A Guide to Punctuation

Punctuation is used to make written language clearer.

Use the Apostrophe:

- To demonstrate omission of one or more letters, one or more words or figures in a number.

  won’t (will not)    ’cause (because)
  981,998           seven o’clock (seven of the clock)

- To show possession

  Singular          Plural
  a cat’s paws     the boys’ meals
  Tom’s jacket      the Smith’s house

- Do not use the apostrophe with possessive forms of personal pronouns.

  The cat broke its leg.    Here is your book.

- To show plurals of numbers, letters and words discussed as words.

  7’s    B’s    no but’s

Use Brackets

- For parentheses within parentheses:

  (That was the color [blue] he preferred.)

- To correct an error in a direct quote:

  “Frank Lloyd [W]right was the architect.”

- To make a quotation fit grammatically into your own text. To indicate explanations or your own comments within quotes:

  He replied, “That’s [San Francisco] where I was born.”
• As an indication for acting or stage directions:

   RED QUEEN [waving her arms] Off with her head!

**Use the Colon**

• After a statement followed by a list.

   Climbers need to take these items: rope, carabiners, and pitons.

• After a statement followed by a clause that explains, extends, or amplifies the statement.

   Judges serve a double duty: they must protect the innocent and punish the guilty.

• After a salutation in a business letter.

   Dear Sir:      Dear Ms. Smith:        Gentlemen:

• To separate minutes from hours when indicating time.

   3:55 P.M.

• To separate parts of a citation.

   The Practical Tutor: 227-250            Exodus 4:1

**Use the Comma**

• To separate the day of the month, or a special day, from the year.

   November 22, 1963          Independence Day, 1776

• To separate parts of an address.

   She lives at 1234 Music Street, New Orleans, Louisiana, 70131.

   ABC Company,  P. O. Box 749, Tualatin, Oregon, 97062.

• After the greeting of an informal letter.

   Dear Mom,            Dear Uncle Bill,
• After the closing of a letter.

Sincerely yours, Affectionately,

• Before any title or its abbreviation that follows a person’s name.

Joe Smith, Dean of Men A. B. Jones, M. D.
Madeline French, Secretary Harold Phelps, Ph.D.

• Between words or phrases in a series.

Go down the street, over the bridge, and into the mall.
The color can be red, white, or blue.

• To set off the name of a person being spoken to.

Bill, here is your hat. Here, Bill, is your hat.

• To set off words that suggest a break in thought, such as however, of course, and moreover.

You will find, however, the largest ones are rare.
The winner, of course, received the gold medal.

• To set off first, second, yes, no, oh, and similar words when they introduce a sentence, or after an introductory word group.

Yes, the fax came. First, who will be present?
When he was ready to leave, his dog began to act nervous.

• To set off groups of digits in large numbers.

4,675 10,786 238,536,444

• To separate unrelated numbers in a sentence.

By 1979, 3,400,000 people lived in the city.

• To set off words that define or explain other words (apposition).

Bill Smith, my cousin, received a traffic ticket.
The baseball bounced, or ricocheted, off the foul-line marker pole.

- To set off phrases and dependent clauses preceding the main clause of a sentence.
  
  By the end of the week, most of the work was done.

  To be a good runner, a person needs strong legs.

  Although the children were poorly dressed, they looked healthy.

- Use a comma before a coordinating conjunction joining independent clauses.
  
  Nearly everyone has heard of love at first sight, but I fell in love at first dance.

**Exception**

- If the two independent clauses are short and there is no danger of misreading, the comma may be omitted.
  
  The plane took off and we were on our way.

- A comma tells readers that one independent clause has come to a close and that another is about to begin.
  
  There are seven coordinating clauses in English: and, but, for, or, nor, so, and yet.

- Caution: Do not use a comma to separate compound elements that are not independent clauses.
  
  A good money manager controls expenses and invests surplus dollars to meet future needs.

- The word group following and is not an independent clause; it is the second half of a compound predicate. To set off phrases or clauses that add to the main idea of a sentence but are not essential to it.
  
  Climbing, John bruised his legs.

  The tutors, busy as they were, found time to help.

  The final reports, which were finished today, give all the totals.
• To separate long coordinate clauses of a compound sentence.
  The scaffolding collapsed, but no one was hurt.
  Snow fell during the night, and the pipes froze.
  But: She sang and she danced.
  The lightning flashed and the thunder rumbled.
  
• To set off coordinate phrases modifying the same noun.
  This lake is as wide as, but deeper than, Lake Pontchartrain.

• Between parts of a sentence that suggest contrast or comparison.
  The more people he met, the lonelier he felt.
  The sooner we start, the sooner we’ll finish.
  The more he saw of her, the more he liked her.

• To indicate the omission of one or more words.
  Instead of: The first game was exciting, the second, dull.
  Use: The first game was exciting; the second game was dull.

• To separate identical or similar words in a sentence.
  Let them go in, in pairs. Who he was, is a mystery.

• To separate adjacent words that might be mistakenly joined in reading a sentence.
  To an Asian, Americans are foreigners.
  Just as we walked in, the window broke.
Use the Dash

- In place of to in between numbers or dates.
  
  You will find helpful information on pages 35-41.
  
  The years 1929-1935 were difficult for the entire country.

- Between proper names showing terminals of airplanes, buses, ships, and trains.
  
  The San Francisco-Los Angeles flight was late.

- Before a summarizing statement introduced by all, this, or similar words.
  
  Brian, Chris, Jason—all found summer jobs.
  
  To defeat every opponent—that was his ambition.

- Before a repeated word or expression.
  
  He was a gentleman—a gentleman of the old school.

- To emphasize or define a part of a sentence.
  
  The Declaration of Independence—that historic document—was written in 1776.

- To indicate an “aside” or a point of view of the speaker.
  
  You may—though I doubt it—enjoy this book.

- To suggest halting or hesitant speech.
  
  “Well—I—ah—I don’t know,” he stammered.

- To indicate a sudden break or interruption in a sentence.
  
  “I’m sorry, sir, but—.” He was already through the door.
**Use Ellipses**

Within a quotation to indicate places where a word or words have been omitted.

> “The house . . . was built in 1953.”

For: The house on Elm street was built in 1953.”

At the end of a quotation to indicate words omitted before the period. Be sure to include the period.

> “He was a giant of a man . . . .”

For: “He was a giant of a man and was highly respected.”

**Use the Exclamation Mark**

- After a word, phrase, or sentence that expresses strong or sudden feeling.
  
  Ouch! That hurts! Good for you!

- To emphasize a command or strong point of view.
  
  Come here at once! We won’t discuss this again!

- To show sarcasm, irony, or amusement.
  
  You are a fine one to talk about being lazy!

  That should be an easy job for you!

**Use the Hyphen**

To mark the division of a word at the end of a line. Here are some general rules for using the hyphen in this way.

You may divide a word only between syllables. Divide it in such a way that each part of the hyphenated word contains at least two letters. If you are uncertain where to hyphenate a word, consult the dictionary. Avoid dividing a word in a way that might lead to incorrect pronunciation. For example, omnipotent is pronounced om nip(tent). Do not hyphenate omnipo-tent; the correct way is omnip-o-tent. Remember that pronunciation is not an accurate
guide to syllabication. For instance, the word babble, is broken into syllables as bab-ble.

Avoid hyphenating a word where either part of the hyphenated word forms a word by itself; for example, tar-tan.

Do not hyphenate a word that is a number or a figure, a contraction, an abbreviation, a word of one syllable, or a word of five letters or less.

The following are specific rules for hyphenating words at the end of a line:

a) Between double consonants unless the root ends in the double consonant.
   
   run-ning          remit-tance          col-lection
   
   But: Divide after a double consonant if the root word ends in the double consonant.
   
   roll-ing          bless-edly           miss-ing

b) Before a suffix only if it has three or more letters.

   port-able          transi-tion        argu-ment
   
   But not: writ-er    person-al           horri-fy

c) After a prefix only if it has three or more letters.

   anti-climax         pro-logue          trans-mission
   
   But not: a-symmetry  bi-cycle           en-circle

d) A compound word only where a hyphen already occurs in the word.

   first-class         vice-president      self-reliant
   
   Not: vice-pres-ident self-re-liant      ep-och-making

If it can be avoided, do not hyphenate a word at the end of a line. It is perfectly acceptable to have a rather uneven looking margin than to make the mistake as I have just previously illustrated. If you must hyphenate a word at the end of a line never start the new line with a second hyphen (as shown).
To join word parts and to separate word parts, use a hyphen:

- In compound numbers between 21 and 99.

  thirty-six         forty-sixth           ninety-one

- Between the two parts of fractions when used as modifiers, unless one part of the fraction contains a hyphen.

  two-thirds vote           one twenty-second piece
  one-fourth capacity       twenty-one thirtieths

But: Do not use the hyphen between the numerator and denominator when the fraction as a noun.

  He bought one half.       He took three quarters.

- After the prefix re- to prevent confusion with other words beginning with those letters.

  re-lay a carpet           re-cover a chair

But: a relay race           recover from an illness

- After a prefix: when the prefix ends with the same letter with which the root word begins; when the root word begins with w or y; or when the root word begins with a capital letter.

  de-emphasize    co-worker    pre-Columbian

Exceptions occur when the dictionary shows that the preferred spelling is without the hyphen, as in cooperate.

- Between the parts of a compound adjective when it appears before the word it modifies.

  drive-in movie           would-be actor           foreign-born person

But: The client was foreign born.
• In compounds containing a prepositional phrase, unless the dictionary shows that the preferred spelling is without the hyphen, as in coat of arms.

       mother-in-law  man-about-town

• After any prefix that precedes a proper noun or adjective.

       un-American    pre-Revolutionary pro-Communists

• After each item in a series when the last item requires a hyphen.

       First-, second-, and third-grade students.

• After great in describing generations or descent.

       great-grandmother          great-great-grandfather

• To spell out a word or a name.

       s-e-p-a-r-a-t-e             D-i-s-r-a-e-l-i

Do not hyphenate a compound adjective that includes an adverb ending in ly even when the adjective is used before a word or phrase it modifies.

       It was a slowly moving train.

       Not:  It was a slowly-moving train.

       But: It was a slow-moving train.

Check your dictionary for words beginning with the prefixes ante, after, non, pro, pre, super, ultra, and well. Some of these words are hyphenated; some are not. Also check compound words beginning or ending with the words book, boy, child, dealer, girl, like, maker, man, mill, payer ,shop, store, and work.

       Examples: man-hours of work    man in white    manslaughter
**Use Parentheses:**

- Around explanatory material in a sentence when this material has no essential connection with the rest of the sentence.
  
  To make holes, use an awl (a sharp, pointed tool).

- To enclose sources of information within a sentence.

  The population of Boise is 74,990 (1970 census).

- Around numbers or letters that indicate subdivisions of a sentence.

  This committee has three duties: (a) to solicit members, (b) to collect dues, and (c) to send receipts.

- Around figures which repeat a number written out.

  Enclosed is five dollars ($5.00).

Put marks of punctuation inside the parentheses when they belong with the parenthetical matter.

  Carol’s question ("Whom did you take to the dance?") produced a chill in the air.

But: John walked to the store in all that snow (even though I asked him not to).

**Use the Period**

- After a sentence.

  It is cold outside.

- After a command given without emphasis.

  Please hurry.

- After initials.

  J. P. Smith
• After an abbreviation or each part of many abbreviations. (Exceptions are listed in the dictionary entry for the word or abbreviation.)

  A. M.  C. O. D.  lbs.  Mr.  Mrs.  Ph.D.  Prof.  yds.

  But: AFL-CIO  AWOL  ICBM  NAACP  NBC

• After each number or letter that begins a heading in an outline.

  Why I like to read

  1. Satisfies my curiosity
     
     A. About people

     B. About things

**Use the Question Mark**

• After a direct question.

  How old is Bill?

• After a statement followed by a short question

  It’s cold outside, isn’t it?

• After a word that indicates a question.

  What?  How?  Why?

**Use Quotation Marks**

• To enclose the exact words of a speaker.

  Mary exclaimed, “I refuse to go!”

• Around each part of a direct quotation when explanatory words come between the parts.

  “This material,” said the clerk, “washes easily.”
“It will not fade,” he added. “The material is also colorfast.”

- To enclose quoted words or phrases within a sentence.

  The boss told us we must “put our noses to the grindstone.”

Enclose a quotation within a quotation in single quotation marks.

  “I do not understand your statement: ‘He obtained the stock illegally.’”

British usage is opposite, with single quotation marks for most uses and double ones for quotations within quotations.

- Around the titles of songs or poems.

  We all sang “America.”

  The child recited “Little Miss Muffet.”

- Around the titles of lectures, sermons, pamphlets, handbooks, chapters of a book, magazine articles, titled material that is less than a whole book.

  “Rescued” was the longest chapter in the book.

- Around a word or phrase explained or defined by the rest of the sentence.

  The “crib” in cribbage is made up of discards from players’ hands.

- Around a word to which attention is called in general writing. (In formal writing, underscore the word.)

  You have spelled “parallel” incorrectly.

- Around a technical or trade name.

  Many people use “Jello.”

- Before the beginning of each stanza of a quoted poem and after the last stanza.

  The teacher recited these lines from Lord Tennyson’s “The Eagle”:

    “He clasps the crag with crooked hands;
    Close to the sun in lonely lands,”
Ring’d with the azure world, he stands.

“The wrinkled sea beneath him crawls;
He watches from his mountain walls,
And like a thunderbolt, he falls.”

- Before each paragraph of continuous quoted material and after the last paragraph. They are not used at the end of intermediate paragraphs.

  “Green told us that the venture turned out to be a complete failure.

  “Upon hearing this, Smith knew he was a ruined man. He quickly left the room.

  “We have not heard from him since that night. Not even his wife knows where he is. I don’t know whether he is dead or alive.”

- Commas and periods are placed inside closing quotation marks (in United States usage).

  We all sang “America.”

- Semicolons and colons are placed outside closing quotation marks.

  John said, “I’ll call you tomorrow”; but I haven’t heard from him.

  Here’s what he did when he said, “I’ll go”: He closed the window and walked out the door.

- Quotation marks and exclamation points are placed inside the closing quotation marks if they belong to the quotation.

  “Get out!” she shouted.

But: How surprised I was to hear her say, “You have written the best essay in the class”!

  “Are you going to the movies tonight?” he asked.

But: What did he mean when he said, “I didn’t know you were here”? 
Use the semicolon

- Between parts of a compound sentence when they are not joined by the conjunctions

  and, but, for, nor, or or.

  I must leave you now; you can visit me later.

- Before a conjunction connecting independent clauses when either clause contains commas.

  During the summer, he accomplished nothing; but during the winter, he finished writing his book.

- After each clause in a series of three or more clauses.

  Bells rang; whistles shrieked; horns blared; and people screamed.

- Before words like therefore, however, and nevertheless when they connect two independent clauses.

  Mr. Grey is a busy man; nevertheless, he has agreed to help us with our fund-raising project.

- After listings when commas occur within the list

  You will need to call Mr. H. H. Hall, of the First Ward; Mr. Henry Griffin, of the Third Ward; and Mr. R. J. Troy, of the Council.

- Before explanatory expressions such as for example, for instance, that is, and namely.

  There are several reasons why this is a good factory site; namely, proximity to fuel, availability of raw materials, good shipping facilities, and an abundance of skilled labor.

Use Underlining

In manuscript, for words that should appear in italics when set in type, underline:

- The name of any book or complete volume.

  Tom Sawyer describes boyhood near the Mississippi river.
• The name of a magazine or periodical.

    There are amusing cartoons in The New Yorker.

• Any foreign word that is not commonly used in English. These words have such labels as Latin, French, or Italian in the dictionary.

    The treasurer made an ad interim report.

• The names of ships, painting, and works of art.

    Titanic

    The Last Supper

    Rodin’s sculpture The Thinker

• Any words not considered for their grammatical meaning but as words.

    But, for, and or are all conjunctions.

**Use the Virgule (/) or Slash**

• Between two words to indicate that the meaning of either word pertains.

    The man and/or his wife may cash the check.

• As a dividing line in dates, fractions, and abbreviations.

    4/4/76    3/4    1/2    c/o    B/L

• When recording bibliographical information to indicate the ends of lines in a title or subtitle.

    The/World/Book/Encyclopedia/ A/ Volume 1

• With a run-in passage of poetry to indicate where one line ends and another begins.

    “This above all: to thine own self be true,/ And it must follow, as the night the day,/ Thou canst not then be false to any man.”
Works Cited
