

# Pride, prejudice and poor punctuation

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Jane Austen is renowned as a pristine literary stylist; but her semicolons were not her own – instead she scattered dashes through her prose, reveals new research by an Oxford professor

The truth universally acknowledged, that Jane Austen was one of the most pristine literary stylists of all time, has been exploded: her punctuation was erratic, her use of capital letters eclectic and her paragraph breaks often nonexistent.

The Austen myth was fuelled by her brother Henry in 1818, a year after her death: "Everything came finished from her pen," he wrote.

She compared her own technique to a miniaturist, "the little bit of ivory on which I work with so fine a brush".

In fact much of the credit for her elegant prose must go to publisher's reader and editor William Gifford, according to an academic who has compared the manuscripts and the published versions line by line.

Gifford, a much more obscure figure who was said to be shy and awkward, polished up Austen's manuscripts, smoothing out the style, regularising the punctuation, introducing the famous exquisitely placed semicolons and eliminating her blizzards of dashes.

"Does it make her less of a genius?" said Professor Kathryn Sutherland of the English language and literature faculty at Oxford University.

"I don't think so," she said, answering her own question. "Indeed I think it makes her more interesting, and a much more modern and innovative writer than had been thought.

"In particular, her use of dashes to heighten the emotional impact of what she is writing is striking: you have to wait for Virginia Woolf to see anything comparable."

Her dashes did not please Gifford, the reader and editor for Jane Austen's final publisher, John Murray, who also worked with Lord Byron, another of Murray's star authors who liked to use dashes by the fistful.

In 1815 Gifford wrote to Murray, who was thinking of acquiring the rights to Mansfield Park and Emma: "I have read the Novel, and like it much – I was sure, before I rec'd your letter, that the writer was the author of P. & Prejudice &c. I know not its value, but if you can procure it, it will certainly sell well. It is very carelessly copied, though the handwriting is excellently plain, & there are many short omissions which must be inserted. I will readily correct the proof for you, & may do it a little good here & there."

In another letter he urged Murray to try also for the rights to Pride and Prejudice, published in 1813 by Thomas Egerton: "I have lately read it again – tis very good – wretchedly printed in some places, & so pointed as to be unintelligible."

In poring over 1,100 manuscript Austen pages – often on tiny homemade notebooks – for an [online archive of all the manuscripts](#) scattered in 1845 by her sister Cassandra's will, Sutherland has discovered an author quite different from the cool, ironic, detached stylist of legend.

Drastic editing for publication was standard practice and Sutherland has found no evidence that Austen objected.

"Her style is much more intimate and relaxed, more conversational," said Sutherland.

"Her punctuation is much more sloppy, more like the kind of thing our students do and we tell them not to.

"She uses capital letters and underlining to emphasise the words she thinks important, in a manner that takes us closer to the speaking voice than the printed page.

"In taking them away, it becomes more grammatical and sophisticated – but something has been lost."