

Handbook of Style

Punctuation

The English writing system uses punctuation marks to separate groups of words for meaning and emphasis; to convey an idea of the variations of pitch, volume, pauses, and intonations of speech; and to help avoid contextual ambiguity. English punctuation marks, together with general rules and bracketed examples of their use, follow.

Apostrophe ' ¹

1. indicates the possessive case of nouns and indefinite pronouns

< Mrs. Cenacci's office >
< the boy's mother >
< the boys' mothers >
< It is anyone's guess how much it will cost. >
< her mother-in-law's car >

NOTE: The use of an 's with words ending in \s\ or \z\ sounds usually depends on whether a pronounceable final syllable is thus formed: if the syllable is pronounced, the 's is usually used; if no final pronounceable syllable is formed, the apostrophe is retained but the s is usually not added.

< Knox's products >
< Aristophanes' play >
< for righteousness' sake >

2. marks omissions in contracted words

< didn't > < o'clock >

3. marks omission of numerals

< class of'83 >

4. often forms plurals of letters, figures, and words referred to as words

< You should dot your *i*'s and cross your *t*'s. >
< His *l*'s and his *7*'s looked alike. >
< She has trouble pronouncing her *the*'s. >

Brackets []

1. set off extraneous data such as editorial interpolations especially within quoted

material

< He wrote, ``I ain't [sic] going." >

2. function as parentheses within parentheses

< Bowman Act (22 Stat., ch. 4, §[or sec.] 4, p. 50) >

3. set off phonetic symbols

< [t] in British *duty* >

Colon :

1. introduces a clause or phrase that explains, illustrates, amplifies, or restates what has gone before

< The sentence was poorly constructed: it lacked both unity and coherence. >

2. directs attention to an appositive

< He had only one pleasure: eating. >

3. introduces a series

< Three countries were represented: England, France, and Belgium. >

4. introduces lengthy quoted material set off from the rest of a text by indentation but not by quotation marks

< I quote from the text of Chapter One: >

5. separates elements in page references, bibliographical and biblical citations, and in set formulas used to express ratios and time

< *Journal of the American Medical Association* 48:356 >

< Springfield, Mass.: Merriam-Webster Inc. >

< John 4:10 >

< 8:30 a.m. >

< a ratio of 3:5 >

6. separates titles and subtitles (as of books)

< *The Tragic Dynasty: A History of the Romanovs* >

7. follows the salutation in formal correspondence

< Dear Sir: >< Gentlemen: >

8. punctuates memorandum and government correspondence headings, and some subject lines in general business letters

< TO: >< VIA: >

< SUBJECT: >

< REFERENCE: >

Comma ,

1. separates main clauses joined by a coordinating conjunction (as *and*, *but*, *or*, *nor*, or *for*) and very short clauses not so joined

< She knew very little about him, and he volunteered nothing. >

< I came, I saw, I conquered. >

2. sets off an adverbial clause (or long phrase) that precedes or interrupts the main clause

< When she discovered the answer, she reported it to us. >

< The report, after being read aloud, was put up for consideration. >

3. sets off from the rest of the sentence transitional words and expressions (as *on the contrary*, *on the other hand*), conjunctive adverbs (as *consequently*, *furthermore*, *however*), and expressions that introduce an illustration or example (as *namely*, *for example*)

< Your second question, on the other hand, remains unanswered. >

< He will travel through two countries, namely, France and England. >

< He responded as completely as he could; that is, he answered each of the individual questions specifically. >

4. sets off contrasting and opposing expressions within sentences

< The cost is not \$65.00, but \$56.65. >

< He changed his style, not his ethics. >

5. separates words, phrases, or clauses in series

< He was young, eager, and restless. >

< It requires one to travel constantly, to have no private life, and to need no income other than living expenses. – Sara Davidson >

NOTE: Commas separate coordinate adjectives modifying a noun.

< The harsh, cold wind was strong. >

6. sets off from the rest of the sentence parenthetical elements (as nonrestrictive modifiers and nonrestrictive appositives)

< Our guide, who wore a blue beret, was an experienced traveler. >

< We visited Gettysburg, the site of a famous battle. >

< The author, Marie Jones, was an accomplished athlete. >

7. introduces a direct quotation, terminates a direct quotation that is neither a question nor an exclamation, and encloses split quotations

< Mary said, "I am leaving." >

< "I am leaving," Mary said. >

< "I am leaving," Mary said with determination, "even if you want me to stay." >

NOTE: If the quotation is used as a subject or predicate nominative or if it is not being presented as actual dialogue, a comma is not used.

< "The computer is down" was the reply she feared. >

< The fact that he said he was about to "leave this instant" doesn't mean he actually left. >

8. sets off words in direct address, absolute phrases, and mild interjections

< You may go, John, if you wish. >

< I fear their encounter, his temper being what it is. >

< Ah, that's my idea of an excellent dinner. >

9. separates a tag question from the rest of the sentence

< It's a fine day, isn't it? >

10. indicates the omission of a word or words, and especially a word or words used earlier in the sentence

< Common stocks are preferred by some investors; bonds, by others. >

NOTE: When the meaning of the sentence is quite clear without the comma, the comma is omitted.

< He was in love with her and she with him. >

11. is used to avoid ambiguity and also to emphasize a particular phrase

< To Mary, Jane was someone special. >

< The more embroidery on a dress, the higher the price. >

12. is used to group numbers into units of three in separating thousands, millions, etc; however, it is generally not used in numbers of four figures, in pagination, in dates, or in street numbers

< Smithville, pop. 100,000 >

but

< 3600 rpm >< the year 1983 >

< page 1411 >< 4507 Main Street >

13. punctuates an inverted name

< Morton, William A. >

14. separates a proper name from a following corporate, academic, honorary, governmental, or military title

< Sandra H. Cobb, Vice President >

15. sets off geographical names (as state or country from city), items in dates, and addresses from the rest of a text

< Shreveport, Louisiana, is the site of a large air base. >

< On Sunday, June 23, 1940, he was wounded. >

< Number 10 Downing Street, London, is a famous address. >

NOTE: When just the month and the year are given, the comma is usually omitted.

< She began her career in April 1983 at a modest salary. >

16. follows the salutation in informal correspondence and follows the complimentary close of a formal or informal letter

< Dear Mark, >

< Affectionately, >

< Very truly yours, >

Dash —

1. usually marks an abrupt change or break in the continuity of a sentence

< When in 1960 the stockpile was sold off – indeed, dumped as surplus – natural rubber sales were hard hit. – Barry Commoner >

2. is sometimes used in place of other punctuation (as the comma) when special emphasis is required

< The presentations – and especially the one by Ms. Dow – impressed the audience. >

3. introduces a summary statement that follows a series of words or phrases

< Oil, steel, and wheat – these are the sinews of industrialization. >

4. often precedes the attribution of a quotation

< My foot is on my native heath ... – Sir Walter Scot >

5. may be used with the exclamation point or the question mark

< The faces of the crash victims – how bloody! – were shown on TV. >

< Your question – it was *your* question, wasn't it, Mr. Jones? – just can't be answered. >

6. removes the need for a comma if the dash falls where a comma would ordinarily separate two clauses

< If we don't succeed – and the critics say we won't – then the whole project is in jeopardy. >

Ellipsis

1. indicates the omission of one or more words within a quoted passage

< The head is not more native to the heart ... than is the throne of Denmark to thy father. – Shak. >

2. indicates the omission of one or more sentences within a quoted passage or the omission of words at the end of a sentence by using four dots the first of which represents the period

< That recovering the manuscripts would be worth almost any effort is without question.... The monetary value of a body of Shakespeare's manuscripts would be almost incalculable – Charlton Ogburn >

< It will take scholars years to determine conclusively the origins, the history, and, most importantly, the significance of the finds.... – Robert Morse >

3. usually indicates omission of one or more lines of poetry when ellipsis is extended the length of the line

< It little profits that an idle king,

.....

Matched with an aged wife, I mete and dole

Unequal laws unto a savage race,

That hoard, and sleep, and feed,

and know not me.

– Alfred Tennyson >

4. indicates halting speech or an unfinished sentence in dialogue

< "I'd like to ... that is ... if you don't mind...." >

Exclamation Point !

1. terminates an emphatic phrase or sentence

< Get out of here! >

2. terminates an emphatic interjection

< Encore! >

Hyphen -

1. marks separation or division at the end of a line terminating with a syllable of a word that is to be carried over to the next line

< mill-

stone >

< pas-

sion >

2. is used between some prefix and root combinations, as

Σ prefix + proper name;

Σ prefix ending with a vowel + root word

beginning often with the same vowel;

Σ stressed prefix + root word,

especially when this combination is similar

to a different word

< pre-Renaissance >

< co-opted >< re-ink >

< re-cover a sofa >

but

< recover from an illness >

3. is used in some compounds, especially those containing prepositions

< president-elect >

< sister-in-law >

< attorney-at-law >

< good-for-nothing >

4. is often used between elements of a compound modifier in attributive position in order to avoid ambiguity

< traveling in a fast-moving van >

< She has gray-green eyes. >

< He looked at her with a know-it-all expression. >

5. suspends the first part of a hyphenated compound when used with another hyphenated compound

< a six- or eight-cylinder engine >

6. is used in writing out compound numbers between 21 and 99

< thirty-four >

< one hundred and thirty-eight >

7. is used between the numerator and the denominator in writing out fractions especially when they are used as modifiers; however, fractions used as nouns are often styled as open compounds especially when either the numerator or the denominator already contains a hyphen

< a two-thirds majority of the vote >

< one seventy-second of an inch >

8. serves as an arbitrary equivalent of the phrase "(up) to and including" when used between numbers and dates

< pages 40-98 >

< the decade 1980-89 >

9. is used in the compounding of capitalized names

< the New York-Paris flight >

Hyphen, Double =

is used at the end-of-line division of a hyphenated compound to indicate that the compound is hyphenated and not closed

self= [end of line] seeker

but

self- [end of line] same

The styling of compounds varies: they may be open, closed, or hyphenated. When in doubt, one should consult the main vocabulary of this dictionary for the most commonly used styling.

Parentheses ()

1. set off supplementary, parenthetical, or explanatory material when the interruption is more than that indicated by commas and when the inclusion of such material does not essentially alter the meaning of the sentence

< Three old destroyers (all now out of commission) will be scrapped. >

2. enclose Arabic numerals which confirm a written number in a text

< Delivery will be made in thirty (30) days. >

3. enclose numbers or letters in a series

< We must set forth (1) our long-term goals, (2) our immediate objectives, and (3) the means at our disposal. >

4. enclose abbreviations synonymous with spelled-out forms and occurring after those forms or may enclose the spelled-out form occurring after the abbreviation

< a ruling by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) >

< the manufacture and disposal of PVC (polyvinyl chloride) >

5. indicate alternative terms and omissions (as in form letters)

< Please indicate the lecture(s) you would like to attend. >

6. are used with other punctuation marks in the following ways:

if the parenthetical expression is an independent sentence standing alone, its first word is capitalized and a period is included *inside* the last parenthesis; however, if the parenthetical expression, even if it could stand alone as a sentence, occurs within a sentence, it needs neither capitalization nor a final period but may have an exclamation point or question mark

< The discussion was held in the boardroom. (The results are still confidential.) >

< Although we liked the restaurant (their Italian food was the best), we seldom went there. >

< After waiting in line for an hour (why do we do these things?), we finally left. >

parenthetical material within a sentence may be internally punctuated by a question mark, a period after an abbreviation only, an exclamation point, or a set of quotation marks

< Years ago, someone (who was it?) told me about it. >

- < The conference was held in Vancouver (that's in B.C.). >
- < He was depressed ("I must resign") and refused to do anything. >

no punctuation mark should be placed directly before parenthetical material in a sentence; if a break is required, punctuation should be placed *after* the final parenthesis

- < I'll get back to you tomorrow (Friday), when I have more details. >

Period .

1. terminates sentences or sentence fragments that are neither interrogatory nor exclamatory

- < Give it your best. >
- < I gave it my best. >
- < He asked if she had given it her best. >

2. follows some abbreviations and contractions

- < Dr. >< A.D. >< ibid. >< i.e. >
- < Jr. >< etc. >< cont. >

3. is used with an individual's initials

- < F. Scott Fitzgerald >
- < T.S. Eliot >

4. is used after Roman and Arabic numerals and after letters when they are used in outlines and enumerations

- < I.Objectives
- A.Economy
 - 1. low initial cost
 - 2. low maintenance cost
- B.
 - Ease of operation >
- < Required skills are:
 - 1. Shorthand
 - 2. Typing
 - 3. Transcription >

Question Mark ?

1. terminates a direct question

- < How did she do it? >
- < "How did she do it?" he asked. >

2. terminates an interrogative element that is part of a sentence; however, indirect questions should not be followed by a question mark

< How did she do it? was the question on each person's mind. >

< He wondered, will it work? >

< He wondered whether it would work. >

3. punctuates each element of an interrogative series that is neither numbered nor lettered; however, only one such mark punctuates a numbered or lettered interrogative series

< Can you give us a reasonable forecast? back up your predictions? compare them with last quarter's earnings? >

< Can you (1) give us a reasonable forecast, (2) back up your predictions, (3) compare them with last quarter's earnings? >

4. indicates the writer's ignorance or uncertainty

< Geoffrey Chaucer, English poet (1340?-1400) >

Quotation Marks, Double

“ ”

1. enclose direct quotations in conventional usage, but not indirect quotations

< He said, "I am leaving." >

< He said that he was leaving. >

2. enclose words or phrases borrowed from others, words used in a special way, and often slang words when introduced into formal writing

< As the leader of a gang of "droogs," he is altogether frightening, as is this film. – Liz Smith >

< He called himself "emperor," but he was really just a dictator. >

< He was arrested for smuggling "smack." >

3. enclose titles of poems, short stories, articles, lectures, chapters of books, short musical compositions, and radio and TV programs

< Robert Frost's "Dust of Snow" >

< Katherine Anne Porter's "That Tree" >

< The third chapter of *Treasure Island* is entitled "The Black Spot." >

< "America the Beautiful" >

< Ravel's "Bolero" >

< NBC's "Today Show" >

4. are used with other punctuation marks in the following ways:

the period and the comma fall *within* the quotation marks

< "I am leaving," he said >

< Her camera was described as "waterproof," but "moisture-resistant" would have been a better description. >

the colon and semicolon fall *outside* the quotation marks

< There was only one thing to do when he said, "I may not run": promise him a large campaign contribution. >

< He spoke of his "little cottage in the country"; he might better have called it a mansion. >

the dash, the question mark, and the exclamation point fall *within* the quotation marks when they refer to the quoted matter only; they fall *outside* when they refer to the whole sentence

< He asked, "When did she leave?" >

< What is the meaning of "the open door"? >

< The sergeant shouted "Halt!" >

< Save us from his "mercy"! >

5. are not used with *yes* or *no* except in direct discourse

< She said yes to all our requests. >

6. are not used with lengthy quotations set off from the text

< He took the title for his biography of Thoreau from a passage in *Walden*:

I long ago lost a hound, a bay horse, and a turtle=

dove, and am still on their trail. ... I have met one or two who had heard the hound, and the tramp of the horse, and even seen the dove disappear behind a cloud, and they seemed as anxious to recover them as if they had lost them themselves.

However, the title *A Hound, a Bay Horse, and a Turtle-Dove* probably puzzled some readers. >

Quotation Marks, Single ‘ ’

1. enclose a quotation within a quotation in American usage

< The witness said, "I distinctly heard him say, 'Don't be late,' and then heard the door close." >

2. are sometimes used in place of double quotation marks especially in British usage

< The witness said, 'I distinctly heard him say, "Don't be late," and then heard the door close.' >

NOTE: When both single and double quotation marks occur at the end of a sentence, the period typically falls *within* both sets of marks.

< The witness said, "I distinctly heard him say, 'Don't be late.' " >

Semicolon ;

1. links main clauses not joined by a coordinating conjunction

< Some people have the ability to write well; others do not. >

2. links main clauses joined by conjunctive adverbs (as *consequently*, *furthermore*, *however*)

< Speeding is illegal; furthermore, it is very dangerous. >

3. separates phrases and clauses which themselves contain commas

< The country's resources consist of large ore deposits; lumber, waterpower, and fertile soils; and a strong, rugged people. >

< Send copies to our offices in Portland, Maine; Springfield, Illinois; and Savannah, Georgia. >

4. often occurs before phrases or abbreviations (as *for example*, *for instance*, *that is*, *that is to say*, *namely*, *e.g.*, or *i.e.*) that introduce expansions or series

< As a manager she tried to do the best job she could; that is, to keep her project on schedule and under budget. >

Virgule /

1. separates alternatives

< ... designs intended for high-heat and/or high-speed applications – F. S. Badger, Jr. >

< ... sit hour after hour ... and finally year after year in a catatonic/frenzied trance rewriting the Bible – William Saroyan >

2. separates successive divisions (as months or years) of an extended period of time

< the fiscal year 1983/1984 >

3. serves as a dividing line between run-in lines of poetry

< Say, sages, what's the charm on earth/Can turn death's dart aside? – Robert Burns >

4. often represents *per* in abbreviations

< 9 ft/sec >< 20 km/hr >