



All of these questions deal with commas and only commas.

The Rise of Punctuation

Every student of grammar knows that the English language has a series, of specific complex rules¹ about proper use of punctuation marks. Today's rules, however², have not existed since the birth of writing. Punctuation has radically evolved over the centuries.

The earliest writing had no punctuation whatsoever. Even worse, there weren't even any spaces between words. Texts were dense blocks of uninterrupted letters.

Ancient, Greek playwrights,³ began using simple punctuation marks in their texts so that actors, reciting⁴ their lines would know when to pause. Even through the start of the Middle Ages, books were meant to be tools for reading aloud, and punctuation continued to be used primarily to regulate the rhythm of speech.

Books gradually started to become more widespread, and, punctuation began⁵ to apply to grammatical structures not just spoken units. But because books were copied and produced by hand, the shapes, and meanings⁶ of these symbols still varied, often⁷ drastically, from book to book. The shapes of punctuation marks became

standardized, with the invention, of⁸ the printing press.

Printers could now mechanically reproduce the same punctuation marks over and over again.

The Italian publisher, and printer Aldus Manutius⁹ was the source of several important innovations. In a

manuscript printed in 1494, Manutius took an earlier mark called the *virgula suspensiva* a mark that¹⁰

resembled a forward slash, curved it and lowered it to produce the mark we know today as the comma.

Manutius was also one of the first printers to use semicolons round parentheses and,¹¹ italic type.

Even after the shapes of punctuation marks became uniform, it still took several, hundred¹² years for their uses to become fixed. Commas for example, were¹³ far more

widespread in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries than they are today. Try reading the U.S. Constitution as it was originally written and you'll be overwhelmed by seemingly unnecessary commas. Today, while there is some variation between British and American

usage, English punctuation marks¹⁴ have been

standardized into well-defined roles. But who knows?

Maybe in another two hundred years, a different

set of new barely recognizable marks,¹⁵ will be standard.