



Figure 1 The Writing Center and Academic Resource Center logo

## PUNCTUATION

Punctuation marks are used as signals to the reader. When we speak, we can pause, stop, or change our tone of voice. When we write, we need to indicate to our reader how we want them to read our writing. If we did not have punctuation, our writing would be one long stream of thought with no coherence. Imagine reading your text book if it were all one very long sentence. How much sense would it make to you? Now, think about a conversation you have had with your best friend. Think about how you animate your voice, the pauses you make for emphasis, and the sound of a question. All those different aspects of your speech can be shown on paper using punctuation. The following are some rules to help you use punctuation to your advantage using the marks below:

PERIOD	.
ELLIPSIS	...
QUESTION MARK	?
EXCLAMATION POINT	!
COMMA	,
SEMICOLON	;
COLON	:
PARANTHESIS	()
DASH/HYPHEN	—
APOSTROPHE	'
QUOTATION MARK	“ ”

**Period** Use a period at the end of a sentence.

*Example:* We took the dog for a walk.

Don't use a period if the last word in the sentence ends in a period.

*My mother is an M.D.*

*She's taking English, math, etc.*

You only need to use one space between the period and the first letter of the following word!

**Ellipsis** Use ellipsis to indicate words that are being left out. When you leave words out in the middle of the sentence, simply replace them with ellipsis.

*Example:* "Jane Austen writes about issues of society...and concerns about morality."

If words are omitted at the end of a quoted sentence, then put the ellipsis before the end punctuation.

*The regulation states, "All agencies must document overtime...."*

If sentences are omitted between quoted sentences, then put ellipsis after the end punctuation of preceding sentence.

*The regulation states, "Agencies may risk losing federal funds.... All agencies will be audited annually."*

In MLA Format, the ellipsis you add should be in [brackets].

**Question Mark:** Use a question mark at the end of a direct question.

*Example:* Where are you going?

Do not use a question mark with an indirect question.

*Example:* I asked if he would go with me.

Use a question mark when the sentence is half question, half statement.

*Example:* You would like to go, wouldn't you?

**Exclamation Point**

Use exclamation points to show emphasis or surprise. Do not overuse the exclamation point, or it will lose its power. *This is very important!*

**Comma:** Use a comma to separate two adjectives when the word *and* can be inserted between them.

Use commas to surround the name or title of a person directly addressed.

Use commas to set off expressions that interrupt the flow of the sentence.

**Semicolon:** Semicolons are used to join related independent clauses with no connecting words.

Semicolons are used to join two independent clauses with conjunctive adverbs (e.g. however, moreover, therefore, consequently, etc.).

Semicolons are used to separate items in a series if the items already include commas.

*For a more detailed description of semicolon use, refer to the Comma & Semicolon Handout.*

**Colon:** Use the colon after a complete sentence to introduce a list of items.

*Example:* The daily newspaper contains four sections: news, sports, entertainment, and classified ads.

Use the colon following the salutation of a business letter.

*Example:* Dear Mr. Smith:

Use the colon between the hour and minutes in time.

*Example:* The time is 11:55am.

Use the colon between chapter and verse in biblical references.

*Example:* Genesis 1:12

Use the colon to introduce a direct quotation that is more than four lines long (remember to double space the quotation and to indent one inch from the left margin).

**Parentheses:** Parentheses are used occasionally for extra, unessential information in a sentence. Parentheses always appear in pairs.

*Example:* My mother (a psychiatrist) thinks I should be in therapy.

**Dash/Hyphen:** Use a dash to emphasize a point or to set off an explanatory comment, but don't overuse dashes, or they will lose their impact.

Dashes function in some ways like parentheses.

Use them in pairs to set off a comment within a sentence.

Dashes function in some ways like colons.

Use them to introduce material illustrating or emphasizing a statement.

Use a hyphen to combine two words that are used as a single adjective before a noun:

- *One-way street*
- *Chocolate-covered peanuts*

However, do not hyphenate words after the noun:

- *The street was one way.*
- *The peanuts were chocolate covered.*

Use a hyphen with compound numbers:

- *Forty-five*
- *Twenty-seven*

Use a hyphen with prefixes *ex-*, *self-*, *all-*; with the suffix *-elect*, between a prefix and a capitalized word, and with figures or letters:

- *Ex-husband*
- *Self-assured*
- *Mid-September*
- *T-shirt*

Use a hyphen to separate a word at the end of a line when hand writing, but always separate the word between syllables:

- pref-er-ence            not prefer-ence
- sell-ing                not sel-ling
- in-di-vid-u-al-ist      not indiv-idualist

Computers automatically wrap the word around to the next line, so there is no need for hyphenation.

**Apostrophes:** The apostrophe has two uses:

1) To form possessives of nouns

To see if you need to make a possessive, turn the phrase around and make it an "of the..." phrase. For example:

*the boy's hat = the hat of the boy*

*three days' journey = journey of three days*

Add **'s** to the singular form of the word (even if it ends in -s)

The *class's* teacher was late.

Add **'s** to the plural forms that do not end in -s

The *fish's* tank was dirty.

Add **'** to the end of plural nouns that end in -s

The cars' engines were noisy and had to be recalled by the manufacturer.

2) To show the omission of letters

Apostrophes are used in contractions. A contraction is two words combined where one or more letters have been left out. The apostrophe shows where you left out the letter(s).

*Do not = don't*

*Would not = wouldn't*

*I am = I'm*

Apostrophes are **NOT** used for possessive pronouns or for noun plurals. Apostrophes should not be used with possessive pronouns because possessive pronouns already show possession -- they don't need an apostrophe. Possessive pronouns are: his, her, its, my, yours, and our.

*his book      not his' book*

**Quotation Marks:** Quotation marks are used for several different purposes, including:

1) Direct Quotations

Direct quotations are another person's exact words, either spoken or in print, incorporated into your own writing. Use a pair of quotation marks to enclose each direct quotation included in your writing. Quotation marks always come in pairs.

*In his Autobiography, Benjamin Franklin says, "The soul of man is immortal."*

2) Writing Dialogue

Write each person's spoken words, however brief, as a separate paragraph.

Use commas to set off dialogue tags such as "she said" or "he explained."

*"He likes to talk about football," she said, "especially when the Super Bowl is coming up."*

Closely related narrative prose can be included in a paragraph with dialogue.

If one person's speech goes on for more than one paragraph, use quotation marks to open the speech and at the beginning, but not the end, of each new paragraph in the speech. To close the speech, use quotation marks at the end of the final paragraph

### 3) Titles of minor works or parts of wholes

Use quotation marks for titles of short or minor works, such as songs, short stories, essays, short poems, one-act plays, and other literary works that are shorter than a three-act play or a complete book.

Titles of parts of larger works, such as chapters in books, articles in newspapers, magazines, journals, or other periodical publications; and episodes of television and radio series.

### 4) Individual words or Phrases

Use quotation marks to indicate words used ironically, with reservations, or in some unusual way.

Put commas and periods within closing quotation marks, except when a parenthetical reference follows the quotation.

Indirect quotations are not exact words but rather rephrasings or summaries of another person's words. You do not need to use quotation marks, but you do need to give credit for the idea to the source.

### **Exercise:**

**Use what you have learned to properly punctuate the following sentences.**

1. Yes sir I will do it right now
2. Why he asked Are you always late
3. Jack and Jills house caught fire

4. You are required to bring the following sleeping bag flashlight and marshmallows
5. Jose a tutor at the Writing Center knows everything about computers
6. Watch out for that car
7. How do they get the ms on the candy coated chocolates
8. He wanted to go to the football game however his car broke down on the way
9. I asked him if he wanted lunch but he said he didn't
10. He said Wow I havent had that much fun in a long time

**This handout is based on the following texts:**

Owl Online Writing Lab. Purdue University. URL:

[http://www.owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/print/grammar/g\\_overvw.html](http://www.owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/print/grammar/g_overvw.html) (03 Oct. 2003).

Straus, Jane. "The Blue Book of Grammar an Punctuation." <http://www.grammarbook.com> (12 Oct. 2003).

**For further reference, see the following books:**

Hooper, Vincent F. Essentials of English. 4<sup>th</sup> ed. Hauppauge: Barron's, 1990.

Spack, Ruth. Guidelines, A Cross-Cultural Reading/Writing Text. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. New York: Cambridge University, 1998.

**All of the above texts are available in The Writing Center.**

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