

Introduction

Why bother learning any special rules for using punctuation in a foreign language? Very few textbooks of Russian mention anything about punctuation at all. The reason you should pay attention to punctuation is that it is important for expressing meaning in a text. And the rules of punctuation are not very difficult to learn.

Have you ever thought about how completely indispensable punctuation is to any written language?

Punctuation, which is nothing more than a system of graphic symbols devised so that writing can express every nuance of the spoken language, appeared relatively recently in Europe: in the middle of the 15th century. At that time, the Manucchi brothers of Italy, who operated a printing shop, developed the first modern system of European punctuation. Their basic system of nearly a dozen graphic symbols was later adopted by the majority of European nations. Today, some form or another of this European-style punctuation is used in most written languages throughout the world. Russian punctuation had been developing since Russians acquired the Cyrillic alphabet in the 11th Century, but by the 18th Century it had already come to resemble the Manucci-style punctuation used elsewhere in Europe. Despite underlying similarities and a common origin, however, the specific rules for using punctuation tend to vary in each language, and Russian usage differs significantly from that familiar to English speakers. Hence the need for a special book such as this.

Nevertheless, it is a fortunate thing that punctuation was invented and spread from language to language, regardless of whether today's commas, colons and periods are used in exactly the same way in each individual language. The marks of punctuation, which may often seem insignificant if not downright annoying, actually play an important role in conveying the proper meaning. In fact, punctuation can at times be much more important than spelling. Judge for yourself from the following examples.

If you mistakenly write the Russian word for “cow” as ***каро́ва** instead of the correct **коро́ва**, any Russian will still understand that you are referring to an ungulate that gives milk.

By contrast, just look at what havoc a misplaced or omitted comma can sometimes cause. Here is a Russian sentence without punctuation of any kind:

ПОМИЛОВАТЬ НЕЛЬЗЯ КАЗНИТЬ

The English translation of this sentence, also without punctuation of any kind, would be: *pardon forbidden execute*. Without any punctuation in the original Russian, a clear understanding of the meaning of these words is impossible.

Was the judge's decision to pardon or to execute? Different punctuation yields different meanings. And here is a case where the use of proper punctuation is literally a matter of life and death. If a comma is placed after the first word, the following sentence results: **Помиловать, нельзя казнить.** *Pardon. Don't execute.* If the comma is placed after the second word, the sentence is transformed into a stern order of execution: **Помиловать нельзя, казнить** *Pardon forbidden. Execute.*

This last example was taken from a story about a Russian boy who was too lazy to learn his punctuation marks. His ignorance nearly cost him his life!

Although not every period or comma will be quite so vital to your survival, punctuation must certainly be taken seriously by any person who wishes to write clearly and be understood properly. And since you are reading this book, that person must be you!

This book will teach you the basic principles and rules of Russian punctuation. You will find that it is divided into three parts. Because Russian and English sentence structure differ significantly, and because punctuation very often depends upon sentence structure, Part One provides an overview of Russian syntax. Part Two moves on to the topic of punctuation itself; nine chapters discuss each individual mark of punctuation and its various uses, taking care along the way to compare and contrast the Russian punctuation with the English. Finally, we have included in Part Three a discussion of some common symbols, such as the hyphen, **дефис (-)**, that resemble punctuation but are used for purposes other than to divide or set off the parts of the sentence (the hyphen, for instance, is a spelling device and never a true mark of punctuation). It would have been possible to exclude these marks from a book on Russian punctuation, but since students naturally associate them with true marks of punctuation, we have included them.

By reading the explanations in each chapter, then working through the practice exercises and checking yourself by referring to the answer keys in the back of the book, you will learn to express yourself clearly in Russian so that anyone reading what you have written will not be misled or distracted by a misplaced or absent mark of punctuation.

If you want to write in Russian and be understood, therefore, it is not sufficient to have mastered a large vocabulary, the Russian system of orthography (spelling), and the rules of Russian grammar; you also must learn the system of Russian punctuation. Just as you have already learned the sound value of each letter of the alphabet in various contexts, you must also begin learning the various functions of each mark of punctuation.

This is the main purpose of our book. And this is the main reason for the existence of punctuation in any written language. But remember, if you intend to master Russian punctuation, you must first develop a basic knowledge of Russian syntax. So let us begin with an overview of Russian syntax.