Rules & Punctuation Marks in English

Punctuation is a set of specific marks or symbols that we used to express the meaning of our sentences clearly and to make the flow of the text smooth. It shows us where we need to pause, it separates ideas from each other, it lets us know that a certain phrase is quoting someone else's words, and has a dozen other important functions.

Punctuation Marks

In the English language, there are fourteen main punctuation marks, and here is the list of them. Some punctuation marks, such as the full stop and quotation marks, are known by more than one name among English speakers.

1. Full Stop / Period (.)
2. Comma (,)
3. Question Mark (?)
4. Exclamation Mark (!)
5. Quotation Marks / Speech Marks (" ")
6. Apostrophe (')
7. Hyphen (-)
8. Dash (– or —)
9. Colon (:)
10. Semicolon (;)
11. Parentheses ()
12. Brackets []
13. Ellipsis (…)
14. Slash (/)

Punctuation Rules

Full Stop / Period (.)

This is the most popular punctuation mark because you simply cannot write even a single sentence without using it. So, there are two most common uses of a full stop: to indicate the end of a sentence, or to follow an abbreviation.

- We feed this cat every evening.
- Mr. Brown does not agree with these new rules.

Comma (,)

A comma is often used to separate different ideas in a sentence. However, it has many other uses as well, and it is important to remember them as well. Some of the most common comma rules follow.

1) A comma separates two sentences when putting a full stop between them seems to create an unnecessarily long pause.
- Mark went by bus, and Allison took a train.

2) Commas separate items in a list.
- We bought apples, peaches, grapes, and oranges in the fruit market.

3) A comma is used after an introductory word or phrase, such as at the end of the day, however, in contrast, etc.
- Nevertheless, we managed to get home until sunset.

4) If you have a tag question at the end of your sentence, you also need to use a comma to distinguish it from the rest of the sentence.
- You are going to the party this weekend, aren't you?

5) If you are directly addressing someone, you need a comma.

- James, what are you doing tomorrow after school?

Question Mark (?)

A question mark, as its name suggests, needs to go at the end of every interrogative sentence instead of a full stop.

For example:

- How old are you?

- Do you remember what I told you about yesterday?

Exclamation Mark (!)

An **exclamation mark** is used to show emphasis. It can be used in the middle of a sentence or at the end of a sentence. When used at the end of a sentence, it also takes on the role of a full stop or a period.

We often use an exclamation mark (**!**) to show strong emotion or give a command.

Examples:

- Stop!
- Yeah!
- Sit down!
- What a lovely view you have here!
- That's fantastic!
- Johnny, don't touch that!
- Help!
- Good heavens!

Quotation Marks / Speech Marks (" ")

As their name suggests, quotation marks indicate direct quotations. You can also use them to show that a word or a phrase is being used ironically, or for titles of articles, book chapters, episodes of a TV-show, etc.

For example:

- "You'll never believe what happened last night," Jerry said.
- In his article "How To Succeed in Everything You Do", Mary Smith gives her readers three valuable pieces of advice.

Apostrophe (')

An apostrophe has two very important uses. Firstly, it can be used in contractions in place of omitted letters. Secondly, it can show possession.

For example:

- You don't have to go to the supermarket if you don't want to.
- We need to invite both of Sally's sisters to the party.

Use an apostrophe in contractions

- He is = He's
- I am = I'm
- Do not = Don't
- They have = They've
- It is = It's
- I would = I'd
- Let us = Let's
- She has = She's
- Who is = Who's

(2) Use an apostrophe to indicate possession

The apostrophe examples:

- He joined Charles's army in 1642.
- Sally's hair was blond and curly.
- We have put together an anthology of children's poetry.
- The boy's sister traveled by bus to meet us.

Hyphen (-)

A **hyphen** (–) is a punctuation mark with three main uses. Many people confuse this punctuation mark with the dash, but the two are quite different. The hyphen can be used in compound words, to link words to prefixes, and also as a way to show word breaks.

The hyphen rules and examples:

(1) Use a hyphen to join two or more words together into a compound term. Do not separate the words with spaces.

Examples:

- My eight-year-old boy loves reading.
- I work part-time.
- Self-expression

- Self-confidence
- Self-consciousness
- Nineteenth-century history
- Old-furniture salesman
- Off-the-peg suits
- Self-paced learning exercises

(2) To link prefixes to words.

For example: These things happened before the pre-enlightenment era.

(3) To indicate word breaks

For example: Unlike what some people might think, the twentieth-century was very different from other preceding time periods.

Dash (– or —)

There are two kinds of dashes, the en dash, and the em dash. The en dash shows range or connections. On the other hand, the em dash is used in places where a comma could also be used. The dash can also be used to mark off words or statements that are not important to the meaning of the statement. The dash can also be used in places where a comma would be typically used.

En dash (–)

Slightly wider than a hyphen, the **en dash** is a symbol (–) that is used in writing or printing to indicate a range or connections.

Examples:

- 1880 –1945
- Princeton–New York trains

Em dash (—)

Twice as long as the en dash, the **em dash** (—) can be used in place of a comma, parenthesis, or colon to enhance readability or emphasize the conclusion of a sentence.

Example: She gave him her answer—No!

Colon (:)

A **colon** (:) is a fairly common punctuation mark with a varied number of uses. It can be used to introduce a quotation, an example, a series, or even an explanation. Secondly, it can be used to separate two independent clauses. Finally, a colon can be used to show emphasis.

Examples:

- You have two choices: finish the work today or lose the contract.
- That's because we have one goal: for you to consider your website a success.
- John has all the ingredients: minced clams, milk, potatoes, and onions.

Semicolon (;)

A **semicolon** (;) is used to separate two independent clauses while still demonstrating that a close relationship exists between them. The semicolon does a better job of showing the connection between two statements than a full stop would.

Examples:

- My daughter is a teacher; my son is a doctor.
- There are eight members in the team: two from China, Japan; three from France, Spain; two from Brazil; and one from India.
- Richard always slept with the light on; he was afraid of the dark.

Parentheses ( )

Parenthesis, (()) are quotation marks that show additional thoughts about a statement. In many scenarios, they can be replaced by commas without any changes to the meaning of the sentence.

We also often use parentheses to set off less important details.

Example: The two brothers (Richard and Sean) were learning how to play guitar.

Brackets [ ]

Brackets are squared off quotations (**[]**) that are used to show information of a technical nature. Even if this information is omitted entirely, the sentence would still make sense.

For example: Was he [the defendant] there when you arrived?

Ellipsis (…)

An **ellipsis** is usually represented by three dots (**…**), although it can also be represented by three asterisks (***). This punctuation symbol is used to show that there has been an omission of some letters or words. In many cases, ellipses are used to cut statement short to avoid unnecessary or irrelevant words that have no impact on the meaning of the statement being made.

We often use an ellipsis to show that parts of sentences are left out.

Examples:

- To be continued…
- You'll never believe what I saw…

Slash (/)

A **slash**, which is also known as a forward slash, a virgule, or even an oblique dash, has a number of uses. The slash can be used to separate lines in a song or poem when they are written in a continuous line. The slash (**/**) is also used in place of the word or. The slash can also be used to show two contradictory notions.

The slash punctuation rules and examples:

(1) Use slashes to separate parts of the internet (web) addresses and file names for some computer programs.

Example: http://www.example.com/

(2) Use slashes for fractions

Example: 1/3 = one-third

(3) Use a slash to separate the day, month, and year in date.

Examples:

- w/o = without
- n/a or N/A = not applicable or not available
- R/C = radio control

(4) Use a slash to show the word "per" in measurements.

Example: 80 miles/hour = 80 miles per hour

(5) Use a slash to separate lines of poetry or rhymes in regular text.

Example: Twinkle, twinkle, little star, / How I wonder what you are. / Up above the world so high, / Like a diamond in the sky.

(6) Use a slash to show alternatives in a sentence.

Example: Please press your browser's Refresh/Reload button.