

## Special Edition: National Punctuation Day

What a year it's been—and we're not done yet! As we pause to celebrate National Punctuation Day, a deep dive into the question mark (*What's happened now? What day is it? WTF??*) seems appropriate.

We'll bring you up to speed on question mark usage, then send you off with a bit of history and trivia.

### How to ?

Lucky for us, question marks are pretty easy to use in English. Got a question? Trying to express puzzlement? You already know what to do: use the humble ? at the end of your sentence and you're good to go.

But question marks sometimes find their way into the middle of sentences, which can create capitalization conundrums. We're used to capitalizing the first word that appears after a period, exclamation point, or question mark; but when these are used to end a clause or phrase (as opposed to a complete sentence), it's often correct to *not* capitalize the next word. For example:

Something small—a mouse? a rat? a vole?—darted out from under the barn.

The same applies when the question mark is part of a quotation or title that appears in the middle of a sentence:

Mindy shouted “Are you open?” through the glass door,  
and the shopkeeper shook his head.

Jake bought a book called *Did You Hear?* at his neighbor's yard sale.

And for all the globetrotters: you probably know that in Spanish, the inverted question mark ¿ should appear at the beginning of a clause, phrase, or sentence that ends with ?, as in ¿*Que tú quieres?* In French, it's standard to add a space before a question mark at the end of a sentence (please don't do this in English!), and the mirrored question mark † is used in some languages that are read right-to-left.

### Huh? Really?

The earliest question mark-like punctuation that experts have identified appears in Syriac, an alphabet used for the language of the same name beginning in the first century AD. Known as *zagwa elaya*, the Syriac question mark appears as two dots written above a word.

The first question mark that resembles the modern ? has been traced to the eighth century AD. It was devised by Alcuin of York, a scholar working for Charlemagne who also helped standardize the use of uppercase and lowercase letters. Alcuin's *punctus interrogativus* resembled “a lightning flash, striking from right to left” over a dot, which over time curved into the shape we're familiar with today.

In the centuries since, writers have suggested using or adapting the question mark for all kinds of applications. These include using the mirrored question mark † as a signifier of ironic or rhetorical questions and the creation of the interrobang, a symbol that blends the question mark ? and exclamation point ! to serve as a more compact version of ?!

While most modern languages use a form of the ? mark, some have distinct symbols. For example, the Greek question mark resembles a semicolon, the Ethiopian Ge'ez script uses three vertical dots, and the West African Vai language features a flourish-like horizontal glyph.

Have a wonderful National Punctuation Day! Stay tuned for the next regularly scheduled issue of *KB CommEntary*.

And please remember, *when it has to be right*, KB COMM is here to help.

Sincerely,

*Kathy*

Kathy Breuninger

**KB COMM**

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