

Usage Basic Punctuation Rules

Correct punctuation is essential for clear and effective writing. The following list contains some of the most critical punctuation rules.

COMMAS

Commas are used to separate parts of a sentence. They tell readers to pause between words or groups of words, and they help clarify the meanings of sentences.

- ◀ Commas are used to separate three or more words, phrases, or clauses in a series.

EXAMPLE: Practice will be held before school, in the afternoon, and at night.

- ◀ Commas are used after an introductory dependent clause (a group of words before the subject of a sentence that do not form a complete sentence).

EXAMPLE: If your friends enjoy Chinese food, they will love this restaurant.

- ◀ Commas are used to set off introductory words, introductory adverbial, participial, or infinitive phrases, and longer introductory prepositional phrases.

EXAMPLE: Incidentally, I was not late this morning. (word)

Hoping for a bigger fish, Rob spent three more hours fishing. (phrase)

- ◀ Commas are used between independent clauses joined by a coordinating conjunction (*for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so*).

EXAMPLE: My dog had fleas, so we gave him a bath.

- ◀ Commas set off nonessential phrases or clauses.

EXAMPLE: The man, I think, had a funny laugh.

- ◀ Commas set off an appositive (a word or phrase that renames a noun).

EXAMPLE: Tanya, Debbie's sister, gave a brilliant speech last night.

END OF SENTENCE PUNCTUATION

End of sentence punctuation is used to let the reader know when a thought is finished.

- ◀ A statement (or declarative sentence) is followed by a period.

EXAMPLE: Orem is the home of Utah Valley State College.

- ◀ A direct question (or interrogative sentence) is followed by a question mark.

EXAMPLE: When did Joe buy a red shirt?

- ◀ Do not use a question mark after a declarative sentence that contains an indirect question.

EXAMPLE: Marie wants to know when Joe bought a red shirt.

- ◀ An exclamatory sentence is followed by an exclamation point.

EXAMPLE: What a good movie!

- ◀ Use exclamation marks sparingly because they can unnecessarily exaggerate sentences.

EXAMPLE: Monet was the most influential painter of his time! (*Most* emphasizes *influential painter*; therefore, an exclamation point is not needed.)

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SEMICOLONS

Semicolons are used to separate clauses or phrases that are related and that receive equal emphasis.

- ◀ Semicolons join independent clauses in a compound sentence if no coordinating conjunction is used.

EXAMPLE: Michael seemed preoccupied; he answered our questions abruptly.

- ◀ Semicolons are used before a conjunctive adverb (transition word) that joins the clauses of a compound sentence.

EXAMPLE: The emergency room was crowded; however, Warren was helped immediately.

- ◀ Semicolons help avoid confusion in lists where there are already commas.

EXAMPLE: We traveled to London, England; Paris, France; Berlin, Germany; and Sofia, Bulgaria.

COLONS

Colons follow independent clauses and are used to call attention to the information that comes after.

- ◀ Colons come after the independent clause and before the word, phrase, sentence, quotation, or list it is introducing.

EXAMPLE: Joe has only one thing on his mind: girls. (word)

Joe has only one thing on his mind: the girl next door. (phrase)

Joe has only one thing on his mind: he wants to go out with Linda. (clause)

Joe has several things on his mind: his finals, his job, and Linda. (list)

- ◀ Never use a colon after a verb that directly introduces a list.

INCORRECT: The things on Joe's mind are: finals, work, and Linda.

CORRECT: The things on Joe's mind are finals, work, and Linda.

HYPHENS

Hyphens are used to form compound words or join word units. They are used to join prefixes, suffixes, and letters to words.

- ◀ Use hyphens with compound numbers from twenty-one to ninety-nine and with fractions used as modifiers.

EXAMPLE: **forty-two** applicants

two-thirds majority (*two-thirds* is an adjective modifying *majority*)

three-fourths empty (*three-fourths* is an adverb modifying *empty*)

two thirds of the voters (*two thirds* is not being used as an adjective here because *thirds* is a noun being modified by *two*)

- ◀ Use hyphens in a compound adjective only when it comes before the word it modifies. However, some compound adjectives are always hyphenated, such as *well-balanced*. Look up compound adjectives in the dictionary if you are unsure whether or not to hyphenate them.

EXAMPLE: a **well-liked** author

an author who is **well liked**

a **world-renowned** composer

a composer who is **world renowned**

- ◀ Use a hyphen with the prefixes *ex-*, *self-*, and *all-*; with the suffix *-elect*; and with all prefixes before a proper noun or proper adjective.

EXAMPLE: all-star

ex-mayor

pro-Canadian

senator-elect

anti-Semitic

non-European

self-control

self-image

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DASHES

Dashes connect groups of words to other groups of words in order to emphasize a point or show that the information is unessential. Usually the dash separates words in the middle of a sentence from the rest of the sentence, or it leads to material at the end of the sentence.

◀ In the middle of a sentence, a dash can put special emphasis on a group of words or make them stand out from the rest of the sentence.

EXAMPLE: Linda Simpson's prescription for the economy, lower interest rates, higher employment, and less government spending, was rejected by the president's administration.

BECOMES: Linda Simpson's prescription for the economy—lower interest rates, higher employment, and less government spending—was rejected by the president's administration.

◀ The dash can also be used to attach material to the end of a sentence when there is a clear break in the continuity of the sentence or when an explanation is being introduced.

EXAMPLE: The president will be unable to win enough votes for another term of office—unless, of course, he can reduce unemployment and the deficit soon.

EXAMPLE: It was a close call—the sudden gust of wind pushed the helicopter to within inches of the power line.

APOSTROPHES

Apostrophes are used to show possession or to indicate where a letter has been omitted to form a contraction.

◀ To show possession, add an apostrophe and an -s to singular nouns or indefinite pronouns that end in *one* or *body*.

EXAMPLE: Susan's wrench, anyone's problem

◀ Add only an apostrophe for plural possessive nouns ending in -s.

EXAMPLE: my parents' car, the musicians' instruments

◀ Add an apostrophe and an -s for plural possessive nouns that do not end in -s.

EXAMPLE: the men's department, my children's toys

◀ Add an apostrophe and an -s for singular possessive nouns that end in -s.

EXAMPLE: Chris's cookbook, the business's system

◀ Do not use an apostrophe with possessive personal pronouns including *yours*, *his*, *hers*, *its*, *ours*, *their*, and *whose*.

◀ Apostrophes are also used in contractions, two words which have been combined into one, to mark where the missing letter or letters would be.

EXAMPLE: I am = I'm

I have = I've

who is = who's

let us = let's

cannot = can't

he is, she is, it is = he's, she's, it's

you are = you're

they are = they're

◀ Avoid confusing *it's* with *its*. *It's* is a contraction for *it is*; *its* is a possessive pronoun.

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QUOTATION MARKS

Quotation marks are used to show the beginning and end of a quotation or a title of a short work.

◀ Quotation marks enclose the exact words of a person (direct quotation).

EXAMPLE: Megan said, "Kurt has a red hat."

◀ Do not use quotation marks around a paraphrase (using your own words to express the author's ideas) or a summary of the author's words.

EXAMPLE: Megan said that Kurt's hat was red.

◀ Quotation marks set off the titles of magazine articles, poems, reports, and chapters within a book. (Titles of books, magazines, plays, and other whole publications should be underlined or italicized.)

EXAMPLE: "The Talk of the Town" is a regular feature in *Time* magazine.

QUOTATION MARKS WITH OTHER PUNCTUATION

◀ Place periods and commas inside quotation marks.

EXAMPLE: Aida said, "Aaron has a blue shirt."

◀ Place semicolons and colons outside quotation marks.

EXAMPLE: He calls me his "teddy bear"; I'm not a bear.

◀ Place question marks or exclamation points inside the quotation marks if they punctuate the quotation only.

EXAMPLE: "Are we too late?" she asked.

◀ Place question marks or exclamation points outside the quotation marks if they punctuate the entire sentence.

EXAMPLE: Why did she say, "We are too late"?

PARENTHESES

Elements inside parentheses are related to the sentence but are nonessential.

◀ Parentheses set off additions or expressions that are not necessary to the sentence. They tend to de-emphasize what they set off.

EXAMPLE: We visited several European countries (England, France, Spain) on our trip last year.

◀ Parentheses enclose figures within a sentence.

EXAMPLE: Grades will be based on (1) participation, (2) in-class writing, and (3) exams.

◀ When the group inside the parentheses forms a complete sentence but is inserted inside a larger sentence, no period is needed. However, if a question mark or exclamation point is needed, it may be used.

EXAMPLE: The snow (she saw it as she passed the window) was now falling heavily.

◀ When parentheses are used to enclose an independent sentence, the end punctuation belongs inside the parentheses.

EXAMPLE: Mandy told me she saw Amy's new car. (I saw Amy's car before Mandy.) She said it was a nice car.