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TRANSCRIPT: SEASON 3, EPISODE 1  
A QUESTION OF QUESTION MARKS IN WRITING

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**Louise Harnby:** Hello and welcome to this episode of The Editing Podcast. So this week we're going to chat about questions marks, because while most writers get these right there are occasions when they come unstuck.

**Denise Cowle:** That's right, and – you'll not be surprised to hear – there will be times when there is a choice. It's not always cut and dried. And in that case, we'll be talking about fiction. We can always count on you fiction lot to get the old brain cells working!

**LH:** I know. We like to keep you non-fic peeps on your toes! Though the tricky stuff comes up in creative and less formal non-fiction too, I think.

**DC:** It definitely does. So the most common use of the question mark in writing is to indicate a **direct** question. For example:

- Who was that book written by?
- How fast did he run the marathon?
- Are you coming to the restaurant later?
- Will the results be available on Wednesday?
- Can I have the bill, please?
- Which crime writer do you most enjoy reading?
- Might I ask for your help?
- When will that research paper be ready?

In all those cases, the question mark goes at the end of the sentence.

**LH:** So that leads onto the issue of what an indirect question is, and whether you need to use a question mark at the end of it. So an indirect question is a statement in which a question is embedded. So I'm going to take some of the direct questions Denise offered, and turn them into indirect questions.

- He asked who that book was written by.
- She wants to know whether you're coming to the restaurant later.
- He wanted to know if he could have the bill.
- She hasn't decided which crime writer she most enjoys reading.

Now, something else we need to mention here is how-to statements (etc.) and question marks. Now, this comes up a lot in blog writing, particularly with headings. So these are examples of headers that start with the words How, Which or What, but they are statements, not questions, and so they don't need a question mark.

- How to punctuate dialogue
- Which training course to choose
- What to look for when searching for an agent

**DC:** Yes, now if they were questions they'd be phrased perhaps as follows:

- How do you punctuate dialogue?
- Which training course should I choose?
- What should an author look for when searching for an agent?

**LH:** Yes. So now let's look at idiomatic phrasing because this can be a little sticky when it comes to question marks.

**DC:** Yes, so we're thinking particularly about questions that are, in fact, more statements of courtesy. The question marks are often omitted, though I wouldn't want to be prescriptive about this. I think it depends on context and author style. So two examples might be:

- How do you do.
- Will you please give Louise a big round of applause.

The reason we can be a little more flexible is because these aren't really questions at all, even though they're framed as such. In the first case, we're simply greeting someone; we don't expect them to say, 'I'm having a terrible time, actually.' And in the second, we're inviting people to clap; we don't expect them to say, 'No, we won't.'

**LH:** Yes, they're actually imperative rather than interrogative. So let's talk now about questions that are framed as wonderments and thoughts. So in creative writing, sentences like

- *What on earth had she been thinking*, he wondered.

can fox readers.

So the usual approach is to place the question mark after the question, and then follow it with the tag.

- *What on earth had she been thinking?* he wondered.

That's because there's a direct question, but it's embedded. We'll come back to embedded questions, but just to stick with thoughts and wonderments for a moment, the thing to bear in mind here is that because there's a tag, in this case *wondered*, the pronoun – *he* – is lower case.

**DC:** That's a crucial point because, usually, the word that comes after a question takes an initial capital because the question mark is the final punctuation in the sentence. So do watch out for that tagging in fiction that Louise mentioned.

Now, I do still sometimes see a comma setting off the question and the tag, and the question mark coming at the end of the sentence.

**LH:** That's true, though *New Hart's Rules* and the *Chicago Manual of Style* recommend the approach we've outlined, so that's what I follow.

And the other thing to mention is that the question mark before the tag functions **instead of** the comma. You don't need the comma as well.

So this issue of wonderments leads nicely into *surely* and *perhaps* statements, where a question is implied. Now these come up in all types of writing, not just fiction, and they often get writers in a muddle. So here's an example:

- Perhaps the inspector would catch the killer after all.

Another example is:

- Surely he wouldn't believe that nonsense Greta had been spouting.

And I see authors placing question marks at the end of the statements frequently. You needn't. The words *surely* and *perhaps* give the reader everything they need in order to understand the uncertainty. And these aren't direct questions so you don't need a question mark.

**DC:** So let's now look at embedded direct questions. The convention for what punctuation mark to use is the same as for the thoughts and wonderments, though you'll see embedded questions in non-fiction too, just perhaps offered a little differently. So for example:

- The question is, how will a general election affect the mood of the country?

or

- What is the likelihood of a no-deal Brexit? is the issue we're all thinking about.

And in both cases, a question mark comes after the direct question, though a comma sets off the modifying statement: *The question is* in the first example.

**LH:** Let's talk quickly about double punctuation, because this is something that a lot of people ask about. So if the question mark comes at the end of a sentence, even though it's embedded, there's no need for any additional punctuation ... usually. So if you write:

- The question is, how will a general election affect the mood of the country?

there's no need for a full stop. The question mark functions as a completion mark.

There's just one other thing I want to mention here, and that's in relation to parenthetical dashes. So sometimes there are questions that are embedded in sentences but those sentences could stand alone without them. For example:

- That deer standing in the road – or had it been something else? – nearly made me crash the car.

So in that case, you could have double punctuation – a question mark at the end of the direct question, but surrounded by two closed-up em dashes or spaced en dashes.

**DC:** And if you were using full stops with contractions or abbreviations – so say you were talking about times and had a.m. or p.m. with full points – and a question mark followed this construction, you would have the double punctuation.

**LH:** So now let's look at some other ways in which question marks can be used to express uncertainty, and here we're looking more at non-fiction writing.

**DC:** So you can use a question mark to indicate that dates are uncertain. So, for example, if you were discussing the discovery of an ancient tomb perhaps, or the year a war broke out, but the date is contested, you can place a question mark after the final number.

**LH:** Denise, what do you recommend if there's a date range, because the reader might not know whether both dates are uncertain or just one.

**DC:** Most style guides recommend avoiding ambiguity by placing question marks against any date that's uncertain. But if you're writing for an audience who you think might not interpret the question mark correctly, I'd recommend recasting, perhaps with a parenthetical statement that one of the dates is questionable. There's no single solution to this kind of problem. It depends on audience.

This leads on to another convention that's acceptable in some style guides, and that's placing a question mark surrounded by round brackets after a word to imply the information is uncertain. So if I were to write:

- Louise was born in Amersham (?) in 1967.

that would indicate that her birthplace was uncertain. Some style guides ask for the brackets and enclosed question mark to be placed close up to the word that's uncertain. Again, though, think about audience. It might be cleaner to write out that Louise is thought to have been born in Amersham.

**LH:** I was born in Amersham, just for the record! Now, I have one more question for you. I don't usually see this in fiction, but it might be a thing in non-fiction, and some of the style guides talk about it. And that's question marks to indicate sarcasm.

**DC:** Yes, I see this in very informal or humorous non-fiction writing. So again, the question mark is placed in round brackets, though in this case there'll be a space either side. So, for example:

- His friends (?) would be sure to help him once they heard about his 30-million-dollar inheritance.

**LH:** We'll be including a transcript with this information in it so you can see it written out. It does get a little tricky trying to show how things appear on paper when you're working with audio!

**DC:** I still think we're having an easier time of it than with that episode on find-and-replace strings!

And now it's time for Editing Bites – the regular bit of the show where we each recommend a favourite resource that we think you'll find useful. So mine is *Making a Point: The Pernickety Story of English Punctuation* by David Crystal. It's both a history of punctuation and a guide on how to use it.

**LH:** And mine is *But Can I Start A Sentence With "But"?* by Carol Saller. It's a collation of some of the most often asked questions of the staff at the *Chicago Manual of Style*. The answers are sensible enough to educate, and humorous enough to make you chuckle.

**DC:** Good stuff. Carol's always worth reading and has a wealth of editing experience. So we hope you've enjoyed this episode. Thank you so much for listening to The Editing Podcast. You can rate, review and subscribe to us via Apple Podcasts, Spotify or whichever platform you prefer.

**LH:** And we've put all the links we've mentioned in the show notes so you can grab everything there.

## Editing bites

- *But Can I Start A Sentence With "But"?* by Carol Saller
- *Making a Point: The Pernickety Story of English Punctuation* by David Crystal

## Ask us a question

The easiest way to ping us a question is via Facebook Messenger: Visit the podcast's Facebook page and click on the **SEND MESSAGE** button.

## Denise and Louise

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