The mark of a question is the mark of a possibility that has yet to be discovered.

Why am I writing this? By exploring the uses of the question mark am I exploring punctuation? What resources provide succinct and reliable guidance in regards to the funny marking placed at the end of an interrogative sentence? Is the question mark the coolest looking punctuation in everyday use? All of these questions and more will be answered.

To answer the question as to what symbol most commonly referred to as ‘question mark’ looks like, I offer you this image:

?

Now that we all remember what it looks like, let’s review its purpose in life.

It’s simple, really. Don’t over think it. According to Dr. Laurie E. Rozakis, author of The Complete Idiot’s Guide to Grammar and Style, you should, “Use a question mark after a question” (207). For example: Is this paper going to have an irrationally high number of q’s in it? Simon and Shuster agrees by stating, “A question mark ends a direct question” (401). The Chicago Manual of Style, the godfather of most things grammar to most people (and at the moment me) affirms, “The question mark, as its name suggests, is used to indicate a direct question” (328). (I personally love that Chicago throws in the phrase, “as the name suggests.” Chicago, there is no need to get snarky.) Times have not changed. Published in 1921, George B. Ives published in Text, type and style: a compendium of Atlantic usage that a use of the question mark is “To mark a direct question” (150). Is the mark of a question used for any other purpose you ask? It is indeed.

The godfather (Chicago) explains that a question mark “may also be used to indicate doubt or at the end of a declarative or imperative sentence in order to express surprise, disbelief, or uncertainty” (328). Surely a reliable resource, whitesmoke.com, “a world-leading company in the field of English writing technologies, with a focus on products that enhance and correct grammar, spelling, and writing style,” agrees with the godfather saying, “Use a question mark enclosed in parenthesis (?) if a date or another number is unknown or doubtful among the experts.” For example, The ancestors of a future word goddess (i.e. me) arrived in America in 1826 (?). I am doubtful as to whether that was the exact year that my ancestors arrived, therefore I expressed said uncertainty with a question mark.

In regards to where the question mark is used, it is not a stretch of the imagination, but we’ll review. We all know to use the question mark to end the sentence, but it becomes trickier when other punctuation symbols believe they have a part in the play (those pesky quotation marks and parentheses). Our friend Mr. George B. Ives from the 1920’s states so perfectly, “This mark is set inside quotation marks if the quoted passage forms a question; otherwise, outside” (152). In accordance, Dr. Rozakis agrees, “Place the question mark inside of closing quotation marks if it is part of the quotation” (207). For example, In my memories I hear someone asking, “So, if you’re from Frankenmuth, like the capital of Christmas, and work in a toy store, does that, like, make you an elf?” Notice since the sentence was not a question, only the elf bit, the question mark was placed inside of the
If a writer is particularly question happy, and uses a series of questions, the corresponding number of question marks should in turn be used. For example, What will tomorrow hold? Fun? Excitement? Dismay? Impatience at the ridiculous amount of questions and time wasted? Simon and Schuster state, “Questions in a series are each followed by a question mark, whether or not each question is a complete sentence” (401). If such a series were to happen, does each question become capitalized? Simon and Schuster believe that consistency is key, “you can choose whether to capitalize the first letter, but be consistent within each piece of writing” (401). The grammar guide online offers a somewhat similar take, “Sometimes a question will actually end with a series of brief questions. When that happens, especially when the brief questions are more or less follow-up questions to the main question, each of the little questions can begin with a lowercase letter and end with a question mark.” Even though there is slight disagreement between Simon and Schuster and the online guide, I think the matter is a small one and can be resolved with a simple house style guide.

A dissenter! Sort of. Our fabulous and opinionated friend George Ives believes that, “it is generally the better practice to reserve the question mark for the end, separating the earlier questions with commas, or semicolons…but the question mark may be repeated after each question, to give added emphasis to each” (152). The rare difference of opinion in the question mark realm.

The online grammar guide, comprehensive and wonderful as it is, raises a sometimes forgotten issue: polite requests. “When a question constitutes a polite request, it is usually not followed by a question mark. This becomes more true as the request becomes longer and more complex.” From Do’s, Don’ts & Maybes of English Usage, Theodore M. Bernstein addresses this issue by confirming the online grammar guide, suggesting that if the author is merely making a request that will need no answer, no interrogation mark is needed (185). Karen Elizabeth Gordon, author of the delightful The New Well-Tempered Sentence: A Punctuation Handbook for the Innocent, the Eager, and the Doomed, concurs with the general masses stating, “A request or order surreptitiously or politely phrased as a question does not end in a question mark” (9). For example, Would the reader please consider reading this entire paper with a slightly sarcastic tone. As the author of this statement, I consider this to be a courteous and civil request; therefore a question mark is not needed.

This foray into the world of question marks has shown me that there isn’t much up for discussion about question marks. Of all punctuation marks, the question mark is probably one of the less contentious ones. In my research I found very few differences of opinion in regards to the mark of a question. This exercise has shown me that for issues regarding punctuation a textbook-like resource is best to use. Simon and Schuster offered me the clearest advice for usage. If I do run (and I mean literally run) into any issues with punctuation, I think I will come away unscathed for one thing, but that a house style guide will save me.

Did you learn something whilst reading my words? Did you become a better being in the world? Most importantly, did I make you smile?