

Basic Punctuation

Note: This document should only be used as a reference and should not replace assignment guidelines.

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

Commas

Commas separate parts of a sentence. They tell readers to pause between words, and they can clarify the meanings of sentences.

- Commas are used to separate three or more words or phrases in a series.
EXAMPLE: Practice will be held **before school, in the afternoon, and at night.**
- Commas are used after introductory words and introductory dependent clauses (groups of words before the subject of a sentence that do not form complete sentences).
EXAMPLES: **If your friends enjoy Chinese food,** they will love this restaurant.
Incidentally, I was not late this morning.
Hoping for a bigger fish, Rob spent three more hours fishing.
- 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.
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.

Periods

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

EXAMPLE: Orem is the home of Utah Valley University.

Question Marks

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.

Exclamation Points

An exclamatory sentence is followed by an exclamation point.

EXAMPLE: What a good movie!

Use exclamation marks sparingly because they can unnecessarily exaggerate sentences or create an informal tone.

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 commas within the listed items.
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 them.

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 and 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.

EXAMPLES: **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 the adjective 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.

EXAMPLES:	a well-liked author	an author who is well liked
	a world-renowned composer	a composer who is world renowned

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

EXAMPLES:	all-star	ex-mayor	pro-Canadian	senator-elect
	anti-Semitic	non-European	self-control	self-image

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Dashes

- 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.
 - NO DASHES: Simpson's prescription for the economy, lower interest rates, higher employment, and less government spending, was rejected by the president's administration.
 - WITH DASHES: 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 sentence or when an explanation is being introduced.
 - EXAMPLES: 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.

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 and to form contractions.

Possessives

- To show possession, add an apostrophe and an -s to singular nouns or indefinite pronouns that end in *one* or *body*.
 - EXAMPLES: Susan's wrench, anyone's problem
- Add only an apostrophe for plural possessive nouns ending in -s.
 - EXAMPLES: my parents' car, the musicians' instruments
- Add an apostrophe and an -s for plural possessive nouns that do not end in -s.
 - EXAMPLES: the men's department, my children's toys
- Add an apostrophe and an -s for singular possessive nouns that end in -s.
 - EXAMPLES: 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*.

Contractions

- Apostrophes show where letters have been omitted in contractions.

EXAMPLES:	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

Note: *It's* is a contraction for *it is*; *its* is a possessive pronoun even though it doesn't have an apostrophe.

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Quotation Marks

- Quotation marks enclose the exact words of a person (a 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 in MLA. (Titles of books, magazines, plays, and other whole publications should be italicized in MLA.)
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, except when citations follow.
EXAMPLES: Aida said, "Aaron has a blue shirt."
Aida said, "Aaron has a blue shirt," but I think it might be green.
Jong writes, "Potatoes may inhibit weight loss in some patients" (4).
- 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

- 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 last trip.
- Parentheses enclose figures within a sentence.
EXAMPLE: Grades will be based on (1) participation, (2) in-class writing, and (3) exams.
- When parentheses are used to enclose an independent sentence, the end punctuation belongs inside the parentheses. When the parentheses enclose part of the sentence, however, the punctuation belongs outside the parentheses.
EXAMPLES: Mandy told me she saw Amy's new car. (I saw Amy's car before Mandy.) She said it was a nice car.
Mandy told me she saw Amy's new car (which I had already seen). She said it was a nice car.