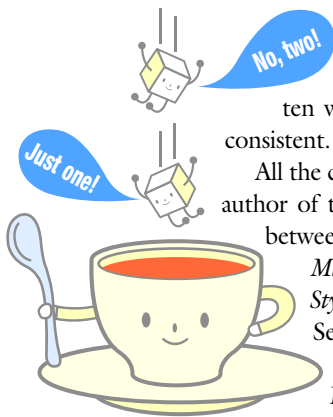




The Space Controversy: One and Done?

You may have noticed that I have strong feelings about certain matters of grammar, style, and punctuation. I love the em-dash. Sentences that omit the serial comma make me twitch. Periods and commas outside quotation marks drive me crazy. I am unequivocally a giant writing nerd.

I remain agnostic, however, when it comes to what may be the biggest punctuation controversy of the modern era: how many spaces to insert after the punctuation at the end of the sentence. When I present to groups of attorneys, paralegals, or secretaries, I can be certain that at least one person will ask about the issue and that several people in the audience will have strong opinions one way or the other. Because I do not believe that the number of spaces after a period materially affects the accuracy or clarity of my written work, my personal rule is simple: Pick one option and be consistent.



All the cool kids, though, argue for one space.¹ Matthew Butterick, author of the excellent *Typography for Lawyers*, mandates one space between sentences (and will brook no discussion). The *Chicago Manual of Style*, *The Redbook*, the *MLA Handbook*, the *MLA Style Guide*, and the United States Court of Appeals for the Seventh Circuit, among other authorities, agree. Typography and style aficionados posted and forwarded Farhad Manjoo's 2011 anti-double-spacing screed.²

The one-spacers' argument goes as follows: The two-space habit—partially a relic of the era of typewriters and monospaced fonts—is obsolete. Old typewriter fonts allocated exactly the same amount of space for each character. As a result, to better show the break between sentences, many typists and typesetters inserted two spaces after the end punctuation. Now that computers and word-processors allow home and office typists many of the same proportionally spaced fonts that professional typesetters enjoy, the reason for the two-space rule has evaporated. Typeface designers take spacing into consideration, and good typeface packages will insert exactly the right amount of space after different letters and punctuation. Moreover, the additional space after the final punctuation creates a “river” of white space in the text that many find visually unappealing. Some argue that this visual river also interrupts eye movement, decreasing readability and comprehension.

Cursory research suggests that the history of post-sentence spacing is both less linear and more interesting than the one-spacer argument allows. Professional typesetters—even those using proportionally spaced font—used two spaces after final punctuation for years, especially in the English-speaking world, and well after the introduction of typewriters. Some typesetters even inserted three (or even four!) spaces to signify the end of a sentence. Perhaps the double space was political: In some quarters, “French spacing” originally referred to single-spacing (before it came to refer to double-spacing ... even the terminology is a moving target).³ The more cynical among us speculate that major publishing houses introduced the single space to save paper (and money), and that magazine and newspaper publishers followed.

Multi-spacers argue that the extra space at the end of the

sentence provides a helpful visual signal to the reader. A space signals a pause, and we want our readers to pause a beat longer at the conclusion of a sentence. Furthermore, a dearth of white space allegedly makes text more difficult to read. Legend holds that T. S. Eliot threw a fit when a publishing house typeset his *The Wasteland* with a mere single space between sentences. But many of the reasons that the two-space habit persists are more practical and, quite honestly, reflexive. Our thumbs were trained to tap twice after a period. Texting and word-processing programs automatically insert a period if you hit the space bar or button twice. The double-space rule is ingrained.

Science provides little guidance. Studies on how post-sentence spacing affects readability and reading fluency—all of which examine screen reading rather than reading print on paper—are inconclusive. Even virulent one-spacers like Farhad Manjoo concede that they can point to no evidence supporting their belief that one space enhances readability.

When pressed, many one-spacers admit that the excess white space caused by the additional space is aesthetically displeasing. Fair enough. Certainly the modern trend favors one space, as do most typography and style authorities. But let's not pretend that history or science dictates one rule or the other. If you find that additional space visually offensive, by all means omit it, and by all means require those you supervise to omit it. If your audience—the supervising attorney, in-house counsel, a judge—prefers one convention or the other, follow that. Just be consistent.

endnotes

1. I think this article title pretty much encapsulates the attitude: Jennifer Gonzalez, *Nothing Says Over 40 Like Two Spaces After a Period!* at www.cultofpedagogy.com/two-spaces-after-period/
2. Farhad Manjoo, *Space Invaders: Why you should never, ever use two spaces after a period*, at www.slate.com/articles/technology/technology/2011/01/space_invaders.html
3. See, e.g., RICHARD ECKERSLEY, GLOSSARY OF TYPESETTING TERMS 46 (1995).



Susie Salmon

Susie Salmon is Assistant Director of Legal Writing and Associate Clinical Professor of Law at The University of Arizona, James E. Rogers College of Law. Before joining Arizona Law, she spent nine years as a commercial litigator at large firms in Tucson and Los Angeles.