

# Usage Basic Punctuation Rules

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

## COMMAS

Commas are used to separate parts of a sentence. They tell readers to pause between words or groups of words, and they help clarify the meanings of sentences.

- ◀ Commas are used to separate three or more words, phrases, or clauses in a series.  
EXAMPLE: Practice will be held before school, in the afternoon, and at night.
- ◀ Commas are used after an introductory dependent clause (a group of words before the subject of a sentence that do not form a complete sentence).  
EXAMPLE: If your friends enjoy Chinese food, they will love this restaurant.
- ◀ Commas are used to set off introductory words, introductory adverbial, participial, or infinitive phrases, and longer introductory prepositional phrases.  
EXAMPLE: Incidentally, I was not late this morning. (word)  
Hoping for a bigger fish, Rob spent three more hours fishing. (phrase)
- ◀ Commas are used between independent clauses 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.
- ◀ Commas set off an appositive (a word or phrase that renames a noun).  
EXAMPLE: Tanya, Debbie's sister, gave a brilliant speech last night.

## END OF SENTENCE PUNCTUATION

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

- ◀ A statement (or declarative sentence) is followed by a period.  
EXAMPLE: Orem is the home of Utah Valley State College.
- ◀ 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.
- ◀ An exclamatory sentence is followed by an exclamation point.  
EXAMPLE: What a good movie!
- ◀ Use exclamation marks sparingly because they can unnecessarily exaggerate sentences.  
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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## SEMICOLONS

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

- ◀ Semicolons join independent clauses in a compound sentence if no coordinating conjunction is used.

EXAMPLE: Michael seemed preoccupied; he answered our questions abruptly.

- ◀ Semicolons are used before a conjunctive adverb (transition word) that joins the clauses of a compound sentence.

EXAMPLE: The emergency room was crowded; however, Warren was helped immediately.

- ◀ Semicolons help avoid confusion in lists where there are already commas.

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 that comes after.

- ◀ Colons come after the independent clause and before the word, phrase, sentence, quotation, or list it is introducing.

EXAMPLE: Joe has only one thing on his mind: girls. (word)

Joe has only one thing on his mind: the girl next door. (phrase)

Joe has only one thing on his mind: he wants to go out with Linda. (clause)

Joe has several things on his mind: his finals, his job, and Linda. (list)

- ◀ Never use a colon after a verb that directly introduces a list.

INCORRECT: The things on Joe's mind are: finals, work, and Linda.

CORRECT: The things on Joe's mind are finals, work, and Linda.

## HYPHENS

Hyphens are used to form compound words or join word units. They are used to join prefixes, suffixes, and letters to words.

- ◀ Use hyphens with compound numbers from twenty-one to ninety-nine and with fractions used as modifiers.

EXAMPLE: **forty-two** applicants

**two-thirds** majority (*two-thirds* is an adjective modifying *majority*)

**three-fourths** empty (*three-fourths* is an adverb modifying *empty*)

**two thirds** of the voters (*two thirds* is not being used as an adjective here because *thirds* is a noun being modified by *two*)

- ◀ Use hyphens in a compound adjective only when it comes before the word it modifies. However, some compound adjectives are always hyphenated, such as *well-balanced*. Look up compound adjectives in the dictionary if you are unsure whether or not to hyphenate them.

EXAMPLE: a **well-liked** author

an author who is **well liked**

a **world-renowned** composer

a composer who is **world renowned**

- ◀ Use a hyphen with the prefixes *ex-*, *self-*, and *all-*; with the suffix *-elect*; and with all prefixes before a proper noun or proper adjective.

EXAMPLE: all-star

ex-mayor

pro-Canadian

senator-elect

anti-Semitic

non-European

self-control

self-image

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## DASHES

Dashes connect groups of words to other groups of words in order to emphasize a point or show that the information is unessential. Usually the dash separates words in the middle of a sentence from the rest of the sentence, or it leads to material at the end of the sentence.

◀ In the middle of a sentence, a dash can put special emphasis on a group of words or make them stand out from the rest of the sentence.

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

BECOMES: Linda 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 continuity of the sentence or when an explanation is being introduced.

EXAMPLE: 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.

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

## APOSTROPHES

Apostrophes are used to show possession or to indicate where a letter has been omitted to form a contraction.

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

EXAMPLE: Susan's wrench, anyone's problem

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

EXAMPLE: my parents' car, the musicians' instruments

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

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

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

EXAMPLE: 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*.

◀ Apostrophes are also used in contractions, two words which have been combined into one, to mark where the missing letter or letters would be.

EXAMPLE: I am = I'm

who is = who's

cannot = can't

you are = you're

I have = I've

let us = let's

he is, she is, it is = he's, she's, it's

they are = they're

◀ Avoid confusing *it's* with *its*. *It's* is a contraction for *it is*; *its* is a possessive pronoun.

# Usage Basic Punctuation Rules

## QUOTATION MARKS

Quotation marks are used to show the beginning and end of a quotation or a title of a short work.

- ◀ Quotation marks enclose the exact words of a person (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. (Titles of books, magazines, plays, and other whole publications should be underlined or italicized.)

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.

EXAMPLE: Aida said, "Aaron has a blue shirt."

- ◀ 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"?

## PARENTHESES

Elements inside parentheses are related to the sentence but are nonessential.

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

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

- ◀ Parentheses enclose figures within a sentence.

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

- ◀ When the group inside the parentheses forms a complete sentence but is inserted inside a larger sentence, no period is needed. However, if a question mark or exclamation point is needed, it may be used.

EXAMPLE: The snow (she saw it as she passed the window) was now falling heavily.

- ◀ When parentheses are used to enclose an independent sentence, the end punctuation belongs inside the parentheses.

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