

The Legal Writer

Pure Sentences:

Punctuation Free

By Suzanne E. Rowe

The purest sentence has no punctuation other than the simple period at its end. The pure sentence conveys a complete idea, unimpeded by additions, interruptions, contradictions, lists or other distractions. The purity means that the sentence does not need commas, dashes, semicolons or colons separating out extra ideas. Without all of that baggage, the pure sentence is clear and easy to understand at once. Its simple beauty might entice you to linger with it for a moment or two, but you won't have to reread it to divine obscure content.

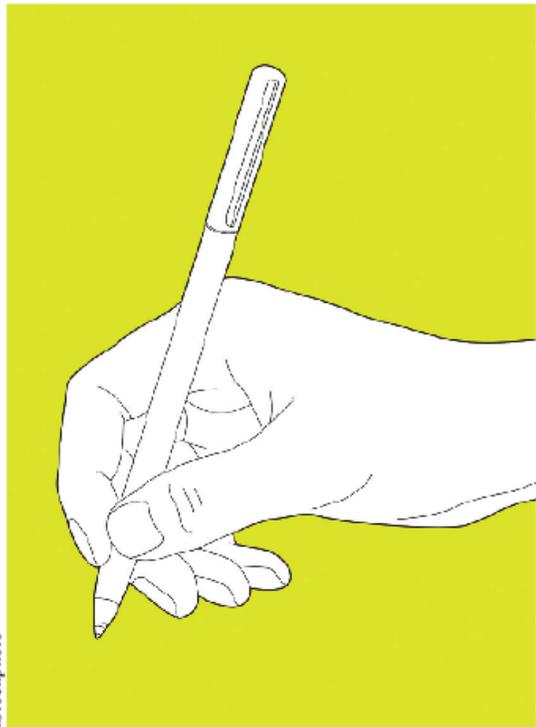
Lest you think that a book (or memo or court brief) filled with pure sentences would be dull, I recommend John Steinbeck's *East of Eden*. This article celebrates one pure sentence from that book:

The spring flowers in a wet year were unbelievable.

Note that the sentence is not stark or dull, as in "The flowers were pretty." The Steinbeck sentence notes the season, explains the weather and exults that the resulting blossoms were several magnitudes beyond pretty. The sentence conveys all of that information in a simple structure and leaves us waiting to hear more.

Now let's see how that pure sentence could become defiled — fancied up with excess ideas, each one needing fancy punctuation. My obvious goal is to make each of you more Steinbeck-ish, paring down your sentences to their purest forms, putting the excess information in other sentences or deleting it altogether. (My subversive goal is to get you to — at least — fancify your sentences correctly.)

I extend my apologies to those of you who would rather I had used examples from one of the many brothel scenes in the book, but these early pages on the beauty of the Salinas Valley kept me entranced.



Appendages

If Steinbeck had wanted to append an informational phrase at either the beginning or the end of his pure sentence, he'd have needed a comma. The comma would have signaled where the main sentence began or ended, separating it from the appendage.

Because of the valley's rich topsoil, the spring flowers in a wet year were unbelievable.

The spring flowers in a wet year were unbelievable, carpeting the valley floor with color.

Each of those additions is interesting, explaining the importance of the valley's topsoil or commenting on the profusion of color. Steinbeck chose to add those ideas elsewhere in his description of the valley, leaving the initial sentence pure.

Interruptions and Contradictions

Commas would also have been useful to indicate interruptions in the middle of the sentence. What if, for example, Steinbeck had wanted to note that a particular year was very wet and produced especially beautiful flowers?

The spring flowers in a wet year, and that was an especially wet year, were unbelievable.

The interruption about special wetness could disappear and still leave a perfectly fine sentence, just with a bit less detail. If the detail were important, it might have ended up in its own sentence. For example:

The spring flowers in a wet year were unbelievable. That was an especially wet year, and the lupines were especially prolific.

To emphasize the interruption, Steinbeck could have used dashes instead of commas.

The spring flowers in a wet year — and that was an especially wet year — were unbelievable.

Before getting too excited about dashes, please remember that they are somewhat less formal than commas. Use them judiciously in legal documents. I suggest no more than one pair of dashes per page. (And don't think dashes can mask fundamental ignorance of punctuation and toss them around everywhere.)

Another type of interruption is the contradiction. Words like *however* and *in contrast* alert the reader to a change in direction. For example, if the prior paragraph had been about dry seasons, Steinbeck's pure sentence might have needed this revision:

The spring flowers in a wet year, however, were unbelievable.

Combinations

Another possibility Steinbeck could have chosen was combining two pure sentences into one compound — and slightly less pure — sentence. He might have done that to show how closely related the ideas in the two sentences were, for example, to showing the progression from spring flowers to summer grasses. He had several punctuation options, but the comma and the semicolon would have been the most likely.

Begin with these two pure sentences:

1) *The spring flowers in a wet year were unbelievable.*

2) *The summer grasses were indescribable.*

Here are the two most likely options for combining them:

The spring flowers in a wet year were unbelievable, and the summer grasses were indescribable.

The spring flowers in a wet year were unbelievable; the summer grasses were indescribable.

Notice that the comma alone is not hearty enough to join two sentences. It must come with a conjunction that is part of the mnemonic FANBOYS (for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so). The following sentence uses the same structure as the first example in this section, with *but* instead of *and* serving as the conjunction. I've added more detail to provide a reason for the new conjunction.

The spring flowers in a wet year were unbelievably blue, but the summer grasses soon changed the pallet of the valley from blues to reds.

In contrast, a semicolon alone can join the two pure sentences. That construction suggests an even closer connection between the two sentences. The following sentence joins ideas that connect around not only the seasons (spring and summer) and the colors (blue, gold and red) but also the weather (wet and dry):

The spring flowers in a wet year were unbelievably blue; a dry year produced summer grasses that were an indescribable blend of gold and red.

Lists

To expand his pure sentence with a list, Steinbeck could have used a colon. At the end of the sentence, the colon would have signaled the examples of spring flowers in the valley.

The spring flowers in a wet year were unbelievable: lupines, poppies and mustard.

Two suggestions will help you use the colon successfully. First, ensure that what comes before the colon is a complete sentence. My riff on Steinbeck didn't stop with *The spring flowers* or even *The spring flowers in a wet year* and stick in a colon. And the colon didn't dangle at the end of *The spring flowers in a wet year included* — obviously not a complete sentence. The following example is incorrect, so I'm not even going to dignify it with italics. "The spring flowers in a wet year included: lupines, poppies and mustard." Take out the unnecessary colon and the sentence would be fine.

The second suggestion is to put the topic of the list closer to the colon. The prior example might be better expressed with "the spring flowers" closer to the colon and thus closer to the list of flowers.

A wet year produced unbelievable spring flowers: lupines, poppies and mustard.

To say something special about each of the flowers in the list, Steinbeck might have upgraded from commas to semicolons. Consider the confusion in this next sentence (Are the lupines edged with poppies? Are the poppies orange? gold? yellow? mustard?): "A wet year produced unbelievable spring flowers: blue lupines edged with white, California poppies burning in a color like creamy orange or gold and yellow mustard, which grew to a great height."

Note how easily semicolons can corral the three items into distinct parts in this revision:

A wet year produced unbelievable spring flowers: blue lupines edged with white; California poppies burning in a color like creamy orange or gold; and yellow mustard, which grew to a great height.

Caveat and Conclusion

Note that you can't just delete punctuation from your sentences and — voila! — pronounce them pure. Punctuation serves useful purposes, and when a sentence gets complicated the punctuation shows the reader how to wade through.

Remember that my ultimate goal is to convince you to more often write a sentence so pure that it needs nothing from punctuation but the simple period at the end. You have that choice. *Timshel!*¹

Source: John Steinbeck, *East of Eden*, Penguin Books 1952. The pure sentence that I use throughout this article appears on page 8. I have borrowed phrases from pages 8 and 9 to develop examples.

1. For an excerpt from *East of Eden* on “timshel,” see <http://timshel.org/timshel.php>. Better yet, read the novel.

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