**Punctuation Marks in English**

**Rules and Examples**

A punctuation mark is a mark (sign) used in writing to divide texts into [phrases](https://www.really-learn-english.com/english-grammar-phrases.html) and [sentences](https://www.really-learn-english.com/parts-of-a-sentence.html).  
  
**Some common punctuation marks are:**

* [period (full stop)](https://www.really-learn-english.com/period.html) ( . )
* [comma](https://www.really-learn-english.com/comma-punctuation.html) ( , )
* [question mark](https://www.really-learn-english.com/question-marks.html) ( ? )
* [exclamation mark](https://www.really-learn-english.com/exclamation-mark.html) ( ! )
* [colon](https://www.really-learn-english.com/colon-punctuation.html) ( : )
* [semicolon](https://www.really-learn-english.com/semicolon.html) ( ; )
* [single quotation marks](https://www.really-learn-english.com/single-quotation-marks.html) ( ' ' )
* [double quotation marks](https://www.really-learn-english.com/quotation-mark.html) ( " " )
* [parentheses](https://www.really-learn-english.com/parentheses-brackets-and-braces.html) ( ), [brackets](https://www.really-learn-english.com/parentheses-brackets-and-braces.html" \l "brackets) [ ] and [braces](https://www.really-learn-english.com/parentheses-brackets-and-braces.html" \l "braces) { }
* [hyphen](https://www.really-learn-english.com/hyphen.html) ( ‐ )
* [en dash](https://www.really-learn-english.com/en-dash.html) (–)
* [em dash](https://www.really-learn-english.com/em-dash.html) ( — )
* [ellipsis](https://www.really-learn-english.com/ellipsis.html) (. . . )
* [apostrophe](https://www.really-learn-english.com/apostrophe.html) ( ' )
* [slash](https://www.really-learn-english.com/slash-punctuation.html) ( / )

**Some additional punctuation marks are:**

* [ampersand](https://www.really-learn-english.com/ampersand-symbol.html) ( & )
* [asterisk](https://www.really-learn-english.com/asterisk.html) ( \* )
* [at sign](https://www.really-learn-english.com/at-sign.html) ( @ )
* [bullet](https://www.really-learn-english.com/bullets.html) ( • )
* [degree symbol](https://www.really-learn-english.com/degree-symbol.html) ( ° )
* [number sign](https://www.really-learn-english.com/number-sign.html) ( # )
* [percent sign](https://www.really-learn-english.com/percent-sign.html) ( % )
* [underscore symbol](https://www.really-learn-english.com/underscore-sign.html) ( \_ )
* [copyright symbol](https://www.really-learn-english.com/copyright-trademark-and-service-mark-symbols.html) ( © )
* [registered trademark symbol](https://www.really-learn-english.com/copyright-trademark-and-service-mark-symbols.html" \l "registered) ( ® )
* [trademark symbol](https://www.really-learn-english.com/copyright-trademark-and-service-mark-symbols.html" \l "trademark) ( ™ )
* [dollar sign](https://www.really-learn-english.com/dollar-sign.html) ( $ )

**Punctuations to end a sentence**

* [period (full stop)](https://www.really-learn-english.com/period.html) ( . )
* [question mark](https://www.really-learn-english.com/question-marks.html) ( ? )
* [exclamation mark](https://www.really-learn-english.com/exclamation-mark.html) ( ! )
* [ellipsis](https://www.really-learn-english.com/ellipsis.html) (. . .)

**To separate phrases or items**

* [comma](https://www.really-learn-english.com/comma-punctuation.html) ( , )
* [semicolon](https://www.really-learn-english.com/semicolon.html) ( ; )

**To begin a list**

* [colon](https://www.really-learn-english.com/colon-punctuation.html) ( : )

**To quote or indicate a title**

* [single quotation marks](https://www.really-learn-english.com/single-quotation-marks.html) ( ' ' )
* [double quotation marks](https://www.really-learn-english.com/quotation-mark.html) ( " " )

**To indicate extra information**

* [parentheses](https://www.really-learn-english.com/parentheses-brackets-and-braces.html) ( ), [brackets](https://www.really-learn-english.com/parentheses-brackets-and-braces.html" \l "brackets) [ ] and [braces](https://www.really-learn-english.com/parentheses-brackets-and-braces.html" \l "braces) { }
* [em dash](https://www.really-learn-english.com/em-dash.html) ( — )

**To show alternatives**

* [slash](https://www.really-learn-english.com/slash-punctuation.html) ( / )

**Why is punctuation important?**

When we speak, we can pause or emphasize certain words and phrases to help people understand what we are saying.  
  
In our writing, we use **punctuation** to show pauses and emphasis. Punctuation marks help the reader understand what we mean.

A **punctuation mark** is a mark, or sign, used in writing to divide texts into phrases and sentences and make the meaning clear.  
  
In this lesson, we will look at some common punctuation marks and mistakes. You will see examples of what happens if you omit or misuse some common punctuation marks.  
  
**End Punctuation**

End Punctuation is the most common punctuation in the English language. You **must** use end punctuation at the end of every sentence to avoid confusion.   
  
The three most common ways to end a sentence are

* **[period](https://www.really-learn-english.com/period.html) ( . )**
* The elephant is big.
* **[question mark](https://www.really-learn-english.com/question-marks.html) ( ? )**  
    
  Where is the man?
* **[exclamation mark](https://www.really-learn-english.com/exclamation-mark.html) ( ! )**  
    
  The huge elephant sat on the man!

**Here is a paragraph without end punctuation:**

Do you like to sing My mom and I sing in a choir that meets every Tuesday Last week we sang Christmas carols at a nursing home The residents of the nursing home enjoyed our visit It was fun Would you like to join us next Tuesday

You can see that it is very difficult to read and make sense of the paragraph. Every sentence runs straight into the next sentence.   
 **Here is the same paragraph with end punctuation:**

Do you like to sing? My mom and I sing in a choir that meets every Tuesday. Last week, we sang Christmas carols at a nursing home. The residents of the nursing home enjoyed our visit! It was fun! Would you like to join us next Tuesday?

**Commas**

[Commas](https://www.really-learn-english.com/comma-punctuation.html) are another very important type of punctuation. Commas tell the reader where to pause. Commas also separate phrases, ideas, and items in a list. Commas help avoid confusion.

**A) Using commas in lists:**

**Here is a list without commas:**

**Sally likes to eat chocolate hot dogs and broccoli.**

Without commas, it sounds like Sally likes to eat hot dogs and broccolicovered in chocolate!  
  
Yuck!

**Here is the same list withcommas:**

**Sally likes to eat chocolate, hot dogs, and broccoli.**  
  
Now, we see that Sally actually likes three foods:  
  
1. chocolate  
2. hot dogs  
3. broccoli

**) Commas for phrasing**

Here is another funny example:

**1. It is time to eat David!**  
 **2. It is time to eat, David!**

1. In the first sentence, it sounds like we are going to eat David for lunch!    
  
2. The comma in the second sentence shows the writer that we are actually informing David that it is time to eat.

Commas are used in many ways when writing in English.  
  
The following rules will help you begin to use commas correctly when writing in English.

### 1. When listing items in a sentence, use comma punctuation to separate words or [phrases](https://www.really-learn-english.com/english-grammar-phrases.html) of three or more.

**Note:** most American non-journalistic writers**use** a comma to separate the final item in the series, but some do not.   
  
It can be a style matter. But whatever style you choose, make sure you are consistent!

Option B is more common and sometimes clearer to the reader.  
  
**Option A:** The colors in my bedroom are blue, green and yellow.  
**Option B:** The colors in my bedroom are blue, green**,** and yellow.  
  
**Option A:**On our farm we have three cats, two goats, one cow and a pig.  
**Option B:**On our farm we have three cats, two goats, one cow**,** and a pig.  
  
**Option A:**Flour, sugar, butter and milk are what you need to buy.  
**Option B:**Flour, sugar, butter**,** and milk are what you need to buy.  
  
**Option A:** My best friends are Richard, Nick, Beth and Lisa.

**Option B:** My best friends are Richard, Nick, Beth**,** and Lisa.

### 2. Use a comma to separate two adjectives if you can reverse the order of the adjectives or insert "and" between the adjectives.

An [adjective](https://www.really-learn-english.com/english-adjectives.html) is a describing word such as big, small, yellow and soft. **Examples:**

* He is a little, short man.  
    
  We would use a comma here because we can say:   
  The man is little **and** short.  
    
  We can also reverse the order of the two adjectives in the sentence:  
  He is a short, little man.
* I have a small, white cat.  
    
  We need a comma here because we can say:   
  The cat is small **and** white.  
    
  We can also reverse the order of the two adjectives in the sentence:  
  I have a white, small cat.
* It was a cold winter night.  
    
  We do not need a comma here because we would not say:  
  It was a cold **and** winter night or The night was cold **and** winter!  
    
  It does not make sense to reverse the order of the words:  
  It was a winter cold night.
* We went to a fun summer party.  
    
  We do not need a comma here because we would not say:   
  We went to a fun **and** summer party or The party is fun **and** summer!  
    
  It does not make sense to reverse the order of the words:  
  We went to a summer fun party.

### 3. When we use an -ly adjective we insert a comma to separate it from other adjectives.

By "**-ly word**" we mean a word ending with **-ly**. For example: quickly, lovely.  
  
Some of the words ending with -ly are adjectives, but most are not.  
  
**Some adjectives ending with -ly:**

* She is a **lovely** lady.
* This is a **smelly** fish.
* Today is a **holy** day.
* He has a **friendly** smile.
* This game is **silly**.

**Some words which are not adjectives ending with -ly:**

* The cat left **quickly**.
* Sharon explains **clearly**.
* The kids jumped **happily**.
* They exercise **regularly**.
* **Naturally**, we all agreed.
* **Oddly**, he did not come.

To test whether a word ending with **-ly** is an adjective, try saying it alone with the noun. If it sounds correct, it is an adjective, and you **need a comma**.  
  
**Examples:**

* She has a **lovely**, black horse.  
    
  Lovely horse sounds correct, so we need a comma.
* We walked the dog for a **friendly**, **elderly** lady.  
    
  Friendly lady and elderly lady sound correct, so we need a comma between them.
* I like to read in a **brightly** lit room.  
    
  In this sentence we do not need a comma because brightly is not an adjective. Brightly room does not make sense.

### 4. When writing a date in a sentence:

#### Use a comma to separate the day from the year.

#### Use a comma after the year to separate it from the rest of the sentence.

#### This rule only applies when the date is written in this format:

### Month Day, Year

**Examples:**

* He was born on March 17th, 1981.
* School will begin August 25, 2013, at 8:15 a.m.

### Do not use a comma if the day or year is left out.

**Examples:**

* He was born in March 1981.
* School will begin on August 25.

### 5. When writing a location in a sentence, we use commas to separate the city from the state.

A) Use a comma after the state if you spell out the name of the state.  **Examples:**

* I am traveling to Austin, **Texas**, to visit my sister.
* She was born in San Diego, **California**, in 1980.

B) Do not use a comma after the state if you use the two letter abbreviated(shortened) version of the state.  
  
**Examples:**

* I am traveling to Austin, **TX** to visit my sister.
* She was born in San Diego, **CA** in 1980.

C) Do not use any commas around the state when addressing an envelope to be mailed at the post office.  
  
**Example:**

* 2307 North Main Street  
  Austin **TX** 97532

### 6. Use commas when you write a sentence that directly addresses someone.

This is called a direct address and is used in writing when one person speaks directly to another person by using their name or title.  
  
**Examples:**

* Yes, teacher, I will finish my work.
* Will you, Bill, show me how to do the mathematics problem?
* Do you like horses, Joe?
* I was wondering, Mr. Jones, if you would like to come to my house next week.
* No, mother, I did not pick up all my toys.

### 7. We also use commas around degrees or titles with names.

**Examples:**

* John Smith, M.D.  
  (= Doctor of Medicine)
* Sally Ford, Ph.D.  
  (= Doctor of Philosophy)

Commas are no longer used with Jr. (Junior) or Sr. (Senior) or II, III, IV and so on.  
  
**Examples:**

* Dan Jones III
* Fred Meeker Jr.
* William Scott Sr.

### 8. Use a comma to set apart an introductory word such as Yes, No, Well, Finally, Then, and Now.

An introductory word is a word that is used to begin a sentence but has nothing in common with the rest of the sentence.  
  
**Examples:**

* Yes, I would love to go to the park today!
* Well, I never thought I would see a tiger.
* Now, it is time to start the movie.
* Then, it will be time to wash the dishes.
* Finally, I am finished with my homework!
* No, she does not like lizards.

### 9. Use a comma with an introductory phrase to set it apart from the main sentence.

Introductory phrases are not complete [clauses](https://www.really-learn-english.com/independent-and-dependent-clauses.html) and are used to introduce the main part of the sentence.  
  
If the phrase is three words or less, the comma is optional.  
  
**Examples:**

* On December 25, many families will celebrate Christmas in America.

**Or**

* On December 25 many families will celebrate Christmas in America.
* In about two weeks, I will finally be 18 years old.
* To prepare for the competition, Tim surfed every day.

### 10. Use a comma with a [coordinating conjunction](https://www.really-learn-english.com/coordinating-conjunction.html) (for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so) to connect two independent clauses in a compound sentence.

An [independent clause](https://www.really-learn-english.com/independent-and-dependent-clauses.html) is a complete thought and complete sentence with a subject and a verb.

### Independent Clause + , +  Coordinating Conjunction + Independent Clause

**Examples:**

* **My little brother likes candy**, **so** **I bought him a lollipop**.
* **The dog chased the cat**, **but** **the cat ran up a tree**.
* **Sarah wants to go to the theater**, **and** **Sandy wants to go to the zoo.**
* **She likes flowers**, **so** **he bought her a bouquet**

### 11. When writing a quote, we use commas to set apart the [quotation](https://www.really-learn-english.com/quotation-mark.html).

**Examples:**

* My mom said, "Be nice to your sister."
* "Please take good care of yourself," said the doctor.
* "You can vote for a president this Tuesday," the man instructed.
* "John," my father asked, "could you please take the dog outside?"

### 12. When writing a [Tag Question](https://www.really-learn-english.com/tag-question.html), use a comma to separate the statement from the question.

**Examples:**

* You like horses, don't you?
* His name is Bill, isn't it?
* This Sunday is your birthday, correct?
* That is a clown, right?

### 13. Use commas around a description of someone or something in a sentence that has already been identified.

Only use a comma if you can remove the description and not change the meaning of the sentence.  
**Examples:**

* Mr. Johnson, my math teacher, told us to study for the test tonight.  
  This would be clear too: Mr. Johnson told us to study for the test tonight.
* Mrs. James, the dentist, was at the grocery store.  
    
  This would be clear too: Mrs. James was a the grocery store.
* My green bike, which has a flat tire, is parked in the garage.  
  This would be clear too: My green bike is parked in the garage.
* The team that won the competition will receive a trophy.  
  We do not need commas around the description in this sentence because we cannot take out the phrase that won the competitionwithout changing the meaning of the sentence.  
    
  The team will receive a trophy does not tell us which team is receiving the trophy. The original sentence says that only the winning team will receive a trophy.
* The students who failed the test must stay after school.  
    
  We do not need commas in this sentence because we cannot take out the phrase **who failed the test** without changing the meaning of the sentence.  
    
  The students must stay after school would mean that ALL students must stay after school.

A [noun](https://www.really-learn-english.com/english-nouns.html) or [noun phrase](https://www.really-learn-english.com/english-noun-phrases.html) that follows another noun or [pronoun](https://www.really-learn-english.com/english-pronouns.html) and explains it is called an **appositive**.   
  
For example, in this sentence:  
The students who failed the test must stay after school.  
  
The underlined phrase is an appositive.  
  
[Click here to learn more about English Appositives](https://www.really-learn-english.com/english-appositives.html).

### 14. When you have two contrasting (opposite) phrases, use a comma to separate the phrases.

**Examples:**

* That ball is mine, not yours.
* The puppy is cute, but messy.
* I am very tired, but still awake.
* The alligator is cute, but dangerous.

### 15. When writing letters, use a comma after the greeting of a friendly letter and the closing in all letters.

**Examples of greetings:**

* Dear John,
* Dearest Mother,
* Dear Mr. and Mrs. Smith,
* Greetings,

**Examples of closings:**

* Sincerely,
* Your loving children,
* Your friend,
* Yours truly,
* With love,
* Love,

**Quotation marks**

[Quotation marks](https://www.really-learn-english.com/quotation-mark.html) are another common punctuation mark in the English language. Quotation marks are used with commas to inform the reader that someone is talking or being quoted.  
  
**Example:**

**"Punctuation is important," my teacher said. "Without punctuation marks, your writing would be very confusing."**

Without quotation marks and commas, it would be difficult to understand what the character is saying.

**Punctuation is important my teacher said without punctuation marks your writing would be very confusing**

Quotation marks are also very important when you are quoting words someone has already said.   
  
**Example:**

**Maya Angelo said, "If you don't like something, change it. If you can't change it, change your attitude."**

Maya Angelo is a famous author and poet. When I am quoting her, I show her exact words by enclosing them in quotation marks. By using quotation marks, I am giving her credit for her words.

**Apostrophes**

[Apostrophes](https://www.really-learn-english.com/apostrophe.html) are another commonly misused form of punctuation. Apostrophes are used to show ownership and missing letters in contractions.  
  
Misplaced apostrophes can cause confusion for readers. **Example:**it's = it is   
its = ownership

* **Correct:**

The dog sleeps in **its** house. The house **belongs** to the dog.

* **Incorrect:**

The dog sleeps in **it's** house.  
  
This does not make sense because we would not say, "The dog sleeps in **it is** house."

**Example:**boy's = ownership  
boys = more than one boy

* **Correct:**The **boy's** room is painted blue.  
    
  The blue room **belongs to the boy**.
* **Incorrect:**  
  The **boys** room is painted blue.  
    
  In this example, we do not know if the room belongs to one boy **(boy's)** or more than one boy **(boys')**.
* **Correct:**  
    
  The **boys** are sleeping in the tent.  
    
  There is **more than one boy** sleeping in the tent.
* **Incorrect:**  
    
  The **boy's** are sleeping in the tent.  
    
  The apostrophe is not needed in this sentence because we are not showing ownership.

Colon punctuation is used to introduce. Colons can introduce a word or words, a phrase, a list or a quotation.

## How to use a colon

A colon is made of two equal dots (or periods). One dot sits on top of the other with a small space between ( : ).   
  
To insert a colon on a traditional American keyboard, press SHIFT and the colon/semicolon key beside the L. There is always one space after a colon.  
  
**Examples:**

* I like many healthy foods: carrots, broccoli, apples, spinach and oranges.
* In writing, colon punctuation is used for one thing: to introduce.
* Mary has only one thing on her mind: work.
* My mom always told me to follow the Golden Rule: "Treat others as you want to be treated."
* I have lived in a few states: Alabama, Kansas, Colorado and California.

A colon gives emphasis to whatever you are introducing because the reader must come to a full stop at the colon, which causes them to pay attention to what comes next.  
  
**Example:**

* Richard was the best person for the job because he had experience in one key area: teaching.  
    
  *This sentence introduces why Richard was the best person for the job and makes the reader focus on that reason: teaching.*
* He was the best person for the job because he had experience in teaching.  
    
  *This sentence does not focus on the reason he is best for the job. It does get the point across, but it does not place any emphasis on the word teaching.*

#### Colon punctuation can also be used after the salutation (greeting) of a formal letter or a business letter.

**Examples:**

* Dear Sir or Madam:
* To Whom It May Concern:
* Gentlemen:
* Superintendent of Schools:
* Dear Selection Committee:

## Common misuses of the colon

### 1. Do not use a colon to separate a [preposition](https://www.really-learn-english.com/prepositions.html) from its object.

A preposition is a word that is used before a [noun](https://www.really-learn-english.com/english-nouns.html) to show its connection to another word in the sentence. Here are a few common prepositions:

* with
* by
* for
* from
* in
* to

**Incorrect:**He was responsible for: cooking dinner, washing dishes and taking out the trash.  
 **Correct without a colon:**He was responsible for cooking dinner, washing dishes and taking out the trash.  
 **Correct with a colon:**He had a few responsibilities: cooking dinner, washing dishes and taking out the trash.  
  
**Incorrect:**She went to the concert with: Amy, Lisa, Nick and Richard.  
  
**Correct without a colon:**She went to the concert with Amy, Lisa, Nick and Richard.  
  
**Correct with a colon:**She went to the concert with her friends: Amy, Lisa, Nick and Richard.

### 2. Do not use a colon after a [verb](https://www.really-learn-english.com/learn-english-verbs.html) in a sentence.

**Incorrect:**Her favorite activities in the summer are: biking, swimming and playing baseball.  
 **Correct without a colon:**Her favorite activities in the summer are biking, swimming and playing baseball.

**Correct with a colon:**She enjoys many activities during the summer: biking, swimming and playing baseball.  
  
**Incorrect:**I like to eat: pizza, chicken and chocolate pie.  
  
**Correct without a colon:**I like to eat pizza, chicken and chocolate pie.  
 **Correct with a colon:**I have a few favorite foods: pizza, chicken and chocolate pie.

### 3. Do not use a colon after "such as."

**Incorrect:**I need to buy a few items before school such as: pencils, paper, glue and crayons.  
  
**Correct without a colon:**I need to buy a few items before school such as pencils, paper, glue and crayons.  
  
**Correct with a colon:**I need to buy a few items before school: pencils, paper, glue and crayons

**How to use the semicolon**

There are three uses of the semicolon.

**1. Use a semicolon to connect (put together) two related, or similar, sentences.**

We connect the [sentences](https://www.really-learn-english.com/parts-of-a-sentence.html) with a semicolon to eliminate the pause between them.  
  
**Example without a semicolon:**

* My shirt is green. My brother's shirt is blue.

When we say these two sentences aloud, we say, "My shirt is green. (pause) My brother's shirt is blue."  
  
**Example with a semicolon:**

* My shirt is green; my brother's is blue.

When we say this sentence aloud, we do not pause after green.  
  
We can put these two sentences together with a semicolon because they are similar. They are both about the colors of the shirts.  
  
Here are some more examples.  
  
**Example without a semicolon:**

* I have my own bed. The cat sleeps on the pillow.

**Example with a semicolon:**

* I have my own bed; the cat sleeps on the pillow.

We can put these two sentences together with a semicolon because they are similar. They are both about my bed.  
  
**Incorrect:**

* Tim likes cats; Bill went to the park.

These two sentences should not be put together with a semicolon because they are not similar. They are about two different subjects.

**2. Use a semicolon to join two related, or similar, sentences when using a conjunctive adverb.**

A conjunctive [adverb](https://www.really-learn-english.com/english-adverbs.html) is a connecting word such as:

* also
* besides
* finally
* similarly
* likewise
* furthermore
* however
* next
* then
* therefore
* meanwhile

**Examples:**

* We will drive to school; then we will go to the museum.
* I ate all of my vegetables; therefore, I should get dessert.

**3. Use a semicolon to connect items in a list if there are already commas in the sentence. Use this when listing dates, locations, names and descriptions.**

**Example with names and descriptions:**  
  
**Correct:**

* My favorite teachers are Mrs. White, my math teacher; Mrs. Smith, my reading teacher; and Mr. Johnson, my music teacher.

**Incorrect:**

* My favorite teachers are Mrs. White, my math teacher, Mrs. Smith, my reading teacher, and Mr. Johnson, my music teacher.

**Example with dates:  
  
Correct:**

* Our birthdays are July 11, 2000; February 12, 2007; and April 9, 2007.

**Incorrect:**

* Our birthdays are July 11, 2000, February 12, 2007, and April 9, 2007.

**Example with locations:**  
  
**Correct:**

* I have lived in Paris, France; London, England; and Los Angeles, California.

**Incorrect:**

* I have lived in Paris, France, London, England, and Los Angeles, California.

**Tips for Using the Semicolon**

**1) Do not capitalize the word following the semicolon, unless it is a proper noun.**

A **[noun](https://www.really-learn-english.com/english-nouns.html)** names a person place or thing.  
  
**Examples of nouns:**

* restaurant
* boy
* school
* woman

A **proper noun** is noun that names a specific person place or thing.  
  
**Examples of proper nouns:**

* McDonald's
* Tom
* Kansas University
* Google

**Correct:**

* This summer my father traveled to Columbus, Ohio; Miami, Florida; and Atlanta, Georgia.

We capitalize the "M" on Miami because it is a proper noun. We do not capitalize the "a" on and because it is not a proper noun.  
  
**Incorrect:**

* Some people like apple pie; Cherry pie is my favorite.

We should not capitalize the "c" on cherry because it is not a proper noun.

**2) Do not use a semicolon with conjunctions.**

[Conjunctions](https://www.really-learn-english.com/english-parts-of-speech.html" \l "conjunction) are combining words like **and**, **but**, **or**, **for**, **so**, and **yet**.  
  
Use a comma with conjunctions.  
  
**Incorrect:**

* My favorite color is red; but my bike is green.

**Correct:** 

* My favorite color is red, but my bike is green.

**Incorrect:**

* My sister was sleeping; so I turned off the lights.

**Correct:**

* My sister was sleeping, so I turned off the lights.

**Parentheses, Brackets and Braces**

**Rules and Examples**

Parentheses, brackets and braces are three punctuation marks that are used when writing in English. 

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**Parentheses ( )**

**Parentheses (plural)**  
  
**Parenthesis (singular)**  
  
Parentheses are the most common of these three punctuation marks.   
  
Parentheses are made on a keyboard by pressing the **SHIFT** key + **9**or **0**.

We use parentheses to enclose information that can be left out.   
  
The information in the parentheses is **not essential**to the meaning of the original sentence. it is given as additional, or extra, information.  
  
**Examples:**

* Sam (the boy from the school) helped me with my homework.
* The pig ate the ice-cream cone. (His favorite flavor was chocolate.)

**Sometimes the information is inserted within the original sentence and is not a complete sentence itself.**

When this happens, we do not capitalize the section in parentheses or put punctuation at the end.  
  
**Examples:**

* Jenny **(the girl that lives in the yellow house)**invited you to her birthday party next week.
* I am going to the park to play with Richard **(who goes to school with me)**.

**Sometimes the information in parentheses is a complete sentence that is separate from the original sentence.**

When this happens, we treat the words in the parentheses as a complete sentence by capitalizing the first letter and adding punctuation inside the parentheses.  
  
**Examples:**

* The children won their baseball game. **(It was exciting!)**
* I am going to the park to play with Richard.**(Richard went to school with me.)**

**If you remove the information that is inside the parentheses, the sentence must still make sense.**

**Examples:**

* Jenny **(the girl that lives in the yellow house)** invited you to her birthday party next week.  
    
  Jenny invited you to her birthday party next week.
* I am going to the park to play with Richard **(who goes to school with me)**.  
    
  I am going to the park to play with Richard.
* The children won their baseball game. **(It was exciting!)**  
    
  The children won their baseball game.
* I am going to the park to play with Richard. **(Richard went to school with me.)**  
    
  I am going to the park to play with Richard.

**Brackets [ ]**

Brackets look squarer than parentheses. They are made on a keyboard by using the two keys to the right of the **P**.   
  
Brackets are placed around extra information in a text, especially comments made by an editor.

in other words, they are typically used for editorial comments, corrections, and clarifications  
  
For example, you can use brackets to add something into a sentence that was taken out by the writer.

**Original sentence:**

* She drove 60 on the highway to town.  
    
  This could mean 60 miles per hour, 60 kilometers per hour or something different.

**Sentence with words added by an editor to help the reader understand:**

* She drove 60 **[miles per hour]** on the highway to town.

In this example, the information in the brackets helps the reader understand the sentence. 

**What the difference between parentheses and brackets?**

**Parentheses** are used for text that is part of the original sentence but can be omitted.  
  
**Examples:**

* We were very happy to see them (all of them).
* For more info see chapter the "Birds" (page 5).
* I was very surprised (and it's pretty hard to surprise me!).

**Brackets** are typically used to explain or clarify the original text by an editor.  
  
**Example:**

* She [Martha] is a great friend of us.  
    
  In this example "Martha" was not part of the original sentence, and the editor added it for clarification.
* Many sheeps [ships] left the port.  
    
  In this example the original writer made a spelling mistake. So later on, when someone quoted them, they added "[ships]" for clarification. "Ships" was not part of the original sentence.

You can also use brackets in sentences where you want to put parentheses within parentheses.   
  
**The order is the following:**

1. Opening parenthesis
2. Opening bracket
3. Closing bracket
4. Closing parenthesis

**Example:**

* The package includes several things (mainly CDs [compact discs]).

**Braces { }**

Braces look like curly brackets.  
  
Braces are made on a keyboard by holding the **SHIFT key**and using the two keys to the right of the **P**.  
  
We do not use braces very often in written language. Braces are more common in mathematics and science, which are not discussed in this lesson.

These were the uses of parentheses, brackets and braces. Now that you know them, it is time to practice! [Read and do exercises](https://www.really-learn-english.com/esl-ebooks.html).

# The Hyphen

## Rules and Examples

A hyphen is a short line ( - ) used in the English language to connect the parts of a compound word or to connect split words such as numbers (twenty-nine) and job titles (vice-president).

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A compound word is made by combining two separate words.   
  
Depending on the dictionary, many of these words can be found written with a hyphen, as two separate words or as one complete word.  
  
**Example:**

* book-keeper
* book keeper
* bookkeeper

The current trend in English writing is to get rid of unnecessary hyphens. Use a dictionary when in doubt. [Click here for some good online dictionaries](https://www.really-learn-english.com/english-dictionary.html).   
  
If you are still unsure on whether or not to use a hyphen with a compound word, it is best to leave the hyphen out.  
  
**Here are a few common compound words that do not require a hyphen:**

* rainforest
* website
* baseball
* cannot
* headache
* laptop
* businessman
* schoolteacher

**Here are a few common compound words that are usually written with a hyphen:**

* truck-driver
* ice-cream
* year-end
* sign-in
* warm-up
* mother-in-law
* free-for-all
* follow-up

**These are a few common compound words that are written with a space between the words and no hyphen:**

* voice mail
* help desk
* fact sheet
* school year
* time line

## General uses of the hyphen

#### 1.  Use a hyphen to join two or more words that stand for a single [adjective](https://www.really-learn-english.com/english-adjectives.html) (describing word) before a [noun](https://www.really-learn-english.com/english-nouns.html).

**Examples:**

* chocolate-covered donuts
* well-known doctor
* much-needed vacation
* nice-looking girl

Do not use a hyphen if the two words have separate meanings and do not stand as a single adjective.  
 **Examples:**

* friendly little girl
* beautiful red dress
* small round ball

#### 2.  Use a hyphen when spelling out numbers between 21 and 99.

**Examples:**

* twenty-one
* thirty-three
* seventy-five
* ninety-nine

#### 3.  Use a hyphen when spelling out fractions.

**Examples:**

* one-third
* two-fourths
* seven-eighths

#### 4.  Use a hyphen to avoid confusion in meaning.

**Examples:**  
a little-used car  
(The hyphen is used to mean a car that is not used often.)  
  
a little used-car  
(The hyphen indicates that the used car is small.)

#### 5.  Use a hyphen with some job titles.

**Examples:**

* vice-president
* attorney-general
* secretary-general

## Using hyphens with prefixes

As I said above, the current trend in writing English is to get rid of unnecessary hyphens. Therefore, most prefixes do not require a hyphen.   
  
Follow the rules below when deciding whether to use a hyphen with a [prefix](https://www.really-learn-english.com/word-formation-processes.html). If you are still unsure and cannot find the word in a dictionary, it is best not to use a hyphen.

#### 1.  Hyphenate prefixes before [proper nouns](https://www.really-learn-english.com/english-nouns.html).

**Examples:**

* un-American
* anti-Republican
* pre-Vietnam War
* mid-May

#### 2.  Use a hyphen with most words that begin with the prefix self-. (Do not use a hyphen with the words "selfless" and "selfish.")

**Examples:**

* self-control
* self-respect
* self-check

#### 3.  Use a hyphen with words that begin with the prefix ex-.

**Examples:**

* ex-wife
* ex-military
* ex-student

#### 4.  Use a hyphen with most words that begin with the prefix non-.  (Do not use a hyphen with "nonaligned," "nonconformist" or "nonstop.")

**Examples:**

* non-smoker
* non-alcoholic
* non-violent

#### 5.  Use a hyphen when the prefix ends in the same letter the word begins.

**Examples:**

* semi-invalid
* inter-related

#### 6.  Use a hyphen with the prefix re- when it stands for "again" and there is confusion with another word.

**Example:**I will recover from my illness.  
(We do not use a hyphen because *re-* does not mean *again*. The word recovermeans to get better.)  
  
I am going to re-cover the sofa.  
(Use a hyphen because re-cover means to cover again.)

## Using hyphens to break lines

When reading books you may sometimes notice the hyphen at the end of a line.   
  
The hyphen is there because there wasn't enough space in that line for the entire word.

The solution was to divide that word between that line and the next one. The hyphen is there to show us that this is actually a single word that continues on the next line.  
  
**For example:**

* Joe worked in the company for many years. Finally, He made a **deci-  
  sion** to quit this job and find a new one.

**En Dash**

**Rules and Examples**

**Intro**

There are three forms of dashes and lines in the English language. The three forms are the **[hyphen](https://www.really-learn-english.com/hyphen.html)**, the **em dash** and the **en dash**.

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**Hyphen**

A hyphen is a short line ( - ) used to connect the parts of a compound word or a split word such as numbers (twenty-nine) and job titles (vice-president).   
  
The hyphen is **shorter** than the en dash and the em dash.

Here are some examples of words and phrases that are usually written with a hyphen.

* brother-in-law
* seventy-eight
* one-half
* ex-wife
* mid-April
* much-needed vacation
* warm-up

**Em Dash**

The em dash gets its name because of its length. It is about the same width as the letter "M". The em dash is **longer** than the hyphen or the en dash.   
  
To form a true em dash on most PCs hold down the **ALT key** while typing **0151** on the numerical pad on the right side of your keyboard ( — ).   
  
The em dash is used in sentences to create a strong break. It can be used in pairs like parentheses ( ) to separate a word or phrase, or it can be used alone to separate one end of the sentence from the main sentence (similar to the use of a colon).   
  
There should be **no spaces** before or after an em dash.  
  
**Examples:**

* The tea—and I rarely drink tea—was warm and delicious.
* Most workers—at least the ones that I know—came to the meeting.
* Have you seen my sister—a tall brunette—when you entered?
* We work—they pay. This is how it works around here.
* This is not where I wanted us to meet—but never mind, it is just as good.
* Leave the dishes—I will wash them later.
* They are getting divorced. But I'm not surprised—they were always arguing.

**En Dash**

The en dash gets its name because it is about the same width as the letter "N". In Microsoft Word, the en dash can be made by pressing **CTRL** + the **minus sign -**, located on the keypad ( – ).  
  
Another way to form an en dash with a PC is to hold down the **ALT** key while typing **0150** on the numerical pad on the right side of the keyboard ( – ).  
  
There should be no spaces before or after an en dash.

**Using the en dash**

**1.  Use an en dash to show a range of numbers.  
  
Examples:**

* Please pick a number from 1–50.
* The instructions were on pages 20–22 in your textbook.
* I need $500–$600 for my computer.

**2.  Use an en dash to show a period of time.  
  
Examples:**

* I lived in Georgia from 2001–2011.
* The meeting will be held May 2–May 4 at the Hilton Hotel.
* Our vacation will be November 16–21, 2013.

**3. Use an en dash to show distance.  
  
Examples:**

* Europe–USA is a long flight.
* We live on the Kansas–Missouri border.

**4. Use an en dash with scores.  
  
Examples:**

* Our team won 22–19.
* The score at the end of the game was 2–5.

**The correct way to use an en dash is without spaces.**

**Incorrect:**Please read pages 1 – 10 tonight and complete the study guide.  
 **Correct:**Please read pages 1–10 tonight and complete the study guide.  
  
**Incorrect:**I worked there from 1999 – 2010.  
  
**Correct:**I worked there from 1999–2010.  
  
  
These were the uses of the En Dash. Now that you know them, it is time to practice! [Read and do exercises](https://www.really-learn-english.com/esl-ebooks.html).