

# UNDERSTANDING THE PUNCTUATION AND SPELLING SIGNS IN ROMANIA TO ELIMINATE FUNCTIONAL ILLITERACY

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**Abstract:** *The international comparative research initiated by the OECD in the 1990s has shown that a considerable proportion of Europeans are classified as functional illiterates, even though they have completed at least primary school. Spelling and punctuation condition the specific human-readable-writing process. We can counteract this deficit perfectly and diminish the scale of the phenomenon of functional illiteracy, giving individuals and social groups another chance for education. The need to express ideas in writing so that they can be understood by the reader may increase the interest in studying spelling and punctuation, as well as establishing rules for their use. This article proposes to address punctuation and spelling signs with examples that could be used as part of an option for primary education in Romania in order to reduce functional illiteracy.*

**Keywords:** *functional illiteracy, literacy, primary education, spelling signs, punctuation marks*

## 1. Introduction

Until the late 1960s, illiteracy was treated in developed countries as a scary phenomenon in the poor and backward areas of the south. The conviction that the problem has been resolved forever has been universal and well anchored in the consciousness of European societies (Daniel, 2000). Later, discovering the scale of illiteracy in the developed countries of the West has caused shocks and surprises. The functional illiterate contemporary person knows the letters in their individuality but does not know how to connect them. In addition, she can read a sentence, but she does not know how to understand her content. Generally, a functional illiterate is considered to be an adult whose written language skills are lower than necessary to meet established social requirements, social participation, and individual chances of self-realization. Low academic abilities, especially reading, are related to poor neurocognitive performance in verbal memory, visual memory, attention and motor dexterity (Tuominen, 2014).

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In 2010, the Committee of the Regions of the European Union published a document entitled “Fighting Functional Illiteracy – Implementing an Ambitious European Strategy Against Exclusion and Protecting Personal Development”, which includes, among other things, the introduction of the fight against functional illiteracy. The document said that illiteracy affects all age groups, especially those aged 45, the phenomenon being present both in cities and in rural areas. Some of the European countries concerned about the results of OECD research have conducted their own research (Cotterell, 1975, p. 8). Studies in France (2004/2005) found a group of 3.1 million people who were qualified as functional illiterates among the productive age group (active population of approximately 40 million people) (9% of the active population). Studies in England in 2011 found that 14.9% (more than 5 million) of English are illiterate. The same studies in Germany showed that complete illiterates (total reading and writing deficit) represented 4.5% of the German population in the 18-64 age group. In Poland, teachers in Torun have shown that among primary school pupils, almost 10% were already functional illiterates compared to other countries such as Sweden (7.5%), Norway (8.5%) or Denmark (9%, 6%), which denotes the extent of functional illiteracy. The PISA study, conducted by the OECD in 2015, places Romania on the last position among the 28 EU states, at Reading Performance Indicator, with a share of 38.7% of 15-year-olds below Level 2 (less than 407.47 test points). Also, in mathematical performances, Romania is on the antepenultimate position among the 28 EU states, with a share of 39.9% of people with the age of 15 being below level 2 (less than 420.7 test points). And in the case of the performance indicator in science, Romania places the penultimate position among the 28 EU states with a share of 38.5% of the 15-year-olds who are below the 2nd level of illiteracy.

Writing is necessary for man throughout his life (Harrison-Walker, 1995). That is why the correct acquisition of the writing from the primary classes is a fundamental task of the school. If the correct writing automat is formed at the age of primary classes, the pupil will register progress in all subjects, not only in Romanian.

The diminution of functional illiteracy implies, in addition to the achievement of reading skills and mathematical calculation, and the competence of correct writing. I chose to approach the spelling and punctuation marks due to their role in the formation of written communication skills. In this article, we aim to understand the text written at the level of the primary cycle, referring to the explanation of the spelling and punctuation marks, as well as to concrete examples of their use that might exist in school practice with students.

## **2. Punctuation signs**

In Romanian, punctuation is represented by eleven specific and two non-specific signs (Kisseleff, 2000). The punctuation marks help to write the written text, giving a clearer logic to the text.

### **2.1. The point [.]**

The point graphically marks a break in speech by lowering the tone. In the preparatory class the reading-writing is not learned, but large and small print letters are recognized

or drawn and the graphic elements that are included in the letters of the hand (besides lines, sticks, rails, loops, semi-oval, oval, knots are written), there is also the writing of the point in the school syllabus for the subject Communication in Romanian – MEN, 2013, p. 18). The explanation of the use of the point in a text also appears in the examples of learning activities in the school programs for: class I – MEN, 2013, p.18; class II – MEN, 2013, p. 18; 3rd class – MEN, 2014, p. 8 – “completing punctuation marks”; 4th class – MEN, 2014, p. 8. In the older classes, the use and role of punctuation and spelling signs in the text are recapitulated and strengthened. For example, students might be asked the following task: “Explain the use of the first point in the letter written for grandparents.”.

It is written:

(a) after independent sentences or phrases:

*An old woman had two children. Being sick, she called her children home.*

(b) by words or groups of isolated words, equivalent to independent sentences:

*– Who wants to read the lesson?*

*– Me.*

(c) before the sentences and phrases introduced by the conjunction and suggesting the uninterrupted sequence of action:

*Let play. And he thought about writing his theme. That it's not good to go to school like that.*

There is no point:

(a) by book titles (Beldescu, 1973);

(b) after some abbreviations: you, Tarom, etc. (Pârâială, 2005, p. 78);

(c) by symbols in physics, chemistry and mathematics: Cl, NaCl, Kg, l, cos, sin, etc. (Neacșu, 2008, p. 15);

(d) after the symbols of the cardinal points: N, S, E, V (Șerbănescu, 2000).

## 2.2. Question mark [?]

The sign of the question “marks a specific intonation graphically, with the climbing or lowering of the tone in sentences or phrases” (Dobridor, 2009, p. 114). In the preparatory class, using the phonetic, analytical-synthetic method in the prescribed and precited stages, exercises can be made to form interrogative sentences, these being represented by a horizontal line with the question mark at the end. In the school syllabus for the preparatory class, we have in the contents “functional writing using drawings, symbols: greeting card” (MEN, 2013). In the school syllabus for class I, there is the use of the question mark (MEN, 2013). For the second class -a, we have the “functional writing” in which we find the content “copies (texts of maximum 50 words)” (MEN, 2013, p. 18). In the third class, it is recommended to suggest learning activities – “to complete punctuation marks in a text without punctuation and discussing the results” (MEN, 2014, p. 8). For the fourth class, it is recommended “to write short functional texts on paper or digital media” (MEN, 2014, p. 8). As a result, in view to diminish the functional illiteracy that starts from the preparatory class as suggested by the MEN, 2013 school program, 18 using the expression “functional writing”, we could give the student a task to them: “Write a ticket in which to use the punctuation mark

showing an interrogation.”.

Ask the question:

(a) after words and query groups:

- *The phone is ringing.*
- *What the?*

(b) after the phrasing phrases and phrases:

- *How do you know I was at the library?*

(c) after an implied sentence:

- *I have not seen him for many years – what else to do? – and I do not know where to look for him.*

(d) after the title of a literary work, with interrogative value:

- *“What are you looking at Gales?”* (Alexandru Vlahuţă)
- *“But your eyes?”* (Tudor Arghezi).

### 2.3. Exclamation mark [!]

The exclamation point marks a specific intonation, with the climbing and then lowering of the tone (Blideanu, 1981). The use of the exclamation mark is suggested from the preparatory class by “formulating sentences with intuitive support” (MEN, 2013), as well as in the syllabus for class I (MEN, 2013), “reading short texts”. In the program for the second class (MEN, 2013) the phrase “punctuation: the sign of exclamation” appears. In the third class it is recommended to “complete the punctuation marks” (MEN, 2014), and in the fourth class the use of the exclamation mark does not necessarily appear, but this can be deduced, for example, from the example of a learning activity. “Creative writing training” (MEN, 2014). An example of a task for children would be: “Make predictions in writing based on the fragment heard using the learned punctuation mark.”.

He places:

(a) after exclamatory words:

- *Putna Monastery! Bicz Canyon! We will all visit them in this area!*

(b) after a sentence or exclamation phrase:

- *I can not believe you took very good dictation!*

(c) after an exclamatory exclamation sentence:

*The two of us had come to the course – we did not even go through it! – and now they were quiet in the bench.*

(d) after interjections or interjections:

- *Bravo! I knew you would finally succeed.*
- *Oh my God! I forgot my notebook at home!*

(e) after some titles of literary works:

- *At the Vultures!* (Gala Galaction)
- *Oh, stay!* (Mihai Eminescu).

### 2.4. Comma [,]

Comma marks the graph “a short pause, made during the speech, graphically rendering the rhythm of speech and intonation in sentence and phrase” (Dobridor,

2009, p. 117). It groups together the words or groups of words forming units of interest, the parts of the sentence, separating them from the rest of the sentence and drawing their attention or delimiting some of the sentences in the sentence (Șerbănescu, 2000). In the preparatory class, the comma could be used, for example, for writing in ascending or descending order of natural numbers in concentration 0-31. For class I, the MEN school program, 2013, p. 15 proposes “adding punctuation words/ signs in elliptical statements”. In the second class (MEN, 2013, p. 15) we encounter “placing punctuation marks in a text”. For the third class, we have “completing the punctuation marks in a text without punctuation and discussing the results” (MEN, 2014, p. 8), and in the fourth class, the MEN school program, 2014, p. 8 offers us suggestions for learning activities “writing an invitation to a birthday, a movie, a picnic” in which the use of the comma is obvious. An example of a student task might be: “Explain the use of a comma in the text read.”.

The comma is written:

(a) between the same sentence parts (unbound by conjunctions *and, or*):

*Mihai, Ionut, Codrut heads for the forest.*

(b) instead of a verb omitted through the ellipse:

*Among the people gathered around the old man, we children.*

(c) before and after the relevant words or sentences:

– *Because then, you know, he promised not to repeat this.*

(d) after, before and after or only before nouns in the vocative case:

– *Where'd you go, kids?*

– *Maria, be careful how you write!*

– *You're wrong, Maria, when writing his words, they were!*

(e) after interjections (including when followed by a noun in vocative):

– *Come on, Costica, do not be late!*

There is no comma:

(a) between the subjective or predilection subordinates and their regents:

*Whoever looks like wind (SB)/ gathers storm. (PP)*

*My question was (PP)/ if we dictate today. (PR)*

(b) between subject and predicate:

*The forest is beyond the hill.*

(c) between unrelated attributive subordinates (determinants) and their regents:

*The dog that was on my way is mine.*

(d) between the predicate and the direct, indirect and circumstantial complements:

*The girl met the request.*

*We'll go to school together.*

(e) after the interjection followed by a verb:

– *Shut up!*

## 2.5. Point and comma [;]

The semicolon punctuates a pause greater than the comma and smaller than the point. For the preparatory class it is not necessary to use the “;” sign in the text. In class I, in the MEN school program, 2013, the point and comma approach does not appear in

the contents, nor in the school program for the second class – MEN, 2013. For the third class we have “completion of punctuation marks” (MEN, 2014, p. 8), and in class IV we find “writing a short text” (MEN, 2014). An example of a student task might be: Explain the use of a semicolon – “No; I will not let you.”.

The sign is used:

(a) to split sentences into a phrase (coordinated or subordinate):

*He spoke these words with a faint voice known only to his mother; she had laughed in laughter, as if she remembered it.*

(b) to separate the incidental sentence from continuing the direct speech:

*– I understand, she said, yawning; but is it when we go home?*

## 2.6. Two points [:]

Two points mark a pause less than one point. They announce direct speech, an enumeration, an explanation, or a conclusion, appearing after a sentence, between two sentences and between two sentence groups, inside the sentence or at the end of it (Beldescu, 2004). In the preparatory and first class, the MEN school program, 2013 does not suggest the use of the punctuation mark “:”. The two-point punctuation mark appears in the school syllabus for the second class (MEN, 2013, p. 18), the third grade – “the completion of punctuation marks in a text” (MEN, 2014, p. 8), and in the fourth class – “making a tape, combining the drawing with the written messages” (MEN, 2014, p. 8). A task for students could be: “Fill in the dotted space: Two points are used ...”.

Two points are placed:

(a) after a verb announcing the reproduction of some noises or sounds:

*– And going home to the woods I heard: Frustrated! Smack!*

(b) Before a text, some proverbs, some sayings:

*– He often said, “Work in your youth to get old”.*

(c) before an enumeration (in narratives and descriptions):

*For the school she bought: pens, colored pencils, a drawing block and watercolors.*

(d) instead of a predicate or copulative verb:

*He went into the kitchen: no one (it was not).*

## 2.7. The citation signs (quotation mark) [“ ... ”, « ... »]

Citation signs (quotation marks) are graphic signs used to reproduce exactly the words, groups of words or texts spoken or written by someone. The use of citation signs does not appear in suggestions of content or learning activities in primary school curricula, but school textbooks sometimes use this punctuation within texts. Sample task for students: Write who is the author of the text “White Harap, I want to do you good.”

They are used at the beginning and at the end of a quote, closing the direct speech (Pârâială, 2005):

*“... and he says to me laughing ugly: «What? do not you remember? Or are you proud and do not want to know your beloved brother, the Verdant-Emperor?»” (I.L. Caragiale, Story)*

*“«I was roast!» Negoita thought.” (I.L. Caragiale, Kir Ianulea)*

### 2.8. The dialogue line [-]

The dialog line is a longer graphic than the hyphen, which shows the beginning of the speech of each person who participates in the conversation (Dobridor, 2009, p. 129):

– *I'll think of your proposal after I look at all the variants.*

The use of the dialogue line in a text appears only in the school syllabus for class I (MEN, 2013, p. 18). Example of a task for students: “The dialogue line marks the beginning.....”.

### 2.9. Pause line [-]

The pause line is a graphic sign as long as the dialog line; it marks a pause between the different parts of the sentence, between sentence sentences or phrases (Dobridor, 2009):

(a) for the delimitation of the relevant sentences or phrases:

*One day – I had come home a little early – he reached out my hand.*

(b) for the isolation of the proposition parts:

*His little girl – Maria – looked at him uneasily.*

(c) for marking the predicate ellipse in the statements:

*Some were telling one, others – another.*

The pause line does not appear in the programs for primary education. Within an optional one made by the teacher for the students of the fourth class, the following task could be given: Explain the use of the pause line in the following sentence: “Our teacher – Vasile Ciubotaru – explained this to us”.

### 2.10. The parentheses [( ), [ ], < >]

Brackets are graphical signs used to show an addition within a sentence or phrases. In the school programs of Communication in Romanian language and Romanian language and literature (MEN, 2013 and MEN, 2014) for primary education we do not encounter the parentheses approach. In Mathematics in the fourth grade, the use of brackets appears in the exercises with several operations. Example of student task: Explains the use of parentheses: “Eugen (coming from outside) said he saw the two.”.

They are of three kinds: round – ( ); sharp – < >; squares – [ ].

The round brackets – ( ) contain an explanation (an explanation or detail) that enriches the meaning of the sentence or sentence (explanation in the form of a word, of some groups of words or phrases):

– *As you work, good grades can be made (and, after a brief meditation), I will do the same.*

Straight braces (corners, hooks) – [ ] contain an addition made in a quoted text (a situation where one's words are separated from those of the author):

*“... as they lie in the stream of the Olt, while they are long, [the fir trees] have the painful appearance of the drowned people.” (Geo Bogza, The Book of Olt)*

Sharpening (angular) brackets – < > are typically used in scientific and technical work. They mark:

(a) elements that appear in addition and which must be removed in order to make the literary form in pronouncement;

(b) misspelled inserts in relation to their correct literary forms: *mi<ta>ke/mis<ta>ke, ca<ba>ges/ca<bba>ges.* (Beldescu, 2004).

### 2.11. Suspensions points [...]

Suspension points are graphic signs showing a longer pause during speech, generally indicating an interruption in the sentences and phrase phrases:

(a) after an interrogative or exclamatory sentence:

– *But what does that mean?... Extraordinary!...*

(b) in the story (to mark the long pauses or the slow rhythm of the narrator's speech):

– *It was once... start with a mysterious voice; there were two brothers... Anca and Costel...*

(c) after interjections:

– *Oh, ha!... smiled together, that's good!*

(d) after titles of poems (when they are composed of the first verse or the first words of it):

*At the star..., What are you legalizing..., Among hundreds of masts...* (Mihai Eminescu)

(e) when a surprise is expressed:

– *Oh... well, it seems to me that you go to sledge!* (Dobridor, 2009, p. 132).

Suspension points do not appear in school programs for primary education. However, an example of a task for students within an optional one would be: Place the suspension points in the following sentence, after the right word: “But I don't think I'll get to the party.”.

### 2.12. Hyphen (dash and partition dash) [-]

“The hyphen is a punctuation mark, smaller than the line of pause and similar to the dialogue line” (Dobridor, 2009, p. 135). For primary education, the MEN, 2013 and MEN, 2014 school programs do not propose the dashed approach as a non-specific punctuation mark; it appears only as a spelling sign. Example of a task within an optional one made in the classroom: Complete with the appropriate punctuation mark: “Slowly it has come to learn the whole alphabet.”.

It uses:

(a) in rehearsals (when the repeated word forms a unit and when a comma may be written instead of a dash):

*She walked - but she seemed to stop.*

(b) inside the dwellings (consisting of two nouns, one noun and one adverb, two adverbs or two interjections):

*path-valley, dog-dog, nitam-nisam, hurry-hurry etc.*

(c) between two numbers to express the idea of approximation:

*Two-three dollars cost you the pen, no more.*

(d) between words that show the boundaries of a distance or a time interval:

*The Bucharest-Iasi-Suceava line was damaged by the storm.*

*Between 101-102 and 105-106 the Dacians waged the Romans.*

### 2.13. Slash Bar [/]

The oblique bar is a non-specific punctuation mark. The oblique bar approach is not found in primary education. Example of a task in an optional for the fourth class: Write the slash in the right place: “Have you ever seen Zdreanță, the one with the eyes of the



faience?” (Tudor Arghezi, Zdreanță).

She:

- (a) substitutes prepositions: *on, to, and up to, from, to*;
- (b) in the marking of a bibliographic indication: *Pedagogy Magazine no.2/2012* (from);
- (c) in marking the duration in years: *1914/1918* (up to);
- (d) substitutes conjunctions *and, or*: between two terms with an antecedent noun (expressing relationship, report, comparison, copulation): *written/oral, worship/uneducated, old/new, tradition/innovation* etc.;
- (e) in the numerical marking of the date in administrative language: *They arrive on Tuesday, 21/03/2015* (Pârâială, 2005).

### 3. Spelling signs

Spelling is correct writing and comes from the Greek words *orthos* – right, right and *graph* – to write, including the set of correct writing rules. The communication reproduced by spelling is called the literary language. The literary language is the neat, cultivated version of the national language (Iordan, 1954).

The spelling signs are represented by three specific signs – the hyphen, the white pause, the apostroph and three non-specific signs – the point, the pause line, the oblique bar (Șerbănescu, 2000).

#### 3.1. Hyphen [-]

The use of the hyphen in primary education appears only in class I – “spelling of words” (MEN, 2013, p. 18). In the second class we have “the correct spelling of the words in *or/ have, his/ her*” (MEN, 2013, p. 18), and at Grade III and IV, school curricula do not propose the hyphenation, but we can guess that this always helps in correct spelling of words. Sample task for students: Cut the line of the wrong word from the following sentence with a line: “In one hour I will reach you”.

(a) marks the utterance of two or more words in Romanian (with or without the absence of sounds): *thinking, I told him, in an hour, he announced, I'm going to get back, go, come back* etc. (Beldescu, 2004, p. 42);

(b) is used to write compound words:

*dog-wolf, child-wonder, Cluj-Napoca, dark-red, beak-beak!* (Dobridor, 2009);

(c) used in the writing of words (adverbial and interjectional) in Romanian:

*through the night, this evening, the afternoon, indeed, in one* (Pârâială, 2005);

(d) used to divide words into syllables:

*co-op, right-angled, non-rational* (Dumitru, 2007, p. 25);

(e) marks the absence of sound in derivatives: *fearless, it returns* (Dumitru, 2007).

#### 3.2. White break (blanc, graphic break)

The white pause is a negative orthographic sign: the free space (the absence of graphic signs) in a written string is a signal that a word ends in that place and another is followed. The approach of the white break in the school curricula for primary education can be seen from “Placing the text on the page. Title. Author. Aligned” (in the school

syllabus for class I, MEN, 2013). Example of task for students: Write the following sentence correctly separating the words so that the sentence has a meaning: “Thediligentstudentswillsucceedinlife”.

It is the sign by which the writing reproduces the forms of the words without phonetic changes, to the contact between them, as if every word had spoken of itself, with a real break before and after it. In reality, these words are spoken without pause between them, as if they were one word. For this reason, the final sounds and the original sounds influence each other. The white pause can establish differences that result in speech only from the context or from the situation in which the communication takes place; to compare: *to be regulated (must be adjusted)/to be deregulated (defective)* – communications utterly identical (Şerbănescu, 2000).

### 3.3. Apostrophes [ ' ]

The apostrophe marks the accidental absence of different sounds:

*Yes' with what to go ?, Let's snow* (Şerbănescu, 2000, p. 97).

The use of the apostrophe is not pointed out in school curricula for primary education. However, in textbooks, we can find this spelling sign or in the readings of students who are recommended for home. The explanation of this spelling sign is also obvious. Example of student task: Explain the use of the apostrophe in the following statement: “Who told you about this?”.

### 3.4. The point [.]

The point is used as a nonspecific orthographic sign in some abbreviations, replacing the letters that are not written: O.N.U., S.U.A., I.T.B., C.A.R. etc., arch. (architect), art. (article), page (page), prof. (professor), vol. (volume), etc. (Secieru, 2004).

The use of the point in primary education is found as a punctuation mark. However, as part of an option for fourth-grade students, we can introduce the task: Write the point in the right place: “We will borrow money from CAR”.

### 3.5. Pause line [–]

It is a nonspecific orthographic sign, as long as the dialogue line. As a spelling sign, the pause line is used optionally, instead of the hyphen, to write some compound words of complex structure, consisting of a simple term and a composite term, dashed in: north – north-east, south – south-west, etc. (Ungureanu, 2003).

Neither break line approach is specified in primary education programs. However, an example of an optional task might be: Write the break line in the following statement: “He was a South Korean American.”

### 3.6. Slash Bar [/]

The oblique bar is a nonspecific spelling sign that we also find as a punctuation mark. The use of the oblique bar could be successfully used within an optional one, such as, for example, in the task: Write the oblique bar in the right place: “By bicycle I traveled 10 km h”.

It is used:

(a) in abbreviations (when separating abbreviated words or a prefix abbreviated by the basic word, abbreviated): *km/h (kilometers per hour)*;

(b) in certain boundaries required by the linguistic description: *blade/s, provide/s, time/s, work/ing* etc. (Kisseleff, 2000).

#### **4. Conclusions**

Spelling and punctuation condition the specific human-readable-writing process. Practically, if there were no punctuation and spelling signs, no one could read and write, no one could receive, issue or write communications messages. By virtue of the syntactic principle, spelling refers to the content, delimiting the words according to their lexical meaning and their grammatical values. Establishing a connection between spelling and punctuation, the lexical meaning of words, and their grammatical values, create a logical basis within the written context of communication, not the memorization of predefined rules and definitions. There is a close intercondition relationship between the elaboration of a spelling and punctuation code. Educational practice is constantly confronted with many and unique questions about punctuation and spelling.

The learning of writing begins with the beginning of the student's school activity and continues throughout the active life of the individual. Written communication is not possible without the correct realization of the two aspects addressed – the spelling aspect and the punctuation aspect. The learning of the writing is realized gradually, starting from inductive approaches – the preparatory class, the first, the second class in the pre-grammar stage, continuing in the third and fourth classes with deductive steps in the grammar notions stage.

Curriculum at the decision of the school offers wide possibilities of adaptation to the concrete situations: the teacher decides whether to propose deepening or extension depending on the level of the students they work with, depending on the competences demonstrated by them in relation to a certain aspect of learning written communication. This level must be identified by different diagnostic and remedial procedures.

It is recommended to design an optional program that constitutes an approach built exclusively for the student, this being the recipient of the entire project in order to reduce functional illiteracy.

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