



Writing Center
Academic Affairs

Punctuation Marks and their Common Uses

Period (.)

To indicate the end of a declarative sentence

Example: Here is the place.

To indicate that letters are used as abbreviations

Example: Dr. Carle D. Reynolds

To indicate decimal fractions

Example: 16.34

Three Periods - Ellipses (...)

To indicate that a portion of quoted matter is omitted

Example: “To receive, obey, and pass on ...”

Comma (,)

To separate independent clauses joined by a conjunction

Example: This is the street, but I don't know the number of the house.

Note: No comma is used unless each statement is independent.

Example: You will police the area and maintain a fire watch.

To separate parts of a series

Example: Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday

To separate coordinate or “equal” adjectives in a series

Example: a loud, sharp blast

Note: Unless the adjectives modify the same noun in the same way, they are not in series and no comma is used. To test, check if the adjectives can be reversed. If not, do not use a comma.

Example: heavy woolen clothing

To separate introductory statements beginning with such words as when, while, since, if, because, until, so, although, and whenever (or other subordinate conjunctions)

Example: When the rain was falling, there was very little wind.

To set off introductory prepositional phrases (starting with on, in, at, to, by, for, of, through, etc.)

Example: By the time she crawled into bed, she was too exhausted to sleep.

Note: Short prepositional phrases (3 words or less) are not always followed by commas.

Example: In Japan he served as platoon commander.

To separate non-essential elements from the rest of the sentence. A non-essential element is a word or group of words that gives additional identifying information about someone or something already identified; it is non-essential because the sentence is still clear without the element.

Example: The President, who is the Commander-in-Chief of the armed forces, rates a salute.

Example: I visited Albany, the capital of the state of New York.

Example: I went to the store with my daughter, Wilma. (The comma indicates this person has one daughter whose name is Wilma.)

Note: Commas are NOT placed around essential elements—those that limit meaning or give identifying information about someone or something not already identified.

Example: The procedure that you are required to follow is explained in TM 5-250.

Example: I went to the store with my daughter Wilma. (The absence of a comma indicates this person has more than one daughter.)

To set off introductory phrases beginning with verb participles ending in -ing, -ed, -en, etc.

Example: Having turned off the lathe, I stopped the motor.

To set off such expressions as you, no, well, on the other hand, you might say, and of course, (such expressions are called interrupters)

Example: He was, of course, the first person I saw.

To set off such expressions as he said from direct quotations

Example: “That decision,” he explained, “must be your own.”

Note: No comma is used to separate such expressions from the rest of the sentence if the sentence is an indirect quotation (often introduced with the word that).

Example: He explained that the decision must be my own.

To separate contrasting elements

Example: The wall is gray, not blue.

To prevent misreading

Example: Undressing, the child ran into the bathroom.

To set off the name of a person addressed

Example: Frank, may I borrow your skill saw?

Semicolon (;)

To separate independent statements that are not joined by a coordinating conjunction (and, but, or, nor, for, yet, so)

Example: Black is a mixture of all colors; white is the complete opposite.

Note: If the independent statements are short, a comma may be used.

Example: Horses sweat, men perspire.

To separate independent statements when the second statement begins with such conjunctive adverbs or phrases like therefore, however, thus, otherwise, on the other hand, for example, in fact, that is, etc.

Example: I submitted a request six months in advance; still, I did not receive a permit in time for the departure.

To separate independent statements joined by conjunctions if such statements are long or they contain internal punctuation

Example: Classic science fiction sagas include Star Trek, with Mr. Spock and his large pointed ears; Battlestar Galactica, with its Cylon Raiders; and Star Wars, with Han Solo, Luke Skywalker, and Darth Vader.

Apostrophe (')

To show possession (if the word does not end in s, add an apostrophe and an s.)

Example: The doctor's advice, the housewife's choice, man's clothing, Martin's house

Note: If the word is singular and ends in s or an s sound, use apostrophe and an s

Example: Mr. Schultz's car unless pronunciation is awkward:

Example: Miss Simmons' coat

To indicate the omission of letters in contractions

Examples: can't, won't, doesn't, haven't, it's

To form the plural of letters, words, and symbols that do not have logical plurals

Example: three 2's, too many &'s, and seven c's

Dash (—)

To indicate a sudden, abrupt break of an unfinished word or sentence

Example: “She will take charge of this post and – Wait a minute. Who are you?”

To set off a summary of a preceding series

Example: Food, clothing, shelter, and a sense of humor – those are the things a man needs to survive.

Hyphen (-)

To join two or more words serving as a single adjective before a noun

Example: a one-way street, chocolate-covered peanuts

Use a hyphen with compound numbers

Example: forty-six, sixty-three

Example: Our much-loved teacher was sixty-three years old.

To avoid confusion or an awkward combination of letters

Example: re-sign a petition (vs. resign from a job)

Example: semi-independent (but semiconscious)

Example: shell-like (but childlike)

Use a hyphen with the prefixes ex- (meaning former), self-, all-; with the suffix -elect; between a prefix and a capitalized word; and with figures or letters

Example: ex-husband, self-assured

To divide words at the end of a line if necessary, or show a break between syllables

Example: pre-fer-ence, sell-ing

Quotation Marks (“ ” and ‘ ’)

To set off quoted matter (including punctuation marks, usually. See a handbook for details.)

Example: “I saw it,” he replied.

Note: Indirect quotes are not set off by quotations.

Example: He said that the decision must be my own.

To indicate a quotation within a quotation (single quotation marks)

Example: I replied, “When I asked him if he had ever heard of the American Revolution, he said, ‘I saw it.’”

To enclose titles of short stories, poems, magazine articles, portions of books, and individual television show episodes

Example: Good diagrams can be found in the chapter titled “Engine Constructions” in Dean Austin’s book *Automotive Mechanics*.

Italics

To indicate the titles of books, plays, magazines, long musical compositions, works of art, movies, and television show series

Example: I highly recommend *The Technique of Clear Writing*, by Robert Gunning.

To indicate use of foreign words

Example: And there I was, *en dishabille*.

To indicate that the writer is referring to a word rather than to the sense that it conveys

Example: He *mistook* was for *saw*.

Example: Can you *spell* precede?

Note: Letters, figures, and symbols, when used as such, are also italicized.

Example: The *m* looks like a *w*.

Example: Type *&* rather than *and*.

Parentheses ()

To set off digressions or elements which provide extra information

Example: The progress report (Form #78) is submitted each week.

Example: I told him (Travers) exactly what to do.

To enclose numbers and letters enumerating parts

Example: The principal parts are (1) the present tense, (2) the past tense, and (3) the past participle.

Brackets []

To set off material inserted in a direct quotation

Example: Audubon reports that “if there are not enough young to balance deaths, the end of the species [California condor] is inevitable.”

Colon (:)

Used after an independent clause (complete sentence) to direct attention to a list, an appositive, or a quotation

Example: He laid down three rules: no smoking, no idle talk, and no sleeping.

Example: A rainbow consists of the following colors: red, orange, yellow, green, blue, and violet.

Example: The speaker quoted a popular saying: “We grow too soon old and too late smart.”

To separate two independent clauses (complete sentences) when the second one summarizes or explains the first

Example: Faith is like love: it cannot be forced.

Slash (/)

To indicate the end of a line of poetry

Example: Here with a Loaf of Bread beneath the Bough, / A Flask of wine, a Book of verse – and Thou

To set off phonemic transcriptions

Example: In French, the /e/ is pronounced as /A/.

To separate paired terms (use sparingly)

Example: pass/fail

Example: producer/director