

Basic Punctuation Rules

“Punctuation marks are the road signs placed along the highways of our communication—to control speeds, provide directions, and prevent head-on collisions.”
~Pico Iyer

End-of-sentence punctuation . ? !

End-of-sentence punctuation marks are used to let a reader know when the thought is finished.

- A **statement** (declarative sentence) is followed by a **period**.
EXAMPLE: Azusa Pacific University is located in Azusa, California.
- A direct **question** (or interrogative sentence) is followed by a **question mark**.
EXAMPLE: Did you come here as a freshman?

NOTE: Do not use a question mark after a declarative sentence that contains an indirect question.

EXAMPLE: She wants to know if you came here as a freshman.

- An **exclamatory** sentence is followed by an **exclamation point**.
EXAMPLE: I love this class!

NOTE: Use exclamation points sparingly because they can unnecessarily exaggerate sentences and can sound less formal and academic in tone. They're rarely, if ever, used in an academic paper.

EXAMPLE: That chapel speaker was the best I've ever heard! (*Best* already emphasizes *chapel speaker*; therefore, an exclamation point is not needed.)

Commas ,

For further information on commas, please see the Writing Center's "A Quick Look at Commas" handout.

Commas are used to separate parts of a sentence. They tell readers to pause between words or groups of words, and they help clarify the meanings of sentences.

- Commas are used to separate three or more **words, phrases, or clauses** (sentence parts) **in a series**.
EXAMPLE: The class includes freshmen, sophomores, and juniors.
- Commas are used **after an introductory dependent clause** (a group of words before the subject of a sentence that do not form a complete sentence).
EXAMPLE: If she hasn't taken Exodus/Deuteronomy yet, she will need to take it before graduation.
- Commas are used **to set off introductory** words and phrases.
EXAMPLE: Interestingly, he was a missionary before he was a professor. (word)
Hoping for an A, she stayed up late to work on her paper. (phrase)
- Commas are used **between independent clauses** (complete sentences) joined by a **coordinating conjunction** (one of the FANBOYS: For, And, Nor, But, Or, Yet, So).
EXAMPLE: My friends went to chapel on Monday morning, but I went to Kaleo on Wednesday night.
- Commas set off **nonessential phrases or clauses** (the sentence makes sense without the phrase) or **appositives** (words or phrases that rename a noun).
EXAMPLE: My professor, who is really strict, said to turn the paper in by midnight.
- Commas separate **multiple adjectives that describe one noun**. (There should be a comma between the two adjectives if the word *and* could be added between them and the sentence would still make sense or if they could be placed in reverse order—otherwise, there should not be a comma)
EXAMPLE: The coffee shop makes huge, delicious muffins.

Basic Punctuation Rules

Semicolons ;

Semicolons are used to separate **clauses or phrases that are related** and that receive equal emphasis.

- Semicolons **join two independent clauses** (complete sentences) that are closely related if no coordinating conjunction is used. Semicolons signal to a reader that the information in both sentences should be taken together.

EXAMPLE: Megan said she was tired; she had stayed up late doing homework.

- Semicolons are used **before a conjunctive adverb** (transition word) that joins independent clauses.

EXAMPLE: We were planning to go get coffee; however, he wanted to go to Donut Man.

- Semicolons help avoid confusion between items in **lists where there are already commas**.

EXAMPLE: She traveled to Dublin, Ireland; Valencia, Spain; and Edinburgh, Scotland.

I took my dog, Jack; my furniture, including two big bookcases; and my entire book collection, which filled up the trunk of my car, with me when I moved across the country.

Colons :

Colons **follow independent clauses** and are used to **call attention to the information** that comes after.

- Colons come **after the independent clause** (complete sentence) and **before the word, phrase, sentence, quotation, or list** they are introducing.

EXAMPLE: Lately, my friend has had only one thing on her mind: graduation. (word)

Lately, my friend has had only one thing on her mind: graduating from college. (phrase)

Lately, my friend has had only one thing on her mind: she can't wait to graduate from college. (clause)

Lately, my friend has had several things on her mind: homework, papers, and finals. (list)

NOTE: Never use a colon after a verb that directly introduces a list.

INCORRECT: The things on my friend's mind are: homework, papers, and finals.

CORRECT: The things on my friend's mind are homework, papers, and finals.

Hyphens -

Hyphens are used to form **compound words** or join word units. They are used to join **prefixes, suffixes, and letters** to words.

- Use hyphens with **compound numbers** from twenty-one to ninety-nine and with **fractions used as modifiers**.

EXAMPLE: **Forty-two** students

Two-thirds majority (*two-thirds* is an adjective modifying *majority*)

Three-fourths empty (*three-fourths* is an adverb modifying *empty*)

Two thirds of the voters (*two thirds* is not being used as an adjective here because *thirds* is a noun being modified by *two*).

- Use hyphens in a compound adjective only when it comes before the word it modifies. However, some compound adjectives are always hyphenated, such as *well-balanced*. Look up compound adjectives in the dictionary if you are unsure whether or not to hyphenate them.

EXAMPLE: a well-liked author

an author who is well liked

a world-renowned composer

a composer who is world renowned

Hyphens, continued

- Use a hyphen with the prefixes *ex-*, *self-*, and *all-*; with the suffix *elect-*; and with all prefixes before a proper noun or proper adjective.

EXAMPLE: all-star ex-mayor pro-Canadian senator-elect
 anti-Semitic non-European self-control self-image

- Also, note how hyphens can change meaning and use them accordingly.

EXAMPLE: a hot-water bottle (a bottle designed for holding hot water)
 a hot water bottle (a bottle of water that is hot)
 to re-press a shirt (to iron again)
 to repress bad memories (to keep under control, reject, or keep down)

Dashes —

Dashes are often confused with hyphens. Dashes connect **groups of words to other groups of words** in order to **emphasize a point** or **show that the information is not essential**. Usually the dash separates words **in the middle** of a sentence from the rest of the sentence, or it leads to material **at the end** of the sentence.

In the middle of a sentence, a dash can put **special emphasis** on a group of words or make them stand out from the rest of the sentence.

INCORRECT: Our ideas for the weekend, going to a movie, having a picnic, doing homework, and hiking Garcia Trail, seemed like a lot to squeeze in.

CORRECT: Our ideas for the weekend—going to a movie, having a picnic, doing homework, and hiking Garcia Trail—seemed like a lot to squeeze in.

EXAMPLE: I knew the material perfectly—until test day.

TIP: To insert the dash into a typed document, just type two hyphens and the next word; when you hit the space bar after the word, Word will automatically turn the hyphens into a dash (-- becomes —).

Apostrophes ‘

Apostrophes are used to show possession or to indicate where a letter has been omitted to form a contraction.

- To show possession, add an apostrophe and an *s* to singular nouns or indefinite pronouns that end in *one* or *body*.

EXAMPLE: Jenny's book, somebody's laptop

- Add only an apostrophe for plural possessive nouns ending in *s*.

EXAMPLE: my parents' car, the musicians' instruments

NOTE: This one can be a little tricky. Just remember that the apostrophe placement depends on whether there is more than one noun: student's books (one student), students' books (more than one student).

- Add an apostrophe and an *s* for plural possessive nouns that end in *s* (or *x* or *z*).

EXAMPLE: Jesus's disciples, the business's employees

- Do not use an apostrophe with possessive personal pronouns including *yours*, *his*, *hers*, *its*, *ours*, *their*, and *whose*.
- Apostrophes are also used in contractions, two words which have been combined into one, to mark where the missing letter or letters would be.

EXAMPLE: I am=I'm I have=I've let us=let's cannot=can't
 they are=they're it is=it's you are=you're

NOTE: Avoid confusing *it's* and *its*. *It's* is a contraction for *it is*; *its* is a possessive pronoun. Substitute *it is* in the sentence, and if that makes sense, *it's* with an apostrophe is the correct form.

Also, do not use apostrophes for plural words without possession. This is seen sometimes on signs: "Flower's for sale" (incorrect).

Quotation Marks “ ”

For further information, please see the Writing Center’s “Quotation Marks” handout.

Quotation marks are used to show the beginning and end of a quotation or title of a short work.

- Quotation marks enclose the exact words of a person (direct quotation).
EXAMPLE: C.S. Lewis said, “God cannot give us a happiness and peace apart from Himself, because it is not there.”
- Do not use quotation marks around a paraphrase (using your own words to express the author’s ideas) or a summary of the author’s words.
EXAMPLE: C.S. Lewis said that happiness and peace can come only from God.
- Quotation marks set off the titles of magazine articles, poems, reports, and chapters within a book (titles of books, magazines, and plays are italicized). This can vary between different citation styles, such as MLA or APA, so double-check your style guide for accuracy.
EXAMPLE: “The Talk of the Town” is a regular feature in *Time* magazine.
- Place periods and commas inside quotation marks.
EXAMPLE: The Writing Center consultant said, “Here’s a handout on commas.”
- Place semicolons and colons outside quotation marks.
EXAMPLE: They call Jon Wallace “J-Dub”; he’s the president of APU.
- Place question marks or exclamation points inside the quotation marks if they punctuate the quotation only.
EXAMPLE: It’s such a good reminder of God’s power when He asks Moses, “Who makes a person’s mouth? Who decides whether people speak or do not speak, hear or do not hear, see or do not see? Is it not I, the Lord?” (Exodus 4:11).
- However, if the quote does not include a question or exclamation, but the sentence itself is asking a question or exclaiming, the question mark or exclamation point sits outside of the quotation marks.
EXAMPLE: Do you know who said, “The apple doesn’t fall far from the tree”?

Parentheses ()

Elements inside parentheses are related to the sentence but are nonessential.

- Parentheses set off additions or expressions that are not necessary to the sentence. They tend to de-emphasize what they set off. They are often seen as less academic in tone and should be used rarely in academic papers.
EXAMPLE: We visited several European countries (England, France, Spain) on our trip last year.
- Parentheses enclose figures in a sentence.
EXAMPLE: Grades will be based on (1) participation, (2) in-class writing, and (3) exams.
NOTE: Usage of numbers like this in sentences may vary for different citation styles. Double-check citation guidelines.
- When the group inside the parentheses forms a complete sentence but is inserted inside a larger sentence, no period is needed. However, if a question mark or exclamation point is needed, it may be used.
EXAMPLE: The snow (she saw it as she passed the window) was now falling heavily.
- When parentheses are used to enclose an independent sentence, the end punctuation belongs inside the parentheses.
EXAMPLE: Mandy told me she saw Amy’s new car. (I saw Amy’s car before Mandy.) She said it was nice.