

QUIRKY

# A Little \*@#& History

What does a bag of ancient Roman grain have to do with a hashtag? Scott Monty, a recognised US expert in business communications and leadership, uncovers the history of the symbols that have become so ingrained into our daily lives, exploring whether the signs that we rely on have a greater meaning or are merely a legacy of human laziness.

*By Scott Monty  
Strategic Communications & Leadership Coach*

One of the simple joys of my life as a timeless communicator is my 1937 Royal portable typewriter (Model O).

On the one hand, it's not the typical device you'd expect the former global head of digital communications and social media for Ford Motor Company to have.

On the other hand, the typewriter is instrumental in how I think about communicating. In brief, it has slowed me down. When I type on it, I do so with great deliberation.

Every key stroke is permanent.

Every line finds its natural end with the sound of the bell.

Every piece of paper finds its place, line by line, as the roller spins and clicks.

Using the typewriter is a cathartic experience for me.

And yet, as I attempted to include my email address in a letter, I was befuddled.



I searched in vain across the set of glass-topped, chrome-encircled black keys. I couldn't find it.

Where was the @ symbol?

I found the pound sign (#), the ampersand (&) and the even the asterisk (\*); the dollar sign (\$) was of course present, as was percent (%). There was even a key for 1/4 and 1/2.

But there was no at sign (@).

I had to admit defeat and simply type "AT" between my name and URL.

Another thought bubble surfaced as well: all of the other symbols have names: asterisk, ampersand, and the ample alternatives for the pound sign: hash, number,

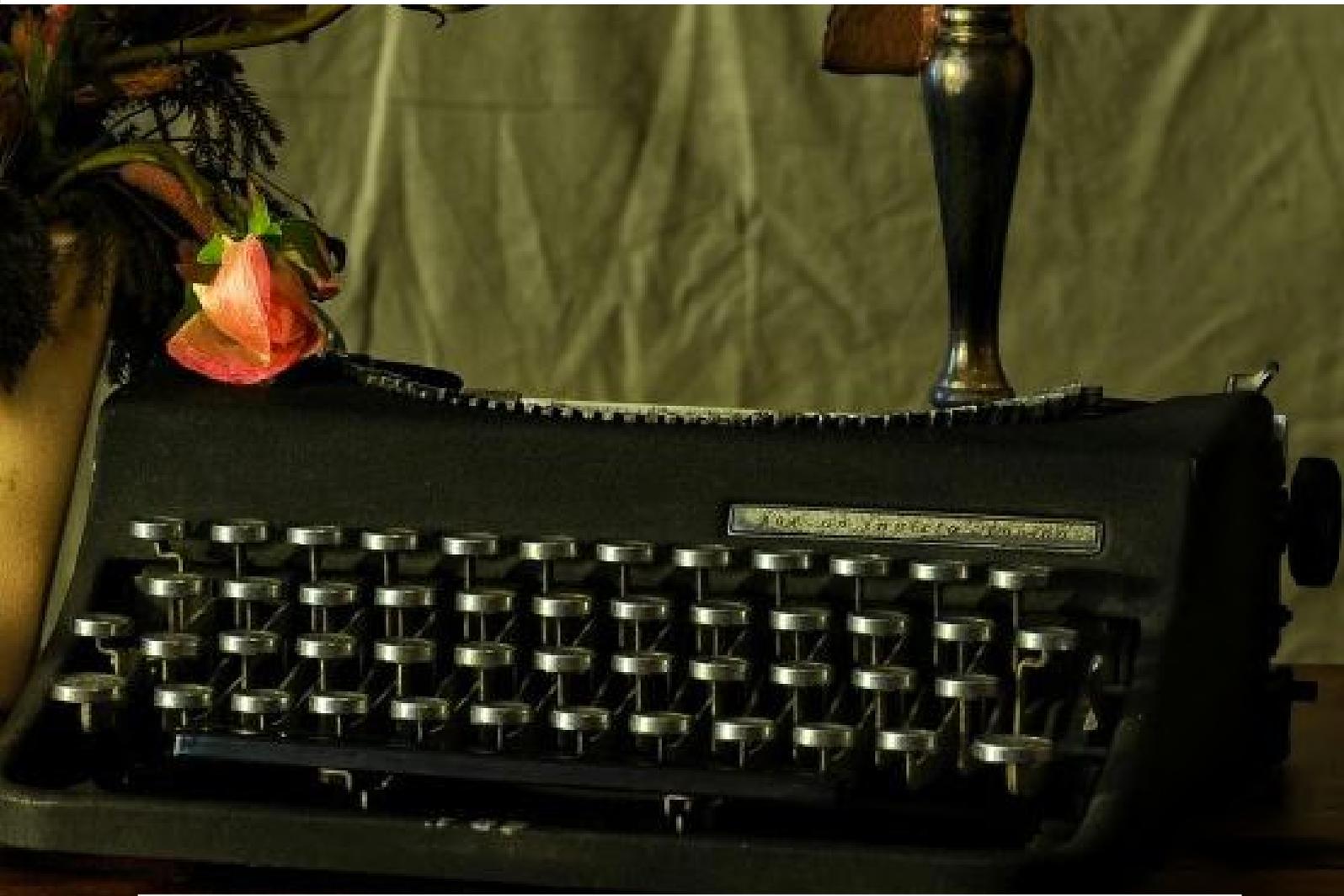
octothorpe (probably my favorite!), grid, crunch, diamond, sharp, mesh, cross-hatch...

It really made me curious about the history of @.

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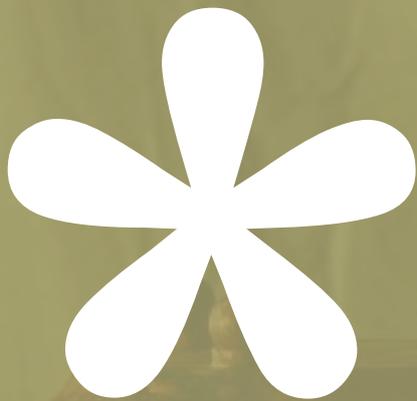
**Language is the armory of the human mind and at once contains the trophies of its past and the weapons of its future conquests.**

— Samuel Taylor Coleridge, 1817



## A History of Obscurity

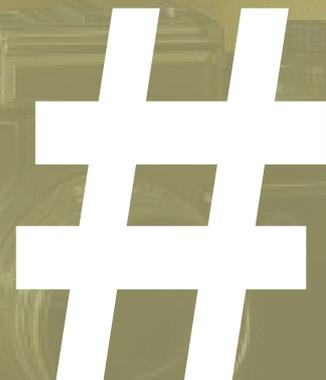
In searching around, I was able to find some fascinating histories of some of the signs and symbols we commonly use.



Lapham's Quarterly has an essay ("A Star Is Born") on the history of the asterisk. In writing, it goes back to Aristarchus of Samothrace, who used an asterisk symbol when editing Homer in the second century BC.

The polynymous pound sign has a fascinating history. It traces its origins to the symbol  $\text{lb}$ , an abbreviation for the Latin *libra pondo*, or "pound weight." This is why we see it written as lbs. when we're referring to weight.

Eventually, our laziness in writing more quickly led to the symbol being cross-hashed and the # was born. If you're of a certain age, you know it from your phone growing up. In recent years, it has become part of our common language as the hashtag.





The ampersand is another language-based evolution that was caused by speedy and lazy scribes. The & is actually a combination of the letters E and T, linked together. Why E and T?

Et is Latin for and. As in et cetera, meaning “and the rest.” And please, never, ever say “eck cetera.” It’s on par with “expresso.”

More on “The History of the Ampersand.” (Medium | The Black Lion Banner)

But the at symbol? Not only is it absent from my typewriter, but it doesn’t even have a name.

The Italians call it a “snail,” the Dutch call it a “monkey tail.” It may have come from the Latin ad or the French à, but its first documented use was in 1536, in a letter by Francesco Lapi, who used @ to denote units of wine called amphorae.

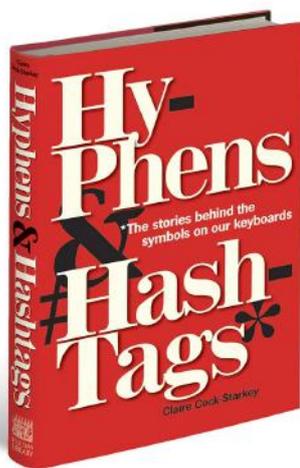
It doesn’t appear on most early typewriters, but the inventor of email managed to drag it into modern usage as a link between name and address.

Read all about “The Accidental History of the @ Symbol” in Smithsonian Magazine.



Symbols are everywhere. If we know their history, it's one more thing that can help us feel connected to each other, whether across the ocean or across the ages from each other.

If you enjoyed this, you'll want to pick up a copy of "Hyphens & Hashtags\*: \*The stories behind the symbols on our keyboard" by Claire Cock-Starkey.



**TIMELESS  
&  
TIMELY**



He writes the Timeless and Timely newsletter, to help leaders make sense of today with lessons from the past, at [TimelessTimely.com](http://TimelessTimely.com). He uses timeless lessons from history, literature and philosophy to help leaders make decisions with empathy, integrity, and wisdom. His knowledge of history, philosophy and literature, together with his ability to trend-spot, shows teams and audiences that the key to our future is in understanding human nature while focusing on integrity and values. Please feel free to sign up: [www.scottmonty.com](http://www.scottmonty.com)



**SCOTT MONTY**

*Strategic Communications & Leadership Coach*

Scott Monty is a strategic communications and leadership coach and advisor who helps the C-suite embrace better communication with timeless and timely advice.

A Fortune 10 leader whose background in classics positioned him to see through the shiny objects, Scott can drill down to understand the common human needs from throughout history that still drive us all.

He was ranked by The Economist as #1 atop the list 25 Social Business Leaders and Alan Mulally, the CEO of Ford Motor Company, called him "a visionary."

Scott spent six years as an executive at Ford, where he helped turn the company around with an uncanny ability to merge technology with humanity.

He served as a strategic adviser across a variety of business functions, leading the company's global social media strategy. He also has another decade and a half of experience in communications and marketing agencies.

Scott's clients have included companies such as Walmart, IBM, McDonald's, Coca-Cola, and Google. He is a trustee of the Detroit Symphony Orchestra, a past board member of the American Marketing Association, and has advised a number of tech companies.

