

Basic Punctuation

Note: This document should only be used as a reference and should not replace assignment guidelines.

Correct punctuation is essential for clear and effective writing. The following list contains some of the most critical punctuation rules.

Commas

Commas separate parts of a sentence. They also tell readers to pause between words, and they can clarify the meanings of sentences.

- Commas are used to separate three or more words or phrases in a series.
EXAMPLE: Practice will be held **before school, in the afternoon, and at night.**
- Commas are used after introductory words and introductory dependent clauses (groups of words before the subject of a sentence that do not form complete sentences).
EXAMPLES: **If your friends enjoy Chinese food,** they will love this restaurant.
Incidentally, I was not late this morning.
Hoping for a bigger fish, Rob spent three more hours fishing.
- 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 had fleas, so we gave him a bath.
- Commas set off nonessential phrases or clauses.
EXAMPLE: The man, **I think,** had a funny laugh.
Tanya, **Debbie's sister,** gave a brilliant speech last night.

See our **Comma Rules** handout for more information on independent and dependent clauses.

End of Sentence Punctuation

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

Periods

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

EXAMPLE: Orem is the home of Utah Valley University.

Question Marks

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

EXAMPLE: When did Joe buy a red shirt?

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

EXAMPLE: Marie wants to know when Joe bought a red shirt.

Exclamation Points

An exclamatory sentence is followed by an exclamation point.

EXAMPLE: What a good movie!

Use exclamation marks sparingly because they can unnecessarily exaggerate sentences or create an informal tone.

EXAMPLE: Monet was the most influential painter of his time! (*Most emphasizes influential painter; therefore, an exclamation point is not needed.*)

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NO DASHES: Simpson's prescription for the economy, lower interest rates, higher employment, and less government spending, was rejected by the president's administration.

WITH DASHES: Simpson's prescription for the economy—**lower interest rates, higher employment, and less government spending**—was rejected by the president's administration.

- The dash can also be used to attach material to the end of a sentence when there is a clear break in the sentence or when an explanation is being introduced.

EXAMPLES: The president will be unable to win enough votes for another term of office—unless, of course, he can reduce unemployment and the deficit soon.

It was a close call—the sudden gust of wind pushed the helicopter to within inches of the power line.

Parentheses

- Parentheses section off additions or expressions that are not necessary to the sentence. They tend to de-emphasize what they section off.

EXAMPLE: We visited several European countries (England, France, Spain) on our last trip.

- Parentheses enclose figures within a sentence.

EXAMPLE: Grades will be based on (1) participation, (2) in-class writing, and (3) exams.

- When parentheses are used to enclose an independent sentence, the end punctuation belongs inside the parentheses. When the parentheses enclose part of the sentence, however, the punctuation belongs outside the parentheses.

EXAMPLES: Mandy told me she saw Amy's new car. (I saw Amy's car before Mandy.) She said it was a nice car.

Mandy told me she saw Amy's new car (which I had already seen). She said it was a nice car.

Apostrophes

Apostrophes are used to show possession and to form contractions.

Possessives

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

EXAMPLES: Susan's wrench, anyone's problem

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

EXAMPLES: my parents' car, the musicians' instruments

- Add an apostrophe and an *-s* for plural possessive nouns that do not end in *-s*.

EXAMPLES: the men's department, my children's toys

- Add an apostrophe and an *-s* for singular possessive nouns that end in *-s*.

EXAMPLES: Chris's cookbook, the business's system

- Do not use an apostrophe with possessive personal pronouns including *yours, his, hers, its, ours, their, and whose*.

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Contractions

- Apostrophes show where letters have been omitted in contractions.

EXAMPLES:	I am = I'm	I have = I've
	who is = who's	let us = let's
	cannot = can't	he is, she is, it is = he's, she's, it's
	you are = you're	they are = they're

Note: *It's* is a contraction for *it is*; *its* is a possessive pronoun even though it doesn't have an apostrophe.

Quotation Marks

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

EXAMPLE: Megan said, "Kurt has a red hat."

- 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: Megan said that Kurt's hat was red.

- Quotation marks set off the titles of magazine articles, poems, reports, and chapters within a book in MLA. (Titles of books, magazines, plays, and other whole publications should be italicized in MLA.)

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

Quotation Marks with Other Punctuation

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

EXAMPLES: Aida said, "Aaron has a blue shirt."
Aida said, "Aaron has a blue shirt," but I think it might be green.
Jong writes, "Potatoes may inhibit weight loss in some patients" (4).

- Place semicolons and colons outside quotation marks.

EXAMPLE: He calls me his "teddy bear"; I'm not a bear.

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

EXAMPLE: "Are we too late?" she asked.

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

EXAMPLE: Why did she say, "We are too late"?