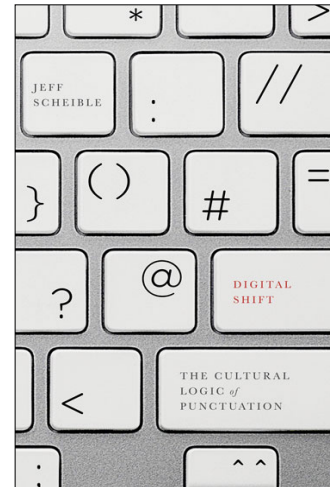


Jeff Scheible, **Digital Shift: The Cultural Logic of Punctuation**, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2015, 176 pp., \$20.00 (paperback).

Reviewed by
Amanda C. R. Clark
Whitworth University, USA

Jeff Scheible's **Digital Shift: The Cultural Logic of Punctuation** introduces its readers to a deceptively simple but intriguing study of typography and symbolic language. Succinct and compelling, Scheible's four chapters and introduction cover our contemporary shifts, the digital transition, punctuation in various media, and our reuse and reinterpretation of the pound sign, now hashtag. This work would certainly appeal to publishers, editors, scholars, and graduate students in a sweep of diverse fields. The objective of the work is to bring the reader on a journey in considering macro issues—that is, the shift in consciousness from a text culture to a visual culture—through micro examples, by focusing on various marks of punctuation. He puns off the term "shift" as both an alteration of our understanding and as the keyboard key itself. Scheible's work, which may owe a debt to a dissertation project, explores not only the power and impact of text and its punctuation, but also how something as small as a parenthesis can infiltrate our everyday lives, in song, film, and text. The book is an absorbing read and leaves the reader hungry for more to be written and with commentary on this knowledge area.



One of the many strengths of Scheible's argument is to suggest that the public is increasingly using symbols in place of text to affiliate oneself and support causes. His discussion of the brightly colored and stalky equals sign is an excellent example of the power of symbol in recent years (p. 3). What Scheible argues is that "to not scrutinize the power of images and their signifying practices across digital culture would be intellectually shortsighted" (p. 6) because, as "social inscriptions, they therefore carry with them ideological underpinnings" (p. 9); this is the overall thrust of the work—to bring the ubiquitous unseen and unnoticed into focus. The book has two primary goals: to describe our contemporary culture in a comparative manner with a wide lens, and to encourage a rethinking of humanistic inquiry. Scheible praises punctuation in its ability to allow the reader to pause and ponder, for however fleeting a moment (p. 18). It seems that we currently live in a paradox in which punctuation is both nowhere (seldom found in text messages) and everywhere (with emoticons popping up in a variety of modes of communication; pp. 20–21). Scheible demonstrates convincingly that the removal of punctuation matters, altering textual meaning, interpretation, and understanding. He also pauses lovingly on ideas such as the keyboard as an object and the shift key enabling punctuation and holding the second largest place on the keyboard (p. 31). Such musings are a delight in the work.

As a cinema studies specialist, Scheible draws heavily on engaging examples from film. He uses the term *punctum* frequently, though the reader could have been provided a bit more of a foothold in understanding this slippery term. In chapter 1, Scheible considers the period punctuation mark and its physical placement, alongside a discussion of the qwerty keyboard and, specifically, in "the intersection of

textual shift and the period in relation to digital media" (p. 42), particularly the shift in a perception of the period in text messages as imposing finality, even anger, having developed "new roles in machine languages" (p. 44). With such a shift, we can observe two responses, the use of the "excessive exclamation," and an increase in the use of emojis or emoticons. Dots in web addresses are essential to breaking up the command, and likewise, when web addresses are read out loud, they become words in their own right, becoming, it seems, more than mere punctuation (p. 51). In short, the period has become more than a "period" and has also become a "dot," an object, and even an industry with the dot-coms.

Many scholars, from Walter Ong to Elizabeth Eisenstein, have considered the power of the printed book, since the middle ages in particular, as generating a culture of trust and reliance on the "alphabet's textual dominion on Western culture" (p. 66). Scheible asks the question if we are in collaboration or locked in combat with our devices, the autocorrect assuming our meanings and intentions.

Chapter 2 attends to parentheses and their use across various media, offering, as it does, a "textual hug" (p. 73). Scheible references Derrida's abundant use of the parenthesis and how this impacts the message of the writing in that "the parenthetical is a form that, within written text itself, invites one to question how writing relates to context, since it sets apart, disrupts, or postpones the space of the 'primary' writing" (p. 77). Discussing how readers interact with parenthetical inserts within text, whether spoken or written, is often laden with a certain hesitancy, and this "uncertainty indicates that parenthetical text is an intriguing case for thinking about the ways we imagine the relationships that exist between silence" (p. 81). In short, Scheible's evocative text weaves an engaging conversation regarding the power of punctuation, one that delves deeply into theory, while remaining accessible to the reader.

Scheible's third chapter addresses the hashtag in particular, though he admits that it is "less strictly a punctuation mark" when compared to the others (p. 103), well-known today as a method for the indexing of and tagging of terms and phrases in social media. He considers the history of the hashtag and how, today, it serves to represent a shift in our thinking—one that demonstrates our current trend to think in terms of keywords (p. 107). This reduction of thought to keywords is troublesome in as much as it indicates that we are culturally moving away from the need to remember detail, only to remember the keywords in order to "Google" the answer based on those loose strands (p. 116). He finds as well that as the ubiquitous quotation marks or scare quotes were the trend of the 1990s, the hashtag is today's trend, offering a glimpse into our current cultural zeitgeist (p. 110). Also of interest is the way in which Twitter, in particular, with its character limitations, has encouraged a condensing of language, without spaces, in the use of the hashtagged sentiment (pp. 112–113).

One of the most salient components of chapter 3 is the discussion of the development of the phone and its use of the pound sign, which carried with it the promise of ease in ordering products over the phone. Ironically, now in the age of the smartphone, we are finally able to do just that. It was in 1968 that Bell phone systems introduced a new phone with two additional buttons (the pound/hashtag and asterisk buttons), which they promised would revolutionize phone use in the "push-button world of tomorrow" (p. 119). He delves into the naming of that button and the deeper meanings that the naming of things generates; in areas such as this, Scheible's book is a wonderful historical ride, bringing the reader close to something as familiar as the pound sign, but seeing it through a new lens. He completes this chapter with

a thesis that “hash logic is in other words a logic of keywords, searchability, and informationization; it strips down language to basic elements” (p. 132).

The last chapter of Scheible’s book is titled “Coda,” considering the ancient symbol of a lattice with its crisscrossing lines that “canceled” whatever was written beneath it. It is here that Scheible concludes his work, which sought overall to “better make sense of digital media and contemporary culture” (p. 137), while noting that “textual shifts across contemporary media cultures have largely been critically overlooked” (p. 138). Scheible has sought to remedy these lacunae. He reminds us that we must better understand the technology we use and how we use it, avoiding that trap of expecting digital inventions to solve our most complicated human problems (p. 138). It is theory, he argues—the understanding and use of it—that will assist us in making sense of the greater cultural milieu that surrounds technology, text, punctuation, and communication (p. 139). We must be attentive to our textual surroundings, since, as Scheible writes, “from the dot to the hash, punctuation today is continually redefined” (p. 140).