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# Punctuation

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**Y**ou should read this chapter if you need to review or learn about

Do I Need  
to Read  
This Chapter?



- Apostrophes, brackets, colons
- Commas, dashes, ellipsis
- Exclamation marks, hyphens
- Parentheses, periods, question marks, quotation marks
- Semicolons, slashes

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## Get Started



Using the correct punctuation helps you convey your ideas exactly as you intend them. In this chapter, you'll review the basic rules of punctuation. This will help you express yourself clearly in writing. The punctuation marks are arranged in alphabetical order for ease of use.

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# Apostrophes

The apostrophe (') is used in three ways:

1. To show possession (ownership)
2. To show plural forms
3. To show where a letter or number has been omitted  
Let's examine each guideline in depth.

1. Use an apostrophe to show possession.

- With singular nouns or pronouns *not* ending in *s*, add an apostrophe and an *s*.

a rocket	a rocket's red glare
a flag	a flag's stripes
someone	someone's wish
anyone	anyone's game

- With singular nouns ending in *s*, add an apostrophe and an *s*.

James	James's car
waitress	waitress's suggestion

- If the new word is hard to say, leave off the *s*.

James' car	waitresses' suggestion
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- With plural nouns *not* ending in *s*, add an apostrophe and an *s*.

men	men's shoes
people	people's feelings

- With plural nouns ending in *s*, add an apostrophe after the *s*.

several computers	several computers' hard drives
three teachers	three teachers' lesson plans

If you are having difficulty deciding where to put the apostrophe and whether to add an *s*, try following these two steps:

- To figure out if ownership is involved, ask yourself: "To whom does it belong?"
- If the answer is a singular noun or pronoun, follow that rule. If it's a plural noun, follow that rule.

You have the phrase "my friends party."

Ask: To whom does the party belong?

Answer: It belongs to my friend. *Friend* is singular. Therefore, the phrase reads: "My friend's party."

2. Use an apostrophe to show plural forms.
  - Use an apostrophe and *s* to show the plural of a number, symbol, or letter, or words used to name themselves.
 

three 7's

two ?'s

your *u*'s look like *w*'s

There are too many distracting *like*'s and *um*'s in her speech.
3. Use an apostrophe to show where a letter or number has been omitted.
  - Use an apostrophe to show where letters have been left out of contractions. Recall that *contractions* are two words combined. When you contract words, add an apostrophe in the space where the letters have been taken out.
 

can not      can't

I will        I'll
  - Use an apostrophe to show numbers have been left out of a date.
 

the '70s      the '90s

## Quick Tip



Don't confuse contractions with possessive pronouns. Study the following chart:

Contraction	Possessive Pronoun
it's (it is)	its
you're (you are)	your
they're (they are)	their
who's (who is)	whose

## Brackets

Brackets are [ ]. Do not confuse them with parentheses, which are curved like this (). Brackets have only two very narrowly defined uses.

1. Use brackets for editorial clarification.
 

Children's author Jackie Ogburn puts it this way: "It's not that 'message' isn't a part of the work. It's just that it's usually the least *interesting* part [emphasis hers]."

2. Use brackets to enclose words that you insert in a quotation.

When you integrate quoted words into a text, you may have to change a few words to fit the structure of your sentences. Enclose any changes you make in brackets.

Original quote: “This pedagogical approach reduces all our work to the literary equivalent of vitamins.” (Ogburn 305)

Quotation with brackets: The primary reason the people involved in creating children’s books detest this attitude so much is that “[it] reduces all our work to the literary equivalent of vitamins.” (Ogburn 305)

## Colons

1. Use a colon after an independent clause to introduce a list. Remember that an independent clause is a complete sentence.

The colon is two dots, one on top of each other, like this (:).

If you really want to lose weight, you must give up the following sweets: cake, pie, candy, and cookies.

2. Use a colon after an independent clause to introduce a quotation.

Robert Lawson speaks impatiently of the good intentions that direct the current trends in children’s books: “Some of this scattered band may be educators or psychologists or critics, but they are all animated by a ruthless determination to do children good through their books; it is these people who start the theories and fads that are the bane of authors and illustrators and editors and a pain in the neck to children.” (Fenner, 47)

3. Use a colon before the part of a sentence that explains what has just been stated.

Our store has a fixed policy: We will not be undersold.

4. Use a colon after the salutation of a business letter.

Dear Dr. Lewis:

[in American English]

British usage prefers a comma or no punctuation mark at all in this case.

5. Use a colon to distinguish chapter from verse in a Biblical citation, hours from minutes, and titles from subtitles.

Song of Songs 4:15

10:15 A.M.

*Eating Healthy: A Complete Guide*



### Quick Tip

Place colons *outside* closing quotation marks.

## Commas

Commas are the most frequently used marks of punctuation in English. In fact, commas occur in writing twice as often as all other marks of punctuation combined!

Commas tell us how to read and understand sentences, because they tell us where to pause. A correctly placed comma helps move readers from the beginning of a sentence to the end.

Here's the overall comma alert:

As you write, don't add commas just because you paused in your reading. Since everyone pauses at different times, a pause isn't a reliable way to judge comma use. Instead, rely on the rules that govern comma use.

And here are those guidelines:

1. Use a comma to set off parts of a sentence.

- Use a comma to separate parts of a compound sentence. Use the comma before the coordinating conjunction.

The movie was sold out, *so* we decided to have an early dinner.

The movie was a blockbuster, *but* we arrived early enough to get seats.

Our friends are easy-going, *and* they don't get upset when plans change.

- Use a comma to set off dialogue.

Martha said, "This movie won an Academy Award."

"This movie," Martha said, "won an Academy Award."

"This movie won an Academy Award," Martha said.

- Use a comma to separate the parts of an address. Do not use a comma before the zip code in an address.

Rick lives at 163 East Plains Drive, Boston, MA 89012

2. Use a comma after introductory and concluding expressions.

- Use a comma after an introductory word.

Yes, I will be coming to the retirement party.

However, I won't be able to bring a macaroni salad.

- Use a comma after an introductory phrase.

To get a good night's sleep, you should practice relaxation techniques.

Beginning tomorrow, the store will be open until midnight.

- Use a comma after an introductory clause.

Although the sky is overcast, I don't think that it will rain this afternoon.

Since you can't do the dishes, could you please walk the dog tonight?

- Use a comma after the greeting of an informal letter.

Dear Mom,      Dear Mickey,

- Use a comma at the close of any letter.

Yours truly,      Sincerely,



### Quick Tip

**Remember:** The coordinating conjunctions are *and, but, for, or, nor, so, yet*.

3. Use a comma after interrupting words and expressions.

- Use a comma to set off interrupting words and expressions.

The State University of New York, *did you know*, has 64 campuses scattered across New York State.

- Use a comma to set off words of direct address (words that tell to whom a remark is addressed).

Nanci, please clean up your room.

Please clean up your room, Nanci.

- Use a comma with names and titles.

Ms. Barbara Gilson, Editorial Director

Laurie Rozakis, Ph.D.

- Use a comma to set off words in *apposition* (words that give additional information about the preceding or following word or expression).

A good eater, my baby will be off the bottle soon.

My baby, a good eater, will be off the bottle soon.

- Use a comma to set off a *nonessential clause* (a clause that can be omitted without changing the sentence's basic meaning).

Elizabeth II, who was born in 1926 in London, is the queen of England.

Prince Charles, Elizabeth's first child, was born in 1948.

- Use a comma to separate items in a series. The comma before *and* in a series of items is optional.

The store had a sale on hot dogs, watermelon, and paper plates.

## Quick Tip



Never use commas to set off an *essential clause*, a clause that cannot be omitted.

Some states retest drivers *who are over age 65* to check their ability to drive safely.

4. Use commas to prevent misreading.

- Use a comma to clarify any potentially confusing sentences.

Confusing:        Those who can practice many hours every day.

Clear:             Those who can, practice many hours every day.

Rewritten:        Those who can practice, do so many hours every day.

Confusing:	Luisa dressed and sang for an enthusiastic crowd.
Clear:	Luisa dressed, and sang for an enthusiastic crowd.
Rewritten:	After Luisa dressed, she sang for an enthusiastic crowd.

Of course, as the rewritten examples show, you're usually much better off revising the sentences so there is no possibility of your audience misreading your words.

5. Use commas with numbers. Do not use commas when writing telephone numbers, page numbers, or years.
  - Use a comma between the day of the month and the year.  
December 7, 1941          July 20, 1969
  - Use commas to show thousands, millions, and so on.  
5,000          50,000          500,000          5,000,000

## Dashes

A dash (—) is *not* the same as a hyphen. The dash, or a pair of dashes, lets you interrupt a sentence to add emphasis with additional information. Use dashes lightly or you risk creating a breathless, overly informal style.

Use a dash to emphasize an example, a definition, or a contrast.

Two of the strongest animals in the jungle—the elephant and gorilla—are vegetarians.

Two of the strongest animals in the jungle are vegetarians—the elephant and gorilla.

## Ellipsis

The ellipsis (three spaced dots) is used to show that you have left something out of a passage you are quoting. You can also use ellipsis to show a pause in a conversation.

1. Use the ellipsis to show that you have deleted words or sentences from a passage you are quoting.  
Abraham Lincoln said: “Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth . . . a new nation, conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.”
2. Use the ellipsis to show a pause or interruption.  
“No,” I said. “I . . . I need some time to think about your offer.”

## Quick Tip



Don't use the ellipsis to show that words have been omitted from the beginning of a sentence. Just omit the words and begin the quote.

## Exclamation Marks

Use an exclamation mark after an exclamatory sentence.

How dare you say that to me!

You can't possibly go out wearing that dress!

## Hyphens

A *hyphen* (-) is smaller than a dash. Use a hyphen to show a break in words. Traditionally, a hyphen was used to show a word break at the end of a line. However, modern computer software has virtually eliminated this use of the hyphen.

1. Use a hyphen in certain compound nouns.  
pint-sized great-grandmother
2. Use hyphens in written-out fractions and in written-out compound numbers from twenty-one to ninety-nine.  
one-half            fifty-five

## Parentheses

Use parentheses to set off nonessential information. In essence, the information in the parentheses is a nonessential modifier because it gives the reader additional information that is not crucial.

1. Use parentheses to enclose additional information in a sentence.  
Capitalize all proper nouns and proper adjectives (see Chapter 11).
2. Use parentheses to enclose numbers or letters.

To prepare spaghetti, follow these steps in order: (1) Bring a pot of lightly salted water to boil; (2) add pasta; (3) cook about 10 minutes, to taste.



## Periods

1. Use a period after a complete sentence.

The shrimp's heart is in its head.

In the Arctic, the sun sometimes appears to be square.

2. Use a period after most abbreviations and initials. If an abbreviation comes at the end of a sentence, do not add another period.

Dr.            Ms.            Jr.            John F. Kennedy

3. Don't use a period after acronyms.

CNN            ABC            CBS

4. Use a period after each Roman numeral, letter, or number in an outline.

I.

A.

B.

1.

2.

## Question Marks

Use a question mark after a question.

Where is the complaint desk?

Will the store be open late tonight?

## Quotation Marks

1. Use quotation marks to set off a speaker's exact words.

"Did you eat the entire bag of chips?" Debbie squealed.

2. Use quotation marks to set off the titles of short works such as poems, essays, songs, short stories, and magazine articles.

"The Lottery" by Shirley Jackson (short story)

"Self-Reliance" by Ralph Waldo Emerson (essay)

"We've Only Just Begun" by the Carpenters (song)

3. Use single quotation marks to set off quoted material or the titles of short works within a quotation enclosed by double quotation marks.

"Did you read 'The Ransom of Red Chief' last night?" the teacher asked.

4. Use quotation marks to set off words used for emphasis or a definition.  
The proposed “tax reform” is really nonsense.

## Semicolons

A semicolon is a comma and period combined, like this (;). The semicolon’s structure shows you that the semicolon is a hybrid of a comma and a period. It’s a stronger stop than a comma but not as strong as a period.

1. Use a semicolon between closely related independent clauses when the coordinating conjunction has been left out.  
The chef cooked far too much chicken; we eagerly devoured the excess.
2. Use a semicolon between main clauses connected by conjunctive adverbs such as *however*, *nevertheless*, *moreover*, *for example*, and *consequently*.  
Sarah wanted to be a doctor; however, she faints at the sight of blood.
3. Use a semicolon to join independent clauses when one or both clauses contain a comma.  
Glenn, who is an accomplished musician, wanted to perform at his sister’s wedding; but he quickly discovered that Marcia, the maid of honor, had other plans for the entertainment.

## Slashes

This is a slash (/).

1. Use slashes to separate lines of poetry. Leave a space before and after the slash to show when the line of poetry ends.

As written:

The band, as fairy legends say,  
Was wove on that creating day,  
When He, who called with thought to birth  
Yon tented sky, this laughing earth.

In running text:

The band, as fairy legends say, / Was wove on that creating day, / When He, who called with thought to birth / Yon tented sky, this laughing earth.

2. Use slashes to show choice.  
Devon broke the on/off switch on the toaster.
3. Use slashes in numerical fractions or formulas.  
1/2          3/4



- ✓ Punctuation helps readers identify clusters of words between and within sentences.
- ✓ Between sentences, the most common mark of punctuation is the period; within sentences, the most common mark is the comma.
- ✓ Hyphens separate word parts; dashes separate sentence parts or sentences.
- ✓ Semicolons separate complete sentences; colons show lists.



## QUESTIONS

### True-False Questions

1. With singular nouns or pronouns *not* ending in *s*, add an apostrophe and an *s*.
2. With singular nouns ending in *s*, add an apostrophe but not another *s*.
3. With plural nouns ending in *s*, add an apostrophe before the *s*, as in “Charle’s” or “Jame’s.”
4. With plural nouns *not* ending in *s*, add an apostrophe and an *s*, as in “men’s suits.”
5. Use a comma rather than an apostrophe to show plural forms.
6. Contractions and possessive pronouns are the same, as in “it’s/its” “you’re/your,” and “they’re/their.”
7. Use a colon after the salutation (greeting) of a business letter.
8. As you write, don’t add commas just because you paused in your reading.
9. The following sentence is punctuated correctly:  
We enjoy taking cruises on luxurious ships, but cruises can be costly vacations.
10. Use a comma to separate the parts of an address; be sure use to use a comma before the zip code in an address.
11. Use a comma after an introductory word, phrase, or clause.
12. Use a comma to set off words in *apposition* (words that give additional information about the preceding or following word or expression).
13. Use a comma to set off an *essential clause* (a clause that cannot be omitted without changing the sentence’s basic meaning).
14. The ellipsis (three spaced dots) is used to show that you have left something out of a passage you are quoting.
15. Use a period after most abbreviations and initials. If an abbreviation comes at the end of a sentence, be sure to add another period.

## Completion Questions

Select the word that best completes each sentence.

1. A (dash, hyphen) is longer than a (dash, hyphen).
2. (Parentheses, Brackets) are curved.
3. Use an apostrophe to show where a letter or number has been omitted in a (contraction, quotation).
4. Use brackets for (showing possession, editorial clarification) and to enclose words you insert in a quotation.
5. The colon is (a dot and a comma, two dots), one symbol on top of the other.
6. Use a colon after an independent clause to introduce a list and a (quotation, question).
7. Use a (semicolon, colon) before part of a sentence that explains what has just been stated.
8. (Periods, Commas) are the most frequently used marks of punctuation in English. In fact, they occur in writing twice as often as all other marks of punctuation combined!
9. Use a comma to separate parts of a compound sentence. Use the comma (after, before) the coordinating conjunction.
10. Use a comma after the greeting of (a business, an informal) letter.
11. Use a (comma, period) after most abbreviations and initials.
12. Use quotation marks to set off a speaker's (paraphrased words, exact words).
13. Use a semicolon between closely related (dependent, independent) clauses when the coordinating conjunction has been left out.
14. Use a semicolon to join independent clauses when one or both clauses contain a (period, comma).
15. Use (commas, slashes) to separate lines of poetry in running text.

## Multiple-Choice Questions

Choose the best answer to each question.

1. The apostrophe (') is used in all of the following ways *except*
  - (a) To show possession (ownership)
  - (b) To show plural forms
  - (c) To show where a letter or number has been omitted
  - (d) To show where information has been omitted
2. Use a comma in all the following situations *except*
  - (a) To separate independent clauses (sentences)
  - (b) The close of any letter, business as well as personal
  - (c) After interrupting words and expressions
  - (d) To set off words of direct address

3. Why is there a comma in the following sentence?  
Those who can, practice many hours every day.
  - (a) To set off a nonessential clause
  - (b) To prevent misreading
  - (c) To show an appositive
  - (d) To separate items in a series
4. What mark of punctuation is used to show that you have left something out of a passage you are quoting?
  - (a) Brackets
  - (b) Parenthesis
  - (c) Ellipsis
  - (d) Quotation marks
5. Use a dash for all the following reasons *except*
  - (a) To emphasize an example
  - (b) To show a contrast
  - (c) To set off a speaker's direct words
  - (d) To set off a definition
6. What mark of punctuation is used to show a break in words?
  - (a) Dash
  - (b) Slash
  - (c) Hyphen
  - (d) Colon
7. Use quotation marks to set off the titles of all the following literary works *except*
  - (a) Novels
  - (b) Poems
  - (c) Songs
  - (d) Short stories
8. Which sentence is correctly punctuated?
  - (a) Tsunamis or seismic sea waves, are gravity waves set in motion by underwater disturbances associated with earthquakes.
  - (b) Near its origin, the first wave of a tsunami may be the largest; at greater distances, the largest is normally between the second and seventh wave.
  - (c) Tsunamis consist of a decaying train of waves and, may be detectable on tide gauges, for as long as a week.
  - (d) These waves are frequently called tidal waves although, they have nothing to do with the tides.
9. Which sentence is correctly punctuated?
  - (a) Most natural hazards; can be detected before their threat matures.
  - (b) But seisms have no known precursors, so they come without warning.

- (c) For this reason they continue to kill in some areas at a level usually reserved for wars and epidemics—the 11,000 dead in northeastern Iran died on August 31 1968 not in the ancient past.
  - (d) The homeless living are left to cope with fire looting pestilence fear, and the burden of rebuilding what the planet so easily shrugs away.
10. Which sentence is correctly punctuated?
- (a) Given by the people of France to the people of the United States as a symbol of a shared love of freedom and everlasting friendship, the Statue of Liberty is the largest freestanding sculpture ever created.
  - (b) It weighs 450000 pounds and rises 1,51 feet above its pedestal.
  - (c) More than 100 feet, around, Ms. Liberty boasts eyes two and a half feet wide.
  - (d) Her upraised right arm; extends forty two feet.

### Further Exercises

Correctly punctuate the following paragraphs:

1. Long-time Boston resident's still talk about the molasses flood that engulfed the city's north end, on January 15 1919 Many people were sitting near the Purity, Distilling Corporations fifty foot high molasses tank enjoying the unseasonably warm day. The tank was filled with over two million gallons of molasses and it was about to burst apart. First molasses oozed through, the tanks rivets then the metal bolts popped out the seams burst and tons of molasses' burst out in a surge of deadly goo. The first wave over twenty five feet high smashed: building's trees people and animals like toys. Sharp pieces of the tank sliced through the air injuring scores of people. After the initial destruction molasses, continued to clog the street's for days. Many survivors had to have their clothing cut off dried molasses turned clothing into cement. People, were stuck to sidewalks and benches molasses glued telephone receiver's to ears and hands. The disaster left over 20 people dead and, more than 50 hurt.
2. In many Native American tribes the "shaman" or medicine man acted as a ceremonial priest. In other tribe's however the medicine mans job was to treat any one of his people who became ill. In his role as a healer the medicine man carried a bag of secret herb's and charms to rid the patient of his sickness. Among the tools of his trade were dried finger's deer tails drums' rattles' and tiny sacks of herbs. Different tribes used different herbs; depending on what was available in the area and through trading. The Dakotas for example relieved asthma with the powdered root of skunk cabbage the Kiowas' stopped dan-druff with the soaproot plant.