Summary of Punctuation Marks

Punctuation marks are used to make the writer's meaning clear to the reader. They are signals that tell the reader how to go about actually reading a piece of writing.

A period (.) tells the reader to stop

An exclamation point (!) tells the reader to stop in astonishment or surprise.

A question mark (?) tells the reader that he or she is to stop and that the writer is asking a question.

A comma (,) tells the reader to pause. (If the pause is for emphasis, a dash should be used instead of a comma.)

Brackets [ ] tell the reader that an editor has corrected, added, deleted, or modified information. Also, brackets are used to place parenthetical elements within parentheses.

An apostrophe (') tells the reader that part of a contracted word is left out. (For example, in the contracted word *I'm*, the *a* is left out of *I am* and replaced by an apostrophe.) An apostrophe is also used to show possession and to form some plurals.

An ellipsis (…) tells the reader that the writer has deliberately omitted part of a quotation. When an ellipsis comes at the end of a sentence, a fourth period is added.

A semi-colon (;) tells the reader to pause between two independent phrases or sentences that are closely related in meaning.

A colon (:) tells the reader that the words before the colon will introduce the words that follow.

A pair of dashes (--) or a single long dash (—) tells the reader that he or she must pause, then read emphasis into the following words.

A hyphen (-) tells the reader that the two words with the hyphen between them should be read as though they were one, or to indicate a word break at the end of a line.

Quotation marks (" ") tell the reader that the words within the marks are an exact copy of spoken or written language. (Note that commas and periods go within quotation marks, but semi-colons and colons go outside.)

Parentheses ( ) tell the reader that the words within the parentheses are less important than others in the sentence.