

TOPIC

Punctuation

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Punctuation

In speaking, we use pauses and the pitch of the voice to make what we say clear. Punctuation plays a similar role in writing, making it easier to read.

Punctuation consists of both rules and conventions. There are rules of punctuation that have to be followed; but there are also punctuation conventions that give writers greater choice.

The most common punctuation marks in English are: capital letters and full stops, question marks, commas, colons and semi-colons, exclamation marks and quotation marks.

There are 14 punctuation marks that are commonly used in English grammar. They are the period, question mark, exclamation point, comma, semicolon, colon, dash, hyphen, parentheses, brackets, braces, apostrophe, quotation marks, and ellipsis. Following their correct usage will make your writing easier to read and more appealing.

Sentence Endings

Three of the fourteen punctuation marks are appropriate for use as sentence endings. They are the period, question mark, and exclamation point.

The **period** (.) is placed at the end of declarative sentences, statements thought to be complete and after many abbreviations.

- As a sentence ender: *Jane and Jack went to the market.*
- After an abbreviation: *Her son, John Jones Jr., was born on Dec. 6, 2008.*

Use a **question mark** (?) to indicate a direct question when placed at the end of a sentence.

- *When did Jane leave for the market?*

The **exclamation point** (!) is used when a person wants to express a sudden outcry or add emphasis.

- Within dialogue: *"Holy cow!" screamed Jane.*
- To emphasize a point: *My mother-in-law's rants make me furious!*

Comma, Semicolon, and Colon

The comma, semicolon, and colon are often misused because they all can indicate a pause in a series.

The **comma** is used to show a separation of ideas or elements within the structure of a sentence. Additionally, it is used in numbers, dates, and letter writing after the salutation and closing.

- Direct address: *Thanks for all your help, John.*
- Separation of two complete sentences: *We went to the movies, and then we went out to lunch.*
- Separating lists or elements within sentences: *Suzi wanted the black, green, and blue dress.*

Whether to add a final comma before the conjunction in a list is a matter of debate. This final comma, known as an Oxford or serial comma, is useful in a complex series of elements or phrases but is often considered unnecessary in a simple series such as in the example above. It usually comes down to a style choice by the writer.

The **semicolon** (;) is used to connect independent clauses. It shows a closer relationship between the clauses than a period would show.

- *John was hurt; he knew she only said it to upset him.*

A **colon** (:) has three main uses. The first is after a word introducing a quotation, an explanation, an example, or a series.

- *He was planning to study four subjects: politics, philosophy, sociology, and economics.*

The second is between independent clauses when the second explains the first, similar to a semicolon:

- *I didn't have time to get changed: I was already late.*

The third use of a colon is for emphasis:

- *There was one thing she loved more than any other: her dog.*

A colon also has non-grammatical uses in time, ratio, business correspondence and references.

Dash and the Hyphen

Two other common punctuation marks are the dash and hyphen. These marks are often confused with each other due to their appearance but they are very different.

A **dash** is used to separate words into statements. There are two common types of dashes: en dash and em dash.

- En dash: Twice as long as a hyphen, the en dash is a symbol (–) that is used in writing or printing to indicate a range, connections or differentiations, such as 1880-1945 or Princeton-New York trains.
- Em dash: Longer than the en dash, the em dash can be used in place of a comma, parenthesis, or colon to enhance readability or emphasize the conclusion of a sentence. For example, *She gave him her answer — No!*
Whether you put spaces around the em dash or not is a style choice. Just be consistent.

A **hyphen** is used to join two or more words together into a compound term and is not separated by spaces. For example, part-time, back-to-back, well-known.

Brackets, Braces, and Parentheses

Brackets, braces, and parentheses are symbols used to contain words that are a further explanation or are considered a group.

Brackets are the squared off notations ([]) used for technical explanations or to clarify meaning. If you remove the information in the brackets, the sentence will still make sense.

- *He [Mr. Jones] was the last person seen at the house.*

Braces ({ }) are used to contain two or more lines of text or listed items to show that they are considered as a unit. They are not commonplace in most writing but can be seen in computer programming to show what should be contained within the same lines. They can also be used in mathematical expressions. For example, $2\{1+[23-3]\}=x$.

Parentheses (()) are curved notations used to contain further thoughts or qualifying remarks. However, parentheses can be replaced by commas without changing the meaning in most cases.

- *John and Jane (who were actually half brother and sister) both have red hair.*

Apostrophe, Quotation Marks and Ellipsis

The final three punctuation forms in English grammar are the apostrophe, quotation marks, and ellipsis. Unlike previously mentioned grammatical marks, they are not related to one another in any form.

An **apostrophe** (') is used to indicate the omission of a letter or letters from a word, the possessive case, or the plurals of lowercase letters. Examples of the apostrophe in use include:

- Omission of letters from a word: *I've seen that movie several times. She wasn't the only one who knew the answer.*
- Possessive case: *Sara's dog bit the neighbor.*
- Plural for lowercase letters: *Six people were told to mind their p's and q's.*

It should be noted that, according to Purdue University, some teachers and editors enlarge the scope of the use of apostrophes, and prefer their use on symbols (&'s), numbers (7's) and capitalized letters (Q&A's), even though they are not necessary.

Quotations marks (" ") are a pair of punctuation marks used primarily to mark the beginning and end of a passage attributed to another and repeated word for word. They are also used to indicate meanings and to indicate the unusual or dubious status of a word.

- *"Don't go outside," she said.*

Single quotation marks (' ') are used most frequently for quotes within quotes.

- *Marie told the teacher, "I saw Marc at the playground, and he said to me 'Bill started the fight,' and I believed him."*

The **ellipsis** is most commonly represented by three periods (. . .) although it is occasionally demonstrated with three asterisks (***)). The ellipsis is used in writing or printing to indicate an omission, especially of letters or words. Ellipses are frequently used within quotations to jump from one phrase to another, omitting unnecessary words that do not interfere with the meaning. Students writing research papers or newspapers quoting parts of speeches will often employ ellipsis to avoid copying lengthy text that is not needed.

- Omission of words: *She began to count, "One, two, three, and four..." until she got to 10, then went to find him.*

- Within a quotation: *When Newton stated, "An object at rest stays at rest and an object in motion stays in motion..." he developed the law of motion.*

British vs. American English

some of those differences:

	British English	American English
The "." symbol is called	A full stop	a period
The "!" symbol is called	an exclamation mark	an exclamation point
The "()" symbols are called	brackets	parentheses
The "[]" symbols are called	square brackets	brackets
The position of quotation marks	Joy means "happiness".	Joy means "happiness."
The punctuation for abbreviations	Dr, Mr, Mrs, St, Rd, Ct	Dr., Mr., Mrs., St., Rd., Ct.

Make your writing clear

Becoming familiar with the basic punctuation marks in the English language will allow you to express yourself better in your writing. Punctuation marks will also make your sentences clearer and more understandable to the reader.