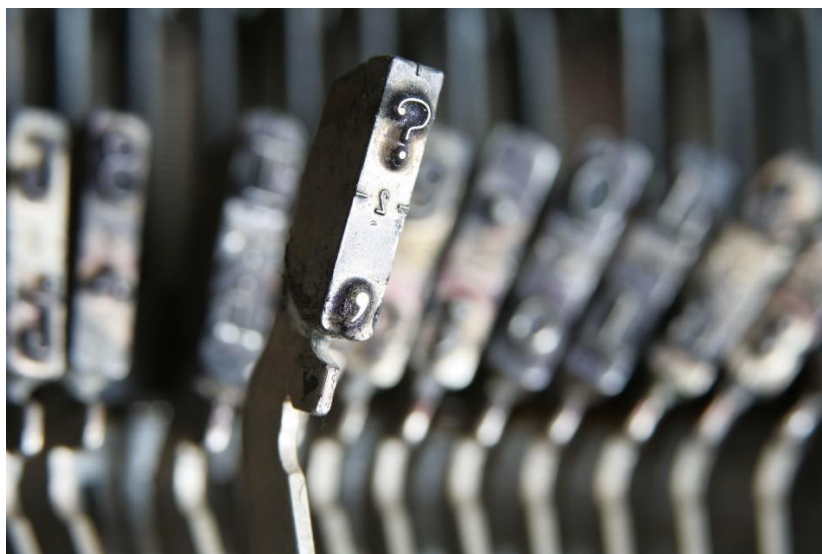


Powerful Punctuation



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Introduction

“Punctuation, when used creatively, is powerful,” writes Marg McAlister of Writing for Success.

“The way you order your sentences and punctuate your work can guide the reader to ‘hear’ the words just as you want them to.”

This booklet on punctuation will review what you already know and do automatically and will be a guide to some of the finer points of punctuation that you should learn to gain greater precision in your written expression.

(Take note of your Spelling and Grammar check’s ‘squiggly’ lines as they’re there for a reason.)

My main reference, from which I have taken points and examples for this booklet, is the Readers Digest *How to Write and Speak Better*. Second edition, reprinted in 1992¹.

Punctuation marks, used correctly and precisely, can suggest most of the pauses, emphases, and emotional states that a speaker would express by his voice and gestures.

¹ Other references and examples are from:

Punctuation, a Foyle’s handbook, by C. Whitaker Wilson;

The Usborne Book of Better English, by R. Gee and C. Watson, 1990;

Marg McAlister’s Writing for Success internet articles;

On Writing Well, Third edition – 1985, by William Zinsser.

The four general purposes of punctuation are:

1. to terminate a thought
2. to introduce a thought
3. to separate thoughts
4. to enclose a thought

Punctuation helps group related ideas, sets off words for emphasis, and indicates which words are to be grouped together or kept separate.

Spaces between words, our most basic punctuation mark, are used to organise written words into a pattern that is meaningful to the eye.

A sentence is a word, or group of words or thoughts, which makes complete sense on its own. It is separated from others, by the use of a capital letter at the beginning and a full stop, question mark or exclamation mark at the end.

Commas, semi-colons, dashes, brackets, and quotation marks are used within the sentence to assist the reader establish the individual parts of an idea and to imagine pauses and tones of voice.

Modern punctuation tends towards shorter, simpler sentences.

**You never get a second opportunity
to make a good first impression.**

Mark Twain

The Full Stop (.)

“There’s not much to be said about the period,” writes William Zinsser in *On Writing Well*, “except that most writers don’t reach it soon enough.”

He suggests that if you’re hopelessly mired in a long sentence, the quickest way to solve your problem is to break it into two or three sentences, or to make sure the sentence is under control from beginning to end, so the reader knows where he is at every step.

- The full stop, or period, is the strongest punctuation mark and is used to indicate the end of a sentence. It’s a stop sign.
- There is no minimum length for a sentence if it makes sense, while 20-25 word is suggested as a maximum.
- Variation in sentence length helps your writing flow and keeps it interesting.
- Remember, the sentence following a full stop always begins with a capital letter.

**...punctuation is a principle;
it is certainly an art;
almost a science.**

C. Whittaker-Wilson

Full stops are also used when a word has been abbreviated.	Prof. or Rev.
If the first and last letters of a contraction are the same as the full word, no full stop is required.	Dr or Mr
Abbreviations of metric measurements don't need full stops.	km mm cm
Leave out full stops after the initial letters of well-known organisations and place names.	UN BBC USA
There's no need for two full stops at the end of sentences finishing with an abbreviation.	She explained the rules for full stops, commas, etc.
Notices, lists and labels need no full stop.	No Entry Paris London

The Comma (,)

“The comma has always had my sympathy: it is much too hard-worked; it is made to do jobs it was never intended for; it is pushed about in people’s sentences regardless of its grammatical construction—and usually as an afterthought anyway.”

C. Whitaker Wilson, *Punctuation*

- A comma indicates a brief pause, much shorter than one made by a full stop, which makes the sense of the sentence clear. You need to be careful how you use them.
- A common error is to ‘splice’ sentences together with commas, creating ‘run on’ sentences.
- Commas are not generally used before or after **and**.
- A sentence is harder to understand if it is broken in too many places by commas. The comma should always help to make the meaning of the sentence clearer.
- One helpful method of resolving whether to place a comma at a certain point, is to speak the sentence out loud. If you pause, a comma may be in order. (I paused in the previous sentence, despite my computer’s squiggly line under ‘point’.)

<p>A comma is always used to set off the name or title of a person being addressed, most often in dialogue.</p>	<p>‘Are you eating, Jim?’</p> <p><i>Without the comma the sentence is gruesome and causes mischief.</i></p>
<p>If a sentence is spoken and followed by a speech tag use a comma.</p>	<p>‘Come here, Mary,’ he said.</p> <p><i>he said is part of the entire sentence.</i></p>
<p>Use to break groups of numbers into thousands.</p> <p>Dates into day, month, year, not month, year, day; and seasons with a comma.</p>	<p>1,999,999</p> <p>spring, 1990</p>
<p>Are used to set off words or phrases (appositives) in a sentence.</p> <p>These comma-enclosed words, used as modifiers, asides or for emphasis, could be left out without changing the general sense of the sentence.</p>	<p>Men, who have beards, often smoke pipes.</p> <p><i>In this sentence consider how the meaning is changed by the absence of commas.</i></p>

<p>When there is a list of words in a sentence, each word in the list is separated from the next by a comma. If and cannot be inserted, do not use a comma.</p> <p>The last word, or group of words, is separated by and instead of a comma. Commas replace and in a list of adjectives or verbs, modifying the same noun.</p>	<p>She wore brown leather gloves,</p> <p><i>compared with,</i></p> <p>Sam frightens the cats, teases the dog, bullies his brother and annoys the neighbours.</p>
<p>Is used to separate two parts of a sentence that begins as a statement but ends as a question.</p>	<p>He's a regular rascal, isn't he?</p>
<p>May be used to set off an introductory phrase that tells how, when, where or why the following statement has happened, but not when it follows that statement.</p>	<p>Even if it rains cats and dogs tomorrow, we won't call off our picnic.</p>
<p>Long sentences consisting of two or more simple sentences are separated by a comma before the conjunction.</p>	<p><i>Words like:</i></p> <p>but, or, nor, so, either, neither, for, as, if and unless</p>

The Question Mark (?)

To end a direct question.	Why? When will you arrive?
Informs the reader that a question is being asked and indicates a rising tone of voice.	You left at midday?
Sometimes, to express doubt about a date or name and is usually inside brackets (parenthetical) but only if the fact cannot be easily verified.	My great-grandfather was born in 1802 (?) and died in 1875.
<i>Note: When a question mark ends a sentence, it does not need the addition of a full stop.</i>	

**The strokes of the pen need deliberation
as much as the sword needs swiftness.**

Julia Ward Howe

The Exclamation Mark (!)

- Overuse of exclamation marks to compensate for careless expressions, or to enliven pathetic situations, makes them less effective.

‘I love you, Mary!’ He whispered. ‘Oh! John!’ she replied.

- Consider how you want your reader to interpret your sentence.

Sit down. Sit down! Sit down?

To indicate strong emotion like shock or surprise.	You’ll never catch me alive! <i>or</i> Ice cream! Lollies!
To indicate sarcasm.	You’re a fine one to tell me how to diet!
After some commands.	Run for your life!
<i>Note: When an exclamation mark ends a sentence, it does not need the addition of a full stop.</i>	

The Colon (:)

A colon introduces or leads into something that is to follow.	Remember the saying: “A stitch in time saves nine.”
A colon is used when the second half explains, expands or summaries what comes in the first half.	Eventually he told us his secret: the old beggar was, in fact, a very rich man.
In fiction you write he said, or she said frequently.	Glancing at his wristwatch, he said: “You have only two minutes.”
A colon is used to introduce lists.	You must remember to take your things with you: razor, shaving soap, toothbrush, and pyjamas.
A colon is used to replace words like:	For example, in other words, to sum up, the following, as follows and namely.

We write to taste life twice.

Anias Nin

The Semi-colon (;)

- A semi-colon can sometimes replace a full stop, linking two complete and closely linked sentences (in meaning and importance) to turn them into one.

The door swung open; a masked figure strode in.

- A semi-colon is often used before words like therefore, nevertheless, however, moreover, consequently, otherwise, and besides, when these words link two independent clauses.

He never exercised; consequently, he put on weight.

- Semi-colons can be used to break up lists, especially when each item on the list is long and using commas would be confusing.

You can use a semi-colon before 'and' when 'and' introduces the last part of the list.

At the circus we saw a dwarf, juggling with swords and daggers; a clown who stood on his head on a tight-rope; a fire-eater with flashing eyes; and an eight-year-old lion tamer.

Which to use – a colon or semi-colon?

There are times when it is difficult to decide whether to use a colon or a semi-colon.

- If the two parts of the sentence seem to be equally balanced, use a semi-colon.
- If the first part of the sentence leads you forward to the information in the second part, use a colon.

The boy was like his father: short, fat and with a large nose.

- Don't use a capital letter after either a colon or a semi-colon.

The Ellipsis (...)

This has three dots in a row (...) or, in **WORD**, use Insert/Symbol/More Symbols and Ellipsis.

- Use an ellipsis when something is ‘trailing off’ or is unfinished.

He hid behind the gravestone and...

- Use an ellipsis when showing hesitation.

“I dunno... she just... disappeared.”

- Use an ellipsis when part of a text or quotation is left out.

Jack and Jill went up the hill... and Jill came tumbling after.

**Words are sacred. They deserve respect.
If you get the right ones, in the right order,
you can nudge the world a little.**

Tom Stoppard

The (Long) Dash (also called an em-dash) (—)

Dashes and brackets can be interchangeable where variety is required in parentheses in a sentence — When I have written all I need to write (in the next chapter) I can begin to revel — and try to persuade you to revel — in the freedom of what I have called ‘Punctuation Complete’.

C. Whittaker-Wilson, ‘Punctuation’

- Unlike brackets, dashes do not need to be used in pairs - unless the words they separate come in the middle of a sentence.

A dash indicates that something following is going to clarify what has gone before.	He hated being made to wash up—it always clashed with his favourite TV programme.
Dashes can also offset an explanation.	Mary—John’s sister—was the last to arrive.
The dash may show someone’s dialogue has been interrupted suddenly.	“But I wasn’t anywhere —.” “Don’t bother denying it!” his father yelled.
A dash can be used to emphasise a particular word by repeating it.	The jumper she made was full of mistakes—mistakes you could see at a glance.

<p>A single dash at the end of a descriptive sentence can often be a vehicle for high or dramatic effect.</p>	<p>...the flaming sky—and the sea.</p> <p>I opened the lid eagerly and there inside the box was—a dead mouse.</p>
<p>A dash is often used to mark a break before a sudden change of direction in a sentence or before an afterthought.</p>	<p>Apples, pears, plums—all these grow in our orchard.</p>
<p><i>Note: To make a long dash in WORD, type your word, immediately followed by two hyphens and the next word, then the space bar, or insert an em-dash.</i></p>	

A drop of ink may make a million think.

Lord Byron

Brackets ()

These are always used in pairs around a group of words (in parenthesis) to keep them separate from the rest of the sentence.

Interruption

I spoke to Eliza (her sister is a doctor) about your strange symptoms.

Explanation

The streets were deserted (it was Easter Sunday) and not a single shop was open.

Afterthought

To decide where to put punctuation marks when using brackets, decide where you would use them if the bracketed words weren't there.

I gave the bear a banana (all I had left).

The rescue is tomorrow, but the plans may be changed any time (you all know what to do).

We will need to take plenty of provisions (blankets, clothes, food and weapons).

Wake me early. We must leave before it gets light (set your alarms for 5 o'clock).

Square Brackets []

Enclose parenthetical material already in brackets.	The other man (David Johnson [alias Wilson]) refused to make a statement.
Enclose explanatory material inserted into a quotation by someone other than the original author.	He told me that his boss said, “You’d better report your symptoms [fatigue and rapid weight loss] to Dr Samuels immediately.”
Correct an error in an excerpt or quotation which indicates the error was in the original.	15 [14] July Bastille Day, is a national holiday in France, or 15 [sic] July is a holiday in France.
<p>Which to use: dash or bracket? If in doubt, use brackets.</p> <p>Brackets mark the strongest division, dashes, a less strong division.</p> <p>If the words you want to separate are close to the main meaning of the sentence, a pair of commas may well suffice.</p>	

The Hyphen (–)

When something can be read without effort,
great effort has gone into its writing.

Enrique Jardiel Poncela

This is half the length of a long dash.

There is no total logic in the rules for hyphenation, and hyphen usage can change rapidly in the space of a few years. Consulting a modern dictionary is the best guide.

In compound nouns.	water-wheel
Compound adjectives.	He gave her a five-pound box of chocolates
To join a noun or adjective to a participle.	short-sighted hard-wearing
With ‘ed’ words.	blue-eyed, heavy-footed
To make a group of words into an expression.	do-it-yourself good-for-nothing
To write numbers and fractions.	sixty-six three-quarters

To avoid confusion.	A man-eating tiger a walking-stick
To clarify meaning.	Recover vs re-cover resign vs re-sign
To separate identical letters.	no-one
When a prefix is added.	pre-school, ex-army
To join a number or word to a noun, except in metric units of measurement.	six-cylinder car X-ray machine
To connect a compound single unit of measurement.	kilowatt-hour light-year
To keep three identical consonants apart.	cross-stitch, shell-like, grass-seed
To show division at the end of a line of typing, broken only between syllables.	fla-vour, pro-gramme
<p><i>Note: It is much better to set you document not to break words over lines: in WORD Paragraph/Indents and Spacing/Formatting exception/Don't hyphenate.</i></p>	

The Apostrophe (')

Takes the place of an omitted letter or letters in a word.	
Contractions: If left out, some pronouns it would make a different word. Contractions in common verb forms include, wasn't, couldn't.	She'll and shell we'll and well <i>Other accepted shortened forms include o'clock and 'tis.</i>
Replaces omitted figure in a number or date.	The class of '72
Shows possession in nouns.	Don's horse
With a plural noun, simply add the apostrophe.	The Whites' house
For a singular noun that ends in s or z, use the apostrophe with s if the noun has one syllable, to show that an extra sound is pronounced.	The mouse's cheese the house's value

For more than one syllable use the apostrophe alone.	Jesus' robe. <i>Decide which sounds best.</i>
For a compound add the apostrophe to the part closest to the thing possessed.	His mother-in-law's car.
When two nouns refer to one person, the second has apostrophe.	The mayor, Mr Smith's, car.
With joint possession.	Jack and Jill's pail.

**'The act of writing is an act of optimism.
You would not take the trouble to do it if you felt that it
didn't matter.**

Edward Albee

Inverted Commas (‘ ’)

The titles of books, plays, films poems, songs, paintings and TV programmes.	Have you seen ‘Amazing Grace’? Read Chapter 2, ‘Early Childhood’ of Thompson’s ‘My Life and Times.’
Unusual words such as specialist terms, foreign words and slang.	The wind is ‘veering’ when it changes in a clockwise direction. He ‘flipped his lid’.
With words quoted for discussion.	I have looked up ‘amnesia’ in the dictionary.
When adding a funny, sarcastic or ironical twist, or to give the word emphasis.	Our ‘luxury’ hotel turned out to be a shed surrounded by mud.
When quoting a proverb or traditional saying.	‘A stitch in time saves nine.’

<p>To draw attention to words that are being used in an unusual way.</p> <p>Old-fashioned or slang expressions, jargon, invented words or combinations.</p> <p>Mottoes, clichés and popular sayings.</p> <p>Nicknames, epithets or personified words.</p>	<p>‘real groovy’, ‘a slight catarrh’</p> <p>‘he who hesitates is lost’.</p> <p>‘The Purple Avenger’, ‘Dashing Dave’.</p>
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**When a book leaves your hands, it belongs to God.
He may use it to save a few souls or to try a few others,
but I think that for the writer to worry
is to take over God’s business.**

Flannery O’Connor

Quotation Marks (Inverted commas used with speech) (“ ”)

Marty Feldman said,

“Remember the words of Robert the Bruce as he watched the spider: ‘If at first you don’t succeed, try, try, and try again.’” *Both single and double marks must be used at the end.*

- Can be single or double, always used in pairs. Be consistent throughout your document.
- Are used when a conversation is quoted, each speaker is given a new paragraph—no matter how little he says. Descriptive material and additional material by the speaker are included in the same paragraph.
- Are used when the quoted material is several paragraphs long, quotation marks are placed at the beginning of each paragraph, and only at the end of the final spoken paragraph.
- Use single inverted commas when two sets of inverted commas are needed in one sentence:

“Who said ‘I have nothing to declare except my genius’ and when did he say it?” asked the quizmaster.

- Are used to set off a direct quotation.

“Next year,” the doctor said, “we’ll need two more on the staff.”

Study these forms:

- The winning essay was called ‘My Experience with Sharks’.
- The scientific report ended: ‘We conclude that life cannot exist on Mars.’
- The conductor shouted, ‘All aboard!’
- A little boy asked, ‘Why?’
- ‘John,’ she said, ‘aren’t you ready yet?’
(The comma and ‘?’ both belong to the quoted question.)
- Do you believe that ‘love is blind’?
- ‘That girl,’ he was saying, ‘is asking for trouble’ – when she walked in.
- Didn’t you hear me call out ‘stop!’?
- “How silly of you to keep saying, ‘Can I really afford it?’!” Mary exclaimed.
- Bob asked, “Don’t you like your nickname ‘Bluey’?”
- “I believe in the saying ‘time is money’,” she answered.
- “I do hope,” said Alice politely, “that you and your friend have a wonderful time.”
(This sentence continues with a small ‘t’. Note the position of the commas.)
- “What?” Jean asked. “He’ll never believe you did that!”

Indentations

Quoted material from a book, speech or report can be indented and in smaller type rather than surrounded by quotation marks.

Italics

Are used for famous paintings, ships and planes. *Titanic*, *Mona Lisa*.

Exceptions

The Bible and the names of its books, sections and verses are neither in italics nor put in quotation marks.

Postscript

Mr Whitaker-Wilson says, “You can never afford to pass by any variation of punctuation that is likely to stimulate or increase the force of your writing. When you have read the last chapter in Punctuation (his book), you should have discovered that punctuation is not only a grammatical necessity, with a definite technique to it, but is a pleasing form of decoration.”

He concludes his book with this: “There is nothing like writing down your best thoughts just as they come to you; there is nothing like revising what you write until everything scans healthily; nothing like reading what you have written—even a year afterward—if you are conscious of having developed your style in the meantime.

“It all comes down to this: never leave a sentence alone until you are sure it balances everywhere; never cease correcting until you know that further correction will mean a bad balance; and never be satisfied until the rise and fall of your rhythm is as perfect as you can make it.

“Write and revise; then revise your revision...
Revising is seeing again.
It is when you see again that you see so much.”

I agree.
Jan 2007

**What is written without effort,
is generally read without pleasure.**

Samuel Johnson

