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Punctuation and Punctuation Style

Punctuation serves two important purposes in written communication. First, it helps present ideas clearly and accurately. It indicates where one thought ends and another begins, shows relationships among ideas, and separates items in a series. Second, punctuation is used in abbreviations and in ﬁgures expressing time, quantities, and measures.

This chapter covers proper usage of end marks, commas, semicolons, colons, quotation marks, apostrophes, hyphens, dashes, parentheses, brackets, and ellipses.

## End Marks: Period, Question Mark, Exclamation Point

*End marks* usually come at the end of a sentence. However, they also can be used after single words or within a sentence.

### *Period*

The *period* is used at the end of a complete sentence, which can be a state- ment, command, or request. It is a visual marker to the reader that one complete thought has ended and that another may follow. In informal writ- ing, periods can be used with single words.

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**Statement:** You shouldn’t drive and talk on the cell phone.

**Request:** Please hang up and drive. **Command:** Get off the cell phone and drive. **Single words:** Thanks. I feel much safer.

Periods are also used in many abbreviations. For a more complete dis- cussion of abbreviations, see pages 86-100.

Saint St.

Avenue Ave.

American Bar Association A.B.A.

### *Question Mark*

A *question mark* is used at the end of a sentence that asks a direct ques- tion. It is not used at the end of a statement that contains an *indirect* ques- tion. In informal writing, question marks also can be used with single words.

**Direct question:** Are you going to the preview tonight?

**Indirect question:** I asked them if they were going to the preview

tonight.

**Single words:** What? I couldn’t hear you over the TV.

So? It’s no trouble to feed one more person.

**Polite Requests.** Many business letters contain requests for information, compliance, reply, or permission. These requests can be punctuated using either a period or a question mark.

**Period:** Would you please send me your company’s website address.

**Question mark:** Would you please send me your company’s website address?

**Series of Questions.** Question marks are used after each question in a sentence containing a series of questions.

How much are you willing to gamble on your future? your family’s health? your career?

**Quotation Marks.** Question marks are placed *inside* quotation marks when the quoted material is a question. Otherwise, they are placed *outside* quotation marks.

“Are the sets ready?” the director asked.

I just ﬁnished the short story “Where Is Paradise?”

Have you read “The Scarlet Ibis”? (The quoted material is not a question. The entire sentence is the question.)

Did he say “no vacation” or “no early vacation”?

### *Exclamation Point*

*Exclamation points* add emphasis to sentences, phrases, or single words. They are like a red ﬂag waved at the reader and as such should be used spar- ingly. Exclamation points are a familiar sight in advertising and promo- tional material.

Wait! Don’t touch that wire! I can’t believe she said that!

Don’t delay! Order your DVDs now!

## Comma

The *comma* is the most commonly used and abused punctuation mark. People often insert commas between subject and verb or when they reach the end of a thought, without regard for the rules of comma usage.

Commas are used to separate words or groups of words in a list or par- allel construction; to set off introductory elements, interruptions, and words moved from their usual position; and to coordinate such grammat- ical structures as compound predicates, coordinate adjectives, and descrip- tive appositives and modiﬁers. On the other hand, some comma uses have little to do with the meaning of a sentence and are inserted to prevent mis-

reading or to create emphasis. In a few cases, they simply represent tradi- tional ways of punctuating various grammatical elements.

This section discusses some of the more common uses and abuses of this often troublesome punctuation mark.

### *Series Comma*

Commas separate items in a series. The items can be single words, phrases, or clauses. Although current practice allows the ﬁnal comma to be dropped before the ﬁnal conjunction (*or, but, nor,* and *and*), including the comma can avoid possible confusion for the reader.

We brought sandwiches, wine, cold soup, and chocolate cake on the picnic.

The conductor set up his stand, took out the score, and lifted his baton. (verb phrases)

She is vice president of operations, sales and resources and personnel. (Are the ﬁnal categories *sales and resources*, and *personnel* or are they *sales*, and *resources and personnel?* A ﬁnal comma would make the categories clear.)

### *Independent Clauses*

When two independent clauses are joined by *and, but, or, nor,* or *for,* use a comma before the conjunction. However, no comma is needed if the clauses are very short.

Her gymnastics routine was brilliant, and the judges gave her a 99.46. Yolanda knew we’d be late, but she left anyway.

He can play the guitar, or he can do his magic show. Stir the batter and add the eggs slowly.

They came early and they stayed late.

A comma is not used when *and, but, for, or,* or *nor* joins two verbs that share the same subject.

Kerry Wood **pitches** with the best of them and **bats** better than most outﬁelders.

Shelly **has never cooked** a meal nor **washed** her own clothes.

### *Introductory Clauses, Phrases, Expressions*

Use a comma after introductory phrases or clauses unless they are very short. When expressions such as *no, yes, in addition, well*, and *thus* begin a sentence, they are followed by a comma.

When Ansel Adams took a photograph, he knew exactly what would appear in the picture.

Speaking of food, isn’t anybody hungry?

In summer we always try to get outside more. (Short phrase *in summer* does not require a comma.)

Well, losing one game doesn’t ruin an entire season.

Thus, I feel your qualiﬁcations make you perfectly suited for this job.

### *Nonrestrictive Clauses and Nonessential Material*

Commas set off nonrestrictive clauses and expressions that interrupt the sentence or that add incidental information or description.

The rodeo, always held in August, draws tourists from all over. (*Always held in August* is a nonrestrictive clause.)

We wanted to ﬁnish, of course, but didn’t know how.

The new ofﬁcer, I’m sure you remember him, locked himself out of his car.

### *Direct Address*

Words used in direct address are set off by commas regardless of their posi- tion in the sentence.

Greg, can you ﬁx my e-mail?

They heard about the trouble, Jean, and wanted to help. Please sign this receipt, Ms. Liang.

### *Commas and Clarity*

At times commas are used to avoid confusing the reader when a sentence can be read in more than one way.

In autumn nights grow steadily longer. (On ﬁrst reading, *autumn* and *nights* appear to go together. It’s evident from the rest of the sentence, however, that they are separate. A comma after *autumn* would make the meaning clear immediately.)

In autumn, nights grow steadily longer.

### *Traditional Comma Uses*

Commas are used in certain conventional situations including dates, addresses, the salutations and closings of informal letters, and certain forms of proper names or names followed by a title.

We were married June 22, 1941, in Los Angeles. (When only the day and month are used, no commas are necessary. *We were married on June 22 in Los Angeles*.)

Send your rebate coupon to Harvard House, Suite 2920, 467 West Rhine Street, Portland, Oregon.

Dear Harriet, Sincerely yours, Truly yours,

Samuel Stanislaw, Jr. (but *Samuel Stanislaw III*) Judith Gallagher, PhD

Linda Marks, director

### *Comma Faults*

Many people use commas incorrectly. The following guidelines point out common errors in style.

1. Never use commas to separate subject and verb.

**Incorrect:** Finding a lead singer for the band, has been an ordeal. (The noun phrase *Finding a lead singer for the band* is the subject and should not be separated from the verb *has been*.)

**Correct:** Finding a lead singer for the band has been an ordeal.

1. Never use commas to separate two phrases or subordinate clauses joined by a conjunction.

**Incorrect:** The waiter suggested that we order a white wine, and that we try the Cajun appetizers.

**Correct:** The waiter suggested that we order a white wine and that we try the Cajun appetizers.

**Incorrect:** Ming-Jie painted her room, but not the hallway.

**Correct:** Ming-Jie painted her room but not the hallway.

**Incorrect:** After the treaty was signed, both sides pulled back their troops, and reduced their armored divisions.

**Correct:** After the treaty was signed, both sides pulled back their troops and reduced their armored divisions.

1. In a series, never use a comma to separate a modiﬁer from the word it modiﬁes.

**Incorrect:** They drove through a damp, cold, eerie, fog. **Correct:** They drove through a damp, cold, eerie fog. **Incorrect:** That is a ridiculous, immature, wicked, suggestion. **Correct:** That is a ridiculous, immature, wicked suggestion.

## Semicolon

A *semicolon* represents a stronger break than a comma but not as complete a stop as a period or colon. Semicolons are used to separate independent

clauses in a variety of special circumstances. They also serve to group items in a series when the items contain internal punctuation.

### *Independent Clauses*

Use a semicolon to join two independent clauses that are similar in thought but are *not* joined by the coordinating conjunctions *and, but, or, nor, for,* or *yet.*

The house stood empty for years; no one would buy it.

The river raged through the gorge; her small tent was swept away in its path.

**Joined by a Linking Adverb.** When two independent clauses are joined by a linking adverb such as *accordingly, however, therefore,* or *thus,* use a semicolon at the end of the ﬁrst clause. The linking adverb is usually fol- lowed by a comma or set off by commas if it falls within the second clause.

The turtle survived its two-story fall; however, it was never quite the same again.

The conference ended last Thursday; therefore, we can get back to business on Monday.

Margaret told me not to stay in a motel; she suggested, instead, that I stay at her house.

**Clauses with Internal Punctuation.** A semicolon may be used to sep- arate two independent clauses if one or both of the clauses contain inter- nal punctuation. The clauses may or may not be joined by conjunctions or linking adverbs.

She owns two dogs, a goat, and a llama; they stay outside all year.

Walter, the one with the allergies, read his story in class; and everyone thought it was excellent.

The dark, dusty street looked deserted; but I kept hearing footsteps behind me.

### *Series*

Use semicolons to separate items in a series if the items contain internal punctuation.

The speakers included Jeff Hines, vice president; Alberta Corazon, director of ﬁnances; Edward Singh, human resources; and Nancy Meripol, assistant to the president.

We ordered ﬁve cartons of color-printer paper; six lined, medium- sized stationery pads; and nine boxes of assorted pens, pencils, and markers.

## Colon

*Colons* represent a more complete break than semicolons but not as com- plete a stop as a period.

### *Before a Series or List*

Colons are used to introduce a series or list only after a complete sentence. When the series immediately follows a verb or preposition, do not use a colon.

**Incorrect:** Our ﬁve travel choices are: the Bahamas, Hawaii, Mexico City, Acapulco, and Peoria.

**Correct:** We have ﬁve travel choices: the Bahamas, Hawaii, Mexico City, Acapulco, and Peoria.

**Incorrect:** They were interested in: one brass bed, two lace pillows, one afghan comforter, and a chamber pot.

**Correct:** They were interested in the following items: one brass bed, two lace pillows, one afghan comforter, and a chamber pot.

### *Between Independent Clauses*

Use a colon to introduce a question or related statement following an inde- pendent clause. The second independent clause may or may not begin with a capital letter. Whichever way you choose, be consistent in your writing.

She had only one thought: What was she going to do now? I know the answer: reverse the two equations.

### *Time*

Colons are used to express time in ﬁgures. Do not use the words *o’clock* after the ﬁgures. However, expressions such as *noon, in the afternoon, AM, PM*, and *midnight* can be used.

10:30 AM 4:35 PM

12:00 midnight 8:30 in the morning

### *Formal and Business Communications*

Colons follow the salutation in a formal or business letter, report, memo, or other type of business communication.

Dear Mr. Winﬁeld: To the Research Staff: Dear Buyer: To All Managers:

Dear President West: Attention Union Members:

## Quotation Marks

*Quotation marks* enclose a direct quotation, that is, the repetition of some- one’s exact words.

“Keep your head down and charge!” the coach said. Her exact words were, “Bake the bread at 350 degrees.”

Indirect quotations do not take quotation marks.

The coach said to keep your head down and charge. She told us to bake the bread at 350 degrees.

### *Punctuation with Quotation Marks*

Commas and periods are always placed *inside* the quotation marks even if the quoted material is contained within the sentence.

She thinks we’re “off the wall,” but I think our idea will work. We’ve heard him say a thousand times, “Waste not, want not.” “Tell me something I’ll remember forever,” she said.

You’ve read the poem “Ash Wednesday,” haven’t you?

Semicolons and colons are always placed *outside* the quotation marks.

Look up the title under “Animated Cartoons”; copy the cartoon features listed there.

The following animals are considered “marsupials”: kangaroo, wombat, koala.

Question marks and exclamation points are placed *inside* the quotation marks if they are part of the quoted material. Otherwise they are placed *outside* the quotation marks. Only one end mark is used at the end of a sentence containing quoted material.

Have you read the report “The Over-Scheduled Child”? (The entire sentence is the question; the end mark comes after the ﬁnal quotation mark.)

He sent Irene the article “Why Can’t Ivan Compute?” (The title is a question; the end mark comes before the ﬁnal quotation mark.)

“Dinner is ready!” he called.

I can’t believe they want us to increase sales “by 20 percent”!

### *Brief and Long Quotations*

Quoted material that is only two or three lines long is enclosed in quota- tion marks and included as part of the regular text.

The movie critic was blunt about her reactions to the ﬁlm. She stated that it “has the intelligence of a jellyﬁsh and as much reality as a *Survivor* series.”

Longer quotations have no quotation marks and are set off from the rest of the text.

The movie critic was blunt about her reactions to the ﬁlm.

This movie should suffer an early and merciful death. It has the intelligence of a jellyﬁsh and as much reality as a *Survivor* series. I don’t know what the director intended for this ﬁlm; but unless it was to bore us to death, he has certainly failed.

### *Single Quotation Marks*

Single quotation marks are used to set off a quote within a quote.

Carla said, “Every time I hear the song ‘Into the West’ I want to cry.” “When I asked him what he needed, he replied, ‘A passport.’”

### *Titles*

Quotation marks are used to enclose the titles of articles, chapters of books, poems, reports, many governmental publications, short stories, individual songs, workshop or conference titles, and titles of proceedings.

“Ballad of the Sad Cafe” is required reading in most college literature programs.

The song “Somewhere over the Rainbow” was almost left out of the classic movie *The Wizard of Oz.*

Read the chapter “How Diet Affects Immune Functions” before you change your eating habits too much.

The report “Equality in the Workplace: A Ten-Year Study” shows how much work still needs to be done.

Billy Collins’ poem “Study in Orange and White” appears in one of his recent collections.

The IEEE international conference focused on the theme “Nanotechnology: Practical Applications.”

Throughout the weekend, we will offer two workshops titled “Living with Stress” and “Getting Control of Your Finances.”

### *Terms and Expressions*

Use quotation marks to enclose terms and expressions that are considered odd or unusual (slang terms in a formal report) or that are likely to be unknown to the reader (jargon, technical terms).

The President told reporters he regarded his opponent as a “ﬂip- ﬂopper.”

Not many people know the functions of “T cells” or “B cells” in the immune system.

Scott said he was as full as a “bug-eyed tick.” The term “blog” should be deﬁned in your book.

## Apostrophe

The *apostrophe* is used to show possession and to form the plural of many nouns and symbols, as well as to indicate the omission of letters in con- tractions. (Possessive nouns and pronouns are also covered in Chapter 1 under Nouns and under Pronouns.)

### *Possessive of Singular Nouns*

The possessive of a singular noun is formed by adding *’s*. Names that end in a *z* sound often take only the apostrophe to avoid the awkwardness of too many *s* sounds.