

## CHAPTER

# 10 Punctuations

## LEARNING OUTCOMES

By the end of this chapter, you should be able to:

1. Identify some main punctuation marks in English language;
2. Recognise the application of these types of punctuations in sentences; and
3. Identify common errors in the use of punctuations and correct them.

## INTRODUCTION

Punctuations are the smallest units in a sentence, but they play very important functions. Without them, we won't know how to read a sentence! Punctuations are like signposts which help us know when to pause when reading, stop reading, and to know what the sentence is doing.

For example, without a punctuation mark, we cannot identify if the sentence is asking a question, or expressing a surprising idea. Without a punctuation mark, we cannot tell if the sentence is a direct speech or part of a dialogue. Without punctuation, we won't even know where a sentence starts or ends.

Consider the following example:

saturday afternoons were the busiest mrs lims box stood  
vacant outside and she helped her husband in the shop  
saturday afternoon was usually my afternoon for going  
down there too my mother and father went out to golf and I  
was left with the tick of the clock and the doves gurgling in  
the empty garden



Source: "The Defeated", by Nadine Gordimer

Did you understand what you have read?

### 10.1 PUNCTUATIONS

Notice how important it is for us to punctuate carefully so that we convey the meaning of our sentences clearly and directly. A poorly punctuated sentence or a wrongly punctuated one often results in misunderstanding, or your reader not being able to understand what you have written at all.

Compare the passage you just read to the following, which is punctuated:

Saturday afternoons were the busiest. Mrs. Lim's box stood vacant outside and she helped her husband in the shop. Saturday afternoon was usually my afternoon for going down there, too. My mother and father went out to golf and I was left with the tick of the clock and the doves gurgling in the empty garden.



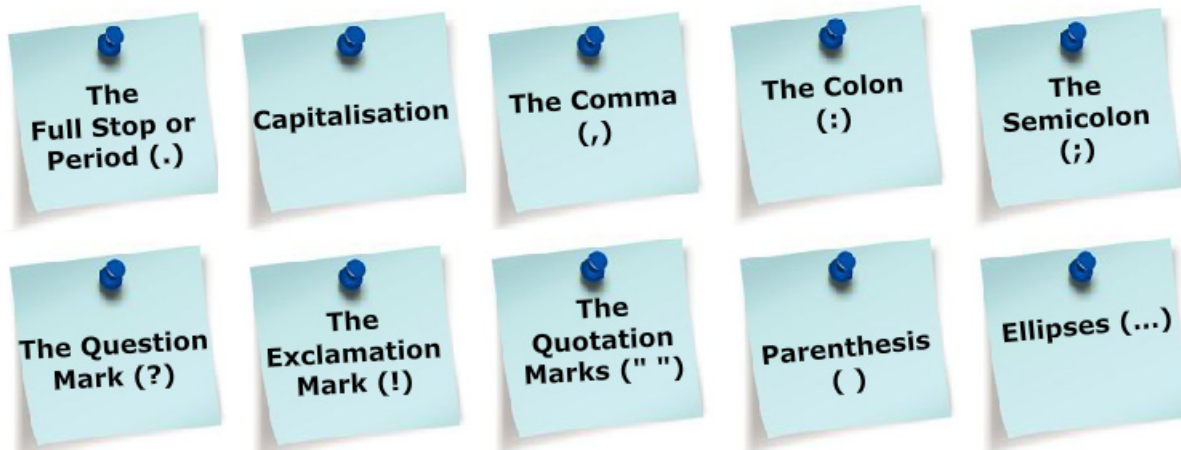
Source: "The Defeated", by Nadine Gordimer

Notice how important it is for us to punctuate carefully so that we convey the meaning of our sentences clearly and directly. A poorly punctuated sentence or a wrongly punctuated one often results in misunderstanding, or your reader not being able to understand what you have written at all.

Compare the passage you just read to the following, which is punctuated:

The English language (actually, the punctuation system is applicable to most languages in the world today) has various kinds of punctuations. We have looked at one in the last chapter – the apostrophe – which has a chapter all to itself because, unlike most punctuation marks, it has more than one function. Most punctuation marks only play one function (although there are many ways in which this single function can take), and we will learn about some of them in this chapter.

The ones we will consider in this chapter include (their signs are also as follows):





There are many more punctuations in the English language which include: the dash ( – ), the hyphen ( - ), slash (/), and italic (*italic*). Use a good grammar book to learn about these other punctuation marks.

## 10.2 THE FULL STOP OR PERIOD (.)

The most common use of this punctuation mark is to end a sentence. When you come to the end of a sentence, you indicate this with this punctuation mark (there is no space between the last word and the period).

Jane and Siti are coming to dinner this evening.



We use the period mark for abbreviations and organisations.

Mr. Tan

Dr. Azlina

U.N.E.S.C.O

If the last word of a sentence is an abbreviation, you do not need another period.

For example:

Last month, my brother joined the U.N.I.C.E.F.

unicef



We normally end a command with a period. This is to show finality.

Stop talking while I am teaching.



In case of a fire, do not use the lifts.



### 10.3 CAPITALISATION

You use capital letters in the following situations:

(a) At the start of a sentence.

**H**okkaido is a Japanese Island.



**T**his cup is unwashed!

(b) For proper nouns (particular persons, places and things).

His name is **O**rlando.  
He lives in **S**pain.  
He was born on **W**ednesday the tenth of **M**ay, 1970.  
He lives at 10 **M**iguel **S**treet, **M**adrid.



(c) With adjectives that are derived from proper nouns.

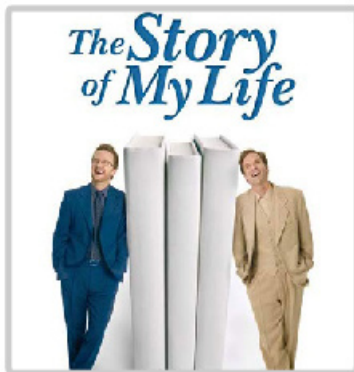


She bought some **C**hinese vases.

We love watching old **M**alay films.



(d) For the first and all of the main words in titles.



(e) For the pronoun “I”.

**I** hope that **I** will be able to achieve my ambition by the time **I** am 30 years old.





**10.4 THE COMMA (,)**

Commas are used to suggest a pause. It is not as final as a full stop.

Here are some specific cases when you use a comma.

**(a) When addressing someone directly.**



Dr. George, when will the results be revealed?

**(b) When separating the various elements in a sentence.**

Tom, Tim, Terry and Tarzan are going to the zoo.



My mother went to the market and bought a dozen eggs, three fish, a basket of fruit and a cooking pot.

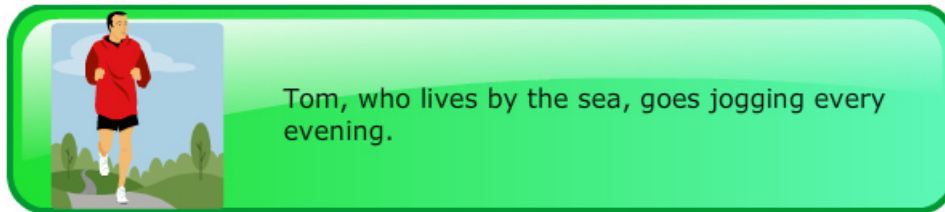
**(c) When separating a state from the city, and the state from the rest of the sentence.**



Klang, Selangor, used to be a mining town.

(d) **When using appositives**

An appositive is a clause or phrase which can be removed without seriously affecting the meaning and structure of a sentence.



“Who lives by the sea” is the appositive in this sentence.



It is important to remember that only true appositives need to be separated by commas. To determine if a phrase or clause is a true appositive, we must determine what meaning is being conferred by the sentence.

Consider the following sentences:

1. Tom, who lives by the sea, goes jogging every evening.

2. Tom who lives by the sea goes jogging every evening.

- In the first sentence, the clause “who lives by the sea” just provides extra information in the sentence. It is non-essential to the sentence.
- In the second sentence, the information “who lives by the sea” is essential to identify which Tom (perhaps because the speaker and listener know many other Toms). In this case, commas are not required.

(d) **When separating a dominant or independent clause from a subordinate phrase.**

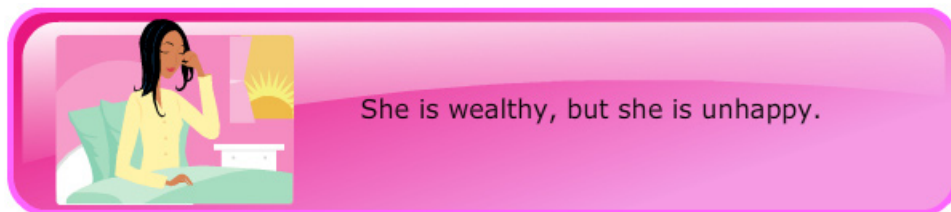
Thinking about the problem, Hassan became convinced that the fault lies with the policy.



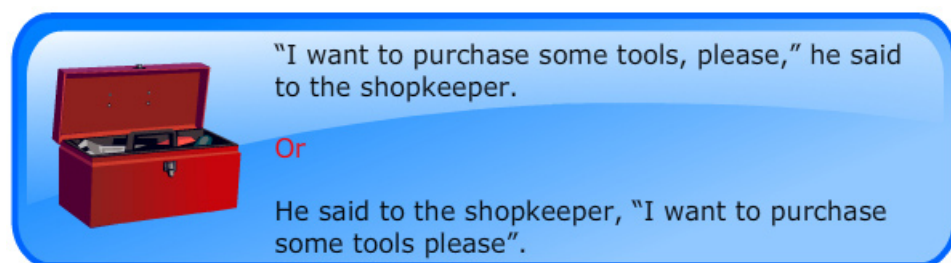


(e) **When separating two dominant or independent clauses.**

In this case, you need to add a conjunction after the comma.



(f) **When setting off quoted elements.**



Be careful when you use commas. The problem most users of English encounter with this punctuation mark is *overuse*. Use commas only if it is absolutely necessary.

## 10.5

## THE COLON (:)

We use a colon in the following manner:

- (a) To set off an introductory remark from its various corresponding elements or examples. It is often used in the case of a list.

For example:

My mother went to the market and this is what she bought:  
a dozen eggs, three fish, a basket of fruit and a cooking pot.

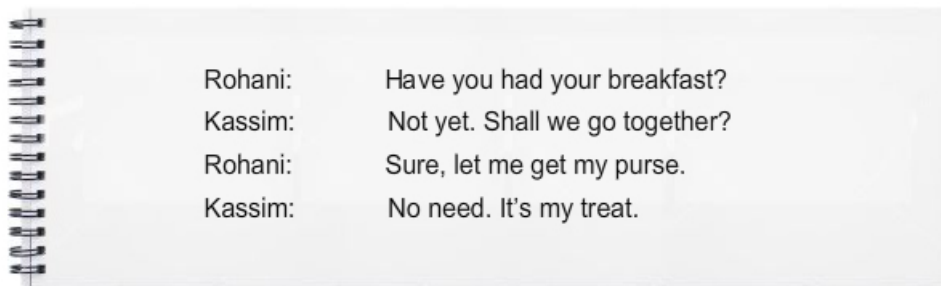


Did you notice the colon after “For example”, before the example was provided?

We use a colon in the following manner:

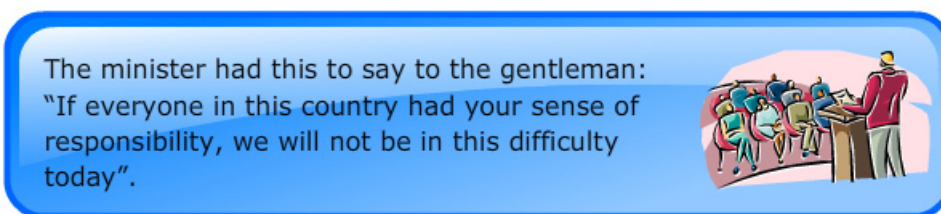
(a) To set off an introductory remark from its various corresponding elements or examples.

It is often used in the case of a list.



(b) To separate the speaker from his or her dialogue in a play script.

Consider the following example:



(c) To separate an independent clause from a quotatio.

**For example:**



The first word in the quoted sentence should be capitalised.

## 10.6 THE SEMI-COLON (;)

There are two main ways in which a semi-colon is used:

(a) **To separate two closely-related independent clauses.**

**For example:**

She is poor; she is working hard to put her child through college.



Alternatively, you can separate the two independent clauses with a comma and a coordinating conjunction. For example:

She is poor, so she is working hard to put her child through college.

In the case of very long and complex sentences, you may even wish to separate the two independent clauses with **both** a semi-colon **and** a coordinating conjunction.

(b) **To separate the various elements in a complex list.**

**For example:**

The following list shows the students and the respective schools they represent that are selected for the competition:

Johari, Sri Murni School; Jason, Alice Smith School; Rashid, La Salle High School; Mariappan, Sri Inai International School and Chin Cheng, Ipoh High School.



## 10.7 THE QUESTION MARK (?)

Very simply, the question mark indicates that the sentence is a direct question. If the question is an indirect one, do not use a question mark.

How soon will I know the examination results? (direct question)

The student asks the teacher how soon she will know her examination results. (indirect question)

The question mark also indicates the end of a sentence. You do not need another punctuation mark after a question mark (although this is sometimes done to add emphasis in informal writings, such as those you will find in comic books). The word that comes after it should also be capitalised, unless the sentence with the exclamation mark is embedded in a larger one.

**For example:**

John asked her, "Did you see the doctor?" but she didn't reply.

## 10.8 THE EXCLAMATION MARK (!)

The exclamation mark expresses exasperation or surprise in a sentence, or is used to emphasise a comment or short, sharp phrase.



The exclamation mark expresses exasperation or surprise in a sentence, or is used to emphasise.

**That was clever!**

(when someone has done something stupid)



In writing, use the exclamation mark minimally. Avoid using a series of exclamation marks. One to end the sentence is enough.

For example, do not write: **That's amazing!!!!**

The exclamation mark expresses exasperation or surprise in a sentence, or is used to emphasise a comment or short, sharp phrase.



John shouted to her, "Look out!" but she did not heed him.

You can also use the exclamation mark to show humour, irony or a sarcastic comment.

Finally, like the question mark, an exclamation mark also indicates the end of a sentence. You do not need another punctuation mark after it. The word that comes after it should also be capitalised, unless the sentence with the exclamation mark is embedded in a larger one.

## 10.9 THE QUOTATION MARK ("")



The quotation marks always come in a pair: the open quotation mark (‘’) and the close quotation mark (’’).

They are used to indicate the start and end of a quote. For example:



John shouted to her, "Look out!" but she did not heed him.



The quotation marks are only used when it is a **direct speech**. The **first word** in the quote should also be capitalised. A full stop and comma should appear before the close quotation mark. A question mark or exclamation mark should appear before the close quotation mark **only if it is part of the quote**.

It is also increasingly becoming common to use the single quotation marks to indicate quotes (John shouted to her, 'Look out!')

We also use quotation marks to set off a word or words for emphasis in a sentence.

Did you read the essay, "Understanding Sociology" for lecture tomorrow?





## ACTIVITY



In the following sentences put in quotation marks wherever they are needed:

1. Raju is studying hard in school this year, his mother said.
2. No, the bus driver replied angrily, I cannot get you to school in ten minutes.
3. I think, Alvin remarked, that the best time of year to visit the east coast is in April. At least that's what I read in the guide book.
4. My French instructor told me that I speak the language better than the native speakers.
5. She asked me if I had read the article The Death of Education?
6. Flannery O'Connor probably got the title of one of her stories from the words of the old popular song, A Good Man is Hard to Find.
7. When Tunku Abdul Rahman shouted the words, Merdeka! Merdeka! Malaya was born.
8. It seems to me that hip and cool are words popular among teenagers today.
9. Can you believe, Dot said to Tod, that it has been almost five years since we've known each other?
10. I think the best story in this collection is Mr. Tang's Girls by Shirley Lim.

## 10.10 PARENTHESES ( )

The parentheses also come in a pair. We use it to set off words, phrases, clauses, or sentences which are used to explain, translate, or comment, but they remain independent constructions.

Consider the following examples:

Kamsiah wanted to buy a red car (Proton Wira).



Take this over to that gentleman (the one in the blue shirt) and tell him to read it.



Mariam retook the test the following year (she had failed it the year before).



When using parentheses with other punctuation marks, punctuate the main part of the sentence as if the parenthetical portion is not there. A punctuation mark comes *after* the second parenthesis if the punctuation mark applies to the entire sentence and not just to the parenthetical portion.

Consider the following examples:

Lina owns three pets (two cats and an iguana), which she left with her brother when she went on a holiday.

Did they buy the house in the end (the one with the swimming pool)?

Place the punctuation mark *inside* the second parenthesis if the punctuation mark applies only to clause or statement within the parenthetical portion.

I heard that there was an accident on the highway. (Was anyone injured?) I wonder if anyone I know was involved.

Use parentheses to enclose a number, letter, or symbol when used as an appositive.

In this chapter, we will learn about the full stop (.) and the comma (,).

The currency for England is the pound sterling (£) and the dollar (\$) in the United States.



It is acceptable nowadays to use the term **brackets** to indicate the parentheses, although brackets operate slightly differently from the parentheses. The brackets ( [ ] ) are usually used in specialised writings, such as technical manuals; they often appear within parentheses if there is a parenthetical portion within a larger parenthetical portion.

For example:

James (Mary's [the girl who threw last night's party] brother) told me that our teacher is slowly going insane.

## 10.11 ELLIPSES (...)

We use the ellipsis in the following ways:

When we are omitting a certain word or words from a quotation. Consider the following situation:

Here is the sentence with the quote:

According to the minister, "Three hundred men and women living in the city have responded to the survey".



Let's say we want to remove the words "living in the city". We will need to substitute them with an ellipsis, as in the following:

**According to the minister, "Three hundred men and women ... have responded to the survey".**

When the omitted word or words come at the end of the sentence, you will need to add another dot to indicate a full stop. For example:

According to the minister, "Three hundred men and women have responded... ."



If the last punctuation is not a full stop, then you do not need an extra dot; instead, use the necessary punctuation.

For example:

In shock, Mrs. Anand asked, "Did you mean to say that ...?"



## SUMMARY

1. Punctuations may be the smallest units in a sentence but their correct usage is vital in order for your sentence to work properly.
2. A poorly or incorrectly punctuated sentence can obscure and even damage what you wish to say, causing confusion or miscomprehension.
3. This chapter covers only the most common and important punctuation marks.
4. There are many more punctuations in the English language which include: the dash ( – ), the hyphen ( - ), slash ( / ), and italic (*italic*). Use a good grammar book to learn about these other punctuation marks.

## KEY TERMS

Capitalisation

Colon

Comma

Ellipses

Exclamation mark

Parenthesis

Period or full stop

Punctuations

Question mark

Semi-colon



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