

Looking at Language

On Your Marks!

by Richard Lederer, Ph.D.

Punctuation developed after writing, not along with it as we might suppose. Early writing had no breaks between words and no punctuation. Some early texts were boustrophedon, which means “as the ox draws the plow.” The words in these texts went from left to right and from right to left in alternating lines, much as oxen pull plows and modern high-speed printers print a page.

Fortunately, we who are writing and reading today have an army of punctuation marks arrayed against confusion and ready to clarify the messages we send and receive.

To take an inventory of your control of the marks from commas to semicolons, from quotation marks to parentheses, punctuate the sentences below. When you are finished, please look at the answers that follow and carefully read the explanations.

1. The Bible which is the central book in religious thought speaks of three virtues faith hope and charity and says the greatest of these is charity

2. Did James travel all the way to Concord New Hampshire to look for the Joneses first edition copy of the story The Tell-Tale Heart he asked

3. Did Julie really declare I refuse to make my bed and I shall never again wash dishes vacuum rugs or water plants asked Jenny

4. Although the school is again warning Mary its warned her many times before the brave wonderfully coordinated young woman wants to try out for the boys football team

5. Roosevelt brilliantly exploited the political situation by bringing together five have not entities the South which had lived for years in a state of chronic depression Roosevelt was to characterize it as the countrys number one economic problem the Roman Catholics who still formed a minority group in many parts of the country the blacks particularly those settled in the urban communities the Jews and the labor unions (from Brooks Lewis and Warren American Literature The Makers and the Making)

Answers

1. The Bible, which is the central book in religious thought, speaks of three virtues—faith, hope, and charity—and says that the greatest of these is charity.

[Commas to separate the nonrestrictive adjective clause; double dashes to set off compound appositive that contains commas for noun series.]

2. “Did James travel all the way to Concord, New Hampshire, to look for the Joneses’ first-edition copy of the story ‘The Tell-Tale Heart?’” he asked.

[Quotation marks for quotation; comma after New Hampshire, as well as before; apostrophe after Joneses; hyphen for first-edition as a compound adjective; single quotation marks for the short-story title set within double quotation marks; question mark outside the single quotation marks; period, not question mark, at end of sentence.]

3. “Did Julie really declare, ‘I refuse to make my bed; and I shall never again wash dishes, vacuum rugs, or water plants!’?” asked Jenny.

[Quotation marks for quotation; single quotation marks within double quotation marks; semicolon before and to separate two independent clauses, one of which contains commas for the verb series; exclamation mark before single quotation mark ending quotation, and question mark before the double quotation mark; period, not question mark, at end of sentence.]

4. Although the school is again warning Mary (it’s warned her many times before), the brave, wonderfully coordinated girl wants to try out for the boys’ [or boys] football team.

[Parentheses for parenthetical sentence in the middle of a larger sentence; it’s as a contraction; comma after second parenthesis to set off introductory adverb clause; comma for adjective series.]

5. Roosevelt brilliantly exploited the political situation by bringing together five have-not entities—the South, which had lived for years in a state of chronic depression (Roosevelt was to characterize it as the country’s number one economic problem); the Roman Catholics, who still formed a minority group in many parts of the country; the blacks, particularly those settled in urban communities; the Jews; and the labor unions. (from Brooks, Lewis, and Warren, *American Literature: the Makers and the Making*)

[Hyphen for compound modifier; dash to set off compound appositive; commas to set off nonrestrictive adjective clauses; parentheses to set off parenthetical statement within the larger sentence; semicolons to set off series in which one or more noun phrase contains commas; commas for series of authors; book title italicized or underlined.]

Richard Lederer, Ph.D., is the author of more than 3,000 books and articles about language and humor. His syndicated column, “Looking at Language,” appears in newspapers and magazines throughout the United States. His new title, *Comma Sense: A Fun-damental Guide to Punctuation*, with John Shore, is now available from St. Martin’s Press. E-mail: richard.lederer@pobox.com



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