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# **Punctuation Marks in English**

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## **Abstract**

In writing, the correct use of punctuation marks is an important technique used by writers to convey meaning in a clear and simple way. In this research, the most widely used punctuation marks in writing have been discussed with examples. The aims of the research are to investigate the errors made by students their performance of punctuation marks, and to identify the most difficult types of them on the part of the students/subjects under investigation. To reach the researcher's aims, a test has been given to 20 students at the second stage in the English Department /College of Basic Education /University of Mosul. Students have been asked to put the correct punctuation marks in the 30 given sentences. It has been shown the subjects have difficulty in their performance in the test with different percentages. The lack of knowledge, and the negligence of punctuation marks exercises are the direct causes of such a weakness that need to be solved.

## **المخلص**

الاستخدام الصحيح لعلامات الترقيم في الكتابة هو تقنية مهمة يستخدمها الكتاب لنقل المعنى بطريقة واضحة وبسيطة. في هذا البحث، تمت مناقشة علامات الترقيم الأكثر استخداما وشيوعا في الكتابة مع الأمثلة. يهدف البحث إلى اكتشاف الأخطاء التي يرتكبها الطلاب اثناء أدائهم لعلامات الترقيم ، وتحديد أصعب أنواعها أداءا من قبل هؤلاء الطلاب. للوصول إلى أهداف الباحث، تم اختبار 20 طالبا في المرحلة الثانية في قسم اللغة الإنكليزية / كلية التربية الأساسية / جامعة الموصل. طلب من الطلاب وضع علامات الترقيم المناسبة في الجمل الثلاثين المعطاة. وقد تبين أن الطلاب يواجهون صعوبة في أدائهم لهذا الاختبار بنسب مئوية مختلفة. إن الافتقار إلى المعلومة الصحيحة والإهمال في التمارين الخاصة لعلامات الترقيم هما السببان المباشرين لمثل هذا الضعف الذي يحتاج إلى حل.

## **1.Introduction**

Writing is an important skill to convey meaning. In their writing, people may write well but struggle from the fear of punctuation and grammar. They know how to pre-write, organize, and revise, but proofreading for punctuation and grammar causes them difficulties. There is no need to fear these conventions of standard written English. In fact, these conventions can help writers become more effective communicators. As Truss (2003) puts it

Many people believe that punctuation rules are rigid commandments, and that only the experts know all the rules. Students may be surprised to learn, however, that it is not the experts but rather educated speakers and writers, such as ourselves, who have established the practices have to know the rules of punctuation (p, 123)

In other words, over the years,

...good writers have used punctuation in ways that have made their messages clear to their readers. Writers have agreed to follow these practices because they have proven to be so effective. The rules of punctuation are not static; they have changed throughout the years, and will continue to change (Gary,1996:87).

The rules of punctuation are created and maintained by writers to help make their prose more effective, and their exact meaning changes over time. This research discusses the most useful punctuation marks that are used in writing. Instead of listing many rules, as a grammar book does, these various marks are presented and discussed in general to get a sense of how to use them in prose.

## **2. Aims**

The aims of the current research are:

- 1- to investigate the errors made by students in their performance of punctuation marks, and
- 2- to identify the most difficult types of the punctuation marks for the students.

## **3. Hypotheses**

- 1- It is hypothesized that not all students perform correctly in their use of punctuation marks.
- 2- Students may have difficulty with one mark more than the other.

## **4. Procedure**

A test is given to twenty students of the second stage at the English Department, College of Basic Education, University of Mosul. Students are asked to put the correct mark in the thirty given sentences.

## **5. Punctuation Marks**

Punctuation marks are pauses or gestures used to clarify the meaning of our words. "They are signals to the reader that indicate pause, place emphasis, alter the function or show the relationship between the elements of the text." (Jane, 2008:122)

### **5.1 Importance of Punctuations Marks:**

There is no doubt about punctuation marks importance. It has a great importance in writing; it facilitates the reading of a reader, and prevent confusion and overlap between the sentence and words, and if a good writer uses them, and put them in their right positions, they will help the reader to understand what is written. If the writer neglected these signs, used or abused and did not put them in their right positions, it will be difficult to read for the reader, and may lead to misunderstand what is written.

Snooks (2002) states that marks of punctuation have a very important role in giving the intended meaning to the language. He adds that the use of the wrong placement of such marks can change the meaning of the sentence completely and sometimes even convert the sentence to complete nonsense.

### **5.2 Punctuation Marks and their Usages**

In this research, we will deal with fourteen punctuation marks that are considered mostly used in writing.

#### **1. comma (,)**

1- When a subordinate (less important) clause comes before the principal clause.

e.g. If you do not go, help me.

2- To separate phrases in apposition (describing the same Person or thing mentioned earlier) from the rest of sentence.

e.g. Mr. Brwon, the doctor, said that he travelled to Canda.

3- To separate items in the same list.

e.g. She travelled to America , Canda, and Australia. (Net: 1)

## **2. full stop(.)**

1- A full stop is used at the end of the sentence and the next sentence begins with a capital letter

e.g. Ali felt tired. He went to bed.

2- an abbreviation ends in a full stop and with acronyms.

e.g. Etcetera→ etc. Mr. B.B.C. (Net:3)

## **3. Colon (:)**

1- The use of a colon indicates that what follows is an explanation of what precedes it.  
e.g. They have some news about the story: John's father has arrived.

2- It is also used to introduce a list of the items.

e.g. To travel, you need the following items: a passport, a visa, an application and the correct fee (Net:1).

## **4. Semi colon (;)**

1- A semi colon is used to join two independent but related clauses or sentences.

e.g. She is a good writer; she has published several books.

2- It can also separate clauses of conjunctive adverbs such as however, therefore, moreover...

e.g. We shouldn't go to the fair; however, I do hear that they have good funnel cakes (Net:2).

## **5. Quotation mark (‘’)**

1- Quotation marks are used for material that is quoted or emphasized.

e.g. Ali said, ‘I cannot finish my quiz’

2- Quotation marks are used to set off the title of short works of writing.

e.g. the television show, ‘Cheers’ (Truss: 2003).

## **6. Apostrophe (')**

1-An apostrophe is used to refer to possessive singular or plural.

e.g. The boy's books. (singular)

e.g. The boys' books. (plural)

2-An apostrophe is used always to be included when telling the time.

e.g. It is eight o'clock. \*short for: (eight of the clock)

3-An apostrophe is used to show letters are missing in words (omission).

e.g. You're→ You are

e.g. I'm→ I am (Truss:2003).

## **7. Exclamation mark (!)**

1- An exclamation mark is used to signal the expression of a strong emotions such as:

a-Excitement: e.g. I can't wait! b-Panic: Ex/ Help me!

2- An exclamation mark is used to add an emphasis to the sentence.

e.g. There's a fly in my Soup. There's a fly in my Soup! (Snooks:2002).

## **8. Ellipsis (...)**

1-An ellipsis is used to show that the speaker has been cut off abruptly(interrupted).

e.g. 'Whatever you do, don't...'

2-An ellipsis is used to indicate a trailing off in speech or thought.

e.g. We could do this ... or maybe that...

## **9. slash (/)**

1-Slash is used with fractions.

e.g.  $1/2$  = one-half

e. g.  $2/3$  = two-third

2- Use a slash to separate the day, month, and a year in dates.

e.g. He was born on 18/3/1987(Jane:2008) .

## **10. Question mark (?)**

1-Use question mark at the end of any direct questions.

e.g. Who is your teacher?

2-Use a question mark at the end of a tag question (a statement followed by a short question).

e.g. You speak English, don't you?(Jane:2008)

## **11. Hyphen (-)**

1-A hyphen may separate, in some cases, the prefix from the second part of words.

e.g. co-opt, T-shirt.

2-A hyphen may join some compound words.

e.g. twenty-one. (ibid)

## **12. Parentheses (( ))**

1-parentheses or brackets are often used to include extra or additional information into a sentence.

e.g. The library (which was built in the seventeenth century) needs to be repaired.

2-Parentheses give additional, but non-essential information in a sentence.

e.g. France, America, and Spanish (but not Chinese) may be studied here.(Net:2)

## **13.Square Brackets ([ ] )**

1-Square brackets are used to clarification, to help the reader understands the sentence.

e.g. She drove 60 [mile per hour] on the highway to town. (Net: 3)

## **14. Dash**

(Em—Dash, En–Dash)

1-Em—Dash is used to indicate a break, often informally, or to add Parenthetical information.



e.g. They received a prize —and a certificate as well.

2- An En–Dash is used to indicate a range.

e.g. 1939–1945 (Net:1)

## **6. Procedures:**

In order to know what errors students make while using punctuation marks in writing a sentence. A test is presented to the second stage, at English Department, College of Basic Education, University of Mosul. Twenty students participated in the test. The test contained thirty sentences without punctuation marks, students were required to put the suitable mark in each of the given sentences in order to make them written correctly and clearly. So, this can be shown in the following page under the title                      of                      the                      test                      question.

### **6.1 The Test: Punctuate the following sentences with suitable marks**

1. If you don t understand please tell me
2. Mr Jone the doctor said that he saw the patient
3. She wants a book papers and a ruler
4. The letter has arrived He sat down to read it
5. Etcetera → etc.
6. They had some news for you Salim s father had died
7. They need the following items a passport a visa and the correct fee
8. She is a good writer she has published several book
9. We shouldn't go to the fair however I do hear that they have good
10. Joseph said I cannot finish my quiz
11. The television show Cheers
12. The students books (singular)
13. The students books (plural)
14. It is nine o'clock
15. You re → You are
16. I can not wait
17. Help me
18. There is a fly in my Soup
19. Whatever you do don t
20. We could do this or maybe that
21. Who is your teacher
22. You speak English don t you
23. T shirt
24. Self- control
25. The library which was built in the seventeenth century needs to be repaired
26. France America and Italian but not Chinese may be studied here

27. She drove 60 mile per hour on the highway to town

28.They got a prize and a certificate as well

29. 1939 1945

30. I was born on 18 3 1987

## 6.2 Discussion of Results:

According to the test given, it is shown that most of the students do not have an idea about the uses of punctuation marks (when and where to use them). This result leads to the verification of the hypotheses posed in this research that not all students are fully aware of the correct use of punctuation marks.

The test which was given to the subjects shows that in the use of:

1. Comma, four of twenty students have answered correctly.
2. Full stop, five of twenty of twenty students have answered correctly.
3. Colon, one of twenty students have answered correctly.
4. Semi colon, one of twenty students have answered correctly.
5. Quotation mark, three of twenty students have answered correctly.
6. Apostrophe, four of twenty students have answered correctly.
7. Exclamation, four of twenty students have answered correctly.
8. Ellipsis, zero of twenty students have answered correctly.
9. Slash, five of twenty students have answered correctly.
10. Question, nine of twenty students have answered correctly.
11. Hyphen, three of twenty students have answered correctly.
12. Parenthesis, zero of twenty students have answered correctly.
13. Square Brackets, zero of twenty students have answered correctly.
14. Dash, three of twenty students have answered correctly.

**Table(1): Test Results**

Punctuation mark	Correct answer	Incorrect answer	Per cent
Comma	4	16	%20
Full stop	5	15	%25
Colon	1	19	%1
Semi colon	1	19	%1
Quotation mark	3	17	%10
Apostrophe	4	16	%25
Exclamation mark	4	16	%25
Ellipsis	0	20	%0
Slash	5	15	%25
Question mark	9	11	%46
Hyphen	3	17	%15
Parenthesis	0	20	%0
Square Brackets	0	20	%0
Dash	3	17	%15

## **7. Conclusions and Implications for Teaching:**

This study focuses on the use of punctuation marks in English. It gives an account of the errors made by the second-year students, at the Department of English, College of Basic Education, University of Mosul. It has been shown that the subjects under investigation committed many mistakes in their performance. The subjects have difficulty in specific marks more than the others. It is suggested that most of the errors made by the subjects occur due to the lack of practice which hindered their ability to punctuate correctly. Also, such a weakness may be the result of the negligence of punctuation marks exercises in their syllabus. Accordingly, further attention should be made to this area of knowledge to be performed correctly and accurately.

As such, writing formally in English is more than just choosing the right words in the right order. Using punctuation in writing helps the reader to clearly understand the message that is being conveyed. Punctuation primarily helps to indicate the pauses and the emphasis on certain ideas or thoughts that are discussed in the text. In particular, in academic writing, it is essential to accurately use punctuation as it helps to strengthen arguments that are made in the text.

Following this, teachers should teach the conventions used in Standard Written English to students because using the conventions of writing is important. Moreover, a need to show how the formality of the writing and the use of the conventions depends on the situation and the purpose of the writing is urgent. Furthermore, an explanation of how to increase the formality calls for the need to be more conventional in one's use of language and punctuation.

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