

Your Personal Guide to Grammar, Punctuation, and Style

PUNCTUATION

Use a period

-at the end of a sentence or command

Examples: The building was sold. Please rise.

Use a comma

-to set off dates and addresses

Example: On May 20, 1994, her address was 2691 Saddleback Way, Cincinnati, OH.

-after the salutation in an informal letter and the closing in any letter

Examples: Dear Ann, Sincerely, Very truly yours,

-to set off an introductory word or phrase

Examples: Nevertheless, she failed to stop. According to Lee, the car was red.

-to set off modifying or connecting words or phrases (such as *however* and *therefore*)

Examples: While looking for her keys, however, she found her pen.
The woman, although quite elderly, made an effective witness.

-to set off appositives (explaining words)

Examples: Ann Lyle, the noted doctor, wrote the article.

-before a conjunction such as but, and, or, for, or yet that introduces an independent clause (one that makes sense by itself)

Example: He wanted to drive, but his car was out of gas.

-to set off items in a series

Example: The boys were Tim, Mike, Al, and Steve.

Use an apostrophe

-to indicate possession or ownership; goes before the s when the noun is singular and after the noun when it is plural

Examples: the judge's chambers the boys' pens

-for words such as men, women, and children that do not form plurals by adding an "s", form the possessive just as you would for singular words.

Examples: women's caucus men's shoes children's toys

-to show plurals of numbers and letters used as words

Examples: There are two Exhibit B's. There are two 23's on the paper.

-to indicate omission of letters in contractions

Examples: Can't (can not) It's (it is) don't (do not)

Note: The only meaning of "it's" is "it is." To show possession, do not use an apostrophe; use "its."

Examples: It's a wise court that explains the reasoning of its decisions.

Use a semicolon

-to connect two independent but related clauses

Example: That was his final offer; it was nonnegotiable.

-to connect two independent clauses joined by a conjunctive adverb such as *therefore* or *however*

Example: His appearance was imposing; however, that appearance belied his character.

-to separate items in a list

Example: You must complete the following: stock the shelves; arrange the display; and clean that area of the store.

Use quotation marks

-to indicate a speaker's words

Example: Mr. Lee said, "Call the meeting to order."

-to explain or emphasize a word

Example: The author misspelled the word "occasion."

Use quotation marks only for quotes of 49 or fewer words. For quotes of 50 or more words, block indent the quote and single space; do not use quotation marks. Place commas and periods inside quotation marks.

Use a colon

-after the salutation in a formal letter

Example: Dear Mr. Campbell:

-to introduce a list

Example: He lived in three cities: Boston, Dallas, and Miami.

-to indicate something will follow

Example: Her testimony had one objective: to discredit the plaintiff.

-to introduce a quotation (although a comma may also be used)

Example: The customer complained: "This is unacceptable."

Use parentheses

-to set off interruptions or explanations, to introduce abbreviations or acronyms, or to direct readers to other information

Examples: John (not his father) answered.

Techno Strategies Company (TSC) alleged fraud (Para.9).

Note: In some instances commas may be used instead.

Use a hyphen

-to divide words between syllables from one line to the next

-in compound adjectives such as *would-be* actress

-after some prefixes such as *anti-establishment*, *pre-Renaissance*, *re-evaluate*, and *re-examine*

-to form compounds such as *ex-president*

Dashes, Slashes, and Exclamation Marks

-Dashes: to set off explanations and interruptions or to indicate an abrupt break.

-Slashes: between two words such as *and/or*.

-Exclamation marks: for emphasis.

-These marks are all informal punctuation and, as such, are rarely used in formal, business, or legal writing.

WRITING TIPS

A verb must agree with its subject in number.

-Multiple subjects joined by '*and*' require a plural verb.

Example: The sand and the beach look inviting.

-When multiple subjects are joined by '*or*' or '*nor*', the verb agrees with the word nearest it.

Example: Neither the students nor the principal is attending.

-Indefinite pronouns, such as: *each*, *everyone*, *no one*, *one*, and *someone* are usually singular and take singular verbs and pronouns.

Example: Everyone in the class is sick.

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-pronouns, such as: *few*, *many*, and *several* are plural.

Example: Few of the boys know the new student.

-Collective nouns, such as: *group*, *jury*, *committee*, *board*, and *court* are usually singular.

Example: The *jury* is deliberating.

-Identify the subject of a sentence and ignore intervening phrases or words,

Example: The *remainder* [of the goods to be donated] is in storage.

A sentence must contain one thought.

-A sentence containing less than one thought is a fragment or incomplete sentence.

Incorrect: I observed two benefits. First the importance of education. Second, the support of my family.

Correct: I observed two benefits: first, the importance of education, and second, the support of my family.

-A sentence containing more than one thought is a “run-on” sentence.

Incorrect: The members of the jury were dead-locked, they could not reach a verdict.

Correct: The members of the jury were deadlocked; they could not reach a verdict. – *or*- The members of the jury were deadlocked. They could not reach a verdict.

-To remedy a fragment or a run-on, either correct the punctuation or make the dependent clause a sentence of its own.

Put modifiers near the words they modify.

-Modifiers are adjectives and adverbs that describe or limit other words. Improper placement of modifiers causes confusion.

Incorrect: tall businessman’s daughter (means the tall business man rather than his tall daughter)

Correct: businessman’s tall daughter

Avoid split infinitives.

An infinitive is a “to + verb” form such as *to run* or *to ask*. Avoid placing an adverb between infinitives.

Incorrect: to quickly run to forcefully ask

Correct: to run quickly to ask forcefully

To fix a split infinitive, place the adverb after the infinitive.

Avoid dangling participles.

A participle (a verb used as an adjective as in “the crying baby”) is said to “dangle” when connects to the wrong noun.

Incorrect: Staggering to the door, the package fell. (*Have you even seen a package staggering to a door?*)

Correct: Staggering to the door, he dropped the package.

Use pronouns carefully.

-Use *it* to refer to collective nouns such as *company*, *committee*, *court*, and *association*.

Example: The court has reached its decision.

-Use *I*, *he*, *she*, *we*, or *they* when the pronoun acts as the subject of a sentence.

Examples: James and she drove home. It was I who fell.

-Use *me*, *him*, *her*, *us*, or *them* when the pronoun acts as the object of a sentence.

Examples: Ray gave the books to Tom and me. Release Sue and them.

-Hint: To choose the correct pronoun, omit the noun and the “and.”

Example: Ray gave the books to [me].

-Use *who* as the subject of a verb and use *whom* as the object of a verb or preposition.

Example: Who wrote the article? The woman who sang is tall.

Example: to whom am I speaking? This is the man whom I mentioned.

-Avoid gender-linked pronouns, if possible.

Example: Nurses should keep their notes. A nurse should keep notes.

- Singular nouns use singular pronouns; plural nouns use plural pronouns.

Incorrect: The nurse handed in their notes.

Correct: The nurse handed in her notes.

IMPROVING YOUR WRITING

1. Select the active voice (John wrote the letter) rather than passive one (The letter was written by John). Active voice is stronger and often shorter.
2. Avoid double negatives. They are confusing and weaker than affirmative or positive expressions.
Example: It is unlawful to fail to pay your rent.
Better: You must pay your rent.
3. Use strong words.
Upset-----furious stated-----boasted
4. Avoid nominalizations (nouns made from verbs).
Made a payment ----- paid
Drew a conclusion ----- because
Issued a statement ----- stated
5. Omit needless words.
During the time that ----- while
Due to the fact that ----- because
In regard to ----- regarding
6. Avoid redundancies
Null and void unexpected surprise
Final result ultimate conclusion
7. Include a beginning, middle, and end.

PROOFREADING TIPS

1. Allow time for the project to get “cold.” Proofreading is tough with familiar projects.
2. Place a ruler under each line to focus on one line at a time.
3. Read sections out of order.
4. Read aloud or with a partner.
5. Read backwards (right to left and from the bottom of a page to the top).
6. Edit a hard copy as well as on the screen.