

Punctuation

Definition of Punctuation

Punctuation is a set of marks that regulates and clarifies the meanings of different texts. The term “punctuation” has originated from the Medieval Latin word “*pūnctuātiōn*,” which means markings or signs.

The purpose of punctuation is to clarify the meanings of texts by linking or separating words, phrases, or clauses. For example, in the [sentence](#) “Yesterday, rain–fog; today, frost–mist. But how fascinating each” (*At the Turn of the Year*, by Fiona Macleod), hyphens are used to separate the compound words, while commas are used to separate the phrases.

Types of Punctuation

There are fifteen basic punctuation marks in English grammar. These include the period, comma, exclamation point, question mark, colon, [semicolon](#), bullet point, dash, [hyphen](#), parenthesis, bracket, brace, ellipsis, quotation mark, and apostrophe. The following are a few examples of these marks being used in a sentence.

Brackets and Ellipses

“Mr. Bumble said ‘a ass’ not ‘an ass’ in *Oliver Twist*. ... [In a quotation, one] option might have been ‘The law is a[n] ass,’ although this would have carried the condescending tone of a sic flag, implying we’re smarter than Dickens.” (*Quibbling Over Quotes*, by Blair Shewchuk)

In this example, see the use of square brackets ([]) and an ellipsis (“...”). The author has used the brackets to explain the technical description, and the ellipsis to show the omission of words.

Dashes and Parentheses

“The why and wherefore of the scorpion – how it had got on board and came to select his room rather than the pantry (which was a dark place and more what a scorpion would be partial to), and how on earth it managed to drown itself in the inkwell of his writing desk – had exercised him infinitely.” (*The Secret Sharer*, by Joseph Conrad)

Here, Conrad has employed dashes to provide a short summary of the main [clause](#). He has also used parentheses, or curved notations, to explain the idea further.

Bullet Points

“The idea is simply to end by design rather than by default, and any of the following practices will help:

- In your notes, keep track of potentially dramatic closing materials.
- Allow space for a developed ending.
- Commit to a closing worthy of the piece.
- Avoid the drift toward a clichéd ending.”

(*Spunk & Bite*, by Arthur Plotnik)

Here, the author has used bullet points to display his list of ideas.

Apostrophes and Quotation Marks

“And underneath the guy on the horse’s picture, it always says: ‘Since 1888 we have been *molding* boys into splendid, clear-thinking young men.’ ...”

“No, sir, I haven’t communicated with them.”

(*The Catcher in the Rye*, by J.D. Salinger)

In this excerpt, Salinger has used an apostrophe, which allows the removal of letters from a word, such that the word still makes sense. He also uses a pair of quotation marks around the sentence in order to quote the statement of another character.

Colons and Semi-Colons

“The City is termite territory: thousands of heads-down workers serving an

(*Lights Out for the Territory*, by Iain Sinclair)

“The past is a foreign country; they do things differently there.”

(*The Go-Between*, by L.P. Hartley)

Here, a colon appears in the first example. It is used to introduce the explanation about the main clause. In the second example, a semicolon connects the two independent clauses.

Questions and Exclamation Marks

LAVINIA – (startled – agitatedly)

“Father? No! ... Yes! He does – something about his face – that must be why I’ve had the strange feeling I’ve known him before ... Oh! I won’t believe it! You must be mistaken, Seth! ...”

(*Mourning Becomes Electra*, by Eugene O’Neil)

In these lines, an exclamation point “!” indicates a sudden expression of emotion, while a question mark “?” is used to pose a question.

Periods

ESTRAGON:

“I remember the maps of the Holy Land. Coloured they were. Very pretty. The Dead Sea was pale blue. The very look of it made me thirsty.”

(*Waiting for Godot*, by Samuel Beckett)

Beckett has used five periods in the above sentences. The use of a period indicates the end of a thought. A period can also be used as a pause after a thought.

Function

Punctuation serves as a pause within a sentence, which is often necessary in order to emphasize certain phrases or words in order to help readers and listeners understand better what the writer or speaker is trying to convey. Thus, the basic function of punctuation is to place stress on certain sections of a sentence.

Punctuation marks are also used to divide text into words and phrases when necessary in order to better clarify the meaning of those words or phrases. On the contrary, using punctuation incorrectly can convey an entirely different meaning of a sentence from the one that was originally intended.