Punctuation

Using correct punctuation helps readers understand your ideas. Long, unbroken sentences can become confusing. Misplaced commas can change the meaning. This handout provides an overview of some of the most common punctuation rules and errors.

End Punctuation: Periods (.), Exclamation Points (!), and Question Marks (?)

End punctuation **indicates the completion of a sentence** and helps the reader know how to understand the information: question, remark upon, or finish an idea or statement.

Period

A period is used to end a declarative (statement of fact) or imperative (command) sentence.
- **Declarative Example:** I'm going to the movies this weekend with my friends**.**
- **Imperative Example:** Go to the basement and get the Halloween decorations**.**

Exclamation Point

An exclamation point is used to indicate excitement, surprise, or other strong emotions. It may also indicate an interjection (a sudden word or phrase that interrupts and expresses emotion). Exclamation points should be used sparingly and are almost never seen in formal academic writing.
- **Excitement/Surprise Example:** There's a hornet nest in the bush**!**
- **Interjection Example:** Hey**!** Watch out for that branch.

Question Mark

A question mark is commonly used to indicate a question. However, it can also be used to surprise or disbelief.
- **Question Example:** Have you done the homework for Monday**?**
- **Surprise/Disbelief Example:** Really**?** You haven't done it already**?**

Commas (,)

Commas are used to **separate words, clauses, and ideas** within sentences.

Join independent clauses (complete sentences) with coordinating conjunctions (FANBOYS—for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so)
- **Example:** The weather outside in North Carolina has been pretty lately**, but** I heard it's supposed to get gross soon.

Set off introductory words or phrases
- **Example: Generally,** I don't like talking to strangers.
- **Example: Because I prefer watching movies,** I will hang out at the movie theater this weekend instead of going bowling.
- **Example: If you see the box,** will you let me know?

Separate items in a series of three or more
- **Example:** I went to the store yesterday and bought **milk, cereal, steak, and cupcakes**.
- **Example:** The intrepid explorer **raced across the plains, climbed the rugged mountain, and planted his flag on the peak**.

Set off interrupters (parenthetical phrases and nonessential information)
- **Example:** May**, my dog,** doesn't like the grass in our backyard.
- **Example:** The cat**, most of my friends agree,** is weird looking.
- **Example:** Running with scissors**, I have to say,** is a bad idea.
- **Example:** The organization is committed to protecting wildlife**, especially pandas**.

Set off transitional elements
- **Example:** My cooking**, however,** is fantastic.
- **Example:** It is**, in fact,** even better than my husband's.
- **Example: Therefore,** you should absolutely stop by this weekend for dinner.

Set off direct quotations
- **Example:** Julie said**, "I think this is a really long lesson."**
- **Example: "Yeah. It's kind of boring,"** Doreen replied.

Set off direct address, yes or no, interjections, and tag questions
- **Example: James,** could you pass the salt?
- **Example: Yes,** I can.
- **Example: Oh no,** I spilled it all over the table!
- **Example:** You're supposed to throw some over your shoulder for good luck**, aren't you?**

Separate addresses, place names, and dates
- **Example:** Please send your payment to **3333 South Smith Dr., Raleigh, North Carolina 22222**.
- **Example: Rocky Mount, North Carolina,** is the home of North Carolina Wesleyan College.
- **Example:** Today is **July 14, 2020**.

Semi-Colons (;)

Semi-colons are used **when punctuation stronger than a comma but weaker than end punctuation is needed**.

Link two closely related independent clauses
- **Example:** I stopped by the school to talk to my professor**;** she explained the homework to me clearly.

Link two independent clauses that are connected by conjunctive adverbs (ex: hence, subsequently, moreover, etc.) or transitional phrases
- **Example:** John thought here heard someone at the front door**; however**, there was no one there when he opened it.
- **Example:** I noticed that there was a package on the porch**; therefore**, I decided it must have been a delivery driver.

Separate items in a list that include commas
- **Example:** You can order the sushi, which is freshly caught each day**;** the steak, which is grass-fed**;** or the pasta, which is homemade and vegetarian.

Separate two independent clauses with many commas that are connected by a coordinating conjunction
- **Example:** When I see mountains, trees, and streams, I know I'm home**; and**, immediately, I relax and enjoy the company of my family.

Colons (:)

A colon is most often used **at the end of a complete sentence and before a list or quote** that adds to or explains the information in the sentence.

Use before a list
- **Example:** I have three favorite colors**: green, purple, and blue**.

Use before a quote
- **Example:** C.S. Lewis discusses how friendships are formed**: "Friendship is born at that moment when one person says to another: What! You too? I thought I was the only one."**

Parentheses () and Brackets []

Parentheses and brackets **interrupt the regular flow of a sentence to provide additional information**.

Parentheses
Parentheses provide details or explanation. They can usually be replaced by commas. Commas are preferred in formal writing.
- **Example:** Jen and Dom (two of my best friends) are planning to visit us next summer.

Brackets
Brackets provide clarifying information (particularly the clarification of pronouns) or technical explanations.
- **Example:** They [Jen and Dom] have known us for many years.
- **Example:** Germination [the development of a plant from a seed] takes a lot longer than you think.

Hyphens (-), En Dashes (–), and Em Dashes (—)

Hyphens, en dashes, and em dashes look very similar; however, they are used in different situations.

Hyphen
A hyphen is a short dash (-) and can be created by hitting the "dash" (or "minus") button on your keyboard once. Below are some of its most common uses:
- **Use to create some compound words:** high-tech, pie-in-the-sky,
- **Use in compound numbers:** twenty-three, forty-two
- **Use with prefixes "all," "self," and "ex":** all-knowing, self-explanatory, ex-wife
- **Use between a prefix and a capitalized noun:** pre-Middle Ages, post-WWII
- **Use with the suffix "-elect":** president-elect
- **Use to indicate a missing element:** high- and low-tech, short-and long-term
- **Use to indicate the continuation of word to another line:** Mary Poppins sings "Supercalifragilistic-expialidocious"

En Dash
An en dash is slightly longer than a hyphen (–) and can be created by holding the "alt" button and "dash."
- **Use to show a range (replace "to"):** The Writing Center is open 1:00–9:00.

Em Dash

An em dash is the longest dash (—) and is usually created by hitting the "dash" button twice. Most word processing software will convert it to an em dash automatically. There should be no spaces before or after the em dash.

- **Use to replace commas:** When he arrived at the store—almost an hour late—his boss was very unhappy.
- **Use to replace parentheses:** Jen's sisters—she has three of them—are all studying at the same school.
- **Use to replace colons:** I have three favorite colors—green, purple, and blue.

Apostrophes (')

Apostrophes are used to **indicate a contraction, the omission of a letter(s) from a word, and possessive nouns.**

Contraction

A contraction is the combination of two words that omits one or more letters. Contractions are discouraged in formal writing.

- **Example:** I **don't** (do not) know how to turn on the computer in my classroom.
- **Example:** **They'll** (they will) have to get up early to catch the plane on time.

Omission

An omission is the removal of a letter(s) from a word. Omission is often used in clang, and is not used in formal writing.

- **Example:** **Somethin'** is going to have to change.
- **Example:** The dog has been **runnin'** around with his bone all day.

Possession

Possession indicates ownership. Apostrophes are only used with possessive nouns. Possessive pronouns such as "its" and "theirs" do **not** use an apostrophe.

- **Example:** **Todd's** new jacket is very stylish.
- **Example:** My **laptop's** screen needs to be replaced soon.

Quotation Marks (" ")

Quotation marks help **set off speech, quotes, and words/phrases**. Commas and periods at the end of quoted material should almost always be placed inside the quotation marks. If a question mark or exclamation point is part of the quoted material, it goes inside the quotation marks. If it is not, it goes outside.

Speech

When creating dialogue in writing, use quotation marks to distinguish speech from the descriptions and actions.

- **Example:** Jamie leaned on the porch railing and said, **"I'd like to add a flower garden to the backyard." "That's a great idea! We can buy plants and mulch at the store tomorrow,"** Tim replied.

Quotes

When using the exact words of an author or other outside source, use quotation marks to show that the language is not your own.

- **Example:** According to C.S. Lewis, **"Friendship is born at that moment when one person says to another: What! You too? I thought I was the only one."**

Quotes within Quotes: On rare occasions, it may be necessary to quote a source that is, itself, quoting another source. In those instances, place regular quotation marks around the full quote and single quotation marks (' ') around the quoted material within the quote.

- **Example:** In the article the author says, "The mayor claimed that the situation was **'being examined.'** She declined to provide more details."

Words/Phrases

When highlighting a word or phrase as part of your discussion, put it in quotation marks to emphasize it and avoid confusion. Quotation marks can also be used around words and phrases to indicate sarcasm or disbelief.

- **Emphasis Example:** The **"Other"** is a major concept in Edward Said's discussion of Orientalism.
- **Sarcasm/Disbelief Example:** Where are all these **"monsters"** you claim to have seen.

Ellipses (. . .)

Ellipses consist of three dots used to **indicate a pause/hesitation or omitted information**. Each dot should have a space before and after it.

Pause or Hesitation

Ellipses can create the illusion of a sudden stop in thought or an unwillingness to share information.

- **Example:** I wish I had **. . .** Never mind. It doesn't matter.

Omitted Information

Ellipses can be used to shorten long or unnecessary sections of writing. When you omit information from a direct quote of a source, put the ellipsis inside brackets to indicate a change has been made.

- **Quoted Example:** Gelernter says, "With the right software, computers could help make science tangible or teach neglected topics **[. . .]** however, computers make our worst educational nightmares come true"

Common Errors

Comma Splice

A comma splice occurs when you **connect two independent clauses using only a comma**.

- **Example:** I walk in the park every day, the paths take me past some beautiful flowers. **(Incorrect)**

  To fix a comma splice:
  o Use a period
     Fix 1: I walk in the park every day**.** The paths take me past some beautiful flowers.
  o Use a semicolon
     Fix 2: I walk in the park every day**;** the paths take me past some beautiful flowers.
  o Use a comma and a coordinating conjunction (FANBOYS)
     Fix 3: I walk in the park every day**, and** the paths take me past some beautiful flowers.

Fused Sentence

A fused sentence occurs when you **connect two independent clauses without using any punctuation**.

- **Example:** The trees in my yard are called mimosas they have fluffy pink flowers. **(Incorrect)**

  To fix a fused sentence:
  o Use a period
     Fix 1: The trees in my yard are called mimosas**.** They have fluffy pink flowers.

- Use a comma and coordinating conjunction
  - **Fix 2:** The trees in my yard are called mimosas**, and** they have fluffy pink flowers.

Run-On Sentence

A run-on sentence occurs when you **connect more than two independent clauses together**.

- **Example:** Yesterday I went to the store, and I bought milk for my family, but I forgot that we also needed cereal, so I had to go back and buy some. **(Incorrect)**

  To fix a run-on sentence:
  - Break it up
    - **Fix 1:** Yesterday I went to the store, and I bought milk for my family. However, I forgot that we also needed cereal, so I had to go back and buy some.
  - Combine ideas
    - **Fix 2:** Yesterday I went to the store to buy milk for my family, but I forgot that we also needed cereal and had to go back and buy some.

Fragment

A fragment occurs when there is **no subject** or when there is **no predicate (verb phrase)**.

- **Example of missing subject:** Ran across the yard, jumped over the fence, and disappeared into the woods. **(Incorrect:** In this example, we do not know who or what is doing the action.**)**

  To fix a fragment missing a subject:
  - Add the subject
    - **Fix: A cat** ran across the yard, jumped over the fence, and disappeared into the woods.

- **Example of a missing predicate:** The little old lady who lives down the street and shares the strawberries from her garden.
  (**Incorrect:** In this example, everything is describing who the little old lady is, but we do not know what she is doing.)

  To fix a fragment missing a predicate:
  - Add the predicate
    - **Fix:** The little old lady who lives down the street and shares the strawberries from her garden **came over to the house for tea this afternoon**.