

BrainPOP Related Reading - Semicolons



The occasional semicolon can be found in the sonnets of legendary English playwright William Shakespeare. But it was his contemporary and rival, the playwright **Ben Jonson** (pictured), who owns the distinction of being the first English writer to use semicolons consistently!

After originating in Italy at the end of the 15th century, the semicolon began gaining popularity in England during the late 1570s. Up until that point, punctuation in English was a bit of a mess—the punctuation marks that existed at the time were used mainly to guide readers in speaking text out loud. There were even rules that established how long you should pause for different punctuation marks: one unit of time for a comma, two for a semicolon, and three for a colon!

Jonson was the first writer to suggest a system of punctuation based more on **syntax**, or the actual grammatical structure of written sentences. He wrote a guide called *The English Grammar* in 1617, which wasn't published until 1640 (after he had already died). In it, he described the potential of punctuation marks to guide a reader's interpretation of various layers of meaning within texts.

The punctuation marks he focused on? The exclamation point, the question mark, parentheses, and—you guessed it—the semicolon. Jonson began to use the semicolon in his own writings, and by the 18th century, it had become widely accepted throughout Europe!

