

TECHNOLOGY

Why You Should Never, Ever Use Two Spaces Between Sentences

By Nicholas Jackson

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Here's an argument that everyone has something to say about: How many spaces are you supposed to put after a period? The answer is one. Putting two spaces between sentences, as many people learned to do in school -- and are still learning -- thanks to early monospaced typewriters "is totally, completely, utterly, and inarguably *wrong*," according to Slate's technology columnist, Farhad Manjoo -- and every major style guide.

Every modern typographer agrees on the one-space rule. It's one of the canonical rules of the profession, in the same way that waiters know that the salad fork goes to the left of the dinner fork and fashion designers know to put men's shirt buttons on the right and women's on the left. Every major style guide--including the *Modern Language Association Style Manual* and the *Chicago Manual of Style*--prescribes a single space after a period. (The *Publications Manual* of the American Psychological Association, used widely in the social sciences, allows for two spaces in draft manuscripts but recommends one space in published work.) Most ordinary people would know the one-space rule, too, if it weren't for a quirk of history. In the middle of the last century, a now-outmoded technology--the manual typewriter--invaded the American workplace. To accommodate that machine's shortcomings, everyone began to type wrong. And even though we no longer use typewriters, we all still type like we do. (Also see the persistence of the dreaded Caps Lock key.)

The problem with typewriters was that they used monospaced type--that is, every character occupied an equal amount of horizontal space. This bucked a long tradition of proportional typesetting, in which skinny characters (like I or l) were given less space than fat ones (like W or M). Monospaced type gives you text that looks "loose" and uneven; there's a lot of white space between characters and words, so it's more difficult to spot the spaces between sentences immediately. Hence the adoption of the two-space rule--on a typewriter, an extra space after a sentence makes text easier to read. Here's the thing, though: Monospaced fonts went out in the 1970s. First electric typewriters and then computers began to offer people ways to create text using proportional fonts. Today nearly every font on your PC is proportional. (Courier is the one major exception.) Because we've all switched to modern fonts, adding two spaces after a period no longer enhances readability, typographers say. It diminishes it.

Read the full story at [Slate](#).

Megan McArdle, *The Atlantic's* business and economics editor, weighs in with "[You Can Have My Double Space When You Pry it From My Cold, Dead Hands](#)."

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CULTURE

You Can Have My Double Space When You Pry it From My Cold, Dead Hands

By Megan McArdle

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I was going to write something on why [Farhad Manjoo's](#) polemic on the double space after a period is dead wrong. But [Tom Lee's piece](#) on the topic is so superlatively better than what I would have written that I will just turn the mike over to him:

I'll take Manjoo's word that all typographers like a single space between sentences. I'm actually pretty sympathetic to arguments from authority, being the big-state-loving paternalist that I am. But, with apologies to friends and colleagues of mine who care passionately about this stuff, I lost my patience with the typographically-obsessed community when they started trying to get me to pay attention to which sans-serif fonts were being used anachronistically on *Mad Men*.

I love you guys, but you're crazy. On questions of aesthetic preference there's no particular reason that normal people should listen to a bunch of geeky obsessives who spend orders of magnitude more time on these issues than average. It's like how you probably shouldn't listen to me when I tell you not to use .doc files or that you might want to consider a digital audio player with Ogg Vorbis support. I strongly believe those things, but even I know they're pointless and arbitrary for everyone who doesn't consider "Save As..." an opportunity for political action.

Nor should we assume that just because typographers believe earnestly in the single space that their belief is held entirely in good faith. They're drunk on the awesome power of their proportional fonts, and sure of the cosmic import of the minuscule kerning decisions that it is their lonely duty to make. Of course they don't want lowly typists exercising opinions about letter spacing. Those people aren't qualified to have opinions!

(For what it's worth, I don't think you rabble should be using Flash or Silverlight or anything other than plain text in your emails. You can't be trusted with it! And, not that this motivates me or typographers at all of course (we just want what's best for you), but when you do such things it makes my job slightly harder.)

Manjoo's argument about beauty, like all such arguments, is easy enough to dismiss: I disagree. I find it easier to read paragraphs that are composed of sentences separated by two spaces. Perhaps this is because I, like most technologists, spend most of my time

working with (quite lovely!) fixed-width fonts for practical reasons. But there's also a deeper beauty to the two space rule -- a sort of mathematical beauty. Let me explain.

Consider the typical structure of writing. Letters are assembled into words, which turn into phrases, which are arranged into sentences -- at the same time being assigned to speakers, a neat trick -- which are then combined into paragraphs.

It's a chemical process, a perfect and infinitely flexible hierarchical system that should command our admiration. Being able to rationally examine, disassemble and interrogate the final product is a mark of the system's beauty. Anything less is settling for a sort of holistic mysticism.

It's disrespectful to let writing's constituent elements bleed into one another through imprecise demarcations. If you see me "making mistakes with comma placement", please rest assured that it's deliberate. In most cases the comma doesn't belong to the phrase delimited by the quotation marks that enclose it. Placing an exclamation point or question mark to the left or right of a close-quote is a weighty decision! That we violate the atomic purity of quotations with injected commas is an outrage.

Let me just add: if you're spending time worrying over whether my emails contain one or two spaces, you need to ask them to let you out of the asylum more often so you can pursue a more interesting hobby. I double space after sentences because I learned to type on a manual typewriter, and it's not worth the effort to retrain myself.

Even if typographers groan every time they open one of my missives.

[Megan McArdle](#) is a columnist at *Bloomberg View* and a former senior editor at *The Atlantic*. Her new book is [The Up Side of Down](#).

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