**Punctuation**



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Definition

The marks used in writing to clarify meaning include commas, semicolons, dashes, apostrophes, quotation marks, and parenthesis. Learning punctuation rules helps you know when and how to use the correct mark.

(Adapted from *A Writer’s Reference* by Diane Hacker.)

## USE COMMAS…

1. **Before a coordinating conjunction joining independent clauses.**

Nearly everyone has heard of love at first sight, but I fell in love at first dance.

(Contrast with: Nearly everyone has heard of love at first sight and love at first dance.)

1. **After an introductory word group**.

When Irwin was ready to eat, he realized that he had forgotten a fork.

On the day I was born, peace was declared throughout the world.

1. **Between all items in a series.**

I need a pen, a paper, and a quiet room in order to write.

1. **Between coordinate adjectives not joined by a coordinating conjunction.**

Mother has become a strong, confident, independent woman.

1. **To set off nonrestrictive word groups.**

Traffic, which can often be a nuisance, has led to many incidents of road rage.

(Contrast with: The traffic that clogged the 101 caused many commuters to use the 118.)

1. **To set off phrases functioning as adjectives.**

The helicopter, with its spotlight illuminating the area, circled above.

1. **To set off appositives.**

Norman Mailer’s first novel, *The Naked and the Dead*, was a bestseller.

1. **To set off conjunctive adverbs and transitional expressions.**

New students try to find ways to feel accepted by their peers; however, students will sometimes struggle in forming appropriate relationships. Although they want to fit in, new students are viewed as outsiders.

1. **To set off parenthetical expressions.**

# Evolution, so far as we know, doesn’t work this way.

1. **To set off absolute phrases.**

His tennis game perfected, Chris won the match.

1. **To set off contrasted elements**

Celia, unlike Robert, had a loathing for dances.

1. **To set off the words “yes” and “no”, interrogative tags, mild interjections, and nouns of direct address.**

Yes, the loan has been approved. I wasn’t speeding, was I? Well, cases like these are difficult to decide. Forgive me, Peter, for insulting you.

1. **With expressions such as “he said” to set off a direct quote.**

# “Convictions are more dangerous foes of truth than lies,” wrote Friedrich Nietzsche.

As Nietzsche claimed, “Convictions are more dangerous foes of truth than lies.”

John said, “You fool,” and then he walked away.

1. **With dates, addresses, titles.**

On December 12, 1890, orders were sent out for the arrest of Sitting Bull.

John Lennon was born in Liverpool, England, in 1940.

Sandra Barns, M.D., performed the surgery.

**SEMICOLON (;)** Separates major sentence elements of equal grammatical rank.

1. **Use between closely related independent clauses if these are not joined by a coordinating conjunction (and, but, or, for, so, yet).**

I have too much to do; I wish I were two people.

I have learned all of the rules and regulations of baseball; however, I have not learned how to “regulate” the ball!

1. **Use between items in a series containing internal punctuation**.

Classic science fiction sagas are Star Trek, with Mr. Spock and his pointed ears; Battlestar Galactica, with its Cylon Raiders; and Star Wars, with Han Solo, Luke Skywalker, and Darth Vader.

**COLON (:)** Used to call attention to the words that follow it.

1. **Use after an independent clause to indicate a list, an appositive, or a quotation.**

The daily routine should include the following: twenty push-ups, fifteen leg lifts, and fifty sit-ups.

My roommate is guilty of two of the seven deadly sins: gluttony and laziness.

Consider the words of John F. Kennedy: “Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country.”

1. **As a mechanical tool, use a colon after a salutation in a formal letter, and to separate city from date in bibliographic entries.**

**DASH (-- )** Two hyphens followed by a space will form a dash.

1. **Use dashes to set off parenthetical material that deserves emphasis.**

Everything that went wrong—from the Peeping Tom at her window to my head-on collision—was blamed on our move.

1. **Use dashes to set off appositives that contain commas.**

In my hometown—an average, middle and lower class community with average, high-school and community college educated people—I learned more about what it means to make a difference in this world than I learned while living among the so-called above-average politicians of our nation’s capital city.

1. **Use a dash to prepare a list, a restatement, an amplification, or a dramatic shift in tone or thought**.

Along the wall are the common oils—vegetable oil, olive oil, canola oil, and peanut oil—but if you want the specialty oils such as avocado or truffle, you need to look in the gourmet display.

Consider the amount of sugar in the average person’s diet—104 pounds per year, which is ninety percent more than was consumed by our ancestors.

Everywhere we looked, there were little kids—an ice-cream cone in one hand and Mommy’s or Daddy’s sleeve in the other.

**QUOTATION MARKS**

1. **Direct Discourse: use to show someone’s exact words (spoken or written).**

**Use a signal phrase (such as she/he said) to introduce or close.**

**Keep punctuation inside the quotation marks.**

He said, “I’m hungry.” “I’m hungry,” he said. He yelled, “I’m hungry!” “I’m hungry!” he yelled. (Contrast with indirect discourse: He said that he was hungry.)

1. **Separate quoted section from signal phrase by a comma or colon**

She asked, “Are you hungry?”

Whenever I was in a bad mood, my mother asked the same question: “Are you hungry?”

1. **If a quote is the beginning of the person’s spoken or written sentence, use a capital letter to begin; if it shows interruption then continues, use lower case to begin.**

“You seem grumpy,” mother began, “so you must be hungry.”

1. **Use quotation marks for so-called words**

Mother thought that hunger put me in a “mood.”

1. **Use single quotation marks to enclose a quote within a quote.**

“I am not hungry,” I stated between gritted teeth, “nor am I , as you say, in one of my ‘moods’!”

**PARENTHESIS**

1. **Use around non-essential information**

Toddler age children (12 to 24 months) are known for the awkward way they walk.

1. **Use around numbers or letters**

Toddlers tend to (1) tilt side to side in order to change from one foot to another, and (2) fall forward rather than step.

1. **If needed for the sentence, place punctuation outside the parenthesis.**

When we are toddlers (12-24 months old), we walk with a “toddling” lilt.

**APOSTROPHE**

1. **Possessive nouns: use apostrophe + s for all singular nouns and plural nouns that don’t end in s**

child’s toy children’s toys

the boss’s office women’s restroom

Use apostrophe alone with plural nouns that end in s

Students’ club Actresses’ costumes The Smiths’ house

1. **Use an apostrophe to show a contraction**

isn’t = is not there’s = there is they’re = they are

can’t = cannot it’s = it is