

Basic Punctuation Rules

Punctuation can make an enormous difference in the meaning of whatever it is you're writing. Consider the following classic examples of the change in meaning that punctuation can communicate:

eats shoots and leaves
eats, shoots, and leaves

Let's eat, Grandma!
Let's eat Grandma!

Woman, without her man, is nothing.
Woman! Without her, man is nothing.

Let's face it: proper punctuation can make or break the impact of an otherwise well-constructed sentence. These basic rules can strengthen your sentences with the punctuation they deserve, so that the quality of your ideas is communicated with precision and clarity.

commas

Commas indicate a separation of ideas or elements within the structure of a sentence. For more information on comma usage, see the Writing Center's "Commas" handout.

Commas are used to separate three or more words, phrases, or clauses (sentence parts) in a series.

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).

Commas indicate that introductory words and phrases moved from the end of the sentence.

Commas are used between independent clauses (complete sentences) joined by a coordinating conjunction: for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so.

Commas set off nonessential phrases or clauses (phrases that can be removed without changing the sentence's overall meaning) or appositives (words or phrases that rename a noun).

Commas separate paired adjectives that describe a noun. You need a comma between adjectives that could go in any order—they're not cumulative and could be separated by the word "and." Do not use a comma between adjectives that need to be in a particular order.

The entree includes **chips, salsa, and a beverage.**

Since we would be returning late anyway, we stayed to watch the sunset.

In the light of day, everything looked different.

My family went to see the live taping of Ru Paul's *Drag Race*, **but** I stayed home with the flu.

My cousin, **who recently joined the mafia,** said it would be best if I skipped town for awhile.

- ✗ They serve cheap delicious meat.
- ✓ They serve **cheap, delicious** meat.
- ✗ They always have cheap, taco meat.
- ✓ They always have **cheap taco** meat.

quotation marks

Quotation marks show the beginning and end of a quotation or title of a short work. When citing, the quotation and punctuation rules change; see “Paraphrasing and Quoting” and specific citation handouts for more help.

Quotation marks enclose the exact words of a person.

Do not use quotation marks around a paraphrase or summary.

Quotation marks set off the titles of smaller works within larger works. This can vary between different citation styles, so double check your style guide for accuracy.

Place periods and commas inside quotation marks.

Place semicolons and colons outside quotation marks.

Place question marks or exclamation points inside the quotation marks if they punctuate the quotation only. However, if the quote does not include a question or exclamation, but the sentence itself is asking a question or exclaiming, the question mark or exclamation point sits outside of the quotation marks.

Sia said, **“I’m gonna swing from the chandelier.”**

Sia said **she intended to pendulate from a chandelier.**

“Short Story”	<i>Book of Stories</i>	“Chapter”	<i>Book</i>
“Poem”	<i>Book of Poetry</i>	“Episode”	<i>Series</i>
“Article”	<i>Magazine/Journal</i>	“Song”	<i>Album</i>

Pope Francis said, “I’ll have extra mayonaise on that.”

I reccommend “the works”: it comes with chicharrón!

Captain Lightfoot said, **“Don’t you think** it’s time we started letting women be pirates, too?”

What did Aesop Rock mean by, “There’s smoke in my iris, but I painted a sunny day on the insides of my eyelids”?

parentheses

Parentheses set off elements within a sentence that are related to the sentence but nonessential.

Parentheses set off additions or expressions that are not necessary to the sentence. They tend to de-emphasize what they set off. They are often seen as less academic in tone.

Parentheses can enclose figures in a sentence. Note: Use of numbers like this in sentences may vary for different citation styles. Double check citation guidelines.

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 should be included.

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

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

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

The snow (**do you remember what snow feels like?**) was falling heavily.

I’m not looking forward to presenting to the class on Monday. (**My childhood stage fright has never really left me.**) I hope I can get it over with quickly.

apostrophes

Apostrophes show possession and also 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*.

Add only an apostrophe for plural possessive nouns ending in s. Remember that the apostrophe placement depends on whether there is more than one noun: student's books (one student), students' books (more than one student).

Do not use an apostrophe with possessive personal pronouns.

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

Jenny's book anyone's guess
somebody's laptop the waltz's tempo

my parents' car
the musicians' instruments

yours, his, hers, ours, theirs, whose, its

I am = I'm cannot = can't they are = they're
I have = I've let us = let's you are = you're

hyphens

Hyphens are used to form compound words or join word units. They are also 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 (adjectives).

Use hyphens in a compound adjective only when it comes before the word it modifies. There are exceptions; look up compound adjectives in the dictionary if you are unsure whether or not to hyphenate them.

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.

Use a hyphen with compound phrases. Note: When describing ages, phrases that function as adjectives will use hyphens, while numbers as adjectives will not use hyphens.

Also, note how hyphens can change meaning, and use them accordingly.

forty-two students
three thousand five hundred and **sixty-seven** students
two-thirds majority (vs. "two thirds of the voters")

a **well-liked** author
an author who is well liked
a **world-renowned** composer
a composer who is world renowned

all-star **ex**-mayor **pro**-choice
self-image **non**-European senator-**elect**

the **nine-year-old** boy he is nine years old
sister-in-law all-or-nothing
up-to-date soon-to-be

a **hot-water** bottle (a bottle for holding hot water)
a hot water bottle (a bottle of water that is hot)
to **re-press** a shirt (to iron again)
to repress bad memories (to keep at bay)

colons

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

Colons come after the independent clause (complete sentence) and before the word, phrase, sentence, quotation, or list they are introducing.

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

Lately, I have had only one thing on my mind: **graduation**.

Lately, I have had one thing on my mind: **graduating from college**.

Lately, I have had only one thing on my mind: **I can't wait to graduate**.

Lately, I have had several things on my mind: **papers, grades, and finals**.

✗ The things on my mind are: papers, grades, and finals.

✓ The things on my mind are the following: papers, grades, and finals.

✓ The things on my mind are papers, grades, and finals.

dashes

Dashes—often confused with hyphens—connect groups of words to other groups of words to emphasize a point. Usually, the dash separates words in the middle or at the end of a sentence.

keyboard shortcuts

Mac: shift+option+hyphen

PC: alt+0151

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.

At the end of a sentence, a dash separates information from the rest of the sentence.

✗ Our ideas for the weekend, **going to a movie, having a picnic, doing homework, and hiking Garcia Trail**, seemed like a lot to squeeze in.

✓ Our ideas for the weekend—**going to a movie, having a picnic, doing homework, and hiking Garcia Trail**—seemed like a lot to squeeze in.

I knew the material perfectly—**until test day**.

We went to Slauson Park—**the one north of Fifth Street**.

semicolons

Semicolons separate clauses or phrases that are related and that receive equal emphasis. You can go your whole life without using them, or you can impress your readers by using them correctly!

Semicolons join two independent clauses (complete sentences) that are closely related if no coordinating conjunction is used.

Semicolons signal to a reader that the information in both sentences should be taken together.

Semicolons help avoid confusion between items in lists where there are already commas.

Megan said she was tired; she had stayed up late cutting giraffe-shaped holes out of foreign newspapers.

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We were planning to go get coffee; however, he had to cancel.

She traveled to **Sao Paulo, Brazil; Seoul, South Korea; and Nairobi, Kenya**.