

Punctuation Pointers

More than any other aspect of writing, punctuation obeys clear, simple rules. Punctuation is **structural**: it shows the reader how sentences are constructed and how they should be used.

1. Commas

Commas are the most widely-used and most misunderstood marks of punctuation. Commas have seven major uses, apart from their function in dates, numbers, and personal names.

a.) Use commas to separate items in a series

Many workplaces have a dress code policy that forbids wearing items such as torn shirts, unbuttoned blouses, tank tops and tube tops, and tight clothing.

APA's current *Publication Manual* and the *Chicago Manual of Style* require a comma before the conjunction (in the above example, the conjunction is *and*) joining the last two items of a series. The comma helps avoid certain ambiguities. In the four-item list above, omitting the comma after "tube tops" would make the division of the last three items uncertain:

ITEM 3:	ITEM 4:
tank tops	tube tops and tight clothing
tank tops and tube tops	tight clothing

The distinction between the two units is not important above, but it can be in some contexts:

The police arrested two rioters, a prostitute and a pimp.

If a comma is not placed before the conjunction joining the final list item, the reader cannot tell how many items are being indicated. In this sentence, we may have two arrests or four. If "a prostitute and a pimp" is a **non-restrictive phrase** explaining "two rioters," then only two people are involved; if this is simply an incompletely punctuated list, then four are indicated.

Note: Use **semicolons** (see below) as dividers when some list items have their own commas:

The breakfast orders included bacon and eggs; ham, tomato, and cheese sandwiches; and blueberry pancakes.

b.) Use a comma before a coordinating conjunction that joins two main clauses.

The patient died later that day, but the operation itself was a huge success.

but not

The surgeon both ordered, and performed the operation. [WRONG!]

The second sentence simply has two predicate verbs, "ordered" and "performed," joined by a coordinating conjunction. No comma should be used in such a situation.

c.) Set off introductory phrases and clauses with commas.

In this way, the proxy server reduces Internet traffic.

d.) Use commas to mark nonrestrictive phrases and clauses.

Aspirin, the world's most familiar analgesic, is now under close scrutiny.

e.) Use commas to mark interjections and other interruptions.

You had agreed, we understood, to write the test before the end of the month.

f.) Use commas to emphasize contrasts.

Red spruce, *not* red pine, thrives in wet, low-lying land.

g.) Use commas for coordinate adjectives.

The sincere, dedicated mentor often suffers more stress than do those who are less committed to their clients.

Note: Test for coordinate adjectives:

1. Can you reverse the order of the adjectives?
2. Can the word *and* be inserted between them without awkwardness?

If the answer to both questions is "yes," separate the adjectives with a comma.

2. Semicolons

The semicolon has only three functions, two joining and one dividing.

a.) The semicolon joins closely related ideas expressed in independent clauses.

The person with this disease faces enormous challenges; his or her family faces almost equal challenges.

Note: A **clause** is a word group that includes a subject and a related verb; **independent clauses** are those that can stand alone as sentences.

Substituting a comma for a semicolon is an error called a **comma splice**. Remember that, as a conjunction, the semicolon is comparable to *and*: It joins pairs of balanced statements without saying anything about the relationship between them. Use it sparingly; semicolon links quickly become annoying.

b.) The semicolon supplements a conjunctive adverb joining main clauses:

QuickZip Inc. reduced its domain controllers to those located in headquarters and the two head offices; therefore, it should have only three child domains.

Among the most common conjunctive adverbs are *however*, *thus*, *therefore*, and *consequently*. Note that a comma usually follows the conjunctive adverb. You may find this quietly removed in some texts: modern practice favours *light* punctuation.

c.) The semicolon serves as a major divider in a subdivided list:

Today's treatments include nitroglycerin, in the form of sprays, pills, pastes, and patches; plaque drills; arterial balloons; and new surgical procedures.

A list is considered to be subdivided if at least one of its items has internal commas. The semicolons are used to mark every subsequent item in the list above, even though only the first one actually has internal commas.

3. Colons

Colons are abused almost as often as they are used. The colon has a limited function: it introduces an explanation, list, or amplification that follows a *complete* statement. This formal restriction on colon use is important: the colon must follow a *syntactically complete clause*. Often textbooks present short, bulleted lists with a colon following the verb:

The four chief stressors affecting addiction are:

- **social,**
- **medical,**
- **emotional,**
- **financial.**

The sentence, however, is incomplete if it ends with the verb *are*; this sentence requires a subject complement, and the list serves in exactly this capacity. Nevertheless, the practice is widespread (even in textbooks), and it may be pedantic to oppose it. Sometimes the rule against incomplete sentences encourages writers to complete the clause by adding "the following" ("The four chief stressors affecting addiction are the following"). This practice leads to stilted and wordy writing. Simple introductory statements can be concise *and* complete:

Four chief stressors affect addiction:

- **social,**
- **medical,**
- **emotional,**
- **financial.**

Note the use of punctuation with bullets. The *Chicago Manual of Style* considers bullets "cumbersome" and offers little comment on their use. In general, items that are syntactically part of a sentence can begin with lowercase letters and end with appropriate punctuation. The sentence above could be presented as a coherent statement without bullets:

Four chief stressors affect addiction: social, medical, emotional, financial.

If the bulleted or enumerated points do not combine with the introductory statement to form a complete sentence, omit end punctuation from the lines of the list.

4. Apostrophes

Apostrophes mark omitted characters in contractions and indicate the possessive form of nouns.

a.) Contractions

The apostrophe marks the position of missing letters; *would not* can be contracted to *wouldn't*, *he is* or *he has* can be contracted to *he's*, *we are* can be contracted to *we're*, and *it is* can be contracted to *it's*. Never confuse the possessive pronoun *its* with the contraction *it's*! Contractions are perfectly appropriate in informal writing, but some stylesheets discourage writers from using them in formal papers.

b.) Possessive apostrophes

When used to mark the possessive case of a noun, an apostrophe generally follows or is followed by an "s". The possessive case is used to indicate ownership or authorship.

Steven's project	is a project assigned to Steven
Microsoft's product	is a product owned by Microsoft
the server's function	is the function of the server
the bus's capacity	is the capacity of <i>one</i> bus

Note that singular nouns ending in "s" receive both an apostrophe and an "s." Some stylesheets recommend adding only an apostrophe if the singular noun ends in "s" and the additional "s" sound would not be pronounced, but this seems to be a needless complication.

PROPER NOUNS ENDING IN "S":

The possessive form of a singular *proper* noun (that is, a capitalized name) ending with an "s" usually includes an apostrophe and an additional "s":

James's wallet	Mr. Jones's house
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Some proper nouns that end with an "s" do not follow this rule; exceptions include certain biblical names and polysyllables ending with an unaccented *eez* sound.

Jesus' followers	Euripides' works
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Some writers use only an apostrophe (without the extra "s") after all polysyllabic names ending with an "s" or "z" sound. Most style sheets discourage this.

PLURAL IN "S":

When an apostrophe is added to a plural noun, add only an apostrophe.

the boys' teachers	the nurses' complaints	the trucks' frames
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PRONOUNS:

Most pronouns (including *its*) have a specific form that signals the possessive case; only one takes an apostrophe to signify the possessive case:

One's home is one's castle.

ATTRIBUTIVE NOUNS:

Some nouns act as adjectives; these, even when plural, may be presented without apostrophes.

musicians society	taxpayers association	consumers union
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LINKED NOUNS:

The possessive form for linked nouns (groups of two or more joined by conjunctions) is determined by meaning:

our son's and daughter's friends	both the son and the daughter have friends
our son and daughter's friend	the son and the daughter have a friend in common

COMPOUNDS

mother-in-law's house	daughter-in-law's houses
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When the situation becomes complex, it is sometimes best to use the preposition *of*:

the houses <i>of</i> my daughters-in-law	the holdings <i>of</i> their mother-in-law
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5. Dashes

The dash signals a break or interruption in the flow of a sentence.

EXAMPLE 1:

Work through the first example--not the second--and then try the test again.

EXAMPLE 2:

The main purpose of the exercise--perhaps the sole purpose--is to prepare you for the challenges of trouble-shooting a real network.

The dash is an "-em space" character, meaning that it is two hyphens long--the same length as the letter "m." There is no space before, after, or between the hyphens. Most current wordprocessors will convert single or double hyphens to dashes when appropriate. Dashes, commas, and parentheses can all be used to set off nonrestrictive information. There is a hierarchy of emphasis:

DASH:	most emphatic--creates an urgent interruption
COMMAS:	less emphatic than a dash, a comma sets off a comment
PARENTHESES:	least emphatic (creates an aside)

6. Quotation Marks

Quotation marks indicate the voice of some other speaker. In fiction, they mark dialogue; in newspapers, journals, and scholarly writing (essays, reports, and research papers), they indicate words taken from some external source. See Quicknotes on MLA and APA methods of handling quoted material.

a.) Quotation marks and dialogue

Place quotation marks around the exact words spoken by somebody else. Note that a verb of articulation (such as *says* or *replies*) is usually followed by a comma.

Larry said that I could borrow his car.	indirect discourse--no quotation marks
Larry said, "You can borrow my car."	direct discourse--quotation marks

b.) Quotation of printed sources

If you use another writer's exact words, enclose them in double quotation marks:

As Albert C. Baugh observed, the choice of American or British spelling patterns "varies with region, education, and age" throughout Canada (*A History of the English Language* 324).

c.) Single quotation marks

Single quotation marks are used only within double quotation marks:

In his lively discussion of verbal clutter, William Zinsser points out that "[e]ven before John Dean gave us 'at this point in time,' people had stopped saying 'now'" (*On Writing Well* 14).

Passages for which Zinsser used double quotation marks are enclosed in single quotation marks.

d.) Quotation marks and other punctuation

Periods and commas fall *within* quotation marks; colons, semicolons and parentheses fall *outside* quotation marks. Exclamation points, question marks, and dashes fall within quotation marks *only if they appear there in the quoted work*.

The Heart Foundation warns that "salt can contribute to high blood pressure."	period within quotation marks
Richard Gardner commented that he "can't envisage this being a procedure that becomes widely available"; stem cell research is still too complex to be the basis for commonplace therapies.	semicolon outside quotation marks
Did he say, "I have the solution for the Navier-Stokes equations"?	question mark <i>not</i> part of quotation
Hosts of Latin American dinner parties are expected to walk each guest to car or bus, and the guest in turn will "protest by saying ' <i>No se moleste!</i> '" (329). Visser, Margaret. <i>The Rituals of Dinner</i> . Toronto: HarperCollins, 1991.	exclamation mark is part of the quotation, originally within double quotation marks; note final period after parenthetical citation.

e.) "Ironic" quotations

In "Notes on Punctuation" Lewis Thomas offers this witty advice about quotation marks to show irony:

Above all, quotation marks should not be used for ideas that you'd like to disown, things in the air so to speak. Nor should they be put in place around clichés; if you want to use a cliché you must take full responsibility for it yourself and not try to fob it off on anon., or on society. The most objectionable misuse of quotation marks, but one which illustrates the dangers of misuse in ordinary prose, is seen in advertising, especially in advertisements for small restaurants, for example "just around the corner," or "a good place to eat." No single, identifiable, citable person ever really said, for the record, "just around the corner," much less "a good place to eat," least likely of all for restaurants of the type that use this type of prose.

As Thomas points out, you should not use quotation marks to mark off clichés or to isolate words that are being used in some peculiar fashion. Instead, choose a word that exactly sums up the sense that you are trying to convey. If you need to draw attention to a word as a word, use italics:

A partial floor raised above the ground floor level is sometimes called a *mezzanine*.