The Writing Lab

Punctuation Overview

Handout courtesy of Lori Williams & Sally Wallace

Periods, Question Marks, Exclamation Points (. ? !)

Periods, question marks, and exclamation marks belong at the ends of sentences, but exclamation marks should be used very, very rarely in college writing.

Commas (,)

A **comma** has many wonderful uses, but here are the most important ones for your purposes:

1. Use a comma before and, but, or, nor, for, yet, and so when the word joins **complete** sentences:
   - There were bells on the hill**, but** I never heard them ringing.

   - Notice that the comma must be accompanied by *and, but, or, nor, for, yet,* and *so* when it's helping to join complete sentences. The comma without one of those words is far too weak and frail to join complete sentences all by itself. What results is known as a **comma splice**, and it's **by far the most frequent punctuation error in college writing**. A run-on (or fused) sentence results when there is no punctuation whatsoever between two complete sentences. Please be kind to your readers by avoiding run-ons.

2. If a dependent clause comes before the independent clause that completes the thought, use a comma at the end of the dependent clause.
   - If you aren't here by noon**,** we'll have to leave without you.

   - However, no comma is needed if the independent clause comes before the dependent clause.
   - We'll have to leave without you if you aren't here by noon.

3. Use commas to separate three or more items in a series.
   - I'm going to have an apple**,** an orange**,** an egg**,** and a squid burger for breakfast.

4. Use a comma to introduce direct quotations.
   - Jasper said**,** "I'm going to take my pit bull to charm school."

5. Use a comma to prevent confusing your reader.
   - After shedding**,** snakes look for something to eat. (Without the comma, your reader would probably see <u>after shedding snakes</u> as a unit of meaning. (EEEEUUUUWWW!)

Parentheses (   )

Use **parentheses** to enclose information that is interesting but not crucial. Parentheses should be used sparingly in college writing because they tend to produce a choppy effect.
   - Aunt Matilda **(**bless her heart**)** is 113 years old.

Dashes (--)

Use a **dash** (which is two hyphens long, with no space before or after) to set off something that could be in parentheses but that you want to emphasize. Dashes tend to produce a choppy effect, too, so use them sparingly.

   - She swallowed the aspirin tablet--at least she thought it was aspirin.

Semicolons (;)

The **semicolon** has two major uses. The primary use of the semicolon is to join related complete sentences when there is no conjunction--*and, but, or, nor, for, yet,* or *so*-- between them.
Your canary falls off its perch a lot**;** its feathers have turned black and blue.

The secondary use of the semicolon is to separate a series of items that already include commas within the series. This use of a semicolon divides the list into discrete terms. *Note: A semicolon is used before the final "and" of this series.*

> ➢ By the time I was thirty-five years old, I had lived in Council Bluffs, Iowa**;** Dubuque, Iowa**;** Ames, Iowa**;** Morris, Minnesota**;** Groton, Connecticut**;** Anchorage, Alaska**;** and Champaign, Illinois.

Colons (:)

Use a **colon** after a <u>**complete sentence**</u> to introduce a list, an example, or a quotation.

> ➢ Be sure to bring your survival kit to class**:** the textbook, sharpened pencils, lots of paper, and a rabbit's foot.

> ➢ My diet is based on two major food groups**:** popcorn and chocolate.

> ➢ Try to live by these words**:** "Sticks and stones may break your bones, but words can break your heart."

Hyphens (-)

Use a **hyphen** to link words for clarity.

> ➢ Prunella is a new-truck owner. (This means she owns a new truck.)

> ➢ Prunella is a new truck-owner. (This means she owns a truck for the first time, but the truck might be old.)

Apostrophes (')

The **apostrophe** has two major uses:

1) Use an apostrophe to indicate possession in nouns and some pronouns.

> ➢ My mother**'s** hair is silver. The babies**'** strollers are parked over there. Is this anybody**'s** seat?

2) Use an apostrophe to take the place of letters left out in contractions.

> ➢ Aren**'t** you packed yet? We're supposed to be on the road at dawn.

Ellipses (. . .)

Use the **ellipsis mark** (also known informally as three spaced dots) to indicate words omitted in direct quotations. Be aware that you can't omit a word from a quotation that substantially changes the meaning of the original quotation ("Thou shalt…kill.")

Scarlet O'Hara said, "I'll think **. . .** tomorrow."

<div align="center">**Quotation Marks (" ")**</div>

Quotation marks have two major functions:

1) Use quotation marks around a direct quotation--a person's exact words.

> ➢ Scarlet O'Hara said, **"**I'll think about that tomorrow.**"**
> <u>When</u> there is punctuation at the end of a direct quotation, remember to put periods and commas inside the quotation marks; colons and semicolons belong outside the quotation marks.

> **To avoid even a hint of plagiarism, which is kidnapping someone's words and presenting them as your own, be sure to use quotation marks around three or more words in order that you have taken from a printed or spoken source.**

> No quotation marks are needed with indirect quotations, which are not a person's exact words. Often, indirect quotations are preceded by the word "that."

> Scarlet O'Hara said **that** she would think about that tomorrow.

2) Use quotation marks around **minor works**: the titles of songs, articles in magazines and newspapers, short stories, essays not your own, and specific episodes of radio and television programs.

> ➢ Grandpa Ferguson's favorite song is **"**Lydia, The Tattooed Lady.**"**

> ➢ Use italics or underlining for **major works:** the titles of just about everything else: movies, books, plays, magazines, newspapers, etc.

<div align="center">**Single Quotation Marks ('   ')**</div>

Use **single quotation marks** when you have a quotation within a quotation.

> ➢ Flora wrote, "My favorite quotation is from Yogi Berra, who said, **'**I didn't really say all of the things I said.**'**"

<div align="center">**Brackets [   ]**</div>

Use **square brackets** within a direct quotation to add your own words or to change a word to clarify the meaning of a sentence.

> ➢ Scarlet O'Hara said, "I'll think about that **[**what to wear to the ball**]** tomorrow." Scarlet O'Hara said, "I **[**will**]** think about that tomorrow."