Basic Punctuation

Punctuation marks are symbols that indicate how a text should be read and understood. Punctuation allows writers to organize ideas by signaling pauses, inflection, tone, and intention. Punctuation is used at the end of sentences, within sentences, and within words. This handout provides general guidelines for punctuation, but writers should always tailor their work to their audience, assignment, or citation and formatting style.

End-of-Sentence Punctuation

End-of-sentence punctuation lets the reader know when a sentence is complete.

Periods

A statement (declarative sentence) is followed by a period.

> **Example:** She placed the book on the table.

Question Marks

A direct question (interrogative sentence) is followed by a question mark.

> **Example:** Where did Annika buy that red shirt?

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

> **Example:** Maria wants to know where Annika bought that red shirt.

Exclamation Points

An exciting or emphatic statement (exclamatory sentence) is followed by an exclamation point.

> **Example:** What a good movie!

Use exclamation points sparingly. They can unnecessarily exaggerate sentences or create an informal tone.

> **Example:** Frida Kahlo's art is iconic and impactful! (*Iconic* and *impactful* already provide emphasis.)

Punctuation Within Sentences

Punctuation marks within sentences help combine clauses and emphasize or separate ideas.

Commas

Commas give structure to a sentence by separating its parts and indicating where to pause when reading. Within sentences, commas are typically used in the following ways:

Commas are used to separate **three or more** words or phrases in a **series or list**.

> **Example:** Practice will be held before school, in the afternoon, and at night.

Commas are used after **introductory words or phrases** or after an **introductory dependent clause** (a group of words before the subject of a sentence that does not form a complete sentence by itself).

> **Example:** Unfortunately, I was late for work.
> **Example:** If your friends enjoy Indian food, they will love this restaurant.

Commas are used between **independent clauses** (groups of words with a subject and verb that can stand alone as a sentence) joined by a **coordinating conjunction** (*for*, *and*, *nor*, *but*, *or*, *yet*, *so*).

> **Example:** My dog was muddy, **so** we gave him a bath.

Commas surround **nonessential phrases** (groups of words that provide optional information).

>**Example:** Alex, **Tanya's friend**, gave a brilliant speech last night.

Semicolons

Semicolons separate clauses or phrases that are closely related and that receive equal emphasis.

Semicolons **join independent clauses** in a compound sentence with no coordinating conjunction.

>**Example:** Michael seemed preoccupied; he answered our questions abruptly.

After a semicolon, you can add a transition word (conjunctive adverb) to help the sentence's flow.

>**Example:** The emergency room was crowded; **however,** Kailani was helped immediately.

Semicolons help avoid confusion in lists where there are commas within the listed items.

>**Example:** We traveled to London, England; Paris, France; Berlin, Germany; and Sofia, Bulgaria.

Colons

Colons follow independent clauses and are used to call attention to the information (word, phrase, clause, or list) that comes after the colon.

>**Example (Word):** Joe has only one thing on his mind: homework.
>**Example (Phrase):** Joe has only one thing on his mind: his math assignment.
>**Example (Clause):** Joe has only one thing on his mind: finishing his math assignment.
>**Example (List):** Joe has several things on his mind: his family, his job, and his math assignment.

Do not use a colon after a verb that directly introduces a list.

>**Example (Incorrect):** The things on Joe's mind are: math, work, and family.
>**Example (Correct):** The things on Joe's mind are math, work, and family.

Dashes (Em Dashes)

A dash can be used to attach material to the end of a sentence when there is a clear **break** in the sentence or to **explain** the material preceding the dash.

>**Example (Break):** Monique arrived with five minutes to spare—just in time.
>**Example (Explanation):** It was a close call—a gust of wind pushed the kite within inches of the tree.

In the middle of a sentence, paired dashes can function as parentheses or commas by offsetting information.

>**Example (No Dashes):** Lee's summer plans (camping, boating, and reading) are underway.
>**Example (Dashes):** Lee's summer plans—camping, boating, and reading—are underway.

Parentheses

Parentheses set apart additional or optional information, such as examples or asides.

>**Example:** We visited several countries in Asia (Thailand, Mongolia, Japan) on our last trip.

Parentheses enclose numbers or citations within a sentence.

>**Example:** Grades will be based on (1) participation, (2) in-class writing, and (3) exams.
>**Example:** "Whales migrate seasonally between feeding and breeding grounds" (Gomez, 2014).

When parentheses enclose an **independent sentence**, the end punctuation belongs *inside* the parentheses. When parentheses enclose only **part of a sentence**, the end punctuation belongs *outside* the parentheses.

> **Example (Inside):** Amy told me she saw Ash's new car. (I saw Ash's car before Amy did.)
> **Example (Outside):** Amy told me she saw Ash's new car (which I had already seen).

Quotation Marks

Quotation marks enclose the **exact words** of a person (a direct quotation).

> **Example:** As one research participant said, "students are often busy."

Do not use quotation marks around a **paraphrase** or a **summary** of the author's words.

> **Example:** One participant noted that busy student schedules are another factor.

Quotation marks often surround the **titles** of articles, poems, reports, and chapters within a book.

> **Example:** "The Talk of the Town" is a regular feature in *Time* magazine.

Quotation Marks with Other Punctuation

The presence of quotation marks influences the placement of other punctuation marks in a sentence.

Place **periods and commas** inside quotation marks, except when citations follow.

> **Example:** Aida said, "Aaron has a black shirt."
> **Example:** Aida said, "Aaron has a black shirt," but I think it might be gray.
> **Example:** Jong writes, "Blue light exposure may inhibit sleep in some patients" (4).

Place **semicolons and colons** outside quotation marks (if they are not part of the quote).

> **Example:** I call my dog my "teddy bear"; he is not a bear.

Place **question marks or exclamation points** *inside* the quotation marks if they punctuate the **quote only**.

> **Example:** "Are we too late?" she asked.

Place **question marks or exclamation points** *outside* the quotation marks if they punctuate the **sentence**.

> **Example:** Why did she say, "We are too late"?

Use **brackets** to indicate changes to an original quote.

> **Example (Original Quote):** According to researchers, "The blue light impacted her sleep."
> **Example (pronoun clarification):** According to researchers, "The blue light impacted **[Ann's]** sleep."
> **Example (verb tense change):** According to researchers, "The blue light **[impacts]** her sleep."
> **Example (capitalization change):** According to researchers, "**[B]**lue light impacted her sleep."

The Latin word *sic* indicates an outdated spelling or error within a quotation that is intentionally left as is. Italicize *sic* and place it in brackets directly after a misspelling. Alternatively, provide the proper spelling.

> **Example:** "The **dreadfulle [*sic*]** disease took many of my **frends [friends]** from me" (Thomas, 12).

Ellipses

An ellipsis consists of three periods according to style: ". . ." (APA, MLA, Chicago) or "…" (AP, fiction).

Ellipses are used in **formal** writing in place of an omitted word, sentence, or passage within a quotation.

> **Example (Original):** One witness said, "The destruction of homes, cars, and trees was catastrophic."
> **Example (Ellipsis):** One witness said, "The destruction . . . was catastrophic."

Ellipses are used in **fiction** writing to suggest a dramatic pause, indicate silence, or allow a sentence to trail off. When a sentence ends with an ellipsis, punctuate normally. (This may result in four consecutive periods.)

> **Examples:** Raul felt a chill creep down his spine … the monster had arrived in all its horror.
> "What do we do now?" Lauren asked. Raul struggled to speak: "I … don't know …."

Punctuation Within Words

Punctuation within words combines words or modifies their function.

Hyphens

Use a hyphen in a **compound adjective** (or hyphenated adjective) only when the adjective comes before the word it modifies. Some compound adjectives are always hyphenated, such as *best-selling*.

> **Example:** a **well-known** author
> **Example:** an author who is **well known**

Use hyphens with the **prefixes** *ex-*, *self-*, and *all-*; the suffix *-elect*; and prefixes before proper nouns.

> **Examples:** ex-partner, self-image, all-star, president-elect, mid-October

Use hyphens for **compound numbers** and **fractions**. When a number is used as a noun, no hyphen is needed.

> **Example: two-thirds** majority (*two-thirds* is an adjective modifying majority)
> **Example: two thirds** of the voters (*thirds* is a noun being modified by *two*)

Apostrophes

Apostrophes show **possession** and form **contractions**. Do not use an apostrophe with the possessive personal pronouns *yours*, *his*, *hers*, *its*, *ours*, *their*, or *whose*.

To show possession, add an apostrophe and an *-s* to nouns.

> **Examples:** Mina's research, Chris's article, the business's system

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

> **Examples:** the musicians' instruments, several businesses' systems

A contraction is a shortened form of two words. Apostrophes show where letters have been omitted.

> **Examples:**
> | | | | |
> |---|---|---|---|
> | I am = I'm | I have = I've | you are = you're | could not = couldn't |
> | who is = who's | let us = let's | they are = they're | she is = she's |
>
> **Note:** *It's* is a contraction for *it is*; *its* is a possessive pronoun.