligence', 'countercharge' but 'counter-claim', and 'counterpoint' but 'counter-tenor'?

The source of the apparent inconsistency is sometimes our phonetic system. If we had 'antisemitic', its *tise* would be reminiscent of the frequent occurrence of '*i* + consonant + *e*', in which the *i* is pronounced as the *i* in 'size'. The hyphen intercedes between *anti* and *Semitic*, therefore, to retain the sound *i* (as *i* in 'in') of 'anti-'. Similarly, 'antihero' would encourage the pronunciation of the *i* in *tiher* as the *i* in 'tire'. The prefixes *re-*, *co-* and *de-* fare similarly: The hyphen intervenes when a collision of letters threatens a change of sound: 're-enter', 'co-operate', 'de-emphasis'. When there is no such threat, the prefix is simply run into a word: 'reconstruct', 'decommission', 'coincidence'.

Very commonly, morphology explains why a prefix is not attached by means of a hyphen: There are nouns of which 'anti' is a part. Some of them are: 'antibody', 'antidote', 'antipodes'. ('Anti-body' does not make sense, and there are no such noun as 'dote' or 'podes'.

Unfortunately though, our phonetic system and morphology won't wear all of the blame. Genuine inconsistencies do occur. For instance, the upper-case is kept in 'Semitic', as it is before all proper nouns in which *anti-* is a prefix: 'anti-Communist', 'anti-

Cartesian', 'anti-Catholic'. But then, we find 'antichristian'. Why not 'anti-Christian'? Why not indeed! The writer who prefers it to 'antichristian' must feel free to use it.

### The hyphen and over-

There are perplexing pieces of dictionary reasoning about some prefixes. The prefix *over* is one of them. One would think that, like *anti-* and other prefixes, it would run into a word rather than hyphenate with it wherever possible. But no: It sometimes hyphenates: *over-exercised, over-abundant, over-anxious, over-many*, and sometimes does not: *overvalue, override, overindulge, overestimate, overexert*. Casting about for justification, one might light upon the possibility that *over-* is hyphenated when it is the prefix of an adjective. Other 'measurement' adjectives hyphenate:

> a too-exaggerated kindness
> a one-in-a-million chance
> a one-off occurrence
> two-meter rod.

But then, there's *overripe*. Why not *over-ripe*? (Here again, anyone who prefers 'over-ripe' can use it.)

### The hyphen and meaning

The real issue in the use of hyphens with prefixes is meaning: When we read *re-cover*, we know that there is something to do with putting a new cover on something. *Recover* tells us that there is something to do with someone's getting better, or something's being got back or retrieved. And we know that an *extra-national issue* is one that is *outside a national parameter*, and that an *extra national issue* is an additional national issue.

When there is no issue of meaning, hyphenation is not something a writer need lose sleep over: Nothing heinous is committed in writing *pre-medical*, *post-industrial*, *etc*., even though the dictionary records *premedical* and *postindustrial*. Using a hyphen unnecessarily – 'post-prandial' (postprandial) – is better than running in something like 'postmodernism' (post-Modernism). But leaving a prefix dangling: 'non proliferation' (non-proliferation), 'pre therapy' (pre-therapy) is never allowed. Common sense prevails in this usage. Simply, the suffix is part of a noun that is a standard word: *ladylike*, *clockwise*. When a word is somehow a customised adjective: a *John-like* character, *an Australian-style* solution, it has to be hyphenated.

### The hyphen as line breaker

Another role of the hyphen is the purely pragmatic one of breaking a line of words at the point set by the right-hand margin of a page.

The hyphen in this role is wholly avoidable. The writer need only disable the automatic-hyphen facility of his writing programme.

Line-breaking is a printer's, and sometimes an editor's, business. Its basis is 'syllabification': the art of demarcating the syllabic parts of a word in order to decide which point between its syllabic parts is also the point where a line break can occur. Exactly what constitutes a syllabic part is yet undecided. Or rather, there have been several decisions about it, but no consensus. Printers choose the syllabification system they favour and break lines in accordance with its rules. So we see, for instance, *significant* broken thus: signif-icant and thus: signi-ficant.

The merits of the various approaches to syllabification need not engage writers even when they put their work up for publication. Their concern should be that line breaks are not so many on a printed page that they irritate the reader, and even more, that lines are not broken in a way that interferes with reading comprehension. For instance, reading *char-* at the end of a line and mentally pronouncing a sound such as 'char' in 'chart', the reader is flummoxed when the beginning of the next line gives him *acter*, and the quite different sound of '*char*acter'.

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