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Why Punctuation Matters; Part One

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WRITER'S BLOCK

WHY PUNCTUATION MATTERS: PART ONE

BY DAVID H. SPRATT

Apparently, I owe a lot to my English teachers. With their assistance, I learned to write reasonably well, and I learned how to punctuate. Some are not so fortunate. Each year, I encounter law students (and lawyers) who were never taught basic punctuation rules or, if taught, never bothered to internalize the rules.

Does punctuation matter? Notwithstanding the plethora of recent articles by fellow grammar nerds (and I use that term lovingly and self-inclusively) bemoaning the death of the semi-colon and more recently-gasp-the apostrophe, punctuation does matter. To quote an old grammar joke (for which I cannot locate original attribution), which of the following letters would you rather receive?

Dear John:

I want a man who knows what love is all about. You are generous, kind, thoughtful. People who are not like you admit to being useless and inferior. You have ruined me for other men. I yearn for you. I have no feelings whatsoever when we're apart. I can be forever happy--will you let me be yours?

Jane

OR

Dear John:

I want a man who knows what love is. All about you are generous, kind, thoughtful people, who are not like you. Admit to being useless and inferior. You have ruined me. For other men, I yearn. For you, I have no feelings whatsoever. When we're apart, I can be forever happy. Will you let me be?

Yours,
Jane

As shown by the above examples, a few misplaced commas, a rogue question mark, or a period lurking where it does not belong can seriously alter, if not destroy, the meaning of a sentence or paragraph. Accordingly, if you are punctuationally-challenged, take note as I remind (ahem, teach) you about the **basic** apostrophe and possessive rules (admittedly, there are exceptions that I am not covering with this short column— hence, the bolded use of the word "basic.")

Shocker, but apostrophes have nothing to do with plurals! Plurals of most nouns (at least in English) are made by simply adding the letter "s."

The lawyer did not know how to form a plural noun.

(The above sentence means that only one lawyer did not know how to form a plural noun, which, in fact, is quite aspirational and would make reading some of the documents I read in practice far easier).

The lawyers did not know how to form a plural noun.

(This sentence means that more than one lawyer did not know how to form a plural noun, which, sadly, seems to be the reality, but not for Virginia lawyers, and clearly not for any of the lawyers who are reading this column.)

Instead, apostrophes have two basic uses: 1) to show possession or ownership, and 2) to indicate when letters have been omitted from a word.

Possessives:

Why is it that so many lawyer's have trouble with possessive's?

To show possession:

Add an apostrophe plus an "s" to most singular nouns and to plural nouns that do not already end in "s."

1. Apostrophes are my writing pro-

fessor's obsession (apostrophes are an obsession possessed by my writing professor).

2. Apostrophes are counsel's least favorite grammar subject (apostrophes are abhorred by many a lawyer; in this instance, counsel is used as a plural noun).

Add an apostrophe plus an "s" to singular nouns that end in "s": Kris's sister

If a word is already plural and ends in an "s," just add the apostrophe: **the lawyers' firm**

Contractions:

Why cant we'all learn the rule's?

Apostrophes are used to show the omission of letters, primarily in contractions. A contraction is a word in which one or more letters have been omitted. Although contractions are informal (and therefore should not typically be used in legal writing), apostrophes take the place of the missing letters:

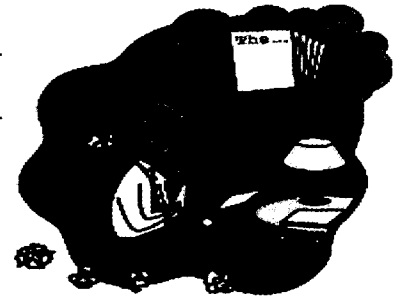
Don't forget basic punctuation rules = Do not forget basic punctuation rules

I'm the grammar police = I am the grammar police

It's over at last = It is over at last (its without an apostrophe is a possessive pronoun).

Now that you have learned the basics of apostrophes, we are ready to move onto commas— alas, a subject for a future discussion. As always, questions, comments, or suggestions are welcomed (even encouraged)!

David H. Spratt is a professor at The American University, Washington College of Law, where he teaches Legal Rhetoric, Introduction to Advocacy, and Family Law Practice and Drafting. Professor Spratt practiced family law for ten years and is a former chair of the VBA Domestic Relations Section.



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