

Grammar Help Sheet: Punctuation

Punctuation in writing is a means of symbolizing pauses heard in speech, although all punctuation is not used for this purpose. Some punctuation is used to make clear to the reader the structure which the writer is using. An example of this is the use of periods after abbreviations. However, basically, punctuation makes clear identification of sentences, and the relationship of the clauses, phrases, and words in the sentence. Punctuation takes over some of the work done by the tone of voice in spoken English.

The Period

The period (.) is used to mark the end of a declarative or imperative sentence.

Abraham Lincoln is buried in Springfield, Illinois. (declarative)

Please hand me my glasses. (imperative)

The period (.) is used after most abbreviations.

Mrs. Dexter lives next door.

He called Dr. Anderson back quickly.

The Exclamation Point

If a sentence expresses such strong feeling that it is considered an exclamatory sentence, an exclamation point (!) is used at the end of it.

We won the game!

Woo hoo!

The Question Mark

The question mark (?) is used to mark the end of a direct question.

Who told you that your brother was here?

What time is it?

The Semicolon

The semicolon (;) can be used as a mark of separation when you wish to make a less definite separation than a period does.

The dog barked; the cat jumped off the couch.

The semicolon (;) can be used between main clauses without a conjunction.

Today is Thursday; there is only one more working day this week.

Here the semicolon takes the place of a comma and “and.”

The semicolon (;) is also used between clauses of a compound sentence which are joined by conjunctive adverbs such as “therefore,” “thus,” “however,” “so,” “yet.”

He wanted to lose weight; therefore, he began to diet.

A semicolon (;) may be used with a conjunction when the clauses are long and/or include commas.
He came from Italy, I am told; but since he emigrated long ago, he seldom talks about his childhood home.

A semicolon (;) may be used to separate items in a series if the items themselves contain commas.
Among the greatest artists of all time are Raphael, an Italian painter, who was one of the greatest artists of the Italian Renaissance; Rembrandt, the Netherlands' greatest artist, who lived in the seventeenth century; and Picasso, the most famous painter of our time.

The Colon

The colon (:) is usually used to introduce a list, series, quotation, or explanation and is preceded by a complete thought. An expression such as as follows or the following usually precedes the list.

She went shopping for the following items: meat, vegetables, fruit, and cheese.

A colon (:) may also be used after the salutation of a business letter.

Dear Mr. Jones:

The Comma

A comma (,) is used to separate words, phrases, and clauses where their use makes the meaning more clear.

A comma (,) may be used between the clauses of a compound sentence if the sentence is long but this use is optional.

Shakespeare was a great dramatist and he also wrote beautiful sonnets.

Shakespeare was a great dramatist, and he also wrote beautiful sonnets.

Use a comma (,) after a long introductory clause.

When he told us the price of the car, we were not sure we could afford it.

Hoping that we would be able to reach our destination before it got dark, we drove as fast as we safely could.

If the same clause comes at the end of the sentence, a comma (,) is not usually necessary.

We were not sure we could afford to buy the car when he told us the price of it.

Non-restrictive clauses and phrases should be set off from the rest of the sentence by a comma (,) or commas. A non-restrictive phrase or clause can be omitted without changing the meaning of the main clause.

The members of the club, who were all ladies from our neighborhood, met for lunch.

Items of a parenthetical nature are set off by commas (,). These items may include person addressed, items in addresses and dates, appositives, as well as independent clauses and phrases.

He was born in Madison, Wisconsin. (Item in address)

I sent for you, Harry, but you did not come. (Person addressed)

She was born on October 5, 1960. (Item in date)

Ellen, her younger sister, looked just like Janet. (Appositive)

Yes, that is correct. (Independent word)

Words, phrases, and clauses in a series should be separated by commas (,)
Bill had a sandwich, a glass of milk, and a piece of pie. Words
Dan walked up the stairs, through the door, and into the room. Phrases
The bell rang, the lights flashed, and the money poured out. Clauses

Commas (,) should be used to separate a direct quotation from the rest of the sentence.

“I will wait for you,” she said.

She said, “I will wait for you.”

“I will wait for you,” she said, “but I hope it won’t be long.”

Quotation Marks

Use quotation marks (“ ”) when you are using someone’s exact words. A direct quotation is the use of the exact words of the speaker.

Direct quotation: The doctor said, “You need not take any more medicine.”

Indirect quotation: The doctor said that he need not take any more medicine.

A comma separates a direct quotation from the rest of the sentence.

If a quotation consists of more than one paragraph, begin each paragraph with the quotation marks, but use them at the end of the last paragraph only.

Quotation marks (“ ”) are used with the titles of articles, of chapter books, and of short poems and stories (italics are used for titles of books, periodicals, names of ships, etc.)

Have you read “Trade Winds” by Cleveland Amory in the September 4, 1971 issue of *Saturday Review*?

Apostrophe

An apostrophe (’) is used to indicate the omission of letters from words.

I haven’t had time to finish my homework.

An apostrophe (’) is used with s to denote plurals of letters, figures, signs.

There are four s’s in Mississippi.

The apostrophe (’) is used in forming the possessive of nouns. To form the possessive of a singular noun or of a plural noun that does not end in s add the apostrophe (’) and s.

My friend’s dog does not like me.

The children’s toys were scattered.

Dash

A dash (-) is used to set off changes in thought.

She told me-but don’t tell anyone else-that she is dropping out of school.

A dash (-) may be used to set off a parenthetical group, if the parenthetical expression contains commas.

The most famous tragedies of Shakespeare-*Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *Romeo and Juliet*-are still frequently presented.

Parentheses

Parentheses [()] are used to enclose material that is incidental or explanatory to the main thought.

When one is learning about marks of punctuation (especially commonly used ones such as the comma) it is surprising how many uses there are.

Numerals

Dates, street numbers, page numbers, and percent should be written in figures.

He moved to 2700 Main Street on November 15, 2019.

The general rule for writing numbers is to spell out the number if it may be done in one or two words; otherwise it should be written in figures.

It cost three thousand dollars.

They issued 1462 copies of the pamphlet.