

11 Emphasising meaning

Learning objective

- Understand how writers use punctuation to emphasise meaning

Writers use punctuation to emphasise meaning in their writing as well as to clarify and avoid ambiguity.

Activity 1

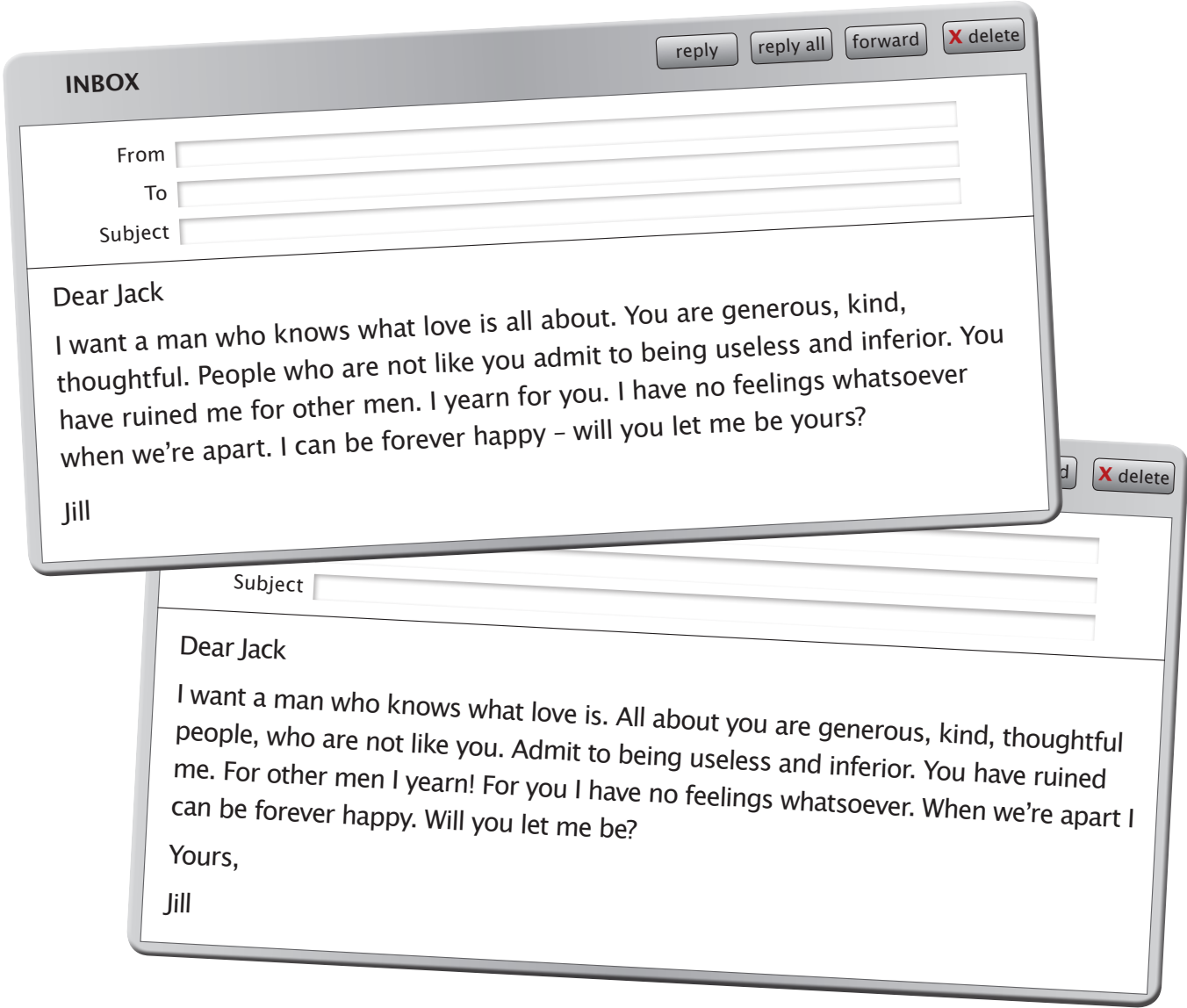
Look at the following sentence. How many different ways can you punctuate it?

A woman without her man is nothing

How can the punctuation alter the sentence's meaning?

Look at the following two emails.

How does the meaning change in the second email?



Activity 2

Read this extract from *Twilight*, which describes Bella's close encounter with a car.

I saw several things simultaneously. Nothing was moving in slow motion, the way it does in movies. Instead, the adrenaline rush seemed to make my brain work much faster, and I was able to absorb in clear detail several things at once.

Edward Cullen was standing four cars down from me, staring at me in horror. His face stood out from a sea of faces, all frozen in the same mask of shock. But of more immediate importance was the dark blue van that was skidding, tyres locked and squealing against the brakes, spinning wildly across the ice of the parking lot. It was going to hit the back corner of my truck, and I was standing between them. I didn't even have time to close my eyes.

Just before I heard the shattering crunch of the van folding around the truck bed, something hit me, hard, but not from the direction I was expecting. My head cracked against the icy blacktop, and I felt something solid and cold pinning me to the ground. I was lying on the pavement behind the tan car I'd parked next to. But I didn't have a chance to notice anything else, because the van was still coming. It had curled gratingly around the end of the truck and, still spinning and sliding, was about to collide with me *again*.

A low oath made me aware that someone was with me, and the voice was impossible not to recognise. Two long, white hands shot out protectively in front of me, and the van shuddered to a stop a foot from my face, the large hands fitting providentially into a deep dent in the side of the van's body.

Then his hands moved so fast they blurred. One was suddenly gripping under the body of the van, and something was dragging me, swinging my legs around like a rag doll's, till they hit the tyre of the tan car. A groaning metallic thud hurt my ears, and the van settled, glass popping, onto the asphalt – exactly where, a second ago, my legs had been.

It was absolutely silent for one long second before the screaming began. In the abrupt bedlam, I could hear more than one person shouting my name. But more clearly than all the yelling, I could hear Edward Cullen's low, frantic voice in my ear.



- How does Edward manage to save Bella?
- Why is this moment tense and exciting? Can you identify any punctuation that the author uses to achieve this?
- Do you think the author has used punctuation effectively here? Try to explain your reasons.



WRITER'S WORKSHOP: Clever punctuation

How can I use punctuation to clarify?

It can be used to add additional detail. The writer uses parenthetical commas (instead of brackets) to slot in extra information and the information within the commas can always be removed. For example:

It had curled gratefully around the curve of the truck and, still spinning and sliding, was about to collide with me *again*.

Can you find any more examples of phrases which use parenthetical commas? What effect do you think they have on the writing? Is the extra detail that is added important?

How can I use punctuation to emphasise meaning in my writing?

Punctuation is essential to meaning, helping to add emphasis to certain points in the text. It can mimic the movement described in the text; create tension and drama; add pathos; highlight humour; create tone, and numerous other things. It is absolutely essential to writing!

Look at the sentence below and consider how the writer has used punctuation to create tension. What, for example, is the effect of the dash?

A groaning metallic thud hurt my ears, and the van settled, glass popping, onto the asphalt – exactly where, a second ago, my legs had been.



How can I use punctuation to keep my reader engaged?

Punctuation is used by writers to engage the reader, keeping them involved in the text. Ellipses (...) can be used to show gaps in a text which can keep the reader guessing, inviting them to fill in the gaps.

Look at how an ellipsis has been used in the following text. It is the ending to *Cirque du Freak*, describing how Darren walks off with the vampire, Mr Crepsley.

Then he took my hand in his and grinned bloodthirstily. ‘Let us go eat.’
I took a deep breath and tried not to think about what might be on the menu. I
nodded nervously and squeezed his hand. We turned and faced away from the graves.
Then, side by side, the vampire and his assistant, we began walking...
... into the night.
TO BE CONTINUED...

What is the impact of this ending on the reader?
Ellipses can be used to great effect, but can lose their effect if they are overused. Do you think punctuation has been used effectively here?

Activity 3

- 1 Look at the piece of writing that you completed in the last lesson. Have you used punctuation to emphasise meaning and heighten the tension?
- 2 Edit your piece, paying particular attention to your use of punctuation and the impact that you want it to have on the reader.

What do better writers do?

Better writers use punctuation in their writing to aid understanding and to emphasise meaning, for example, to heighten the drama and tension of their narrative.

CHECK YOUR WRITING

➡ Look back at the piece that you edited in Activity 3 and consider which column best describes your use of punctuation.

Level 3	Level 4	Level 5
I used straightforward punctuation such as full stops, capital letters, question marks, commas and exclamation marks in my writing which begin to clarify its meaning.	I accurately demarcated sentences. I used most punctuation accurately and used it to emphasise some points in my writing.	I used a range of punctuation, although I sometimes made errors with difficult structures. I used it to emphasise meaning and created tension in my writing.