

Punctuation

The following covers the most important usages. Practice in punctuation often differs in particulars among writers, publishing houses, etc., but the modern trend is toward simplification.

PERIOD The period (.) is used:

1. to mark the end of a sentence.

Example: I am tired.

2. as one of a series (usually three) to indicate missing material or a break in continuity. When the missing material ends the sentence, that period is added.

Example: “I pledge allegiance . . . and to the Republic . . .” (Notice the deleted material in the brackets: “I pledge allegiance [to the flag] and to the Republic [for which it stands].”)

COMMA The comma (,) is used:

1. between independent clauses of equal value that are short and have no commas within them.

Example: He worked hard, he saved his money, and he bought a house.

2. between two independent clauses joined by a coordinating conjunction.

Example: We went to the party, but Ralph wasn't there.

3. after an introductory dependent clause.

Example: When it became apparent that they would not cooperate, we stopped all negotiations.

4. before and after a dependent clause that comes in the middle of a sentence.

Example: The apples, although they had been freshly picked, became spoiled in shipment.

5. to set off a nonrestrictive, (as distinguished from a restrictive) clause, phrase, or word.

Example: Tim, who is my brother, is not here. (But *not* in: The boy who is my brother is sitting there.)

6. to avoid initial confusion in interpretation.

Example: Run, for your life is in danger.

7. to set off conjunctive adverbs, such as *however*, *moreover*, etc., or short transitional phrases.

Example: We are, however, pleased with your suggestion.

8. to separate phrases, words, or short clauses in a series.

Example: Find out who he is, what he wants, and where he comes from. Ann, Lois, or Jane will be here.

9. after terms (e.g., i.e., namely) that introduce a series or example.
Example: Some of our presidents, e.g., Jefferson, J. Q. Adams, and Buchanan, had previously been secretaries of state.
10. to set off a parenthetical clause, phrase, or word.
Example: By the end of the month, when the bill is due, I will have the money. The family, along with the servants, has left for the summer.
11. between two adjectives which modify the same noun or pronoun and can be interchanged in position.
Example: a large, modern building
12. to indicate omitted material.
Example: The baby becomes a child; the child, a teenager; the teenager, an adult.
13. to set off the one spoken to in direct address.
Example: “Go, Dick, and shut the window.”
14. to set off direct quotations.
Example: He said, “Welcome.” “Thank you,” we replied.
15. to set off titles, addresses, names of places, etc.
Example: R. T. Fisher, Ph.D., Secretary, 110 Elm Street, Akron, Ohio, handles all correspondence.
16. before, and sometimes after, the year in dates.
Example: On February 12, 1809, Lincoln was born.
17. after the salutation of a personal letter.
Example: Dear Max and Alice,
18. after the complimentary close of a letter;
Example: Very truly yours,
19. to separate thousands in numbers.
Example: The area of the earth is about 197,260,000 sq. mi.
20. to separate inverted names, phrases, etc., as in a bibliography, index, or catalog.
Example: Jones, Harold T.

SEMICOLON The semicolon (;) is used:

1. in compound sentences between independent clauses not joined by connectives, especially if they are long or have commas within them.

Example: Detroit, on one side of the river, is in the U.S.; Windsor, on the other side, is in Canada.

2. in compound sentences between independent clauses joined by conjunctive adverbs.

Example: We are pleased with your suggestion; moreover, we intend to put it into effect.

3. in a series where commas have already been used.

Example: The contestants came from Albany, New York; Seattle, Washington; and London, England.

COLON The colon (:) is used:

1. to introduce a series.

Example: You need the following materials: pen, eraser, ruler, and notebook.

2. to introduce a part of a sentence that exemplifies, restates, or explains the preceding part.

Example: Some of the greatest artists never became wealthy: Mozart died a poor man.

3. before and extended quotation.

Example: Lincoln rose and spoke as follows: “Four score and seven years ago . . .”

4. between chapter and verse in Biblical references.

Example: The story of Noah begins in Gen. 5:28.

5. between the volume and page numbers in references.

Example: The article is in the *U.S. Encyclopedia* 34:1747.

6. after the salutation of a business letter.

Example: Dear Sir:

7. to separate the hours from the minutes in time.

Example: The train will depart at 10:47 p.m.

8. to separate the parts of a ratio.

Example: Wins and losses were in the ratio 3:1.

DASH The dash (-) is used:

1. before and after parenthetical material that is a result of a break in thought or continuity.

Example: I wrote a letter – and what a chore it was – to my lawyer concerning the problem.

2. between numbers, dates, times, places, etc., that mark limits.

Example: You will find it on pages 89–104. Franklin lived 1706–1790. The hotel is open June–September. The office hours are 8:00–5:00 daily. He will arrive on the New York–Chicago flight.

QUOTATION MARKS Double quotation marks (“ ”) are used:

1. to enclose a direct quotation.

Example: I replied, “I will try to help them.”

2. to enclose the titles of short stories, essays, poems, songs, etc. Titles of plays, operas, and other works of art are italicized.

Example: I have just read “The Gold Bug.” “The Knight’s Tale” is my favorite story.

3. to enclose words out of grammatical context.

Example: The word *silly* originally meant “happy.”

4. to enclose terms that are technical, ironical, coined, etc.

Example: How “considerate” of him to make us wait.

Single quotation marks (‘ ’) are used to enclose a direct quotation within other quoted material.

Example: The teacher said, “William Hazlitt’s dying words were ‘It was a happy life.’ ”

Note: Commas and periods are usually placed inside quotation marks.

Example: “I am seven,” he said. The answer was “No.”

Colons and semicolons are placed outside quotation marks.

Example: Answer this question on the “Gettysburg Address”: In what year was it given? I had not read Francis Bacon’s essay “Of Truth”; in fact, I had never heard of it.

A question mark or exclamation mark is placed outside or inside depending on the part of the sentence to which it applies.

Example: “What did you say?” he repeated. Did I hear you say, “It’s snowing?” she exclaimed. “Never!” You had better not call me “yellow”!

APOSTROPHE The apostrophe (') is used:

1. to indicate an omitted letter or letters as in contractions.

Example: The secretary will attend if he's in town.

2. to form the possessive of nouns and some pronouns.

Example: Sam's, Horace's, wolves', everyone's

3. in forming the plural of letters, numbers, etc.

Example: He pronounced his *th*'s like *s*'s.

PARENTHESES Parentheses () are used:

1. to enclose nonessential, explanatory or supplemental material.

Example: He ran 1500 meters (a little less than a mile).

2. to enclose letters or numbers of reference.

Example: The candidate spoke on three subjects: (1) housing, (2) roads, and (3) recreation.

Note: A period, question mark, or an exclamation mark is placed inside or outside parentheses depending on the part of the sentence to which it applies.

Example: *Veni, vidi, vici.* (I came, I saw, I conquered.) I have many faults (as does everybody else).

BRACKETS Brackets [] are used:

1. to enclose parenthetical material that falls within other parenthetical material.

Example: Dr. Lee (a person I feared [no, dreaded] as a child) was a kindly man.

2. to enclose comments, corrections, insertions, etc., made by a person other than the author of the quoted material.

Example: "He was a friend of the nineteenth-century British statesman [Randolph] Churchill."

ITALICS Italicized type is used:

1. to indicate foreign words.

Example: His motto was *omnia vincit amor.*

2. To indicate words (or letters or numbers) mentioned as words (or letters or words). The words *accept* or *except* are frequently confused.

Note: Quotation marks are also accepted.