

Talking (Exclamation) Points

IN an essay published in 1895 called "How to Tell a Story," Mark Twain chastised writers who use "whooping exclamation-points" that reveal them laughing at their own humor, "all of which is very depressing, and makes one want to renounce joking and lead a better life."

One shudders to imagine what Twain would have made of e-mail.

Writing is by definition an imperfect medium for relaying the human voice. And in the age of electronic communication, when that voice is transmitted so often via e-mail and text message, many literate and articulate people find themselves justifying the exclamation point to convey emotion, enthusiasm or excitement. Some do so guiltily, as if on a slippery slope to smiley faces.

"I've degenerated to the point where I allow one per e-mail, but I don't feel good about it," said Alex Knight, a media and technology investor in Seattle. "If I use one, I will go back and delete the previous ones. It's sort of 'Sophie's Choice.' "

In their book "Send: Why People Email So Badly and How to Do It Better," David Shipley and Will Schwalbe say that the exclamation point was originally reserved for an actual exclamation ("My goodness!" or "Good grief!") but that they have become unexpected champions of this maligned punctuation. "We call it the ur emoticon," Mr. Schwalbe said in a recent phone conversation. "In an idealized world, we would all be able to do what our English teachers told us to do, which is to write beautiful prose where enthusiasm is conveyed by word choice and grammar."

"E-mail has such a flattening effect: it's toneless and affectless," he said. "The exclamation point is the quickest and easiest way to kick things up a notch, but not if you're angry. Only happy exclamation points."

It's unusual for a punctuation mark to carry such infamy. "Italics are far more expressive, and they never get a bad reputation," Joni Evans, chief executive of the Web site WowOwow.com, wrote in an e-mail. "I'm not ashamed of using exclamation points to convey emphasis. I would never use a smiley face, but there are smiley-face personalities. Kathie Lee Gifford comes to mind. People are what they type. But now I am worried: I'm a frequent user of the dash, which might mean that I'm a dash kind of person. Could be a bad sign."

Coincidentally, many of the earliest typewriters did not include a specialized key for the exclamation point, and the endeavor to sound animated required three strokes: an apostrophe, a backspace and a period. The computer not only renders such labor unnecessary but also, with a lingering finger on the key, facilitates exclamatory abuse: A conga line (!!!) is effortless, so standards must be self-imposed. "I draw the line at more than one at a time," said Cyndi Stivers, a digital media consultant in Manhattan, but she permits herself three if she wants to signify being "gobsmacked."

Classic style manuals generally decree that exclamation points be used sparingly. "But e-mails seemed from the start to require different punctuation," said Lynne Truss, the author of "Eats, Shoots & Leaves: The Zero Tolerance Approach to Punctuation." "As if by common consent, people turned to the ellipsis and the exclamation point. There must have been a reason for this. My theory is that both of these marks are ways of trying to keep the attention of the reader. One of them says, 'Don't go away, I haven't finished, don't go, don't go,' while the other says, 'Listen! I'm talking to you!'"

"Since the advent of e-mail, I have personally started all my messages with a yell," she said. "Instead of 'Dear George,' I write, 'George!' My belief is that when we read a printed page, we engage an inner ear, which follows the sense, the voice and the music in a linear way. We sort of listen to the writer. Whereas on a computer screen, we tend to pick out bits of information and link them for ourselves. The exclamation

point is a natural reaction to this: Writers are shouting to be heard.”

Unsurprisingly, the literati are particularly sensitive to, or particularly defensive about, the use of the exclamation point. “I’m definitely guilty of abusing it in e-mails,” said Jennifer Egan, whose book “A Visit From the Goon Squad” won this year’s [Pulitzer Prize](#) for fiction. And she notes a curious rebound effect: “The more exclamation points you use, the more you need to use in order create an impression of exclamation.”

Aimee Lee Ball writes for numerous national magazines and is the co-author of four books, including “No Time to Die.”

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“I have long tried to swear off them,” said Peter Godwin, whose book “When a Crocodile Eats the Sun: A Memoir of Africa” detailed life in his native Zimbabwe. “I think they are the literary equivalent of canned applause. I hate the way they jostle you, and the way they prescribe, ‘Dear reader, be amazed!’ And while we’re on the subject, there’s the ‘?!’ one-two combo. I suppose it is trying to say, ‘My question is jokey,’ or ‘I’m embarrassed to ask it in the first place.’ ”

Diana Abu-Jaber, author of the memoir “The Language of Baklava,” indulges in a prodigious use of exclamation points, with a chaser of self-flagellation. “It’s sort of ironic and damning, considering what a total literary snob I fancy myself,” she said. “It might have something to do with my new life of texting 20-year-old baby sitters. I think there’s also a connection to having a non-native-speaker parent — that whole thing of shouting to be heard.”

A sense of punctuation may be imprinted in childhood, the way the Inuit heroine Smilla has a “sense of snow” in Peter Hoeg’s novel “Smilla’s Sense of Snow.” “I think I first got interested in the exclamation point while watching the old Batman TV show as a kid. Kablam! Kapow!” said Meg Wolitzer, whose most recent novel is “The Uncoupling.” “In a way, the cartoon aspect of this emphatic spatter of punctuation has stayed with me. I still feel a little uneasy when I use it, although I sometimes do use it because it feels appropriately sprightly.”

“There’s a case to be made that the exclamation point is the adverb of punctuation; if you have to put it in, then maybe the sentence didn’t do its job,” she said. “Then again, I’m also highly uneasy about ever using italics. If the exclamation point is the adverb of punctuation, then italics are the Ambien of typography. I guess my only rule is to use the exclamation point sparingly, like adverbs, italics and cortisone cream.”

Walter Kirn, author of “Up in the Air,” sees no reason to curb his enthusiasm. “The text message and the exclamation point are made for each other, and I’m glad they finally found each other,” he said. “They’re both one-note forms of communication, without music, without connotation and atmosphere, but they do have their uses.”

“To me, there’s no more shame in filling text messages with exclamation points,” he added, “three at a time, if necessary, than there is in using strings of expletives while arguing politics at an Irish pub.”

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