COMPLETE ENGLISH PUNCTUATION RULES

Perfect Your Punctuation &
Instantly Improve Your Writing

FARLEX INTERNATIONAL

The Farlex Grammar Book
Volume II

Complete English Punctuation Rules

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Preface

Punctuation is essential to learning how to write. Only when we master punctuation can we begin to perfect our writing. More than a dozen unique punctuation marks are used in modern English, and each mark can change the structure and meaning of our chosen words in both drastic and subtle ways. When we speak, we control this meaning by pausing or changing the inflection of our voice; when we write, however, the only way to convey this meaning is through the correct use of punctuation marks.

This guide covers all the ways punctuation shapes the English language as it is written today. Because of how varied the usage of punctuation marks can be, it’s crucial to understand exactly how each mark can (or cannot) be used.

Each chapter in this guide focuses on a different punctuation mark, providing clear examples that show not only how to use it correctly, but how to identify and avoid common mistakes as well. Since many punctuation marks overlap with one another in how they are used, this book contains many cross-references to make it clear when and why one mark might be preferable over another.

Once you have mastered the basic rules of punctuation, your writing will become much clearer, better structured, and more precise. You’ll be able to add more nuance and variety to your writing without worrying about whether you’re using the correct punctuation. With this guide, you will have no doubt.

Editor’s Note

This book is written according to the standard styles and spellings used in American English. While major differences between American and British English are usually addressed, some information in the book might not coincide with the styles, tendencies, or preferences of other English-speaking communities.

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English Punctuation

Punctuation refers to the specific markings, signs and symbols that are used in and around sentences to give them structure and to allow for correct understanding and comprehension.

Providing structure

If we think of words as bricks that build a sentence (arranged in a certain pattern according to English grammar), punctuation could be thought of as the mortar that holds the bricks together. Without punctuation, our writing would just be a continuous stream of words that lacked structure, pacing, and, ultimately, meaning. For instance, let’s see how this same paragraph would look without any punctuation:

> *if we think of words as bricks that build a sentence arranged in a certain pattern according to English grammar punctuation could be thought of as the mortar that holds the bricks together without punctuation our writing would just be a continuous stream of words that lacked structure pacing and ultimately meaning for instance lets see how this same paragraph would look without any punctuation*

While it’s possible to discern some of the meaning, it becomes remarkably difficult to understand what is being said when no punctuation marks are used.

Providing internal meaning

In addition to providing overall structure and clarity to sentences, punctuation can also provide nuanced internal meaning as well; that is, sentences that have the exact same words can have different meanings depending on which punctuation is used (or misused). Let's look at some sets of examples that illustrate this idea:

- "Brackets are also used to distinguish parenthetical information that appears within a larger set of parentheses. (Informally, though, it is quite common to simply use a second set of parentheses.)"
- "Brackets are also used to distinguish parenthetical information that appears within a larger set of parentheses. (Informally, though; it is quite common to simply use a second set of parentheses.)"

Here, by changing the second comma after *though* to a semicolon, we've changed what *informally* refers to: In the first example, it is referring to the use of a second set of parentheses as being informal; in the second example, it is the use of brackets that is now being described as informal.

Now let's look at two examples involving more complex punctuation changes:

- "If we look at our sales team's report, an increase in consumer confidence, an upturn for our July figures, and successful budget cuts indicate a very promising second half of the year."
- "If we look at our sales, teams report an increase in consumer confidence—an upturn for our July figures—and successful budget cuts indicate a very promising second half of the year."

The second sentence's meaning is now different from that of the first in three ways:

1) By placing a comma after *sales* and removing the apostrophe from *team's*, the information is no longer a part of the *sales team's report*. Instead, *teams* becomes the subject of the verb *report*, of which *an increase in consumer confidence* is the direct object.
2) By placing em dashes around *an upturn for our July figures*, it changes the information from being part of a list to instead describing *an increase in consumer confidence*.
3) Finally, because of these changes, *successful budget cuts* is now not a

part of a list of information but has rather become another **subject**: the agent of *indicate a very promising second half of the year*.

By understanding the various nuances of how punctuation functions in a sentence, we can be much more precise in the meaning we want our writing to convey.

Minor mistakes with humorous results

Sometimes, misplacement or omission of punctuation yields silly, humorous, or absurd sentences. For instance:

✓ "Attention employees: dangerous when active." (*With the correct colon placement, this is a clear warning* ***to*** *employees.*)
✗ "Attention: employees dangerous when active." (*Without correct colon placement, this seems to be a warning* ***about*** *employees.*)

✓ "Symptoms include inability to eat, feelings of paranoia, and irritability." (*With commas, the individual symptoms are easy to understand.*)
✗ "Symptoms include inability to eat feelings of paranoia and irritability." (*Without commas, it sounds like one of the symptoms is being unable to eat certain feelings.*)

✓ "OK, let's start moving, Jack!" (*With the second comma, it's clear that Jack is being addressed by the speaker and asked or invited to begin moving.*)
✗ "OK, let's start moving Jack!" (*Without the second comma, it seems like the speaker is suggesting that Jack be physically moved by others.*)

While the intended meaning of such sentences will probably still be understood by the reader, it undermines the credibility of the writer to have sentences whose literal meanings are so starkly (and humorously) different, so it's important to know where, when, and how to use the appropriate types of punctuation.

Types of Punctuation

There are 15 unique punctuation marks that are used in everyday written English. We've categorized them together according to the similarity of their function. We'll briefly look at each one along with some examples, but you can continue on to their individual sections to learn more about the various ways they are used.

Terminal points

Terminal points are those that mark the end of a complete sentence. These include **periods**, **exclamation points**, and **question marks**.

Periods (Full Stops)

Periods (**.**), also known as **full stops** (especially in British English), mark the end of sentences that are not questions or exclamations. For example:

- "I need to buy new glasses."
- "She didn't really like the play."
- "Reports are indicating increased activity in the region."
- "If I were able to live anywhere in the world, I would move to Beijing."
- "Please don't be angry with him for what he said."

Periods are also used to mark abbreviations, and they function as a decimal point in non-whole numbers. For instance:

- "Let's find an **A.T.M.** [automated teller machine] so I can withdraw some cash."
- "Your **appt.** [appointment] has been rescheduled for next Tuesday."
- "At current market value, the dollar is worth **0.89901** euros."

Exclamation Points

An **exclamation point** or **exclamation mark** (**!**) is commonly used to express strong, intense emotions in declarations or to add emphasis to interjections and commands.

For example:

- “I can’t wait to travel to Paris next week**!**”
- “I can’t believe I got into law school**!**”
- “Yuck**!** I hate coconuts**!**”
- “That was an impressive victory**!** Congratulations**!**”
- “Please don’t stay out too late tonight**!**”
- “Get out of here, now**!**”
- “Go to your room this instant**!**”

Question Marks

Question marks (**?**) are used, quite simply, to ask questions.

While it is usually a matter of intent and preference whether to use a period or an exclamation point in declarative, conditional, or imperative sentences, we must use question marks in interrogative sentences (sentences that ask questions); to use any other terminal point would turn a question into a statement.

Here are some examples:

- “How are you feeling**?**”
- “You can’t be serious, **can you?**”
- “It really ended just like that**?**”
- “How**?** When**?**”

Pauses or breaks

Marks that indicate a **pause** or **break** in the flow of the sentence include **commas**, **semicolons**, and **colons**.

Commas

Commas (**,**) are primarily used to join two or more elements in a sentence—such as clauses, introductory elements, or items in a list—or to set parenthetical information apart from the rest of the sentence.

For example:

- “We can go to the movies tonight**,** or we can just stay home.”
- “We have always wanted to buy a boat**,** sell everything**,** and set sail.”

- “Either Tom**,** Bill**,** Jen**,** or Michelle will lead the seminar.”
- “In a way**,** they are both right.”
- “When I was traveling in Croatia**,** I met a lot of interesting people.”
- “The office**,** an old colonial building**,** badly needed repairs.”
- “The mirror**,** which was a gift from my grandmother**,** was broken during the storm.”
- “Find me something to dig with**,** such as a shovel or spade**,** so I can plant these flowers.”

We also use commas for several technical purposes, such as listing a state or country after a city, writing the full date, writing long numbers, or separating quoted sentences from non-quoted text:

- “I’m from Portland**,** Oregon**,** but I’ve lived in Washington**,** D.C.**,** for more than 10 years.”
- “I first arrived in Europe on September 6**,** 2010.”
- “There are over 15**,**000 protestors gathered outside Capitol Hill.”
- “You should**,**” said my doctor**,** “begin feeling better immediately.”

Semicolons

Semicolons (**;**) function like more powerful commas that create a stronger break in the sentence. They are used to join lists when the items are complex and contain internal punctuation, as well as to join independent clauses without the need of a coordinating conjunction (though they *are* used with conjunctive adverbs). For example:

- “All I’m taking on the road trip is my truck, along with its spare tire**;** a radio, which only kind of works**;** and my dog.”
- “Jen hadn’t enjoyed the play**;** as a result, she didn’t recommend it to her friend.”
- “I hope the traffic isn’t too bad**;** I don’t want to be late for the movie.”

Colons

Colons (**:**) are used to add information that helps illustrate or clarify. A colon is most commonly used to introduce a list, but it can also introduce quotations and information that completes the meaning of the previous clause. Conventionally, a colon can only be used after text that can stand independently as a complete

sentence.

Here are some examples:

- “There are a few things you’ll need for the trip**:** a flashlight, a good compass, a water purifying kit, clean clothes for seven days, comfortable hiking shoes, and a heavy-duty rucksack.”
- “If there’s anything I’ve learned from working here, it’s this**:** you don’t get ahead in this industry by doing the bare minimum.”
- “My father had a phrase he was fond of repeating**:** ‘Hope for the best, but prepare for the worst.’”

Parenthetical information

We can insert text that has no grammatical bearing on a sentence by using the two parenthetical markers: **parentheses** and **brackets**.

Parentheses

Parentheses (**( )**), sometimes called **round brackets**, are used to separate parenthetical information that has no grammatical bearing on the structure of the overall sentence. This can be a clause, phrase, word, or even just a punctuation mark. For example:

- “As I have said before **(on numerous occasions),** we must find a long-term solution to this problem.”
- “The goal by Hendrickson **(and what a goal!)** secured the team’s entry into the championship finals.”
- “She said I had behaved ‘like a yak’ (?) as she was leaving.”
- “The last time I went to Toronto, I had an awful experience. **(I won’t be visiting again any time soon!)**”

Brackets

Brackets (**[ ]**), sometimes called **square brackets**, function similarly to parentheses but are only used within quoted text, indicating clarifying or explanatory information that has been added to the quotation by the author:

- “She **[the governor]** insisted that the restructured budget would not result in funding shortfalls for schools.”

- “The acting president has confirmed that ‘**[t]**he U.N. will ultimately have oversight over reunification.’”
- “In his analysis of the play, Thompson claims that ‘the entire second act serves to underscore the *persistence of hope* that is always present in our subconscious mind’ **[emphasis added]**.”

Brackets are also used to distinguish parenthetical information that appears within another set of parentheses. (Informally, though, it is quite common to simply use a second set of parentheses.) For example:

- “At least I’ll have some extra spending money this summer. (My cousin got me a job at my uncle’s **[his dad’s]** warehouse.)”

Connectors and dividers

When we want to demonstrate a specific relationship between different letters, words, phrases, or clauses, we variously use **hyphens**, **dashes**, **slashes**, and **apostrophes**.

Hyphens

Hyphens (**-**) are most often used to join two or more words and/or affixes to form a single and unique **compound word**. For example:

- “Do you have any **sugar-free** cookies?”
- “It is the only **10-storey** building in the town.”
- “My **old-fashioned** aunt would never approve.”
- “I don’t mean to **second-guess** you, but you should check the work again.”
- “This behavior is decidedly **un-American**.”

There are also several technical uses for the hyphens, such as when creating divisions in sequences of numbers or expressing ranges.

Dashes

There are two types of **dashes**: the en dash (**–**) and the em dash (**—**).

En dashes are the preferred punctuation mark (especially in publishing) to express ranges, scores, voting results, or connections between two people or things (although hyphens are very commonly used instead). For instance:

- “We need you to submit your expense report for **January–March**.”
- “I’ll be in the office **8:00 AM–4:00 PM** this Friday.”
- “The board voted **5–4** to accept the proposal.”
- “We will begin boarding the **Denver–Chicago** flight shortly.”
- “The **Republican–Democrat** divide on the issue has only widened in recent months.”

Em dashes, the longest of the dash marks, are most often used in place of commas or parentheses to give greater emphasis to parenthetical information. They can also informally stand in for colons when introducing a list or illustrative information. For example:

- “Many fundamental aspects of living on one’s own**—cooking, cleaning, doing laundry—**are things for which many young adults are completely unprepared.”
- “The committee**—which I have helped set up—**will investigate spending irregularities by CEOs of charities and other not-for-profit groups.”
- “There are only two things I want to do on my vacation**—sit on the beach and read books**.”
- “**Remember—**keep your friends close, and enemies even closer.”

Em dashes can also be used to represent omitted or censored words, as well as to indicate an interruption in written dialogue:

- “Countess M——, a prominent member of the aristocracy, was in fact a leading contributor to the resistance.”
- “You ———!” he shouted. “I’m going to make sure everyone knows the truth!”
- “I don’t think this is a— ” he started to say when the branch suddenly broke.

Slashes

Slashes (**/**) work in a similar way to hyphens, combining words and letters into compounds. The slash is generally considered an **informal** punctuation mark, as it provides a shorthand way of expressing connections between words. For example:

- “Each candidate must be sure to provide **his/her** [his or her] references before the interview.”

- “Whoever is leading the group study, **he/she** [he or she] needs to keep detailed notes about how the time is spent.”
- “We’ll need a signed statement from you **and/or** your employer [one, the other, or both].”
- “Rent is **$650/month** [$650 per month], due on the first day of each month.”
- “This **singer/songwriter’s** [singer who is also a songwriter] work never fails to impress.”

Slashes are also used to form abbreviations in very informal writing, as in quick notes or messages. For instance:

- “Use hyphens **b/w** [between] compounds.”
- “Our shop has been open **24/7** [24 hours a day, seven days a week] since we first started up 30 years ago.”
- “Will be late **b/c** [because] of traffic.”

In formal writing, such as academic papers, slashes are used to show line breaks in poetry quotations. Conventionally, this is the only time when spaces are used around a slash. For example:

- “I’d like to include the following lines from Shakespeare’s ‘Sonnet 116’ in our wedding ceremony: ‘Love is not love **/** Which alters when it alteration finds, **/** Or bends with the remover to remove: **/** O, no! it is an ever-fixed mark, **/** That looks on tempests and is never shaken.’”

Apostrophes

The **apostrophe** (**’**) is used to form **contractions** (two words shortened and merged into one) as well as to show **possession**.

When used in contractions, the apostrophe replaces the letters that are omitted from one of the two words. For instance:

- “This plan **doesn’t** [does not] make any sense.”
- “**It’s** [it is] a very unfortunate circumstance.”
- “I hope **you’re** [you are] happy in your new job.”
- “Please **don’t** [do not] do anything you **aren’t** [are not] sure about.”

When showing possession, the apostrophe comes before the letter “s” for singular nouns (and irregular plurals) or after the letter “s” in regular plural nouns:

- “We were looking everywhere for **Jonathan’s** bike!”
- “The **kids’** play room is a mess.”
- “We could stay in my **family’s** cabin for the weekend.”
- “Police are gathering **witnesses’** testimonies regarding the incident.”
- “We’ll have to rely on **people’s** donations to stay open.”

Quoted material

When we quote something that someone else has written or said, we distinguish it from our own writing through the use of **quotation marks**. If we omit (leave out) any portion of a quote but keep the rest of it in its original form, we can use **ellipses** to show where the omission exists within the quote.

Quotation Marks

Whenever we reproduce exactly what someone else has said, whether it’s a word, phrase, or entire sentence, we use **quotation marks**—either double (**“ ”**) or single (**‘ ’**)—to separate it from the rest of our writing. For instance:

- John said, **“I’ll never live in this city again.”**
- The CEO has expressed his **‘genuine concern and remorse’** over the developments.

If we use a quotation that already has a quotation within it, we alternate between double and single marks:

- The president said, “I’ve been assured by the prime minister that she is **‘taking all appropriate steps in response to the crisis.’**”

We can also use quotation marks to highlight text that is or might be considered somehow questionable, dubious, or uncertain, as in:

- His **“promise”** turned out to be a complete lie.

Quotation marks also have the technical use of marking the titles of smaller pieces of written or creative works, such as poems or songs:

- My favorite song has always been **“Auld Lang Syne.”**

Ellipses

An **ellipsis** (plural: **ellipses**) is a series of three dots (**. . .**) that represents

material that has been omitted from a quotation for the sake of neatness and brevity. In general, this is only done when an omission is made in the middle of a quoted sentence; any other punctuation necessary for the structure of the sentence must be kept intact. For example:

- "In response to the outcome of the trial, the president said, 'I don't think the decision today reflects the **. . .** opinion of most Americans.'"
- "The final passage sums up the protagonist's view: 'I'm sure of one thing in life: I value family over all other things**, . . .** and I will never forget it again.'"
- "Our local correspondent told us that '[a]dvocates from around the state are rallying around a new law aimed at reducing the number of roadside accidents**. . . .** Still, there are some critics **. . .** who feel the law will have a greater and more negative impact on commuters.'"

Less formally, ellipses are commonly used to indicate when a statement trails off or is broken up due to uncertainty or hesitation, as in:

- "I sure hope this works**. . .**"
- "But**. . .** I don't understand**. . .**"

Other Signs and Symbols

In addition to the 15 punctuation marks above, there are many different signs and symbols that are commonly used in everyday writing, such as the **asterisk** (*) or the **ampersand** (&). These are not standard punctuation marks—they are never necessary to the grammatical or syntactic meaning of a sentence—but they appear often enough that it's important to know how they might be used. Continue on to the section Other Signs and Symbols to learn more about them.

Quiz

1. Which of the following is the function of punctuation?

a) To provide structure and clarity to a sentence
b) To provide nuanced meaning and intention to a sentence
c) To govern word order
d) A & B
e) B & C
f) All of the above

2. Which of the following sentences is punctuated **correctly**?

a) “Of all these issues, that one. is the most important”
b) “There have been multiple U.F.O. sightings in these parts.”
c) “Why are you so upset.”
d) “There are many .abbrev used in English.”

3. Which of the following are **not** terminal points?

a) Periods
b) Semicolons
c) Exclamation points
d) Question marks

4. Generally speaking, hyphens, dashes, slashes, and apostrophes are used to:

a) Demonstrate a specific relationship between different letters, words, phrases, or clauses
b) Mark the end of complete sentences
c) Indicate parenthetical information within a quotation
d) Indicate a pause or break in the flow of the sentence

5. Which of the following uses of a slash is considered appropriate in **formal** writing?

a) “I just need a simple yes/no answer.”
b) “Insert b/w the two marks.”

c) “Love has earth to which she clings / With hills and circling arms about— / Wall within wall to shut fear out.”
d) “If an employee is late more than three days in a row, s/he will receive a formal warning.”

See the answers

Periods

Definition

The **period** (also known as a **full stop**, especially in British English) is a punctuation mark (**.**) primarily used to indicate the end of a sentence. It appears as a single dot on the bottom line of the text, and it comes immediately after the last word of the sentence without a space.

There are also several minor uses for the period, which we'll look at later in this section.

Punctuating sentences

The most common use of periods is to punctuate the end of sentences. This occurs with almost all the types of sentences we use. For example:

- "I run three miles every morning**.**" (declarative sentence)
- "I could study better if you turned down the music**.**" (conditional sentence)
- "Please start the car**.**" (imperative sentence)

Note that if we wanted to indicate an especially strong emotion in any of the above sentences, or else indicate that the speaker is shouting, we would typically use an exclamation point instead. For instance:

- "I run three miles every morning**!**"
- "I could study better if you turned down the music**!**"
- "Please start the car**!**"

However, this is based solely on the intention of the writer; the form of the sentence itself doesn't require that an exclamation point be used instead of a period.

Interrogative sentences (Questions)

The only type of sentence in which a period is **not** used is the **interrogative sentence** (a sentence that asks a question). These sentences always use question marks rather than periods, as in:

- "Would you like a bite of my sandwich**?**"
- "Where is the closest supermarket**?**"
- "Did you sleep well**?**"

Using periods with quotation marks

If a sentence uses quotation marks to indicate something that another person has said, and the quotation marks appear at the end of the sentence, the period can appear in one of two places.

In American English, the punctuation used at the end of direct speech always appears within the quotation marks. For example:

- The CEO said, "This is a great day for the company**.**"

- Our five-year-old said that when she grows up she wants to be a “doctor and a pop star and a ballerina**.**”

However, in British English (which also uses different rules for quotation marks), periods that end quotations are usually placed outside the final quotation mark, as in:

- The CEO said, ‘This is a great day for the company’**.**
- Our five-year-old said that when she grows up she wants to be a ‘doctor and a pop star and a ballerina’**.**

One vs. two spaces after a period

When we begin a new sentence after another one has ended, we generally use a single space between the period of the first sentence and the first word of the second sentence.

However, at one point, it was standard practice to add **two spaces** after the end of a sentence. This trend arose out of the use of manual typewriters (in which the monotype font created a lack of space between periods and the first letter of the next sentence). With the advent of word processor applications for computers, this problem was eliminated, but some writers today persist in adding two spaces after a period.

While this continues to be a point of contention for some, the definitive answer is that it is not only preferable but correct to use only **one** space after the period of a sentence. This is a point on which all modern grammar and style guides (including this one) agree: When beginning a new sentence after a period, only use a single space.

Periods with abbreviations

While the period is most commonly used to mark the end of a sentence, it is also used to mark abbreviations. In addition to standard abbreviations (words that are shortened by omitting one or more letters), there are also three sub-categories that can use periods: **initials**, **acronyms**, and **initialisms**.

However, unlike its use in punctuating the end of a sentence, the use of a period with abbreviations is not as strict or consistent, often depending on the location (i.e., American English vs. British English) and preference of the writer, publisher, or style guide.

Abbreviations

We often use periods to indicate when a word has been abbreviated (that is, has had letters omitted from it) in a sentence. This period always appears at the very end of the abbreviated word. For example:

- "Please **cont.** to page 41 for further instructions." (abbreviation of *continue*)
- "**Dr.** Davis has been of immense service to the hospital." (abbreviation of *Doctor*)

Note that when an abbreviation ends a sentence, the period that shortens the word also marks the end of the sentence—that is, we do not use a second period. If another punctuation mark (such as a comma or question mark) is used after an abbreviated word, it comes directly after the period. For example:

- "Our offices are open each week **Mon.–Fri.**" (abbreviations of *Monday* and *Friday*)
- "My new house is on Lilac **Ave.,** just across from the old courthouse." (abbreviation of *Avenue*)
- "Are you returning to work in **Feb.?**" (abbreviation of *February*)

Titles in British English

Formal titles, such as *Mr.*, *Mrs.*, or *Dr.*, are actually abbreviations, but we usually only use them in their contracted forms in writing. Because they are so common, the period is usually left out in British English, as the abbreviation does not need

to be indicated by punctuation to be understood. It’s therefore common to read “Mr Jones,” “Mrs Smith,” or “Dr Casey” (for example) in writing that uses British English styles.

In American English, however, these abbreviated titles are still punctuated with periods.

Initials of names

Initials are a kind of abbreviation of people’s names formed from the first letter of each part of the name (first, middle, and/or last name). We usually mark each initial with a period. For example:

- “Martin **S.** Smith, the renowned physicist, will be speaking here next month.”

If sequential parts of someone’s name are made into initials, then a space will usually come after the period of the initial. For example:

- “I love the writing of **J. R. R.** Tolkien.”

However, while some style guides recommend this spacing between letters, other style guides recommend **not** including spaces, as in:

- “I love the writing of **J.R.R.** Tolkien.”

Whether to use spaces after the periods of initials is largely a matter of personal preference, but be sure to check the recommendations of your school’s or employer’s style guide.

(Note: It is also not uncommon to see multiple initials used without either periods or spaces, as in “JRR Tolkien,” but this usually occurs in less formal writing.)

Acronyms and Initialisms

Similar to initials, **acronyms** and **initialisms** are abbreviations of multiple words using just their initial letters.

Acronyms are distinguished by the fact that they are read aloud as a single word. Because of this, they are usually (but not always) written without periods. In some cases, the acronym has become so common that the letters aren’t even capitalized anymore.

For example:

- "Scientists from **NASA** have confirmed the spacecraft's location on Mars." (acronym of "National Aeronautics and Space Administration")
- "The officer went **AWOL** following the attack." (acronym of "Absent Without Leave")
- "I need those documents finished **A.S.A.P.**" (acronym of "As Soon As Possible"; also often written as *ASAP*, *asap*, and *a.s.a.p.*)
- "His **scuba** equipment turned out to be faulty." (*Scuba* is actually an acronym of "self-contained underwater breathing apparatus," but it is now written as a regular word.)

Initialisms are formed in the same way as acronyms, but they are spoken aloud as individual letters rather than a single word. (However, because they are so similar in appearance to acronyms, initialisms are very often simply referred to as acronyms.)

Like acronyms, it is most common to write initialisms without periods. However, in American English, it is also common to include periods between the letters of some initialisms. This varies between style guides, and it is generally a matter of personal preference; whether you use periods in initialisms or not, be sure to be consistent.

Here are some examples of common initialisms (some with periods, some without):

- "I grew up in the **US**, but I've lived in London since my early 20s." (initialism of "United States")
- "It took a long time, but I've finally earned my **Ph.D.**" (initialism of "Philosophiae Doctor," Latin for "Doctor of Philosophy")
- "I need to go to an **ATM** to get some cash." (initialism of "Automated Teller Machine")
- "The witness claimed to have seen a **U.F.O.** fly over the field last night." (initialism of "Unidentified Flying Object")

The decimal point

One final common use of the period is as a **decimal point**—the dot that separates a whole number from its decimals. For example:

- “I can’t believe he sold you that car for **$450.50**!”
- “Today’s Special: Two-course meal and a bottle of wine for two, only **$45.95**.”
- “We found that X equals **43,456.21**.”

Quiz

1. Periods are **most commonly** used to __________________.

a) mark the end of sentences
b) mark the end of phrases
c) indicate an abbreviated word
d) connect two independent clauses

2. In **American English**, where is the period placed in relation to **quotation marks** that appear at the end of a sentence?

a) Always outside the quotation marks
b) Outside the quotation marks only if it belongs to the quoted text
c) Always inside the quotation marks
d) Inside the quotation marks only if it belongs to the quoted text

3. How many spaces is considered **correct** to place after a period before beginning a new sentence?

a) One
b) Two
c) Three
d) Four

4. With which of the following types of abbreviations is it standard to include a period?

a) Acronyms
b) Initialisms
c) Initials of names
d) Words that have middle or end letters omitted
e) A & B
f) C & D
g) All of the above

See the answers

Exclamation Points

Definition

An **exclamation point** or **exclamation mark** (**!**) is a punctuation mark commonly used to express strong, intense emotions in declarations. It can also be used to add emphasis to interjections and commands.

Ending exclamatory sentences

Exclamation points are most often used in place of periods to end declarative sentences that express a very strong emotion, such as anger, excitement, surprise, or disgust. These are sometimes referred to as **exclamatory sentences**. For example:

- “I can’t wait to travel to Paris next week**!**”
- “I can’t believe I got into law school**!**”
- “We are all so excited for your visit**!**”
- “I’m so sick of all the negativity in this office**!**”

Interjections

An **interjection**, also known as an **exclamation**, is a word, phrase, or sound used to convey an emotion such as surprise, excitement, happiness, or anger. Interjections are grammatically unrelated to any other part of a sentence. Because they are able to stand alone as minor sentences, they can be punctuated with a period, an exclamation point, or a question mark.

We use an exclamation point when the emotion we want to convey is very strong and is not a question. Interjections are usually followed (or occasionally preceded) by an exclamatory sentence. For example:

- "**Hooray!** I got accepted to my top choice university!"
- "**Yuck!** I hate coconuts!"
- "That was an impressive victory! **Congratulations!**"

Adding emphasis to imperative sentences

Imperative sentences are direct commands or requests. They are formed by using the base form of a verb (the infinitive without the particle *to*) and omitting the subject of the sentence (it is implied). For example:

- "Please finish all of your vegetables."
- "Have that report finished by 5 o'clock."
- "Just drop me off in front of the school."

We often use exclamation points to intensify a command, generally to indicate anger, exasperation, or urgency. For example:

- "Please don't stay out too late tonight**!**"
- "Get out of here, now**!**"
- "Go to your room this instant**!**"

Other uses

While exclamation points most commonly end exclamatory sentences, we can also use them to emphasize particular words or phrases within a sentence. Generally speaking, there are two ways this can be done.

Putting exclamation points in parentheses

If we want to draw attention to a certain word or phrase as being exciting, surprising, upsetting, or otherwise noteworthy, we can put an exclamation point in **parentheses** immediately after the word being emphasized. For example:

- "It was nearly 4 AM (!) before we left the office." (The time at which the speaker left is astonishing and/or upsetting.)
- "So far he has won 10 (!) Olympic gold medals throughout his career." (The amount of medals he won is remarkable.)
- "I think I'm getting a car (!) for my birthday." (It is very exciting and unexpected to be getting a car.)
- "According to the bank, the account was under my mother's name (!) this whole time!" (It is astonishing that the bank account is under the mother's name.)

While using an exclamation point in this way is sometimes useful in conversational writing, it is best not to use it very often as it can result in a cluttered sentence that is hard to read, and it should generally be avoided altogether in formal, professional, or academic writing.

Using exclamation points with onomatopoeias

When we use **onomatopoeias** (words that phonetically imitate particular sounds), we can emphasize the intensity of the sound by putting an exclamation point immediately after it. (It is also common practice to put such words in *italics*.) This does not end the sentence, so the word following the onomatopoeia will not be capitalized. Also note that if a comma is used after the onomatopoeia, it will come after the exclamation point. For example:

- "With a great *whirr!*, the machine started and began lighting up."
- "The cat let out an angry *meow!* before running out through the open door."

- “*Creak!* went the rusty old gate as we pushed our way into the yard.”

Using exclamation points with other punctuation

With periods (full stops)

An exclamation point replaces a period when it ends a sentence. However, if a period is used to mark an **abbreviation** that appears at the end of an exclamatory sentence, we put the exclamation point outside (to the right of) the period, with no space between them. For example:

- "I can't believe your grandfather worked with Martin Luther King, Jr.**!**"
- "We're going on vacation until the end of Aug.**!**"

With quotation marks

We use quotation marks to indicate the exact words used by someone else. This is known as direct speech or **direct quotation**.

When the quoted text is itself a complete exclamatory sentence, the exclamation point will appear within the quotation marks, as in:

- He exclaimed, "I've never stolen anything in my entire life**!"**
- "Oh, give me a break**!"** she shouted angrily.

However, if the quoted text is a **part** of a larger exclamatory sentence, then the exclamation point will fall outside of the quotation marks. For instance:

- I can't believe he seriously wants to "join the circus**"!**
- Don't tell me to "calm down**"!**

With question marks

In informal writing, we sometimes use a **question mark** with an exclamation point to emphasize surprise or excitement about the question we are asking. Generally speaking, the exclamation point comes after the question mark. If the writer wants to add even more emphasis, the question mark/exclamation point combination can also be repeated. For example:

- "What did you say to him**?!**"
- "You won the lottery**?!?!**"

However, this construction is very informal, and it should be reserved for casual

communication between friends—do not use an exclamation point after a question mark in formal, professional, or academic writing. If you are asking a question, no matter how excited or emphatic, simply use a question mark on its own.

Multiple exclamation points

Similar to using an exclamation point with a question mark to add emphasis to a question, it is also common in informal, conversational writing to use multiple exclamation points to add extra intensity to an exclamatory sentence. Generally speaking, the more exclamation points used, the greater the intensity of the sentence. For example:

- "My mom screamed, 'Go to your room this instant**!!**'"
- "I can't believe I failed my test again**!!!**"
- "Jack, we won the lottery**!!!!**"

Again, this is a very informal practice, and it should be avoided in any writing other than casual communication.

With *italicized* and underlined text

You may have noticed when we discussed emphasizing onomatopoeias that the exclamation points in those examples were also *italicized*. However, we do not always apply the same formatting to an exclamation point as the word(s) it follows.

If the exclamation point is a part of the formatted text, it should be formatted the same way. This is especially relevant to *italics*, which are often used to distinguish the titles of bodies of work, such as books, films, or music albums. (Underlining is also used this way, though it is much more common in handwriting than in print.) If the title contains an exclamation point, it should appear with the same formatting as the rest of the title. For example:

- "One of my favorite books to read as a child was *How the Grinch Stole Christmas***!**"
- "We're studying Absalom, Absalom**!** in my literature class."

(Notice that we use the exclamation point as the final punctuation if the title appears at the end of the sentence, even if the sentence wouldn't otherwise be exclamatory.)

However, if the formatted text is a <u>part</u> of a larger exclamatory sentence, we must be sure **not** to format the exclamation point if it is not a part of the title, as in:

- "I can't wait until the first time my daughter reads *The Wind in the Willows*!"
- "I absolutely love the TV show <u>The Office</u>!"

Quiz

1. What are sentences called that end in an exclamation point?

a) Emphatic sentences
b) Exclamatory sentences
c) Intensive sentences
d) Exclamation sentences

2. Why would we use an exclamation point instead of a period in a declarative sentence?

a) To indicate strong, intense emotion
b) To ask a question
c) To emphasize a particular word or phrase
d) To make the sentence negative

3. Which of the following sentences is **not** punctuated correctly?

a) Don't make me turn this car around!
b) Ouch! That really hurt!
c) The waiter yelled out, "Sir, you forgot your wallet"!
d) I can never get to the bank because they're only open Mon. through Fri!
e) A & B
f) B & C
g) C & D

4. An exclamation point should only be used directly after a question mark in _________________.

a) informal writing
b) academic writing
c) professional writing
d) formal writing

See the answers

Question Marks

Definition

Question marks (**?**) are used to identify sentences that ask a question (technically known as interrogative sentences). They almost always appear at the end of a sentence, marking its conclusion (though there is a specific exception to this rule, as we will see later). For example:

- “Will you be joining us tonight**?**”
- “How are you feeling**?**”
- “This weather is wonderful, isn’t it**?**”

Tag questions

Notice the last sentence, in which the question appears as a remark at the end. This is known as a **tag question**. It begins as a normal declarative sentence, but the “tag” right at the end makes it into a question. These are usually used for rhetorical affect, meaning that the speaker probably knows the answer or has a belief about what the answer should be, or else to indicate surprise or disbelief. For example:

- “You’ll be home in time for dinner, **right?**”
- “They won’t have the report finished on time, **will they?**”
- “You can’t be serious, **can you?**”

Tag questions can also be used with imperative sentences to add politeness to a request, invitation, or instruction. For instance:

- “Have some more tea, **won’t you?**”
- “Help me dry these dishes, **will you?**”

Other interrogative sentences

Some interrogative sentences consist of a declarative statement posed as a question. In speech, they are indicated by a rising intonation, but in writing we simply add a question mark to the end, such as:

- “You won**?**”
- “It ended just like that**?**”
- “Excuse me**?**”

Some questions can even be a single word. These are often “question words” (e.g. *What?*, *Why?*, *When?*, etc.), but they can consist of other words as well. For example:

- Speaker A: “A package arrived for you.”
- Speaker B: **“When?”**

- Speaker A: “Sir, you need to move your car.”
- Speaker B: **“Me?”**

- Speaker A: “You didn’t eat all of your vegetables.”
- Speaker B: **“So?”**

- Speaker A: **“Well?”**
- Speaker B: “Hold on, I’m thinking!”

Multiple minor questions

While a question mark almost always indicates the end of a sentence, there are some instances in which we can have multiple brief questions in a row within the same sentence. These act as qualifying questions to ask about specific possibilities stemming from the “main” question. When this happens, we don’t have to capitalize the questions that come after the first question mark. For example:

- “How much pizza do you want**?** one slice**?** two slices**?**”
- “What’s that in the sky**?** a bird**?** a plane**?**”

However, it is more common to see such cases capitalized, in which case they function as minor sentences:

- “How often would you say you use the school’s online library**?** Once a year**?** Once a week**?** Once a day**?**”

When not to use a question mark

Polite requests

When we make polite requests framed as questions, it is sometimes acceptable to omit the question mark at the end and simply use a period. This usually occurs with particularly long and formal questions that begin with the modal auxiliary verbs *will* or *would*, as in:

- "Will all applicants please wait in the foyer until called for their interview."
- "Would any students who have not received their results please report to the principal's office as soon as possible."

Indirect questions

There are many cases in which a declarative sentence expresses uncertainty or indecision. These are known as **indirect questions**. While such sentences are very close in nature to direct questions, they are still declarations—we must remember **not** to use a question mark in such instances, even though it may seem correct to do so. If we want to change such statements of uncertainty to become true questions, we must reword them slightly. For example:

✓ "I was wondering if you would like to get some dinner after work." (correct)
✓ "Would you like to get some dinner after work**?**" (correct)
✗ "I was wondering if you would like to get some dinner after work**?**?" (incorrect)

✓ "I'm curious whether it will be sunny this weekend." (correct)
✓ "Do you think it will be sunny this weekend**?**" (correct)
✗ "I'm curious whether it will be sunny this weekend**?**" (incorrect)

Using question marks with other punctuation

Question marks most often stand in isolation at the end of a sentence. However, when other punctuation marks are used alongside them, it's important to know how and where the question mark should be used.

With periods (full stops)

A question mark will stand in place of a period when it is ending a question. However, if a period is used to mark an **abbreviation** that appears at the end of a question, we put the question mark outside (to the right of) the period, with no space between them. For example:

- "Did you really meet Martin Luther King, Jr.**?**"
- "Is the meeting still on for Fri.**?**"

With exclamation points

In informal writing, we sometimes use a question mark with an exclamation point to emphasize surprise or excitement about the question we are asking. Generally speaking, the exclamation point comes after the question mark. If the writer wants to add even more emphasis, the question mark/exclamation point combination can also be repeated. For example:

- "What did you say to him**?!**"
- "You won the lottery**?!?!**"

However, this construction is very informal, and it should only be reserved for casual communication between friends—do not use an exclamation point after a question mark in formal, professional, or academic writing. If you are asking a question, no matter how excited or emphatic, simply use a question mark on its own.

Multiple question marks

A very similar method of conveying surprise or excitement in a question is to use more than one question mark in a row—the more question marks used, the greater the degree of surprise or excitement:

- “What did you say to him**??**”
- “You won the lottery**???**”

Again, this is very informal, so you should only use it in casual written conversation (if at all).

The interrobang

There are instances in which it might seem more appropriate or accurate to include an exclamation point with a question mark. This has given rise to a unique punctuation mark known as the “**interrobang**” (**‽**), which is a combination of a question mark and exclamation point. If we were to use an interrobang in the two sentences above, they would look like this:

- “What did you say to him**‽**”
- “You won the lottery**‽**”

This is still not a formally recognized punctuation mark, so its use is not recommended in anything other than casual writing. (In fact, many readers might not even know what it is.)

With quotation marks

We use quotation marks to indicate the exact words used by someone else. This is known as direct speech or **direct quotation**.

When the quoted text is a complete question, the question mark will appear within the quotation marks, as in:

- He asked, “How do I know they’re telling the truth**?”**
- “When will this meeting be over**?”** he wondered to himself.

However, if the quoted text is a **part** of a larger interrogative sentence, then the question mark will fall outside of the quotation marks. For instance:

- Did you know that he said he’ll “never go back to that city again**”?**
- Why do you think we “don’t have a chance**”?**

With *italicized* and underlined text

As with quotations, if a question mark is a part of formatted text, it should use the same kind of formatting. This is especially relevant to *italics*, which are often

used to distinguish the titles of bodies of work, such as books, films, or music albums. (Underlining is used this way too, though it is more common in handwriting than in print.) If a title contains a question mark, the question mark should appear with the same formatting as the rest of the title. For example:

- “One of my favorite books is *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, by Philip K. Dick.”
- “Tonight we’re going to watch Who Framed Roger Rabbit?”

(Notice that although the second example is not a question, we still use the question mark as the final punctuation of the sentence.)

If the formatted text is a part of a larger question, we must be sure **not** to format the question mark, as in:

- “Have you ever read *For Whom the Bell Tolls*?”
- “Why don’t we listen to Pink Floyd’s The Wall?”

Quiz

1. Question marks are used with what kinds of sentences?

a) Declarative sentences
b) Imperative sentences
c) Interrogative sentences
d) Exclamatory sentences

2. What kinds of questions do **not** use question marks?

a) Direct questions
b) Indirect questions
c) Tag questions
d) Single-word questions

3. Which of the following sentences is **not** punctuated correctly?

a) You will let me know when you arrive, won't you?
b) I was wondering if we had any mayonnaise?
c) She asked the teacher, "Who was the 22nd president of the United States"?
d) Are you only open Mon. through Fri.?
e) A & B
f) B & C
g) C & D

4. An exclamation point should only be used directly after a question mark in ________________.

a) informal writing
b) academic writing
c) professional writing
d) formal writing

See the answers

Commas

Definition

The **comma** (**,**) is one of the most commonly used punctuation marks in English. Commas are the same in appearance as apostrophes (**’**), but they are placed on the bottom line of the text (in the same location as periods).

Generally speaking, commas are used to connect two or more elements in a sentence, but the way in which they do this varies widely, depending on what these elements are and how they are arranged in the sentence.

Joining independent clauses

When we link two or more closely related independent clauses together to form a compound sentence, we usually do so by adding a comma followed by a coordinating conjunction (*and*, *but*, *or*, *so*, *for*, *nor*, or *yet*). For example:

- "The family moved into the new house**, and** the neighbors welcomed them warmly."
- "She wanted to play tennis**, but** he wanted to play basketball."
- "We can go to the movies tonight**, or** we can just stay home."

We can also use a semicolon instead of a comma to join independent clauses; the semicolon can either stand on its own or be used with a conjunctive adverb. (Note that we must always use a comma with a conjunctive adverb, as it is acting as an introductory element.) For example:

- "We can go to the movies tonight**; however,** I would rather just stay home."
- "She wanted to play tennis**;** he wanted to play basketball."

Comma Splices
A comma splice occurs when we try to join two independent clauses using only a comma on its own. A comma alone, however, is **not** strong enough to separate two independent clauses. For example: ✗ "My brother is a very good swimmer**,** I'm a better runner." (incorrect) Luckily, the mistake is easy to correct using any of the methods for forming compound sentences that we have already described. For example: ✓ "My brother is a very good swimmer**;** I'm a better runner." ✓ "My brother is a very good swimmer**, but** I'm a better runner." ✓ "My brother is a very good swimmer**; however,** I'm a better runner."

Joining items in a list

In addition to joining independent clauses, coordinating conjunctions can also join two people or things in a sentence. When we are listing more than two people or things in a row, we separate each item with a comma, using a coordinating conjunction between the last and second-to-last item. For example:

- “I enjoy swimming**,** hiking**, and** riding my bicycle.”
- “Either Tom**,** Bill**,** Jeff **or** Mike will lead the seminar.”

The Oxford Comma

Notice that the first example has a comma before the coordinating conjunction (*and*), while the second example does not. When we use a comma before this coordinating conjunction, it is called a **serial comma** or **Oxford comma**.

There are strong opposing opinions over whether this comma should ever be used. Neither side is right or wrong, though; it’s simply a stylistic preference. Therefore, all of the following sentences could be considered correct:

- ✓ “I like apples**,** bananas**,** pears**, and** figs.
- ✓ “I like apples**,** bananas**,** pears **and** figs.

- ✓ “She’s smart**,** beautiful**, and** witty.”
- ✓ “She’s smart**,** beautiful **and** witty.”

- ✓ “We have always wanted to buy a boat**,** sell everything**, and** set sail.”
- ✓ “We have always wanted to buy a boat**,** sell everything **and** set sail.”

It should be noted that certain varieties of English use the serial comma more than others. For example, most American English style guides recommend its use. On the other hand, the majority of British English style guides recommend against it, with the most important exception being the *Oxford Style Manual* (from which the “Oxford comma” received its name).

Joining coordinate adjectives

When we use multiple adjectives to describe the same noun, we may or may not use commas between them, depending on how the adjectives function together.

In general, we *do* use commas between adjectives that describe the noun independently from one another. These are called **coordinate adjectives**. For example:

- "I bought a **heavy, long** table."

Each of the above adjectives separately describes the noun *table*. One way that we can check if adjectives are coordinate is by trying to switch around the order and see if the sentence still makes sense. For example:

- "I bought a **long, heavy** table."

The sentence still sounds correct, so we know that we are using coordinate adjectives and need to use a comma. Another way that we can check is by inserting the word *and* where the comma would go:

- "I bought a **heavy** *and* **long** table."

Again, the sentence still sounds correct, so we know we are dealing with coordinate adjectives. Here are a few more examples of sentences using coordinate adjectives:

- "It was a **dark, cold, blustery** day."
- "There's no way I'm staying in an **old, dirty, drafty** room like this!"

Repetition of adjectives and adverbs

When an adjective or adverb is repeated to add emphasis to a description, we use a comma between the repeated words. For example:

- "Your mother and I are **very, very** proud of you!"
- "It is just a **sad, sad** occasion."

Cumulative adjectives

Adjectives that build on each other to create a complete description, rather than functioning independently, are called **cumulative** adjectives, and we **don't**

separate them with commas:

- “I bought a **black wooden** table.”

Black describes *wooden table* (not just *table* alone), and so this sentence would sound strange if rearranged, like this:

❌ “I bought a **wooden black** table.”

We can also try inserting *and*, with the same result:

❌ “I bought a **black** *and* **wooden** table.”

The sentence doesn’t sound right when rearranged or when *and* is added, so we know that we are dealing with cumulative adjectives, and we should not separate them with a comma.

Introductory information

We also use commas to link introductory information at the beginning of a sentence. This can be a single word, a phrase (a group of two or more words), or an entire dependent clause. For example:

- "**Strangely,** he wrote to Michelle but not to me."
- "**In a way,** they are both right."
- "**When I was traveling in Croatia,** I met a lot of interesting people."

There are some cases in which the introductory element is brief enough or so closely related to the independent clause that the comma is often omitted. The second example, for instance, has an introductory phrase with clear meaning and relation to the sentence, so we could probably leave the comma out, as in:

- "*In a way* they are both right."

However, we can only do this if it does not make the sentence confusing or difficult to read. We can see that confusion arises if we omit the commas in the other two examples:

- "*Strangely* he wrote to Michelle but not to me."
- "*When I was traveling in Croatia* I met a lot of interesting people."

By leaving out the comma in the first sentence, it looks as though *strangely* is just modifying the verb *wrote*, rather than the entire sentence. In the second example, the sentence runs together and it becomes a bit harder to read without the comma.

Because we must exercise such care when deciding whether to include or omit a comma after an introductory element, the most straightforward guidance is to <u>always</u> include it, as it is <u>always</u> correct to do so.

Afterthoughts and closing comments

Much in the way we place a comma after an introductory element, we usually use a comma before a final or closing thought at the end of a sentence. For example:

- “I never said that I would have the project finished by that date**, just to be clear**.”
- “I find such behavior appalling**, frankly**.”
- “I would like to have a bit more**, please**.”
- “She works for a financial firm, but she is a remarkably accomplished theater director**, too**.”

Parenthetical information

Parenthetical information is not considered critical to the meaning of the sentence as a whole—if we removed it completely, the sentence would still make as much sense as before. Parenthetical elements can function as introductory or closing elements, as we have seen, but they can also appear anywhere in a sentence. If they appear in the middle, they are separated by two commas.

Absolute phrases, appositives, relative clauses, interjections, and nouns of address are all examples of parenthetical elements.

Absolute phrases

An **absolute phrase** (sometimes known as an **absolute construction**) is usually made up of a noun or pronoun and a participle, along with any modifying information. It is always considered a parenthetical element, so it is always set apart by one or two commas. (Note that we can sometimes use em dashes instead of commas to highlight the absolute phrase more dramatically.)

We usually use absolute phrases at the beginning of a sentence to introduce additional information, or at the end of a sentence to provide a final comment on the sentence as a whole. However, it's also possible to use an absolute phrase in the middle of a sentence to highlight or put extra emphasis on the extra information. For example:

- "**The test finished,** Jason heaved a sigh of relief."
- "She walked out the door**, her head turning for a last look at home**."
- "I hope**—God willing—**to get into Harvard next year."

Appositives

An **appositive** is a proper noun or a noun phrase that serves to describe or rename another noun (or pronoun).

Appositives most commonly provide parenthetical (nonessential) information about the noun they describe. These are known as **non-restrictive appositives**, and they are indicated by the commas surrounding them. Remember, if the appositive appears in the middle of the sentence, it is surrounded by two

commas; if it appears at the beginning or end, it is followed or preceded by just one. For example:

- "The <u>heir</u>**, Prince William,** is adored by many." (The proper noun *Prince William* provides a name for the noun *heir*.)
- "The <u>office</u>**, an old colonial building,** badly needed repairs." (The appositive phrase *an old colonial building* describes the noun *office*.)
- "**A true classic,** this <u>book</u> inspired a generation of young readers." (The appositive phrase *a true classic* describes the noun *book*.)

Restrictive appositives

Keep in mind that appositives <u>can</u> be essential to the meaning of a sentence. These are known as **restrictive appositives**, and they are **not** set apart by commas. Most commonly, these are proper nouns that rename a common noun, though appositive noun phrases can occasionally be restrictive, too. For instance:

- "The popular <u>restaurant</u> **Joe's Place** gets thousands of diners a day."
- "<u>Jeremy Jones</u> **the professor** has gained much more praise than <u>Jeremy Jones</u> **the novelist** ever did."

Relative Clauses

Relative clauses (also known as **adjective clauses** or **adjectival clauses**) are dependent clauses that provide descriptive information about a noun or noun phrase. Relative clauses are introduced by either a **relative pronoun** (*who, whom, whose, which*, and *that*) or a **relative adverb** (*where*, *when*, and *why*).

Like appositives, the information relative clauses provide can either be essential (restrictive) or nonessential (non-restrictive) to the completeness of the sentence; only **non-restrictive relative clauses** are set apart by commas. For example:

- "The woman down the street**, whose children are the same age as ours,** invited us over for dinner next week."
- "Samantha**, whom I've asked to be my bridesmaid,** is getting married next year."
- "The movie**, which is my favorite comedy of all time,** is on TV tomorrow night."
- "I'm going on a date with Paul**, who went to high school with my brother**."

Restrictive relative clauses

Restrictive relative clauses, like restrictive appositives, introduce information that must be included for the sentence to make sense, and they are **not** set apart by commas:

- "I saw the guy **who delivers my mail** in town yesterday."
- "This was the river **where we learned to swim**."
- "There are a few different things **that we've been working on lately**."
- "Do you know the reason **why the sky is blue**?"

Interjections

An **interjection**, also known as an **exclamation**, is a word, phrase, or sound used to convey an emotion such as surprise, excitement, happiness, or anger. Interjections can stand alone as minor sentences, punctuated with a period, exclamation point, or question mark. However, since interjections are not "proper" sentences, some writers prefer to attach them to a complete sentence with a comma. (Ultimately, it is up to preference.)

For example:

- "**Ooh,** that's a beautiful dress."
- "**Brr,** it's freezing in here!"
- "**Oh my God,** where did you get all this money?"
- "**Wow,** what a great achievement!"

Nouns of Address

A **noun of address** (technically known as a **vocative**) is the person or thing you are directly addressing. Like interjections, they are grammatically unrelated to the rest of the sentence—they don't modify or affect any other part of it. Instead, they are used to let the listener or reader know who is being spoken to, or to get that person's attention. For example:

- "**James**, I need you to help me with the dishes."
- "Can I have some money, **Mom**?"
- "This, **class**, is the video I was telling you about."
- "Sorry, **Tom**, I didn't see you there."
- "**You in the back**, do you have a question?"

Contrasting information

Another type of parenthetical element occurs when we introduce information that strongly **contrasts** with the rest of the sentence. We separate the contrasting information with either one or two commas (depending on its position in the sentence). For example:

- "I told you to buy four cases**, not six**."
- "The manager**, not employees,** will decide when it is appropriate to close the restaurant each night."
- "It is not the wealthy elite who decide elections**, but ordinary citizens like you and me**."

Other parenthetical information

We can also use other phrases or clauses parenthetically to provide supporting information or commentary on the rest of the sentence. For example:

- "Find me something to dig with**, such as a shovel or spade,** so I can plant these flowers."
- "However, the rules**, if we choose to follow them at all,** are not always consistent."
- "**Whatever you decide to do,** just leave me out of it!"

Be aware that if the parenthetical element contains internal commas, em dashes might be required instead of commas to provide better clarity in the sentence:

✓ "Many fundamental aspects of living on one's own**—cooking, cleaning, doing laundry—**are things for which many young adults are completely unprepared." (Em dashes are preferable here, because they clearly set apart the parenthetical information from the rest of the sentence.)

✗ "Many fundamental aspects of living on one's own**, cooking, cleaning, doing laundry,** are things for which many young adults are completely unprepared." (Incorrect: too many internal commas create a confusing sentence that is hard to read.)

Note that in each of these examples, we could have also used parentheses instead of commas or em dashes to indicate the parenthetical information.

Parenthetical elements in compound sentences

There is one exception to the use of two commas to set apart parenthetical elements that appear in the middle of the sentence. When a parenthetical element occurs directly after a coordinating conjunction that links two independent clauses in a compound sentence, it is **not** necessary to include the first comma—instead, we only place one comma at the end of the parenthetical information. For example:

- "Our sales have improved over the year, **but in my view,** we still should remain cautious with our investments."
- "Sarah has her mind set on moving to London, **so try as you might,** you're not going to get her to change her decision."

It can be helpful, however, to include it when the parenthetical element is quite long or needs to be given more emphasis in the sentence. For instance:

- "The problem seems simple enough at first, **but, as you will soon find out for yourselves,** there are many complexities that we must consider."

Note that some writers prefer to **always** include the first comma, regardless of the length of the parenthetical information. They might write our first two examples like this:

- "Our sales have improved over the year, **but, in my view,** we still should remain cautious with our investments."
- "Sarah has her mind set on moving to London, **so, try as you might,** you're not going to get her to change her decision."

However, this is entirely based on personal preference, as both styles are considered correct. Check the style guide of your employer or school, though, as they might have a particular preference for one practice over the other.

Countries and States

Similar to parenthetical information, we set apart the names of countries and states with commas when specifying the location of a particular city. For example:

- "I used to live in Detroit**, Michigan,** but I moved to Albuquerque**, New Mexico,** last month."
- "Paris**, Texas,** is nothing at all like Paris**, France**."

Note that a comma comes both before and after the country or state if it appears in the middle of a sentence. There is often a tendency for writers to leave out the second comma (especially in newspapers and magazines), but this is incorrect—the second comma is almost always necessary.

Omitting the second comma
There are certain instances in which the second comma should **not** be used after the country or state name. This occurs when the location takes on a **possessive form**, or is used to create a compound adjective. For instance: • "Portland**, Oregon's** coffee-roasting culture has become nearly legendary." • "The Dublin**, Ireland-owned** company has expanded to nearly 10 offices around the world." We would also omit the comma if another parenthetical element (such as an appositive or absolute phrase) using em dashes appears directly after the country or state, as in: • "Denver**, Colorado—**situated just east of the Rocky Mountains—is a wonderful blend of urban bustle and outdoor activities." Note that if a parenthetical element that directly relates to the country or state is set apart by parentheses, the second comma is still used, but it appears after the parenthetical element. For example: • "Denver**, Colorado (situated just east of the Rocky Mountains),** is a wonderful blend of urban bustle and outdoor activities."

Listing the year in a date

Similarly to how we set apart the names of countries or states with commas, we also set apart the **year** when it is included with a date. In American English, the month will typically be listed first, followed by the day's date, followed by a comma and the year. If the date appears in the middle of the sentence, it is also followed by a comma, as in:

- "It was on July 20**, 1969,** that American astronauts set foot on the moon for the first time in history."
- "I was born on January 31**, 1988,** the same day as my cousin!"

If we also include the day of the week (*Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday*, etc.), then we put a comma between the day and the month <u>as well as</u> before and after the year. For instance:

- "The senator's arrest on **Friday, August 8th, 1998,** marked a turning point in the government's anti-corruption campaign."

If the date consists of just the month and the year, then **no** comma is used:

✓ "We first opened our doors in **August 1981** during a recession, but the business managed to survive." (correct)
✗ "We first opened our doors in **August, 1981,** during a recession, but the business managed to survive." (incorrect)

Note that in British English, the day's date usually appears first, followed by the month and the year. (This is sometimes referred to as the international or military format.) We do **not** use commas in this format. For example:

- "The United Kingdom held a referendum on **23 June 2016** to decide whether or not it should remain within the European Union."
- "My wife was born in Limerick, Ireland, on **3rd June 1978**."

Using commas with quotations (direct speech)

Direct speech (also known as **quoted speech**) refers to the direct quotation of something that someone else said. We generally use the past tense of **reporting verbs** (such as *said, asked, told, remarked,* etc.) to introduce the quotation.

When used in writing, we separate direct speech with quotation marks. (Note that American English uses **double quotation marks** (**“ ”**), while British English typically uses **single quotation marks** (**‘ ’**).)

If we are quoting an entire sentence, we set it apart with commas as we would for parenthetical information. For example:

- John said**, “I’ll never live in this city again.”**
- Mary told him**, “I want to have another baby,”** which took him by surprise.
- The other day, my daughter asked**, “Mommy, why do I have to go to school, but you don’t?”**

However, if we are quoting a fragment of speech that is used as an integral part of the overall sentence, then no commas are used. We still use reporting verbs in the past tense, though. For instance:

- John said he feels **“really bad”** about what happened.

Direct speech before a reporting verb

We can also put direct speech before the reporting verb. Again, we usually use a comma to separate the quoted text from the unquoted text, as in:

- **“I can’t wait to see daddy,”** my son said.

This rule also holds true if the reporting verb and the person attributed to the quotation appear in the middle of quoted text. Note that if the quoted sentence **continues** after the reporting verb, then we use a second comma to introduce the second part of the sentence. For example:

- **“It will be a long time,”** she remarked**, “before we’re able to afford a house like this.”**

However, if the quoted text after the reporting verb is a **new** sentence, then we use a period before the rest of the quotation, as in:

- **“I hope we get there soon,”** said Tom**. “I’m tired of being stuck in this car.”**

Finally, be aware that if a **question mark** or **exclamation point** is used in a quotation that appears before the reporting verb, then we do **not** use a comma at all:

- **“Where are we going?”** asked Sally.
- **“This is going to be great!”** Tom exclaimed**. “I’ve always wanted to see Paris.”**

End punctuation — American vs. British English

In American English, a period or comma used at the end of direct speech always appears within the quotation marks, as we’ve seen in the examples so far.

In British English, however, if the quotation ends in a period or comma, it is usually placed outside the quotation mark, as in:

- The CEO said**, ‘This is a great day for the company’.**
- **‘I want to be a doctor when I grow up’,** Susy told us yesterday.

Note that if a quoted sentence ends in a question mark or exclamation point that belongs to the quotation, it will appear within the quotation marks. If the question mark or exclamation point belongs to the **overall** sentence (that is, it isn’t actually part of the quotation), it will appear outside the quotation marks. This is the same in **both** American and British English. For example:

- Samantha asked**, “How long will it take to get there?”**
- But I don’t want to just **“see how things go”!**

Other technical uses for commas

There are a few other typographical instances in which a comma should be used, such as in long numbers and for titles that appear after people's names.

Long numbers

It is standard practice to add one or more commas to long numbers to make them easier to read. (Commas used in this way are technically known as **delimiters**.)

A number is considered to be "long" if it has more than three digits, and we put commas before each section of three that appears in it (not including decimals, if used). For example:

- "Just over **20,000** students attend the private university."
- "I can't believe you won **$1,500** in the lottery!"
- "In 2011, the population of England was **53,012,456**, while the population of Canada was only **33,476,688**!"
- "The final bill was **$3,543.21**."

While it is very common for people to leave the comma out of four-digit numbers, it is recommended to always include it, especially in formal or professional writing.

Exceptions

For any long number that is acting as a determiner—directly modifying a noun to indicate how many there are—we always use a comma. However, when a number is being used to indicate the year, a street address, or a page number, we do **not** use a comma. For instance:

- "Please send the package to **5678** Main Street."
- "By the year **2014**, we had over 2,000 clients across the state."
- "Refer to the notes on page **1345** in the textbook."

(Note that if we are listing the **amount** of pages in a book, then the comma would be used as usual, as in, "This book has **1,345** pages.")

Other numbering styles

It’s important to note that not all countries use this format for numbers. In many parts of Europe, for instance, commas are used as decimal points, while periods are used as delimiters. Other countries will variously use spaces, apostrophes, or “interpuncts” (a dot that appears halfway between the top and bottom of the line) as delimiters in long numbers.

Here are some examples of how long numbers might appear around the world:

- 1.234.567.890,12
- 1’234’567’890.12
- 1’234’567’890,12
- 1 234 567 890,12
- 1,234,567,890·12

When we are writing in English, we only need to worry about using commas before sets of three numbers and periods as decimal points.

Titles and Certifications

Another technical use of commas is to set apart professional, academic, or royal titles and certifications that come after a person’s name. These function much like parenthetical elements, which we looked at earlier—they do not have an impact on the grammatical structure of the sentence, so they are separated by commas. For example:

- “The board is pleased to announce that John Barry**, BA, MA, PhD,** will be joining the faculty in September.”
- “Allow me to introduce you to Janet Smith**, Director of Surgery**.”
- “Please forward the material to my attorney, Barbara Simmons**, Esq.,** for further review.”

Exceptions

Some labels that appear after a name do not generally take a comma anymore; sometimes, including the comma is optional. These include family titles, such as *Junior* and *Senior* (usually abbreviated as *Jr.* and *Sr.*), and company titles, such as *Incorporated* or *Limited* (usually abbreviated as *Inc.* and *Ltd.*). For example:

- “Harry Smith Jr. is nothing at all like his father, Harry Smith Sr.”

- “Global Markets Inc. is currently in the process of selling off its subsidiary company, Global Markets Ltd.”

As noted, the comma is still considered optional, so it is not uncommon to see these set apart by commas. If commas are used, they should appear both before and after the title (unless the title ends the sentence), as in:

- “Harry Smith, Jr., is nothing at all like his father, Harry Smith, Sr.”
- “Global Markets, Inc., is currently in the process of selling off its subsidiary company, Global Markets, Ltd.”

Quiz

1. What must be used with a comma to join two **independent clauses**?

a) A subordinating conjunction
b) A coordinating conjunction
c) A conjunctive adverb
d) None of the above

2. **At least** how many people or things must be included in a list for it to use one or more commas?

a) 1
b) 2
c) 3
d) 4

3. When is a comma used with a **dependent clause** that is joined to an independent clause?

a) When it appears at the end of the sentence
b) When it functions as an introductory element in the sentence
c) When it can function on its own as a complete sentence
d) When it provides contrasting information

4. Which of the following sentences uses a comma **incorrectly**?

a) “Shortly after we began working in the garden, it started to rain.”
b) “Any instrument is tricky at first, but with enough practice, it eventually gets easier.”
c) “My gym teacher, who won a medal at the Olympics, always encourages us to enjoy outdoor activities.”
d) “We’ve been working on this project for months, we’ve still got a long way to go.”

5. When do we use commas between multiple adjectives that describe the same noun?

a) When the adjectives function as independent modifiers of the noun
b) When the adjectives build on each other to create a unique description
c) When an adjective is repeated for emphasis
d) A & B
e) A & C
f) B & C

6. Which of the following sentences has a number that is **not** punctuated correctly?

a) “Repairs to the house will cost $146,22.88.”
b) “I can’t believe you wrote a book that has over 1,500 pages.”
c) “By the year 2034, the world’s population is expected to reach 9,000,000,000.”
d) “There were more than 10,000 people at the concert last night.”

See the answers

Semicolons

Definition

Semicolons (**;**) are used for two main purposes: to separate lengthy or complex items within a list and to connect independent clauses. They are often described as being more powerful than commas, while not quite as a strong as periods (full stops). That's why, despite its name, a semicolon should really be thought of as a hybrid between a period and a comma. (After all, it looks just like a period on top of a comma.)

Separating items in a list

When writing lists, we usually use commas to separate the individual elements, as in:

- "I only want **ham, cheese, and lettuce** on my sandwich."

However, when one or more items in a list already include commas, we use semicolons to make the division between the items clearer. (If we simply used commas, such lists would be difficult to understand.) For example:

✓ "Recipients of this year's awards will include the law firm of Jacobs, Jacobs, and Smith**;** A1 Consultants, LLC**;** and several advertising, marketing, and digital media companies." (correct)
✗ "Recipients of this year's awards will include the law firm of Jacobs, Jacobs, and Smith**,** A1 Consultants, LLC**,** and several advertising, marketing, and digital media companies." (incorrect)

✓ "In less than 10 years, I have lived in Portland, Oregon**;** Seattle, Washington**;** Paris, Texas**;** Denver, Colorado**;** and Washington, D.C." (correct)
✗ "In less than 10 years, I have lived in Portland, Oregon**,** Seattle, Washington**,** Paris, Texas**,** Denver, Colorado **,** and Washington, D.C." (incorrect)

Numbered, lettered, and vertical lists

We usually only use semicolons in lists if the individual items in the list use commas internally. However, if we want to **number** or **letter** the lists (for instance, to clarify the order in which a list must be followed or to highlight its items), we use semicolons to make them easier to read. For example:

- "Your assignment for the evening is as follows: (1) interview an older relative about his or her experiences growing up**;** (2) write down your own experiences for the same time period**;** (3) write a one-page report that compares and contrasts your experiences to those of your relative."
- "We'll need four things for the upcoming audit: (a) copies of all bank statements over the last year**;** (b) a letter from the bank confirming the company's signatories**;** (c) any receipts for business-related purchases made this year**;** (d) a profit and loss report for the year to date."

Some writers also prefer to use semicolons when they write lists vertically

(whether using numbers, letters, bullet points, or nothing at all). For instance: "There are a few tasks we need to address at the next meeting**:**

- reaching a wider consumer demographic**;**
- developing a stronger presence on social media**;** and
- deciding on the slogan for our new advertising campaign."

However, there is a wide variety of opinion regarding when and how (and even if) to punctuate and/or capitalize elements in a vertical list. For the most part, this comes down to stylistic preference rather concrete "rules" about the structure, so check with the style guide of your school or employer.

Joining independent clauses

We can also use semicolons to combine independent clauses that have an inherent relationship with one another (such as contrast or causation) into a larger compound sentence. The semicolon is used in place of a period to bridge the gap between the end of one sentence and the beginning of another. We can see in each of the following examples how either a period or a semicolon could be used:

- “I hope the traffic isn’t too bad. I don’t want to be late for the movie.”
- “I hope the traffic isn’t too bad**;** I don’t want to be late for the movie.”

- “Don’t run near the pool. You might slip and hurt yourself!”
- “Don’t run near the pool**;** you might slip and hurt yourself!”

- “My Great Aunt Winifred was an amazing woman. She once traveled to the North Pole on a bobsled all by herself.”
- “My Great Aunt Winifred was an amazing woman**;** she once traveled to the North Pole on a bobsled all by herself.”

By using semicolons instead of periods, we express a relationship between the two clauses that is not as obvious when we use periods and treat them as separate sentences.

Note that we could also use commas and coordinating conjunctions to connect the two clauses and <u>explicitly</u> describe the relationship between them. For instance:

- “I hope the traffic isn’t too bad**, for** I don’t want to be late for the movie.”
- “Don’t run near the pool**, or** you might slip and hurt yourself!”
- “My Great Aunt Winifred was an amazing woman**, as** she once traveled to the North Pole on a bobsled all by herself.”

While grammatically correct and perfectly acceptable, forming the sentences this way expresses a very specific relationship between the clauses. By using semicolons instead to <u>imply</u> the relationship, the sentence flows more naturally and the reader is allowed to be more engaged in the interpretation of its meaning.

Using semicolons with coordinating conjunctions

Generally speaking, we do not use semicolons with coordinating conjunctions to

connect independent clauses. The pause created is too strong, and we would usually just use a comma to link them together.

However, in certain cases when the first independent clause is particularly lengthy or complex and already contains commas internally, we can use a semicolon to make the pause between clauses easier to understand. For example:

- “It was only after discovering the financial arrears of the company, which amounted to nearly $1 million, that we realized we would need to reorganize its entire infrastructure**; but** we had little to no means of making any further investments, with so much debt already outstanding.”

Be wary of making the sentence too cumbersome by joining two complex clauses with a semicolon, however. It might be preferable in such instances just to use a period and divide them into two separate sentences.

Using semicolons with conjunctive adverbs

While it is only under certain conditions that we may use a semicolon with a coordinating conjunction, another type of conjunction is almost always paired with a semicolon. These are known as **conjunctive adverbs**, and they are used to describe a relationship between the clauses they conjoin.

Conjunctive adverbs are typically used at the beginning of the second clause (immediately after the semicolon), followed by a **comma**. Note that while we can use a period instead of a semicolon with conjunctive adverbs, we **cannot** use a comma to join the clauses. For example:

✓ “Jen hadn’t enjoyed the play**; therefore**, she didn’t recommend it.” (correct)
✓ “Jen hadn’t enjoyed the play**. Therefore**, she didn’t recommend it.” (correct)
✗ “Jen hadn’t enjoyed the play**, therefore**, she didn’t recommend it.” (incorrect)

If we choose to separate the two clauses with a period, we must remember to capitalize the conjunctive adverb, since it is the first word in a new sentence.

Choosing a conjunctive adverb

To choose the conjunctive adverb best suited to join two clauses together, we

must consider the relationship between the first and second clause. Let's look at the example again:

- "Jen hadn't enjoyed the play**; therefore**, she didn't recommend it to her friend."

The second clause is a result of the first clause. Jen hadn't enjoyed the play, and that is the reason that she didn't recommend it to her friend. So, when we connect the two clauses, we choose a conjunctive adverb (*therefore*) that makes this cause-and-effect relationship clear. Think about how the relationship between *these* two clauses is different from the previous example:

- "Jen hadn't enjoyed the play. She recommended it to her friend."

We still have two independent clauses, but now the relationship between them is different. Jen hadn't enjoyed the play, but recommended it to her friend anyway. We can no longer use the conjunctive adverb *therefore*, because we are no longer dealing with cause and effect. Instead, we need to choose a conjunctive adverb like *nevertheless*, which is used to express unexpected results:

- "Jen hadn't enjoyed the play; **nevertheless**, she recommended it to her friend."

There are many different conjunctive adverbs we can use, depending on the relationship we want to describe.

When not to use a semicolon

Although semicolons function in ways similar to both commas and periods, they do not have the exact function of either: they are stronger than a comma but weaker than a period, so it is not always appropriate to substitute one for the other.

Don't use semicolons with dependent clauses

Because dependent clauses rely on independent clauses to make sense, the link between them must be expressed by either a comma (if a dependent clause is used at the beginning of a sentence) or no punctuation at all (if a dependent clause comes after an independent clause and does not require a pause). Using a semicolon would create too strong a break between the clauses to maintain their cohesion. For example:

✓ "Whenever I travel to Paris**,** I always stay in the same hotel overlooking the Seine." (correct)
✗ "Whenever I travel to Paris**;** I always stay in the same hotel overlooking the Seine." (incorrect)

✓ "Shares in the company fell as details of the corruption scandal emerged." (correct—no punctuation needed between clauses)
✗ "Shares in the company fell**;** as details of the corruption scandal emerged." (incorrect)

✓ "We'd be happy to lend you the money**,** provided that you have something you can use as a collateral." (correct—use of a comma is optional in this case)
✗ "We'd be happy to lend you the money**;** provided that you have something you can use as a collateral." (incorrect)

Don't use semicolons between unrelated independent clauses

Using semicolons can add sophistication to a sentence by implying a relationship between two independent clauses. However, we must be sure that such a relationship exists in the first place; otherwise, a semicolon will not be appropriate. Consider, for example, these two simple sentences:

✗ "Tomatoes are a fruit**;** they were once considered poisonous." (incorrect)

The fact that tomatoes are a fruit is not directly related to the fact that they were once considered poisonous. Therefore, joining the two clauses with a semicolon creates a confusing sentence, because it implies a relationship between the clauses that does not necessarily exist. Therefore, we should use a period and leave the clauses as two separate sentences:

- ✓ "Tomatoes are a fruit**.** They were once considered poisonous." (correct)

Using semicolons with other punctuation

Because semicolons are used to join lists or independent clauses, they are usually not used alongside other punctuation marks. The only exceptions to this are certain uses of **periods** and **quotation marks**.

With periods

A semicolon is most often used as an alternative to a period to join two independent clauses together. However, when a period is used to mark an **abbreviation** that appears at the end of an independent clause, then it becomes necessary to use both punctuation marks together. For example:

- “We are open every week Mon. through Fri**.;** we are closed on weekends and public holidays.”
- “I’ll be away for most of Jan**.;** you can still reach me by email, though.”

This can also occur when abbreviations appear in lists that use semicolons to separate items that have internal commas, as in:

- “Customer support is available every Tuesday, from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m**.;** Wednesday, from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m**.;** and Thursday, from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m.”

With quotation marks

When a semicolon is used after a quoted element of text, it is important to remember that it should appear outside of the ending quotation mark. For instance:

- He says he has been “working on a solution**”;** what exactly that means, however, is unclear.
- I have a few suggestions for the story: a stronger emphasis on character development; a new love interest, whom the protagonist could meet during the chapter “Reunions**”;** and less historical background information so the story maintains a faster pace.

Quiz

1. When **must** a semicolon be used to divide elements in a list?

a) When there are more than two items in a list
b) When one or more items in a list contain commas
c) When a list is introduced by a colon
d) When a list contains a quoted portion of text

2. What is a semicolon **usually** unable to function with?

a) Coordinating conjunctions
b) Subordinating conjunctions
c) Conjunctive adverbs
d) A & B
e) B & C

3. Which of the following is **not** a function of a semicolon?

a) To separate items of a list that use commas internally
b) To join two independent clauses without a coordinating conjunction
c) To join a dependent clause to an independent clause
d) To join two independent clauses together with a conjunctive adverb

4. Which of the following sentences uses a semicolon **incorrectly**?

a) "Due to a problem with our servers; production has been delayed for at least a week."
b) "Thank you for interviewing for the job; we will let you know our decision soon."
c) "In addition to the city of London in England, there is London, Ontario (in Canada); London, Burgundy (in France); and several cities known as London across the United States."
d) "I'm not exactly sure when I'll arrive; however, I'll be sure to call you as soon as I get in."

See the answers

Colons

Definition

A **colon** (**:**) is used after an independent clause to add information that helps illustrate or clarify what it says. It is most commonly used to introduce a list, but it can also introduce words, phrases, or entire clauses that complete the meaning of the clause that came before it.

First, we'll look at when it is appropriate to use a colon, and then we'll look more closely at all the specific ways it can be used.

When to use a colon

When using colons, the general rule is to only place them after an independent clause—that is, a clause that can stand on its own as a complete sentence and is not grammatically dependent in any way on the information that the colon introduces. Don't use a colon after a single word or a sentence fragment, in which case a comma or no punctuation at all would be more appropriate. If you feel a colon is necessary or helpful, try to reword the introductory clause so that it could stand on its own as a complete sentence.

× "Your homework for the evening is**:** to interview a relative about his or her childhood, answer the same questions about your own childhood, and then write a short report that compares the two." (Incorrect—*Your homework for the evening is* is not an independent clause, so a colon is not appropriate here.)
✓ "Your homework for the evening is to interview a relative about his or her childhood, answer the same questions about your own childhood, and then write a short report that compares the two." (Correct—no additional punctuation is used.)
✓ "Your homework for the evening is *as follows***:** to interview a relative about his or her childhood, answer the same questions about your own childhood, and then write a short report that compares the two." (Correct—the addition of *as follows* makes the introductory clause independent, so a colon is appropriate here.)

Additionally, because colons act as an introductory element, they stand in place of words that would perform the same task: we should not use colons after words or phrases like *for example*, *e.g.*, or *namely** because they serve the same purpose, and the sentence would seem redundant if a colon were used as well. We must either use a colon on its own, or an introductory adverb with a comma (or no punctuation at all) instead of a colon:

× "There are several reasons to switch to online banking, *for example***:** faster access to your accounts, instant loan approvals, and a lower impact on the environment." (Incorrect—do not use both *for example* and a colon together.)
✓ "There are several reasons to switch to online banking**:** faster access to your accounts, instant loan approvals, and a lower impact on the environment." (Correct)
✓ "There are several reasons to switch to online banking, *for example*, faster

access to your accounts, instant loan approvals, and a lower impact on the environment.” (Correct)

× “In my opinion, there is only one true muscle car, *namely*: the original Ford Mustang.” (Incorrect—do not use both *namely* and a colon together.)
✓ “In my opinion, there is only one true muscle car: the original Ford Mustang.” (Correct)
✓ “In my opinion, there is only one true muscle car, *namely* the original Ford Mustang.” (Correct)

Note that you can also use dashes before words like *for example* and *namely* if you want to put emphasis on the text that follows, or you can simply use a dash on its own (but you would not use dashes **and** colons together). For example:

✓ “There are several reasons to switch to online banking—*for example*, faster access to your accounts, instant loan approvals, and a lower impact on the environment.”
✓ “In my opinion, there is only one true muscle car—the original Ford Mustang.”

(See the section on Dashes to learn more about their uses.)

***Author's Note**
You may notice throughout this guide the tendency to introduce example sentences or lists with “For example:” or “For instance:” When introducing a list of items arranged **vertically** (even just a single item), it is acceptable to use single words, phrases, or sentence fragments before a colon. (Although not all style guides agree on this point.) Furthermore, highly stylized bodies of text often require formatting that is not always in line with the grammatical conventions of day-to-day writing. The use of colons with *for example* creates a clearer separation in the text that makes it easier for the reader to navigate. In less stylized writing, though, where *for example* or similar phrases would be embedded within a complete sentence, it would not be considered grammatically correct to use a colon to introduce the information that follows. Likewise, a colon should not be used with a word or phrase unless it can stand on its own as a complete sentence, except in the case of **vertical lists**.

Introducing lists

The most commonly cited use for a colon is to introduce a list of information. In many cases, the list is simply an extension of the existing sentence. This is known as a **run-in list** or **horizontal list**. For example:

- “In my opinion, the perfect sandwich has only three things**:** ham, cheese, and mayonnaise.”
- “There are three new members of the faculty whom I would like to introduce**:** Janet Baker, Professor of Literature; Tom North, Professor of Economics; and Susanne Whitefield, Professor of Philosophy.”
- “There are two things that I love doing more than anything**:** reading and water skiing.”

When we write a list in this way, there is no particular importance given to one item over another; it might be implied by the order of the sentence, but it is not explicit. If we want to indicate the importance of the items in a list, we have to number or letter it.

Numbered lists

If a strict order needs to be established, we can use **numbered lists** to specify which items should be accomplished or attended to first. Consider the following examples:

- “Your assignment for the evening is as follows**:** (1) interview an older relative about his or her experiences growing up; (2) write down your own experiences for the same time period; (3) write a one-page report that compares and contrasts your experiences to those of your relative.”
- “The schedule for the seminar will be structured in the following way**:** (1) welcoming of attendees; (2) introduction of keynote speakers; (3) presentations from first and second speakers; (4) one-hour lunch break; (5) presentations from third and fourth speakers; (6) closing remarks.”

Notice that we put the number or the letter in parentheses, and we mark the end of each item with a semicolon. We also do not use a coordinating conjunction before the last item in a list like this.

Lettered lists

When we want to highlight each item in a list—especially if the list presents a selection that someone must make or if the item will be referred to again later—we can also use **lettered lists**. We format lettered lists in the exact same way as numbered lists, except that we substitute sequential lowercase letters for the numbers. For example:

- "We'll need four things for the upcoming audit**:** (a) copies of all bank statements over the last year; (b) a letter from the bank confirming your company's signatories; (c) any receipts for business-related purchases made this year; (d) a profit and loss report for the year to date."

Vertical lists

While using numbers or letters can help to better organize a list, it can also result in rather long, clunky sentences, as we saw above. In many cases where numbers or letters are necessary, writers often prefer to structure their lists **vertically**—that is, with the contents of the list appearing in individual lines indented beneath the introductory clause. We can also create vertical lists that use bullet points or no marks at all. Let's look at some examples.

"Your assignment for the evening is as follows**:**

1) Interview an older relative about his or her experiences growing up.
2) Write down your own experiences for the same time period.
3) Write a one-page report that compares and contrasts your experiences to those of your relative."

"We'll need four things for the upcoming audit**:**

a) Copies of all bank statements over the last year
b) A letter from the bank confirming the company's signatories
c) Any receipts for business-related purchases made this year
d) A profit and loss report for the year to date"

"There are a few tasks we need to address at the next meeting**:**

- reaching a wider consumer demographic;
- developing a stronger presence on social media; and
- deciding on the slogan for our new advertising campaign."

"Below are the most common punctuation marks used in English**:**

Periods
Commas

Question marks
Exclamation points”

Note that there is a wide variety of opinion regarding when and how (and even if) to punctuate and/or capitalize elements in a list. For the most part, this comes down to stylistic preferences rather concrete “rules” about the structure, so check with the style guide of your school or employer.

Introducing other text

While we most commonly use colons to introduce lists, there are also instances in which they can be used to introduce words, phrases, clauses, or even multiple sentences that help explain or illustrate the previous clause. For example:

- “One thing is for sure**:** we aren’t going to get a better deal than the one they’re offering today.”
- “Let’s get something straight**:** We are not at an equal level. I’m the boss, and you are an employee of this company, so what I say is final.”
- “Many people will try to sell you ‘easy’ ways to become successful, but it really comes down to just one thing: hard work.”

Again, we must be sure to use only **independent clauses** before colons when we do this. If the clause can’t stand on its own, we must either rewrite the sentence or omit the colon altogether:

× “All I want to say is**:** this has been the best experience of my life!” (Incorrect—*All I want to say is* is not an independent clause, so a colon is not appropriate here.)
✓ “All I want to say is this has been the best experience of my life!” (Correct—no punctuation is needed.)
✓ “All I want to say is this: This has been the best experience of my life!” (Correct—*All I want to say is this* is an independent clause, so a colon is appropriate here.)

Capitalizing after a colon
Notice in our examples above that the sentences following the colons are sometimes capitalized, sometimes not. There is a bit of debate regarding when (and if) to capitalize the first word of a complete sentence when it follows a colon, but in reality this largely comes down to the stylistic preferences of the writer, as there are many different competing “rules” among style guides. A good standard to apply to your writing is this: If a colon is introducing a short, complete sentence that flows naturally with the previous clause, there is no need to capitalize the first word. If the sentence after the colon is particularly lengthy (and the clause before the colon is very brief), or the

information introduced by the colon spans across multiple sentences, then capitalize the first word.

This is ultimately just a suggestion, however. There is no concrete rule for capitalizing sentences after a colon, so it comes down to the preference of the writer. You should also be mindful if your school or organization follows a particular style guide; if so, then be sure to follow the rules that it prescribes.

Quotations

Another common reason to use a colon is to introduce a complete **quotation**, especially if a **reporting verb** (such as *said, told, asked* etc.) is not used. For example:

- Always remember Polonius's famous line in *Hamlet***:** "This above all else: to thine own self be true."
- My father had a phrase he was fond of repeating**:** "Hope for the best, but prepare for the worst."

Remember that we only use a colon after an independent introductory clause; if the text before the quotation is a fragment, then we must either use a comma (if a reporting verb is used) or no punctuation at all, or else rewrite the sentence. For instance:

× My mother was fond of saying**:** "You can't always get what you want." (Incorrect—*My mother was fond of saying* is not an independent clause.)
✓ My mother was fond of saying "You can't always get what you want." (Correct—no punctuation is used before the quote.)
✓ My mother often said**,** "You can't always get what you want." (Correct—a comma is used with the reporting verb *said*.)
✓ My mother usually had this to say**:** "You can't always get what you want." (Correct—*My mother usually has this to say* is an independent clause, so a colon is appropriate here.)

Note that while it is optional to capitalize the first letter after a colon when introducing non-quoted sentences, we should always capitalize the first letter when we introduce a *quoted* sentence.

Other technical uses

In addition to its grammatical function of introducing lists or illustrative information, the colon is also used for a number of technical, non-grammatical reasons in writing.

Writing the time

One of the most common technical uses for a colon is when writing the **time** numerically. The colon is placed between the numbers representing the hour and the minutes of that hour (without any spaces), as in:

- "Our flight is at **8:30**, so we'll need to be at the airport by **6:30** AM at the latest."

Very occasionally, we write the seconds as well as the hour and minutes:

- "Mr. President, at **22:37:45**, unauthorized foreign aircraft entered US airspace." (Notice that the hour is in **military time**, meaning 10 PM.)

Another situation in which we might write time numerically is when indicating how much time is remaining for something to occur, such as for a timer or countdown. For example:

- "The space shuttle is scheduled to launch in **01:32:45**." (one hour, 32 minutes, and 45 seconds)

Writing numerical ratios

Colons are also used with numeric writing when we want to express a **ratio** between two amounts. For example:

- "The proportion of international students compared to US-born students in the university has increased to nearly **2:1**." (There are almost twice as many international students as there are US students.)

Citing Bible chapters & verses

One specific use of the colon is to indicate the specific verses that appear in a chapter of the Bible. Similar to how we write numerical times and ratios, we

place the colon between the number of the chapter and the number of the verse(s), with no spaces in between. For example:

- "One of my favorite passages is from 1 Corinthians **13:4–7**, which begins, 'Love is patient, love is kind.'" (The passage is from the fourth through seventh verses in chapter 13 of 1 Corinthians.)

Citing pages from a journal volume

We also use colons to indicate a page or range of pages from a volume of an academic journal. It is formatted in the same way as when we cite a chapter and verse(s) from the Bible (except the title of the journal is in *italics*):

- "According to Smith, unemployment should decrease to around 4% by the year 2020 (*Journal of Economic Studies* **8:25**)." (The sentence is referencing information found on page 8 of volume 25 of the journal.)

(Note that there are other uses for colons when creating longer citations for academic writing. You should check the style guide used by your academic institution for the proper way to format your citation, as the specific styles vary quite a bit.)

Written correspondence

In written correspondence, especially in business, we sometimes use a colon after a formal salutation (the introduction that includes the name or title of the recipient). For example:

> "Dear sir or madam**:**
> I wish to make you aware of a recent change to your account …"

> "Mr. and Mrs. Philips**:**
> In reference to your recent application, please find enclosed …"

We also use a colon after certain introductory phrases or abbreviations:

> "RE**:** Your recent application"
> "PS**:** Please remember to bring your swimsuit to the party!"

Writing dialogue

One final use of the colon occurs in written dialogue between two or more

people, most often in transcripts of plays or legal testimony in a courtroom.

We place the colon immediately after the name of the speaker (which is often in all capital letters), followed by the dialogue (without quotation marks). In a play, if there is any stage direction or other information about the character, it appears in parentheses immediately before the colon. For example:

- DIANNE**:** You're lying to me again! Tell me the truth!
- ANTHONY (backing up nervously toward the door)**:** I can explain! It's all just a big misunderstanding.

- PROSECUTOR**:** Tell the court again your whereabouts on the evening of August 12, 2010.
- DEFENDANT**:** As I've said already, I was at home with my parents for the entire evening.

Usage Note: Spaces after a colon
Whenever we use a colon (except when writing times, ratios, or citations), it will be followed by a single space before the list or other information. When typewriters were used, it was common practice to place **two** spaces after a colon to make the writing clearer. However, now that most writers use word processors, which space letters automatically to make them easier to read, this second space is unnecessary. Always use just one space after a colon.

Quiz

1. When are we able to use a colon to introduce a list or explanatory information?

a) Anytime
b) When the colon follows a dependent clause
c) When the colon follows an independent clause
d) When the colon follows a particular introductory word or phrase

2. What is the function of a **numbered list**?

a) To indicate that the items in a list are in a specific and necessary order
b) To indicate a choice between the different items in a list
c) To make the sentence easier to read
d) None of the above

3. Which of the following can come after a colon to help explain, clarify, or illustrate the previous clause?

a) A word
b) A phrase
c) A clause
d) A sentence
e) All of the above
f) None of the above

4. Which of the following is the correct way to write the time numerically?

a) 8 :23
b) 8: 23
c) 8:23
d) 8 : 23

5. When **must** we capitalize the word immediately after a colon?

a) Always
b) When the colon introduces a quotation that is a complete sentence

c) When the colon introduces multiple sentences
d) When the colon introduces a word or phrase for emphasis

See the answers

Hyphens

Definition

A **hyphen** (**-**) is used primarily to join two or more words to form a new, compound word or to provide clarity when using certain **affixes** (such as prefixes). Hyphens also have certain technical uses, such as indicating a range of numbers or combining multiple sets of numbers together into a single unit (as is often done with telephone numbers).

Because a hyphen unites multiple things into a single element, we do not put spaces on either side of it (except in one specific circumstance known as a **hanging hyphen**, which we'll discuss later on).

Forming compound words

The most common use for the hyphen is to join multiple words to create **compound words**. These can be compound adjectives, compound nouns, and **compound numbers**.

Compound adjectives

A **compound adjective** (also known as a **compound modifier** or a **phrasal adjective**) is created by two or more words that work jointly to modify the same noun. They can be composed of various combinations of adjectives, nouns, quantifiers, and participles, with a hyphen appearing between each word that is used.

Adjective + Adjective

- “Look in the **top-right** corner of the screen.”
- “She had bright, **blue-green** eyes.”
- “I need you to print 20 **black-and-white** copies of the contract.”

Adjective + Noun

- “They went on a **wild-goose** chase.”
- “I can only find **part-time** work at the moment.”
- “Do you have any **sugar-free** cookies?”

Noun + Noun

We usually join two nouns with the conjunction *and* to make them into a compound adjective.

- “I find her **salt-and-pepper** hair very attractive.”
- “These old **brick-and-mortar** buildings have stood the test of time.”

Quantifier + Noun

- "It is the only **10-storey** building in the town."
- "The **eight-pound** bag fell to the floor."
- "The theater has a **400-person** capacity."

Participles

Past and present participles can be paired with adjectives, nouns, and adverbs to form compound adjectives.

- "Many legends still survive about **man-eating** whales, but they are simply untrue." (present participle + noun)
- "My **old-fashioned** aunt would never approve." (adjective + past participle)
- "We have **well-intentioned** neighbors, but they can be a bit nosy sometimes." (adverb + past participle)
- "Our eyes had to adjust in the **dimly lit** corridor." (adverb + past participle)

When not to use a hyphen

Notice that, in the last example above, *dimly lit* is not hyphenated. Adverbs ending in "-ly," as well as the adverb *very*, do **not** take a hyphen in compound constructions because it is always clear that they are modifying the adjective or participle that follows them. For example:

- "There are many **beautifully constructed** houses in this neighborhood."
- "Margaret is a **very bright** student and a **wonderfully talented** pianist."

Be careful not to apply this rule to **adjectives** or **nouns** that end in "-ly"—these will take a hyphen in a compound adjective, as in:

- "My uncle helped refugees escape to **ally-controlled** countries during the war."
- "My brother was a **sickly-looking** kid growing up, but he has become one of the top athletes in the country."

Also note that we generally don't use a hyphen with compound adjectives when they appear after the noun they are modifying. For example:

- "My aunt is rather **old fashioned**."
- "This bag weighs **eight pounds**."
- "We're looking for a place to eat that is **family friendly**."
- "Our neighbors can be a bit nosy, but they are **well intentioned**."

Be careful though, because this is not always the case—some compound adjectives always (or often) remain hyphenated, even when they appear after a noun. For instance:

- “Her eyes are **blue-green**.”
- “Are these cookies **sugar-free**?”
- “I try to avoid food that is **mass-produced**.”

If in doubt, try searching for the compound adjective in a dictionary—if it is listed with a hyphen, there’s a good chance that it always takes one regardless of its position.

Compound nouns

A **compound noun** is a noun composed of two or more words that work together as a single unit to identify a person, place, or thing.

Writing compound nouns is a bit complicated due to the fact that they can take three different forms: open (or spaced), hyphenated, and closed (written as a single word). Unfortunately, there aren’t any rules that tell us which of the three forms is acceptable for a particular compound noun. Here are some examples of **hyphenated compound nouns**:

- **six-pack** (quantifier + noun)
- **check-in** (noun + preposition)
- **mother-in-law** (noun + preposition + noun)
- **eight-year-old** (number + noun + adjective)

Single-word compound verbs

We sometimes use other parts of speech, especially nouns and adjectives, to form verbs that describe a very specific action. When these are combined into a single word, we often use a hyphen to eliminate possible confusion when reading. For example:

- “Why don’t we go **ice-skating** this weekend?”
- “Please be sure to **double-space** your essays.”
- “After the horrible heatwave last year, the campus has promised to start **air-conditioning** their classrooms.”
- “I would like to **test-drive** the car before I buy it.”

However, as certain words become more commonplace, they tend to lose their hyphenation. For instance:

- “We need to **childproof** the house this weekend.”
- “I’m going to **babysit** for them next Friday.”
- “The report still needs to be **copyedited**, but otherwise it’s finished.”

If you’re unsure whether to hyphenate a single-word compound verb, check the spelling in a good dictionary.

Usage Note: Compound verbs vs. Compound predicates

A compound verb is one that is formed from two or more words. In addition to the single-word compound verbs that we just looked at, there are also phrasal verbs and prepositional verbs. Verbs formed using auxiliary verbs are also sometimes referred to as a type of compound, since there are composed of multiple verbs. (Note that only single-word compounds are hyphenated.) For example:

- “I don’t mean to **second-guess** you, but you should check the work again.” (single-word compound)
- “We’re just waiting for the plane to **take off**.” (phrasal verb)
- “Kelly **asked for** a raise.” (prepositional verb)
- “I **will see** him on Monday.” (auxiliary verb construction)

Be careful not to confuse compound verbs with **compound** predicates, which refer to multiple actions being performed by the same subject of a clause. Compound predicates are made up of multiple verbs joined by a conjunction (and a comma or commas, if there are more than two). For example:

- “By the time she was five, she could **read, write, and play the violin**.”

Note that you may find sources that erroneously call these compound verbs, but this is not correct.

Compound numbers

While we usually write double-digit numbers numerically (as in 21, 45, 87, etc.), we can also write them as words. For any double-digit number higher than 20 and lower than 100, we use a hyphen to write it as a **compound number**.

For example:

- **twenty-one** (21)
- **forty-five** (45)
- **eighty-seven** (87)

We use this same method if the hyphenated number appears in a compound that's more than two digits. If the number has more than three digits, we use commas in the same way as we would for writing it numerically. For example:

- **one hundred ninety-nine** (199)
- **two thousand, three hundred thirty-two** (2,332)
- **five million, four hundred fifty-six thousand, one hundred twenty-two** (5,456,122)

This will also work the same way when we write full years (we don't use commas for these):

- "The United States declared its independence in **seventeen seventy-six** [1776]."
- "The **fifty-third** [53rd] US presidential election took place in **nineteen ninety-six** [1996]."

Writing fractions

Similar to how we form compound numbers, we also use a hyphen when we write **fractions**. For example:

- "The auditorium was only **one-third** (1/3) full."
- "We've still got **three-quarters** (3/4) of a tank of gas."

Forming compound words with prefixes

A **prefix** attaches to the beginning of a word (known as the **root** or **stem word**) to change its meaning.

The vast majority of prefixes don't require a hyphen when they are attached to the root. Here are just a few examples:

- *un* + *happy* = ***unhappy*** (not happy)
- *de* + *activate* = ***deactivate*** (turn off or stop from functioning)
- *semi* + *circle* = ***semicircle*** (half a circle)

However, it is sometimes the case that adding a prefix to a stem can result in a word that is hard to read. In this case, we can use a hyphen between the prefix

and the stem word to clarify the meaning of the new word.

Same letters

Many writers choose to add a hyphen when the last letter of the prefix and the first letter of the root are both the same (usually **vowels**) so as to avoid creating a word that is difficult or confusing to read. For example:

- *co* + *operate* = ***co-operate*** (work/operate together)
- *re* + *election* = ***re-election*** (a second election)

Note that this hyphen is often optional and up to the writer's discretion, and many double-vowel words are now commonly spelled <u>without</u> the hyphen. If in doubt, use a good dictionary or check your school's or business's style guide.

Confusing spellings

Another instance when we might use a hyphen is when the resulting spelling would be confusing or awkward to read. For example:

- *co* + *edit* = ***co-edit*** (compare with *coedit*)
- *de* + *ice* = ***de-ice*** (compare with *deice*)

Again, using the prefix <u>without</u> a hyphen is often a correct way to spell the word too, so the hyphen is purely up to the writer's discretion.

Creating words with a different meaning

When adding a prefix (especially *re-*) creates a word that looks the same as (or similar to) an existing word with a different meaning, we should use a hyphen to avoid confusion. For example:

- *re* + *cover* = ***re-cover*** (meaning "to cover again"; compare with *recover*, meaning "to get back or regain")
- *de* + *stress* = ***de-stress*** (meaning "to reduce stress"; without the hyphen, *destress* looks very similar to *distress*, meaning "to cause strain, anxiety, or suffering")

With proper nouns and adjectives

When a prefix is paired with a proper noun or a proper adjective, we use a hyphen so we don't have a capital letter appearing in the middle of a word. While hyphens have been almost always optional in our previous examples, we always use a hyphen with proper words. For example:

- *pro* + *Canada* = ***pro-Canada*** (in favor of Canada; not *proCanada*)
- *pre* + *Industrial Revolution* = ***pre-Industrial Revolution*** (before the beginning of the Industrial revolution; not *preIndustrial Revolution*)

Note that some style guides suggest using an **en dash** (**–**) instead of a hyphen when a prefix is used with a proper noun or adjective that is already a compound, as in our last example. Using this method, it would look like this:

- ***pre–Industrial Revolution***

However, this is largely a personal preference, unless the style guide used by your school or employer specifically prescribes its use.

(See the usage note at the end of this section for more information on using en dashes vs. hyphens.)

With *self-*, *all-*, and *ex-*

In addition to proper nouns and adjectives, we almost always use a hyphen with the three prefixes *self-*, *all-*, and *ex-*, as in:

- *self* + *conscious* = ***self-conscious*** (not *selfconscious*)
- *all* + *encompassing* = ***all-encompassing*** (not *allencompassing*)
- *ex* + *boyfriend* = ***ex-boyfriend*** (not *exboyfriend*)

The hanging hyphen

Sometimes the same word will be repeated in multiple consecutive compound words. Rather than just repeat the word multiple times, which would lead to a repetitive sentence, we use what's known as a **hanging hyphen** (also called a **suspended hyphen**, **suspensive hyphen**, **dangling hyphen**, or **floating hyphen**). This is the only instance in which a hyphen can be followed (or preceded) by a space.

Usually, it is the last word (or words) in a compound that will be omitted and leave a hyphen "hanging" from the end of a descriptor in the compound. For example:

- “There are many interesting differences in the way social classes operated in **pre-** and **post-war** Britain.”
- “My dissertation is going to focus on **late-nineteenth-** and **early-twentieth-century** literature.”
- “I teach **sixth-**, **seventh-**, and **eighth-grade** students.”
- “My **mother-** and **father-in-law** are flying in from Chicago this evening.”
- “Each politician must ask **him-** or **herself** what is best for the country.”

(Note that, as in the last example, a hanging hyphen can be used for a closed compound word that would normally not use a hyphen.)

Much less commonly, the first word of a compound is omitted, which means the hyphen is suspended from the beginning of the compound’s descriptor, as in:

- “We’re here today to honor the **policemen** and **-women** who go above and beyond the call of duty.”
- “The **family-owned** and **-operated** business has been a part of the local community for over 50 years.”

Technical uses

Aside from the grammatical function of forming compounds, the hyphen is also used for two technical purposes.

Dividing numerical sequences

When we have long numerical sequences that are not representative of a sum, we often use hyphens to separate them into smaller sections that are easier to read. This is often used for telephone numbers or unique personal identifiers.

Expressing a range of values

Hyphens are often used to indicate a range of values, usually numbers or dates. For example:

- "Please refer to pages **83-88** for more information."
- "The clinic is open **Monday-Friday**, **8:00 AM-5:00 PM**."

They can also be used when reporting the result of a ballot or score of a contest, as in:

- "The home team beat their rivals **10-2** in the homecoming game."
- "The board voted **5-4** to accept the proposal."

However, many style guides—including this one—recommend using an **en-dash** instead of a hyphen in such instances.

Usage Note: Hyphens vs. Dashes

It's important to clarify the difference between hyphens and dashes. Although they are very similar in appearance, they have very different grammatical functions.

As we said already, hyphens are used to join words or sets of numbers together to form a single unit.

Dashes are subdivided into two types: **en dashes** (–) and **em dashes** (—). En dashes are slightly longer than hyphens (approximately the width of a capital N), while em dashes are slightly longer than en dashes

(approximately the width of a capital M).

En dashes are the preferred punctuation used to either express a range (usually of numbers or dates) or the result of a contest or vote. Let's look at our previous examples, this time using en dashes instead of hyphens:

- "Please refer to pages **83–88** for more information."
- "The clinic is open **Monday–Friday**, **8:00 AM–5:00 PM**."
- "The home team beat their rivals **10–2** in the homecoming game."
- "The board voted **5–4** to accept the proposal."

Em dashes (often simply referred to as dashes, because they are more common) are used to indicate parenthetical information or to emphasize a part of a sentence. They are used in pairs if the information appears in the *middle* of a sentence, but only one is used if the information appears at the *end* of the sentence. For example:

- "The senator**—a vocal critic of the president's policies—**said she is planning a motion to defeat his latest tax-reform bill."
- "In my opinion, there is only one true muscle car—the original Ford Mustang."

It is quite common to see a hyphen used in place of dashes (usually because it is simply faster and easier to type), but this should be avoided, especially for em dashes. Using hyphens for too many purposes can result in a very confusing sentence. However, if you do use hyphens instead of em dashes (for instance, if you are using a typewriter and cannot form an em dash), just use **two hyphens** in a row, as in:

- "The senator**--a vocal critic of the president's policies--**said she is planning a motion to defeat his latest tax-reform bill."
- "In my opinion, there is only one true muscle car--the original Ford Mustang."

For more information on using en and em dashes, see the chapter on Dashes.

Quiz

1. Which of the following is **not** a function of the hyphen?

a) To join two words together into a compound
b) To divide numerical sequences into smaller sections
c) To indicate parenthetical information in a sentence
d) To make a word formed with a prefix easier to read or understand

2. Which of the following words **must** take a hyphen? (All punctuation has been removed)

a) cooperate
b) selfdescribed
c) proBritain
d) unjust
e) A & B
f) B & C
g) C & D

3. Which of the following is the correct spelling of the number **243,652**?

a) twenty-four three thousand, six hundred fifty-two
b) two hundred forty-three thousand, six hundred fifty-two
c) two hundred forty-three thousand, sixty-five two hundred
d) twenty-four three thousand, sixty-five two hundred

4. A hyphen can join which of the following together to form a compound adjective?

a) adjective + adjective
b) adjective + noun
c) noun + participle
d) all of the above
e) none of the above

5. Which of the following is the only instance in which a hyphen can be preceded or followed by a space?

a) When it is a hanging hyphen
b) When it is used to express a range
c) When it is forming a compound verb
d) Never

See the answers

Dashes

Definition

There are two similar but distinct punctuation marks called **dashes**: the **en dash** (**–**) and the **em dash** (**—**). In appearance, an en dash is slightly longer than a hyphen (**-**), approximately the width of a capital N, while an em dash is slightly longer than an en dash, approximately the width of a capital M (hence their names).

When we refer to dashes, we are usually referring to em dashes, as they are the more common punctuation mark of the two. However, it’s important to know the different ways that each mark is used.

En dashes

En dashes (sometimes referred to as **n-dashes** or **en rules**) are the preferred punctuation to indicate a range or the result of a contest or vote, or to establish a connection or conflict between two people or things. (The en dash also has an optional use when forming certain compound words, which we'll look at a little later.)

We do not use a space between the en dash and the two elements it is connecting.

Indicating a range of values

The most common use of the en dash is to connect two numbers, dates, or times to indicate a range that spans these figures. We can think of the en dash as representing the words *to* or *through* when it is used in this way. For example:

- "Please refer to pages **83–88** for more information."
- "The clinic is open **Monday–Friday**."
- "We need you to submit your expense report for **January–March**."
- "The company had been a fixture in the community from **1998–2006**."

Note that when the items in the range contain multiple words, we place the en dash between the last word of the first element and the first word of the second element, as in:

- "I'll be in the office **8:00 *AM–4:00* PM** this Friday."
- "The **November *2010–February* 2011** sales figures were a bit lower than we had hoped."

If the first part of the range includes an abbreviation marked with a period, the en dash appears directly alongside it—we still do not put a space between the two. For example:

- "Please be aware that we will be closed **Thurs.–Mon.**"
- "We'll be staying with my in-laws from **Apr.–Aug.** while our house is renovated."

Note that some style guides do not recommend using an en dash when a range is introduced by a word like *from* or *between*. In very formal or professional writing, consult your school's or employer's style guide; otherwise, it is largely a matter of personal preference.

Indicating a score

When we write the score of a competition, such as a sporting event or a vote, we use an en dash between the two numbers. Again, think of the en dash as standing in for the word *to* in this case. For example:

- "The home team beat their rivals **14–10** in the homecoming game."
- "The board voted **5–4** to accept the proposal."
- "The jury returned a guilty verdict with a **10–1** majority."

Expressing a connection or conflict

We can also use an en dash when we want to express a direct connection between two people, things, or places. This is different from simply joining them as a compound modifier to describe the same noun (which we would use a hyphen for). This use can be a bit trickier to understand, so let's look at some examples:

- "The president is trying to drum up support for the **Mexico–U.S.** trade deal."
- "The **Republican–Democrat** divide on the issue has only widened in recent months."
- "We will begin boarding the **Denver–Chicago** flight shortly."
- "The **England–Germany** match will air at 5 PM, London time."

Even though each pairing is modifying the noun or nouns that follow it (*trade deal, divide, flight, match*), the en dash in each is expressing an explicit connection between the two elements that a hyphen would not be able to demonstrate. If we were to use a hyphen instead of an en dash, it would combine the two elements in each pair into a single modifying element, thus confusing the meaning of each sentence. For instance, "**Mexico-U.S.** trade deal" suggests Mexico and the United States as a single entity, rather than two separate parties engaged in the same trade deal. If we want to preserve the intended meaning, we must use an en dash.

Other uses

Technical references

We sometimes use an en dash when referencing a technical element that appears elsewhere in the text (as in an appendix). For instance:

- "Table **1–C** on page 239 gives a quick breakdown of all three options."
- "Please refer to clause **4–D** in Appendix C for more information."

Forming certain compounds

While we typically only use hyphens to form compound words, some style guides recommend using an en dash instead if we are joining an existing compound (whether open or hyphenated) with another word. For example:

- "The **New York *State–led*** initiative is gaining traction across the country."
- "A ***multiple–award*-winning** novelist, Ms. Jones currently lives in Portland, Oregon."
- "My thesis focuses on ***post–Industrial* Revolution** economics."
- "Daniel is doing quite well for himself, despite having only a ***pre–high*** **school** education."

Other style guides only suggest using the en dash when forming compounds with multiple-word proper nouns and adjectives, in which case our second and fourth examples above would only use hyphens.

Either way, the use of en dashes rather than hyphens to form compounds is largely a matter of personal preference for writers; unless your school's or employer's in-house style guide provides specific guidelines, just use whichever form looks best to you and be consistent.

Hyphens vs. en dashes

Because they are so similar in appearance (and because there is no dedicated "en dash" button on a keyboard), many writers tend to simply use hyphens in place of en dashes in all cases for the sake of ease.

Let's look at some of our examples from above, this time using hyphens instead of en dashes:

- "Please refer to pages **83-88** for more information."
- "The home team beat their rivals **14-10** in the homecoming game."
- "We will begin boarding the **Denver-Chicago** flight shortly."
- "Table **1-C** on page 239 gives a quick breakdown of all three options."

- "A **multiple-award-winning** novelist, Ms. Jones currently lives in Portland, Oregon."

While there is not much difference between the two forms in their appearance, the extra length of the en dash is usually preferred because it helps to specify its exact function within the context. If there are several hyphens that perform different functions in the same sentence or paragraph, the text may be difficult or confusing to read.

How to type an en dash
One of the main reasons writers end up using hyphens instead of en dashes in their writing is because a hyphen is faster and easier to type. In many cases, writers simply may not be aware how to type an en dash. In most word processing software, you can create an en dash simply by typing space-hyphen-space. After you hit the spacebar the second time, the program will automatically convert the hyphen into an en dash. However, as we've seen above, we generally should **not** put spaces around an en dash. To create one manually on a computer running Windows, hold the left Alt button on your keyboard and type 0150 on the number pad (with Num Lock enabled). If you are using a Mac computer, hold Option and hit the hyphen button to create an en dash.

Em dashes

Em dashes (also known as **m-dashes** or **em rules**) are primarily used to indicate parenthetical information. In this way, they act as more emphatic alternatives to commas and parentheses. While parentheses and commas are used to include parenthetical information more naturally and subtly in a sentence, a dash creates a more forceful break in the text that serves to emphasize and highlight such information.

In addition, em dashes can be used instead of colons in less formal writing, and they can also be used to represent missing or omitted text and to indicate a break in dialogue.

In place of commas

In addition to many other functions, **commas** are often used to enclose parenthetical information, such as absolute phrases, appositives, relative clauses, and interjections. It is an understated punctuation mark that does not draw the reader's attention away from the rest of the sentence, instead weaving the parenthetical statement into the natural flow of the sentence. If we want to emphasize the information, though, we can instead use em dashes, which break the flow of the sentence and force the reader to pay closer attention. (Em dashes are also useful if the parenthetical statement contains internal commas that might cause confusion.)

Let's look at different types of parenthetical writing and examine when it is—or is not—appropriate to use an em dash in place of a comma.

Absolute phrases

An **absolute phrase** (sometimes known as an **absolute construction**) is a grammatically independent group of words (usually, but not always, a noun phrase and a past or present participle) that adds a parenthetical commentary on the rest of the sentence.

Absolute phrases can appear at the beginning, middle, or end of a sentence. For the most part, we would use a comma with absolute phrases that appear at the

beginning or end of a sentence, because an em dash would interrupt the flow of the sentence too dramatically (and might cause confusion as a result).

But for absolute phrases that appear in the middle of a sentence, em dashes can sometimes be useful to add forceful emphasis to the parenthetical statement. However, we must be careful not to use em dashes when they might make the sentence awkward or confusing to read.

For example:

- "**The test finished,** Jason heaved a sigh of relief."

✕ "**The test finished—**Jason heaved a sigh of relief." (em dash is not appropriate)

- "Jennifer walked slowly and thoughtfully out the door**, her head turning for a last look at home**."

✕ "Jennifer walked slowly and thoughtfully out the door**—her head turning for a last look at home**." (em dash is not appropriate)

but:

✓ "Jennifer**—her head turning for a last look at home—**walked slowly and thoughtfully out the door." (dashes are acceptable)

- "I hope**, God willing,** to get into Harvard next year."

✓ "I hope**—God willing—**to get into Harvard next year." (dashes are acceptable)

If you are in doubt as to whether dashes will be appropriate to use with an absolute phrase, it is safer just to use commas.

Appositives

An **[appositive** is a proper noun or a noun phrase that serves to describe or rename another noun (or pronoun). Appositives can either be restrictive, meaning they are essential to the meaning of the sentence, or **non-restrictive**, meaning they are parenthetical and thus nonessential to the meaning of the sentence. Only non-restrictive appositives can be set apart by commas or em dashes.

Like absolute phrases, appositives can appear anywhere in a sentence. While we would normally only substitute commas with em dashes for appositives appearing in the middle of a sentence, we **can** use em dashes for appositives at

the end of a sentence if we want to emphasize the added information. For example:

- “The senator**, a vocal critic of the president’s policies,** said she is planning a motion to defeat his latest tax-reform bill.”

✓ “The senator**—a vocal critic of the president’s policies—**said she is planning a motion to defeat his latest tax-reform bill.”

- “Last night we watched *Funny Girl***, my favorite comedy of all time**!”

✓ “Last night we watched *Funny Girl***—my favorite comedy of all time**.”

- “**A true classic,** this book inspired a generation of young readers.”

× “**A true classic—**this book inspired a generation of young readers.” (an em dash is not appropriate at the beginning of the sentence)

Relative Clauses

Relative clauses (also known as **adjective clauses** or **adjectival clauses**) are dependent clauses that provide descriptive information about a noun or noun phrase. Relative clauses are introduced by either a relative pronoun (*who*, *whom*, *whose*, *which*, and *that*) or a relative adverb (*where*, *when*, and *why*).

Like appositives, relative clauses provide information that is either essential (restrictive) or nonessential (non-restrictive) to the completeness of the sentence; only **non-restrictive relative clauses** are set apart by commas or em dashes. For example:

- “The woman down the street**, whose children are the same age as ours,** invited us over for dinner next week.”

✓ “The woman down the street**—whose children are the same age as ours** —invited us over for dinner next week.”

- “Samantha**, whom I’ve asked to be my bridesmaid,** is getting married next year.”

✓ “Samantha**—whom I’ve asked to be my bridesmaid—**is getting married next year.”

- “*Funny Girl***, which is my favorite comedy of all time,** is on TV tomorrow night.”

✓ “*Funny Girl***—which is my favorite comedy of all time—**is on TV tomorrow night.”

- “The principal scheduled the meeting for mid-July**, when most members of staff will be on vacation**.”

✓ “The principal scheduled the meeting for mid-July**—when most members of staff will be on vacation**.”

- “The book **that I read for class** was really interesting.”

× “The book**—that I read for class—**was really interesting.” (Incorrect; we cannot use an em dash with a restrictive relative clause.)

Interjections

An **interjection**, also known as an **exclamation**, is a word, phrase, or sound used to convey an emotion such as surprise, excitement, happiness, or anger. Interjections can stand alone as minor sentences, punctuated with a period, exclamation point, or question mark.

However, since interjections are not “proper” sentences, some writers prefer to attach them to a complete sentence using a comma or, if more emphasis is desired, an em dash. (Ultimately, it is up to preference, but note that this use of the em dash is very informal.)

For example:

- “**Ooh,** what a beautiful dress!”

✓ “**Ooh—**what a beautiful dress!”

- “**Brr,** it’s freezing in here.”

✓ “**Brr—**it’s freezing in here.”

- “**Oh my gosh,** did I tell you what Jonathan did last week?”

✓ “**Oh my gosh—**did I tell you what Jonathan did last week?”

Other parenthetical information

We can also use other phrases or clauses parenthetically to provide supporting information or commentary on the rest of the sentence. Again, how we set these apart from the rest of the text depends on the level of emphasis we want to add to them. In some cases, an em dash is actually preferable to a comma. For example:

- “Find me something to dig with**, like a shovel or spade,** so I can plant these

flowers."
✓ "Find me something to dig with**—like a shovel or spade—**so I can plant these flowers."

- "However, the rules**, if we choose to follow them at all,** are not always consistent."

✓ "However, the rules**—if we choose to follow them at all**—are not always consistent."

- "The popular song is a great example of poor grammar**, because its lyrics are all wrong**!"

✓ "The popular song is a great example of poor grammar**—because its lyrics are all wrong**!"

× "Many fundamental aspects of living on one's own**, cooking, cleaning, doing laundry,** are things for which many young adults are completely unprepared."
✓ "Many fundamental aspects of living on one's own**—cooking, cleaning, doing laundry—**are things for which many young adults are completely unprepared." (Dashes are preferable here because having so many commas can be confusing to read.)

Note that in each of the examples above, we could have used parentheses instead of commas or em dashes to indicate the parenthetical information.

In place of parentheses

Parentheses always travel in pairs of two, no matter where they appear in a sentence. Because they are self-contained, there is generally no restriction as to what information can be included within them, so long as it is grammatically independent of the rest of the sentence.

Like commas, parentheses can often be replaced by em dashes in a sentence if we want (or ought) to draw more attention to the information within them. Just be aware that em dashes are considered much less formal than parentheses, so they should be avoided when writing professional or academic material.

While we always use two parentheses, we only use one em dash if it is used at the beginning or end of a sentence. Additionally, a set of parentheses will operate in conjunction with surrounding commas, while em dashes will replace the commas altogether.

Let's look at some examples:

- "I know that my friend Stephen **(the poor dear!)** has found living on his own very difficult."

✓ "I know that my friend Stephen**—the poor dear!—**has found living on his own very difficult."

- "As part of the centenary commemorations for the sinking of the RMS *Lusitania* **(May 7, 1915)**, Irish President Michael Higgins participated in a wreath-laying ceremony in County Cork."

✓ "As part of the centenary commemorations for the sinking of the RMS *Lusitania***—May 7, 1915—**Irish President Michael Higgins participated in a wreath-laying ceremony in County Cork."

- "Knowing how difficult it is to look after just one child, I'll never grasp how my mother managed, considering how many children **(nine in all)** she raised more or less on her own."

✓ "Knowing how difficult it is to look after just one child, I'll never grasp how my mother managed, considering how many children**—nine in all—**she raised more or less on her own."

Note that em dashes should **not** be substituted for parentheses in more technical, specialized uses (such as enclosing numbers or letters in a list, area codes of telephone numbers, or a person's birth year). For more information on these types of uses, see the section on Parentheses.

In place of colons

In less formal writing, we can often substitute an em dash for a colon if we want to quickly indicate or emphasize a list or clarifying information. Just remember that we can only use a colon after an clause—that is, one that can stand on its own as a complete sentence—and we must apply the same rule if we are using an em dash instead.

For example:

- "In my opinion, the perfect sandwich has only three things: ham, cheese, and mayonnaise."

✓ "In my opinion, the perfect sandwich has only three things—ham, cheese, and mayonnaise."

- "There are several reasons to switch to online banking: faster access to your

accounts, instant loan approvals, and a lower impact on the environment."

✓ "There are several reasons to switch to online banking—faster access to your accounts, instant loan approvals, and a lower impact on the environment."

- "As far as I'm concerned, there is only one true muscle car: the original Ford Mustang."
- "As far as I'm concerned, there is only one true muscle car—the original Ford Mustang."

We sometimes capitalize the first word that follows a colon (see the article on Colons for more on this topic), but we should never do so after an em dash. For instance:

- "Remember: Keep your friends close, and your enemies even closer."

✓ "Remember—keep your friends close, and your enemies even closer."

- "I will say only this: Don't be distracted from your studies. Your education must come first and foremost."

✗ "I will say only this—Don't be distracted from your studies. Your education must come first and foremost." (incorrect)

Other uses

In addition to replacing other types of punctuation, the em dash can also be used in two specific technical ways: representing missing text and indicating an interruption in dialogue.

Missing text

Occasionally, dashes can be used to represent words or parts of words that are omitted from a sentence. These can be intentional omissions, as for censorship purposes, or because the missing text is unknown. If only a part of a word is missing, we represent it with two em dashes in a row; if an entire word is omitted, it is represented with two or three em dashes (depending on the writer's preference). Unlike in other uses for the em dash, other punctuation in the sentence (such as commas) will appear as usual.

For example:

- "I was speaking with **B——**, and he told me that he would be visiting **C**

—— later this week.”

- “Long ago, in the city of **P——**, a young man named Alexey made a most troubling discovery.”
- “With the page torn, all I could read was, ‘Please, find a fr——.’ Who knows what it’s supposed to mean.”
- “My client, ———, has requested not to be referred to by name again during this inquest.”

Interruptions

We can also use the em dash to signify when someone has been interrupted while talking or thinking. We can use either a single or a double em dash to this effect; it’s entirely up to personal preference (just be sure to be consistent). For example:

- Speaker A: “As I was saying, I think we ne—”
- Speaker B: “Sorry to interrupt again, sir, but I’m still not clear on your last point.”
- Speaker A: *Gosh, this is boring. I hope something interesting happens soon so I——*
- Speaker B: “Thompson! Stop daydreaming and pay attention!”

Spacing around em dashes

Conventionally, we do not put spaces around em dashes. However, many writers (especially journalists and online writers) prefer to include a space on either side of a dash to aid readability. For example:

- “The victory — a first for the L.A. team — has led to celebrations throughout California.”
- “There is at least one thing the candidate has learned in recent months — discretion.”

Regardless of convention, whether or not to use spaces generally comes down to personal preference; just be sure to check whether the style guide of your school or employer specifically requires that they be included or omitted.

Substituting hyphens and en dashes

It is quite common to see writers use hyphens instead of em dashes, due to the speed and ease with which a hyphen can typed. However, this should be avoided, as having hyphens performing too many functions in a sentence can lead to some very confusing reading.

If you need to use a hyphen instead of a dash—for instance, if you are using a typewriter or the keyboard on a mobile device, and you are unable to form a true em dash—then you should use **two hyphens** in a row. (Do not just use a single hyphen, as it might look like you're creating a compound word.) For example:

- "The senator**--a vocal critic of the president's policies--**said she is planning a motion to defeat his latest tax-reform bill."
- "In my opinion, there is only one true muscle car--the original Ford Mustang."
- "I will say only this--don't be distracted from your studies. Your education must come first and foremost."
- "The victory--a first for the L.A. team--has led to celebrations throughout California."

It's also not uncommon to see an en dash used instead of an em dash, especially in published writing. Again, this is not the preferred mark according to the majority of style guides, but it is not necessarily incorrect. If en dashes are used, they should be surrounded by spaces to avoid making the words appear too close together. For instance:

- "The senator **– a vocal critic of the president's policies –** said she is planning a motion to defeat his latest tax-reform bill."
- "In my opinion, there is only one true muscle car – the original Ford Mustang."
- "I will say only this – don't be distracted from your studies. Your education must come first and foremost."
- "The victory – a first for the L.A. team – has led to celebrations throughout California."

How to type an em dash
In most word processing software, you can create an em dash simply by typing two hyphens in a row between two words (without hitting the spacebar in between). Once you hit the spacebar after the second word, the program will automatically convert the hyphens into a single em dash.

You can also manually create an em dash without relying on a word processor. If you are using a Windows-based computer, hold the left Alt button on your keyboard and type 0151 on the number pad (with Num Lock enabled). If you are using a Mac computer, hold Shift + Option and hit the hyphen button to create an em dash.

Quiz

1. Which of the following is the **longest** punctuation mark?

a) Hyphen
b) En dash
c) Em dash

2. Which of the following is not **conventionally** a function of an en dash?

a) To indicate a range between two values
b) To indicate parenthetical information
c) To indicate a score or result
d) To indicate a connection or conflict

3. Which of the following sentences is punctuated **correctly**?

a) “I would love to stay longer—really, I would, but I need to get up early tomorrow.”
b) “The application period this year will be June—August.”
c) “The Cavaliers beat the Warriors 93–89 in game seven.”
d) “He has shown two of the things I hate most-deceit and jealousy.”

4. Em dashes can be used in place of which punctuation marks?

a) Commas
b) Colons
c) Parentheses
d) A & B
e) A & C
f) All of the above

5. How many em dashes are used to represent an entire word that is omitted from a sentence?

a) One
b) Two
c) Three

d) Either A or B
e) Either B or C

See the answers

Slashes

Definition

The **slash** (**/**)—technically known as a **virgule** but also called a **slant**, **solidus**, or **stroke** (the common name in British English)—serves a number of purposes in writing, essentially standing in for other words as a quick and clear way of showing the connection between two things. A slash is conventionally used without spaces between it and the words it connects (although it is also common to see spaces used, especially if one or both of the things being joined contain multiple words).

Be aware that using a slash is generally considered informal by style guides, and its use is discouraged in formal, academic, and professional writing. The only time a slash is considered acceptable in formal writing is when citing lines of **poetry**, which we'll look at later.

The slash must also not be confused with a **backslash** (\ ), which is used in computer programming but not in written English. When a distinction between the two needs to be made, the slash is sometimes referred to as a **forward slash**.

In place of *or*

One of the most common uses for the slash is to stand in for the word *or*, expressing a choice between two things. For example:

- “Each candidate must be sure to provide **his/her** references before the interview.”
- “This is not a simple **right/wrong** issue; it has much more complexity than that.
- “Please limit your responses to **yes/no**.”
- “Ask your **parent/guardian** before purchasing any online content.”

It’s also common to find the slash used in this way with shortenings of words. For example, it’s often found used with a shortened form of “she or he” as a way of providing an alternative that looks more gender-neutral, as in:

- “If any student has concerns, **s/he** should speak to one of the school’s counselors right away.”

In other constructions, words are represented by their first letter (often capitalized):

- “The test will consist of 24 **T/F** [true or false] question and six short-answer questions.”
- “During the interview, you’ll be asked several **Y/N** [yes or no] questions.”

Remember, in more formal writing, it is always better to use *or* instead of a slash, and the shortened words we saw above should be written out in full.

and/or

One somewhat specialized use of the slash is in the term ***and/or***, meaning “one or the other or both.” Because *or* is already present in the compound, the slash does not represent a second *or*, but the implication of a choice between the two remains nevertheless. For example:

- “Upon conviction, drivers may face a fine of $5,000 **and/or** six months in jail.”
- “The seminar will be conducted by the general manager **and/or** an HR representative.”
- “Expect rain **and/or** snow over the weekend.”

We can also use *and/or* with more than two items, generally meaning "one or more." For example:

- "Please provide proof of identity, address, current residency status, **and/or** an existing employment permit (as applicable) when filing your visa application."
- "Any and all information, illustrations, **and/or** downloadable content on this website are purely for educational purposes only."

Again, *and/or* should be avoided in any formal, academic, or professional writing. In some cases, *and/or* can simply be replaced with *or* in cases when the possible inclusion of the other option is implied, as in:

- "Expect rain **or** snow over the weekend."
- "Please provide proof of identity, address, current residency status, **or** existing employment permit (as applicable) when filing your visa application."

In other instances, *and* may do the work of *and/or*, with *or* being either implied or unnecessary:

- "Any and all information, illustrations, **and** downloadable content on this website are purely for educational purposes only."

Sometimes *or* is not enough to express this relationship clearly. If we need to make it explicitly clear that one, the other, or both of two options are possible, we could use *or* and then follow the options with *or both*. Alternatively, we could replace *or* with a comma, treating *or both* as the third item in a list. For instance:

- "Upon conviction, drivers may face a fine of $5,000 **or** six months in jail **or both**."
- "The seminar will be conducted by the general manager**,** an HR representative**, or both**."

Finally, if we decide to use *and/or*, we must be sure that it is grammatically appropriate for the sentence—it can only be used when one or both (or all) options are possible, **not** when we can choose only one or the other. For example:

✗ "You are required to bring either a pen **and/or** a pencil." (Incorrect—because the word *either* is used, only one is required, not both.)

In place of *per*

Another very common use of the slash is to stand in for the word *per* (or sometimes *a/an*) when writing about rates. For example:

- "Rent is **$650/month**, due on the first day of each month."
- "Experts have estimated that the state loses at least 300 million gallons of water a month (or roughly 10 million **gallons/day**)."

As when the slash replaces the word *or*, it's very common to see abbreviated forms of words when the slash is used in place of *per*. For instance:

- "Rent is **$650/mo.**, due on the first day of each month."
- "Experts have estimated that the state loses at least 300 million gallons of water a month (or roughly 10 million **gal./day**)."

Expressing connection, conflict, or contrast

It's also common to see a slash used to express connection, conflict, or contrast between two things, a function that is normally reserved for an **en dash** (or, more informally, a **hyphen**) or the Latin loanword *cum* (meaning in this case "also functioning as" or "as well as being").

In place of en dashes

We sometimes use an en dash (**–**) when we want to express a direct connection between two people, things, or places. It's not uncommon for slashes to be used instead of en dashes for this purpose: they're easier to type than en dashes while still maintaining the meaning (which might be lost if we used hyphens instead). Just be aware that the en dash is the preferred punctuation, so you should only use the slash in informal writing. For example:

- "The president is trying to drum up support for the **Mexico–U.S.** trade deal."
- "The president is trying to drum up support for the **Mexico/U.S.** trade deal."
- "The **Republican–Democrat** divide on the issue has only widened in recent months."
- "The **Republican/Democrat** divide on the issue has only widened in recent months."
- "We will begin boarding the **Denver–Chicago–Dublin** flight shortly."
- "We will begin boarding the **Denver/Chicago/Dublin** flight shortly."
- "The **Seattle–New England** football game will air at 5 PM (EST)."
- "The **Seattle/New England** football game will air at 5 PM (EST)."

In place of *cum*

The Latin word *cum* is a preposition meaning "with" (as in the term *summa cum laude*, "with highest honors"). In modern writing, when joining two or more separate nouns that function as a single entity, it has also come to mean "combined with," "as well as being," or "also functioning as." It is often, but not

always, italicized, and it is joined with hyphens between the two things it connects; if we choose to use a slash instead of *cum*, we replace the hyphens as well as the word. Note that we can also use a single hyphen this way as well. For example:

- "I built a **bicycle-cum-generator** to keep the lights on if the power ever goes out."
- "I built a **bicycle/generator** to keep the lights on if the power ever goes out."
- "I built a **bicycle-generator** to keep the lights on if the power ever goes out."

- "I started up my own business as an **agent-*cum*-promoter** about five years ago."
- "I started up my own business as an **agent/promoter** about five years ago."
- "I started up my own business as an **agent-promoter** about five years ago."

- "The **novelist-cum-screenwriter** has found great success in Hollywood."
- "The **novelist/screenwriter** has found great success in Hollywood."
- "The **novelist-screenwriter** has found great success in Hollywood."

Note that in some cases, using a slash or hyphen is much more common than using *cum*. This usually occurs with pairings that have entered common vernacular, as in:

- "This **singer/songwriter's** work never fails to impress."
- "The latest film from the acclaimed **writer-director** is sure to shock audiences."

However, the slash is still discouraged for more formal writing by many style guides; if in doubt, use a hyphen.

Shorthand abbreviations

In very informal writing—especially quick, shorthand notes or outlines—we often find the slash used to denote certain abbreviated forms of words or phrases. Sometimes the slash represents a portion of a word that is omitted, while other times it is used to join the initials of other words. For example:

- "Our offices are open **M/W/F** [Monday, Wednesday, and Friday] from 8 AM to 4 PM."
- "The system failed **b/c** [because] there are problems **w/** [with] the database."
- "Please send correspondence **c/o** [care of] my attorney."
- "Use hyphens **b/w** [between] compounds."

Other abbreviations have become so standard that they've been accepted into common vernacular. For example:

- "Our shop has been open **24/7** [24 hours a day, seven days a week] since we first started up 30 years ago."
- "The entire world changed after **9/11** [September 11, 2001, the date of the al-Qaeda terrorist attacks in the United States]."

Expressing fractions

The slash is also used in mathematics to express a fraction—the numerical portion of a larger number. One instance in which we commonly come across this in day-to-day writing is when expressing a value (especially a score) in contrast to the possible maximum. The slash in this case functions in place of the words “out of.” For example:

- “I loved the movie despite its flaws. I give it **3.5/4** stars.”
- “Your daughter received a **495/500** on our aptitude test, the highest score we’ve ever seen.”
- “When an error occurs, **9/10** times it will be due to a human mistake rather than the computer system.”

We can use the same format when writing more standard ratios as well:

- “I’m already about **3/4** finished, so I should be done by Friday.”
- “The theater is only about **1/2** full.”

Note that in more formal writing we should try to avoid numerical ratios like these, using full words wherever possible or appropriate. For example:

- “Your daughter received a **495 out of 500** on our aptitude test, the highest score we’ve ever seen.”
- “When an error occurs, **nine out of ten** times it will be due to a human mistake rather than a problem with the computer system.”
- “I’m already about **three-quarters** finished, so I should be done by Friday.”
- “The theater is only about **half** full.”

Spans between years

When we are writing about something that spans from one year to the next, we can use a slash as an abbreviated way of indicating this range. We do so by placing a slash immediately after the end of the first year (written in full), followed without a space by the last number of the second year. For example:

- “Could you please forward us your tax information for **1998/9**?”
- “For some reason I’m missing my **2006/7** school transcript.”

It’s also not uncommon to see a two-year span written with the last **two** numbers of the second year, as in:

- “The theater’s **2012/13** program is now available for pre-booking.”
- “The team’s **1978/79** season is still considered its greatest period of success.”

More formally, we would use **en dashes** to write such ranges. Note as well that we can use en dashes when we write the two years in full, as well as for ranges that span more than two years; however, slashes should **not** be used for this:

✓ “The team’s **1978–84** seasons are still considered its greatest period of success.”
✗ “The team’s **1978/84** seasons are still considered its greatest period of success.”

✓ “For some reason I’m missing my **2006–2007** school transcript.”
✗ “For some reason I’m missing my **2006/2007** school transcript.”

Writing dates

When writing a date numerically, we use a slash between the month and day (and year, if included). For example:

- “Your appointment has been scheduled for **10/21** [October 21].”
- “The date of the ceremony is set for **11/16/2019** [November 16, 2019].”

Note that in British English, the day comes before the month:

- “Your appointment has been scheduled for **21/10**.”
- “The date of the ceremony is set for **16/11/2019**.”

Hyphens are also often used for numerical dates, especially in different countries. For instance:

- “Your appointment has been scheduled for **21-10**.”
- “The date of the ceremony is set for **16-11-2019**.”

Note that some style guides consider using the slash to write the date to be informal; for more formal, academic, or professional writing, write out the date in full.

Citing lines of poetry

All of the above uses for the slash are considered by nearly all style guides to be informal (to varying degrees) in proper written English. There is, however, one very specific use for slashes that is considered formally appropriate: denoting line breaks in poetry when it is included as an **in-text citation** (meaning it is structured into the flow of the overall sentence and paragraph).

When we use a slash in this way, we put a space on either side of it; it is the only circumstance under which spaces are **required** with a slash.

For example:

- "These motifs are used in Shakespeare's 'Sonnet 116' in several famous verses: '… Love is not love **/** Which alters when it alteration finds, **/** Or bends with the remover to remove: **/** O, no! it is an ever-fixed mark, **/** That looks on tempests and is never shaken.'"

Be aware that in-text citation of poetry is generally limited to four or five lines for academic writing; if the citation is longer than that, we include the lines beneath the opening sentence, indented and without quotation marks:

"Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, in addition to its moral message, includes one of the simplest yet most horrifying descriptions of being stranded at sea:

> All in a hot and copper sky,
> The bloody Sun, at noon,
> Right up above the mast did stand,
> No bigger than the Moon.
>
> Day after day, day after day,
> We stuck, nor breath nor motion;
> As idle as a painted ship
> Upon a painted ocean.
>
> Water, water, every where,
> And all the boards did shrink;
> Water, water, every where,
> Nor any drop to drink.

This passage contains one of the most famous—and often misquoted—lines of

the poem.”

Quiz

1. Which of the following is **not** a common use for the slash?

a) To stand in place of a conjunction
b) To indicate parenthetical information
c) To indicate a connection, contrast, or conflict between two things
d) To form certain abbreviations
e) A & C
f) B & D

2. In what way are spaces **conventionally** used around a slash (not including lines of poetry)?

a) None are used
b) Only one appears after the slash
c) Only one appears before the slash
d) One before and after the slash

3. Which of the following is the function of a slash when forming shorthand abbreviations?

a) To replace letters omitted from a word
b) To indicate where an abbreviation begins or ends
c) To join the initials of abbreviated words
d) A & B
e) A & C
f) B & C

4. What is the function of the slash in the following sentence?
"I earned about **$300/week** when I worked as a landscaper during college."

a) To replace the word *or*
b) To replace the word *per*
c) To replace the word *cum*
d) To replace an en dash

5. What is the function of the slash in the following sentence?

“We converted the old barn out back into a **bungalow/office**.”

a) To replace the word *or*
b) To replace the word *per*
c) To replace the word *cum*
d) To replace an en dash

6. When are we **not** able to use a slash when citing poetry?

a) When the poetry appears indented beneath the opening sentence
b) When 1–5 lines of a poem are cited
c) When 5 or more lines of a poem are cited
d) When the poetry is quoted within in the flow of the sentence
e) A & C
f) B & D

See the answers

Apostrophes

Definition

An **apostrophe** is a punctuation mark that primarily serves to indicate either grammatical possession or the contraction of two words. It can also sometimes be used to pluralize irregular nouns, such as single letters, abbreviations, and single-digit numbers.

(Note: An apostrophe looks the same as a single end quotation mark (**’**), so care must be used not to confuse the two.)

Forming contractions

When two words are combined to form a contraction, we use an apostrophe as a substitute for the letter or letters that are removed as a result. Most commonly, it is the second word in the group that is shortened, which is known as an enclitic. For example:

- *we'll* = *we* + *will* ("wi" from *will* is replaced by the apostrophe)
- *I'd* = *I* + *would* ("woul" from *would* is replaced by the apostrophe)
- *let's* = *let* + *us* ("u" from *us* is replaced by the apostrophe)
- *can't* = *can* + *not* ("no" from *not* is replaced by the apostrophe)

Remember, the apostrophe marks the **letters** that are left out of the contracted word; it does **not** mark the space that was between the words:

✗ "This plan **does'nt** make any sense." (incorrect)
✗ "This plan **does'n't** make any sense." (incorrect)
✓ "This plan **doesn't** make any sense." (correct)

Sometimes in speech and informal writing, people contract more than two words into one:

- *I'd've* = *I* + *would* + *have* (apostrophes replace "woul" and "ha" of *would* and *have*)

However, this is not a standard practice, and it should not be done in formal or professional writing.

Proclitics

When we form contractions, we almost always omit one or more letters from the second (or occasionally third) word, as we've seen in the examples above. There are a few instances, though, in which the **first** word used in a contraction has one or more letters replaced by an apostrophe. The shortened form of the first word is known as a **proclitic**.

The most common contraction that uses a proclitic in everyday speech and writing is the very informal *y'all*, which is used primarily in Southern dialects of American English:

- *y'all* = *you* + *all* ("ou" from *you* is replaced by the apostrophe)

(While common in colloquial speech and writing, this contraction should not be used in formal, academic, or professional writing.)

The word *it* can also be contracted as a proclitic (usually when followed by “w” words), but this is generally used in more poetic or old-fashioned writing and is not common today. For instance:

- ***’****twas* = *it* + *was* (“i” from *it* is replaced by the apostrophe)
- ***’****twere* = *it* + *were* (“i” from *it* is replaced by the apostrophe)
- ***’****twill* = *it* + *will* (“i” from *it* is replaced by the apostrophe)

Be careful, though: When using an apostrophe at the beginning of a word, remember not to use a single opening quotation mark (**‘**) by mistake.

× **‘Twas** a night we would not soon forget. (incorrect)
√ **’Twas** a night we would not soon forget. (correct)

Contracting single words

An apostrophe can also be used when a longer word is contracted into a shorter word (generally replacing a consonant between two vowels). For example:

- **ma’am** = *madam*
- **ne’er-do-well** = *never-do-well*
- **o’er** = *over*

Till vs. Until vs. ’Til

One single-word contraction that is prevalent, especially in American English, is ***’til***—a contraction of the preposition *until*.

However, this is actually an unnecessary contraction. The confusion is caused by the word *till*, which is synonymous to (but actually pre-dates) *until*. Because of the seemingly extraneous “l” in *till*, many people presume it to be a misspelling, so instead they shorten it to *til* and add an apostrophe where they think *un-* should be.

While it is not necessarily “incorrect” to use *’til* instead of *until* or *till*, be aware that it is a nonstandard spelling and is not preferred by dictionaries. If you are writing in an academic or professional context, it is safer to stick with *until* or, if need be, *till*.

Indicating possession (the possessive form)

An apostrophe is also used with nouns (people, places, and things*) to indicate their possession of something. Most often, an apostrophe is placed at the end of a word followed by "-s." This occurs when there is only **one** person, place, or thing that demonstrates possession.

A lot of the time, the thing that is possessed by the noun follows immediately after it in the sentence. For example:

- "Everyone hates going to the **principal's** office." (The office belongs to the principal.)
- "My **car's*** brakes have been squeaking a lot." (The brakes being discussed are those "belonging" to the car of the speaker.)
- "**Denver's*** weather is dreadful this time of year. (The weather that is dreadful is specific to Denver.)

However, the possessed element can also be separated from the possessor in a sentence, too:

- "Those glasses are my **dad's**." (The glasses belong to the dad.)

A noun with an apostrophe can also be used on its own to answer a question about possession, as in:

- Speaker A: "Whose backpack is this?"
- Speaker B: "**Jenny's**, I think."

*Usage note: Possessives with inanimate objects

Some writers argue that an inanimate object (such as a car, tree, city, etc.) is incapable of "possessing" something, and therefore it should not take the apostrophe "-s" form. From this point of view, "my car's engine" should be replaced with "the engine in my car" or "the engine of my car."

However, grammatical possession refers to the **possessive case** (more technically known as the **genitive case**), which was adapted to English from Latin. Despite the confusing name "possessive," it is not restricted to literal ownership. In many cases, it is used to denote the *attribution* of a person, thing, or place to something or someone else. So even though a car cannot "own" brakes, "*my car's brakes*" lets us know that the brakes the speaker means are specific to his or her car.

Likewise, “**Denver’s weather is dreadful**” doesn’t mean that Denver “owns” that weather. It just makes it clear that only the weather in Denver is being discussed.

Because this is still something of a contentious topic, check the writing style guide of your school, university, or business to see which they prefer. If you are still in doubt as to whether it is acceptable or not, try to reword your sentences to avoid adding apostrophe “-s” to an inanimate object.

On a final note, there are two inanimate things that are generally accepted as able to use possessive apostrophes: **time** and **money**. In these cases, the apostrophe is used to indicate an *amount* of time or money being described. For example:

- “I’ll be there in a **week’s** time.” (I will be there in seven days.)
- “Get me a **dollar’s** worth of candy.” (Get me as much candy as a dollar can buy.)
- “Just be sure to give me an **hour’s** notice.” (Notify me an hour ahead of time.)

Plural possession

If there is more than one person, place, or thing that possesses something else, then the rules change slightly. Because an “-s” is usually added to a word to make it plural, the “-s” that follows the apostrophe is dropped; possession in this case is marked simply by the apostrophe at the end, outside of the plural “-s.” For example:

- “Our **clients’** reactions were fantastic.” (There was more than one client who had a reaction.)
- “The two **cities’** populations have grown at equal rates.” (The populations of two different cities are being discussed and compared.)
- “I’ll have three **months’** experience after this internship.” (I will spend three months gaining experience.)

However, certain words have an **irregular plural** form that doesn’t end in an “-s”—for example, *children*, *people*, *teeth*, *mice*, and many others. In this case, possession is marked in the same way as for singular nouns:

- “**People’s** emotions often get the better of them.”
- “That candy is the **children’s**, so don’t go eating it yourself.”

Words and names ending in “-s”

There are two ways that we can indicate possession in non-plural words and names that end in “-s”. Some writers prefer to treat them like plurals and simply add an apostrophe to the end, leaving out the second “-s,” as in:

- “Mr. **Jones’** house looks quite nice, doesn’t it?”
- “The **boss’** car got towed this morning.”

Other writers choose to add a second “-s” after the apostrophe to create the usual singular possessive form. For example:

- “I’m going out on **Charles’s** boat next weekend.”
- “The **witness’s** impact statement was very moving.”

Both forms are generally accepted, but many writers choose to be guided by **pronunciation** rather than a single universal rule—that is, they do not add the extra “-s” if it would not be pronounced as an extra syllable in speech:

- “Our **class’s** field trip was cancelled.” (The extra “-s” is added because it would be pronounced in speech.)
- “**Brussels’** bridges may soon need repairs.” (The extra “-s” would not be pronounced, so it is left off.)

However, if a name ends in an “-s” or “-es” because it has become plural, then it is always made possessive with just an apostrophe at the end, as in:

- “We ate at the **Smiths’** apartment last night.”
- “I invited the **Joneses’** daughter to see the play tonight.”

Note that apostrophes are **not** used to indicate plurality in a normal noun (except in certain instances with nonstandard words; see “**Pluralizing nonstandard nouns**” later in this article). For example:

✗ “A number of **witness’s** have come forward.” (incorrect)
✓ “A number of **witnesses** have come forward.” (correct)

✗ “The **Jones’** have invited us over to dinner.” (incorrect)
✓ “The **Joneses** have invited us over to dinner.” (correct)

Compound possession

If two or more nouns (usually people) are shown to have possession of something in a sentence, the placement of the apostrophe changes depending on

whether they possess the thing together or separately. This is known as **compound possession** (also called **joint possession**.)

If the people **share** possession of the same thing, then only one apostrophe is used with the last person listed. For example:

- "John, Jack, and **Mitchel's** adventure in Mongolia sounded so exciting!"

If the people possess two separate things, then apostrophes are used for each person in the sentence:

- "**Kate's** and the other **witness's** testimonies were completely different."

If a **personal pronoun** is used for one of the people, then the other one receives an apostrophe no matter what, as in:

- "Oh, that car outside is **John's** and **mine**."
- "**Your** and **Danny's** report cards arrived in the mail today."

Personal pronouns

Apostrophes are never used with personal pronouns to indicate possession, because every personal pronoun has a specific genitive (possessive) case for this purpose. Personal pronouns can take the form of either possessive pronouns or possessive determiners, depending on their function:

Personal Pronoun	Possessive Pronoun	Possessive Determiner
The book belongs to **me**.	The book is **mine**.	That's **my** book.
The book belongs to **you**.	The book is **yours**.	That's **your** book.
The book belongs to **her**.	The book is **hers**.	That's **her** book.
The book belongs to **him**.	The book is **his**.	That's **his** book.
The book belongs to **us**.	The book	That's **our** book.

	is **ours**.	
The book belongs to **them**.	The book is **theirs**.	That’s **their*** book.
The book belongs to **who**?	The book is **whose**?	**Whose*** book is that?
This book is great, but there is some outdated information in **it**.	(not generally used)	This book is great, but **its*** information is a bit outdated.

*Usage note: *it’s*, *who’s*, and *they’re* versus *its*, *whose*, and *their*

Because we are so used to an apostrophe indicating possession, the contractions *it’s*, *who’s*, and *they’re* are often mistakenly used instead of the real possessive forms *its*, *whose*, and *their*. Remember, *it’s* = “it is” (“**It’s** raining outside.”), *who’s* = “who is” (“**Who’s** knocking at the door?”), and *they’re* = “they are” (“I think **they’re** coming tomorrow.”).

Pluralizing nonstandard nouns

While contractions and possession are the two standard uses of the apostrophe, it is also sometimes used to pluralize nonstandard words—such as single letters, abbreviations, and single-digit numbers—for the sake of clarity in writing. These are informal uses, and, as such, the rules that go with them are not set in stone: some writers use them in these instances, while others do not.

Plurals of single letters

Apostrophes are often used to make single letters plural because without them the sentence might be confusing to read. This is especially true when the single letter is not capitalized and even more so if it is a vowel, as a vowel + "-s" can look like a unique word.

For example:

× "Be sure to mind your **ps** and **qs** while you're at your grandmother's house." (Because "ps" and "qs" are awkward to read, an apostrophe is called for here.)
✓ "Be sure to mind your **p's** and **q's** while you're at your grandmother's house." (correct)

× "I just have to dot my **is** and cross my **ts**." (This creates a lot of confusion for the reader because "is" just looks like the word *is*, rather than a plural of "i," and "ts" is awkward and confusing to read.)
✓ "I just have to dot my **i's** and cross my **t's**." (correct)

It is less commonly accepted to use an apostrophe with single letters that are capitalized, especially in formal writing. If you do choose to use an apostrophe, though, just be sure to be consistent throughout your writing.

For example:

✓ "I got two **As** and two **Bs** on my report card." (correct)
✓ "I got two **A's** and two **B's** on my report card." (Correct, but less standard than the first sentence.)
× "I got two **A's** and two **Bs** on my report card." (Incorrect—do not mix styles in the same text.)

Plurals of acronyms

Stricter style guides emphasize that apostrophes should not be used to pluralize acronyms with multiple capital letters, especially **initialisms**, as it suggests possession or contraction. In these cases, just add an “-s” (or “-es”) as you would with normal nouns:

- “Two **MPs** from Yorkshire have signed the motion.”
- “Are there any **ATMs** nearby? I need to withdraw some money.”
- “The stranded boat has been sending out **SOSs** all day.” (Sometimes written as “**SOSes**”)

However, many writers feel more comfortable adding apostrophes after a plural abbreviation to add clarity to the writing:

- “Trust me, it’s as easy as learning your **ABC’s**.”

Some style guides say it is appropriate to use an apostrophe only if the acronym uses periods (**full stops**) after the abbreviated letters (in this case, the apostrophe would come after the final period), or if the last letter of the abbreviation is an “S,” as in:

- “I can’t believe he has three **Ph.D.’s**—he must be a genius!”
- “There aren’t any **A.T.M.’s** in this part of town.”
- “I don’t think anyone has received our **SOS’s** yet.”

In most cases, it really comes down to personal preference, as there is not a single rule that is considered universally correct. In very formal or professional writing, it is probably better to use the first rule and not use an apostrophe with acronyms, but check with the style guide of your school, university, or workplace.

Plurals of single-digit numbers

An apostrophe is generally accepted as a means of making a single-digit number plural in writing. It is not necessary, though, so the apostrophe is largely up to the discretion and preference of the writer. For example:

- “He received three **7’s** and two **6’s** on the exam.”
- “OK, all the **2s** line up on this side of the room; all the **1s**, line up over there!”

Multiple-digit numbers, on the other hand, are generally **not** given an apostrophe at all:

- “There are a lot of men in their **30s** here.”

Apostrophes with decades and years

Apostrophes can also be used when a particular decade is written out numerically, which essentially pluralizes the years within that decade. There are multiple ways that writers use apostrophes in this instance:

- “I grew up in the **90’s**.”
- “The fashion of the **1980s** was awesome!”
- “I prefer the style of the **1970’s**.”
- “No way, the **’60s** were the best.”

However, many writers and style guides consider the first and third example to be incorrect, and advise that you should only use an apostrophe in place of missing numbers (example 4) because it is a form of contraction. For professional or formal writing, it is better to observe this rule and only add an apostrophe before the decade if you are abbreviating it to two digits.

Finally, when abbreviating a specific year, replace the first two digits with an apostrophe:

- “I graduated from high school in **’06.**” (Abbreviation of 2006)

Remember, when using an apostrophe before a word or number, make sure that you do not use a single opening quotation mark (**‘**) by mistake.

✖ “Still, I think the **‘50s** was a great era.” (incorrect)
✔ “Still, I think the **’50s** was a great era.” (correct)

✖ “I thought **‘twas** a very simple solution.” (incorrect)
✔ “I thought **’twas** a very simple solution.” (correct)

✖ “My sister was born in **‘98**.” (incorrect)
✔ “My sister was born in **’98**.” (correct)

Dos and Don’ts, Do’s and Don’ts, or *Do’s and Don’t’s*

This ubiquitous phrase is often the subject of debate regarding where (and if) to place apostrophes.

Some adhere strictly to the rule that no nouns receive an apostrophe to become plural, so the phrase should be ***dos and don’ts***.

Others believe that because *dos* looks like the Spanish word for “two,” or else the acronym DOS (disk operating system), an apostrophe is called for to

eliminate confusion. The most common version using this method is ***do's and don'ts***.

However, because *do* has been made plural with an apostrophe, some might argue that, for the sake of consistency, *don't* has to be made plural the same way, as in ***do's and don't's***.

There is no universal agreement about this (although in general most writers and style guides dislike "**don't's**"), so if you are writing in a professional capacity, check your (or your company's) preferred style guide and follow that. Otherwise, use whichever one looks or feels most correct.

Quiz

1. What is the purpose of an apostrophe in a **contraction**?

a) To replace the space that is missing between two words
b) To replace the omitted letter(s) of the contracted word
c) To make the contracted word plural
d) To show that one contracted word is in the possessive case

2. Select the sentence that correctly uses an apostrophe to show **plural possession**.

a) “My brother’s new truck is really big.”
b) “The trees bark is indicative of a beetle infestation.”
c) “Both of my bosses’ birthdays are on the same day.”
d) “I’m going over to the Jones’ house after dinner.”

3. In **compound possession** in which two people share possession of the **same** thing, who receives the apostrophe?

a) The second person
b) The first person
c) Both people
d) Neither person

4. Select the sentence that uses one or more apostrophes **incorrectly**.

a) Your sister and I aren’t coming to Daniel’s dinner party, in case you’re wondering.
b) I love Jared’s new dog; I can’t believe how soft it’s fur is.
c) The pool’s too shallow in this area, so it’s not safe for diving.
d) Jim’s and my game was cancelled yesterday.

5. When can you use an apostrophe to indicate that something is **plural**?

a) Never.
b) If the word ends in an “-s.”
c) If the word is a proper noun, and using an apostrophe makes the writing

clearer.
d) If the word is not a standard noun, and using an apostrophe makes the writing clearer.

6. Which of these is the generally considered the most correct way to write about a **decade**?

a) The 1980s
b) The ’80s
c) Both A & B
d) Neither A nor B

See the answers

Parentheses

Definition

Parentheses (**( )**) are used to separate information that is not necessary to the structure or meaning of the surrounding text. Similar to quotation marks, parentheses are always used in pairs—we cannot have a single parenthesis (the name for one of the brackets on its own) without its match appearing elsewhere nearby. (The one exception is when we write vertical lists, which we'll look at later on.)

Using parentheses

Parentheses indicate **parenthetical information**—that is, any additional information that is not integral to the writing that appears outside of the parentheses. This information may comprise a **fragment** (a word, phrase, or clause) or one or more **complete sentences**. How we use parentheses in relation to other punctuation depends on the length of the information they contain.

Fragments

When parentheses enclose a word, phrase, or dependent clause, they will generally appear <u>within</u> a sentence, since the information usually can't function as a sentence alone.* When this is the case, the parentheses must appear adjacent to any other existing punctuation within the sentence. For example:

- "As I have said before **(on numerous occasions),** we must find a long-term solution to this problem."
- "I want to tell you something that you must always remember **(even after you've moved away):** We will always be here to support you, no matter what."
- "Who will be coming to the party on Saturday **(other than us, obviously)?**"
- "This calls for congratulations **(and celebration)!**"

Although parenthetical fragments cannot use periods when appearing within a sentence, they **are** able to take exclamation points or question marks, depending on their meaning and intention. For example:

- "Arnold Schwarzenegger **(spelling?)** was a huge action icon in the '80s and '90s."
- "The goal by Hendrickson **(and what a goal!)** secured the team's entry into the championship."
- "With the commission we're expecting to receive from the deal **(details finalized yet?)**, our shares should rise to their highest level in years."

We can also place exclamation points and question marks on their own inside of parentheses to indicate surprise, excitement, or doubt about something that just preceded them. For instance:

- “The value of the British pound dropped nearly 10 per cent **(!)** following the UK’s decision to leave the European Union in 2016.”
- “She said I had behaved ‘like a yak’ **(?)** as she was leaving.”

(*Note that, on occasion, a parenthetical word or phrase may be used as a complete sentence, in which case parentheses **can** be used outside of another sentence. We’ll look at some examples of these a little later.)

Using parenthetical fragments correctly

Because parenthetical elements are grammatically independent of the sentence they appear in, we must be sure that they do not include information that is necessary to complete the meaning of the overall sentence. We can easily check this by reading the sentence without the parenthetical element: If the sentence doesn’t make sense without it, then we will need to rewrite the sentence or remove the parentheses. Let’s look at a few examples that demonstrate this.

- “I knew John would agree with me **(he always does!)**, so I didn’t bother consulting him on the matter.”

✓“I knew John would agree with me, so I didn’t bother consulting him on the matter.”

As we can see, the sentence still makes complete sense grammatically, so the parentheses have been used correctly.

- “I’ve packed some sandwiches, bananas, carrots **(and a few chocolate bars)** for the train ride.”

✗ “I’ve packed some sandwiches, bananas, carrots for the train ride.”

The sentence is no longer grammatically correct if we remove the parenthetical element, so either the parentheses must be removed or the sentence must be reworked:

✓ “I’ve packed some sandwiches, bananas, carrots, **and a few chocolate bars** for the train ride.”

or:

✓ “I’ve packed some sandwiches, bananas, and carrots **(and a few chocolate bars)** for the train ride.”

Complete sentences

When a parenthetical element stands on its own as a complete sentence (or multiple sentences), then the opening parenthesis will appear <u>after</u> the period of the previous sentence, and the closing parenthesis will appear <u>before</u> the first word of the next sentence (unless it appears at the end of a paragraph). The sentence within will end with a period, question mark, or exclamation point of its own, which will appear <u>inside</u> the closing parenthesis. For example:

- "The last time I went to Toronto, I had an awful experience. **(I won't be visiting again any time soon!)**"
- "You can also choose to send in your application by mail. **(I wouldn't recommended it, though, as it will only add more time to the process.)** If you would like to do so, use the mailing address listed at the bottom of the form."
- "I was left completely speechless when I met Michael Jordan. **(How else could I be after meeting my lifelong hero?)**"

It's also not uncommon for words and sentence fragments to be used as complete sentences (known as minor sentences or **irregular sentences**) within parentheses outside of the regular sentence. This is often done to put extra emphasis on the parenthetical information, while still making it clear that it is operating as an aside, commentary, or non-integral element. For example:

- "I had a few choice words for him after the meeting. **(Just a few!)**"
- "The president has described the results as 'shocking.' **(Shocking? Really?)**"
- "He has been accused during the election of only being concerned with the stability of big corporations. **(Which is nonsense.)**"

Complete sentences within sentences

Note that we can also have a complete parenthetical sentence that appears within another sentence. In this case, we treat it the same way as a parenthetical fragment: we do not capitalize the first letter of the sentence if it isn't a proper noun or pronoun, and we do not end it in a period (though we still use a question mark or exclamation point, if appropriate). For instance:

- "I won't bore you with the details **(it's not a very interesting story)**, but suffice to say that I'm looking for a new job."
- "We're going to be very busy this weekend **(I don't need to tell you that!)**, so everyone needs to be in top form."

- “On Tuesday I’ll be visiting your great-uncle Michael **(do you remember him?)**, so I won’t be home to fix you dinner.”

Substituting em dashes

Parentheses can often be replaced by em dashes in a sentence if we want (or ought) to draw more attention to the information within them. Just be aware that em dashes are considered much less formal than parentheses, so they should be avoided when writing professional or academic material.

While we always use two parentheses, we only use one dash if the parenthetical information comes at the beginning or end of a sentence. Additionally, a set of parentheses will operate in conjunction with surrounding commas, while em dashes will replace them altogether.

Let’s look at some examples:

- “I know that my friend Stephen **(the poor dear!)** has found living on his own very difficult.”
- “I know that my friend Stephen**—the poor dear!—**has found living on his own very difficult.”

- “As part of the centenary commemorations for the sinking of the RMS *Lusitania* **(May 7, 1915)**, Irish President Michael Higgins participated in a wreath-laying ceremony in County Cork.”
- “As part of the centenary commemorations for the sinking of the RMS *Lusitania***—May 7, 1915—**Irish President Michael Higgins participated in a wreath-laying ceremony in County Cork.”

- “Knowing how difficult it is to look after just one child, I’ll never grasp how my mother managed, considering how many children **(nine in all)** she raised more or less on her own.”
- “Knowing how difficult it is to look after just one child, I’ll never grasp how my mother managed, considering how many children**—nine in all—** she raised more or less on her own.”

Note that em dashes should **not** be substituted for parentheses in more technical, specialized uses (which we’ll look at later).

Parentheses within parentheses

Very occasionally, we might have a larger parenthetical element that contains one or more smaller ones. Conventionally, the smaller parenthetical element will be enclosed within brackets (**[ ]**) to distinguish it from the parentheses of the larger text. While it is not uncommon to see multiple sets of parentheses used within one another (sometimes known as **nested parentheses**), this is generally discouraged, especially in more formal, academic, or professional writing.

For example:

✓ "The authors maintain that the correlation is strong enough to assume causation (though they make this claim 'with caution' **[Wilson, Dobs, et al., 2010]**)."
× "The authors maintain that the correlation is strong enough to assume causation (though they make this claim 'with caution' **(Wilson, Dobs, et al., 2010)**)."

✓ "At least I'll have some extra spending money this summer. (My cousin got me a job at my uncle's **[his dad's]** warehouse.)"
× "At least I'll have some extra spending money this summer. (My cousin got me a job at my uncle's **(his dad's)** warehouse.)

In more informal writing, we could also substitute the internal parentheses with one or two em dashes:

✓ "At least I'll have some extra spending money this summer. (My cousin got me a job at my uncle's**—his dad's—**warehouse.)"

Note that it is quite common to see nested parentheses in conversational writing; most of the time, readers will have little trouble keeping track of them. If you are writing for work or school, be sure to use **brackets**, as it is the most correct; otherwise, use whichever method looks best.

Subsequent parentheses

We should always avoid putting two parenthetical elements back-to-back. For example, the following sentence would be incorrect:

× "I don't know, Jack. I've never been there before **(and neither have you)(I think!)**."

Depending on the sentence, we can either place one inside the other, merge the information into a single parenthetical element, or simply rework the sentence altogether:

✓ "I don't know, Jack. I've never been there before **(and neither have you *[I think!]*)**."

✓ "I don't know, Jack. I've never been there before **(and neither have you, *I think!*)**."

✓ "I don't know, Jack. I've never been there before, **and neither have you *(I think!)***."

Other uses

In addition to indicating parenthetical information that supplements the rest of the writing, there are also a number of technical uses for parentheses.

Explaining or introducing acronyms and initialisms

Acronyms and initialisms are forms of abbreviations in which the first letters of multiple words are used to represent the phrase or name as a whole. (Acronyms are such groups of letters that are pronounced as a word, while initialisms are read as their individual letters—though most people simply refer to both as acronyms.)

We often see parentheses used to explain what acronyms and initialisms stand for. Conversely, we can also put the acronym or initialism itself into parentheses after the full phrase or name if the abbreviated form will be used throughout the rest of the document. Here are some examples:

- "The OMB **(Office of Management and Budget)** has just released new figures."
- "Text messaging has given rise to all sorts of abbreviated writing, such as LOL **('laugh out loud')**, BRB **('be right back')**, and BFF **('best friends forever')**."
- "The Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries **(OPEC)** has expressed concern as shares in global oil corporations continue to fall."
- "Forces have already been deployed by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization **(NATO)** into the region, though the Secretary General of NATO has made assurances that it is a precautionary measure at this stage."

Translating foreign text

If we include writing that is in a foreign language and wish to include a translation (or the original characters, if the language uses non-Arabic lettering), we can place it in parentheses immediately after the foreign text (which will usually be in *italics*). For example:

- "The only thing I ever learned to say in Spanish is *una mas, por favor* (one more, please)."

- “Many tourists visiting Japan incorrectly use *konnichiwa* (こんにちは or in kanji 今日は, meaning ‘good afternoon’) as a greeting at any time of day.”

Numbered and lettered lists

When we write lists that require a certain structure or order, we can include numbers or letters before the items within it. If the list is written into the flow of the overall sentence, we surround the number or letter with parentheses, and we end each item with a semicolon. For instance:

- “Your assignment for the evening is as follows**:** (1) interview an older relative about his or her experiences growing up; (2) write down your own experiences for the same time period; (3) write a one-page report that compares and contrasts your experiences to those of your relative.”
- “We’ll need four things for the upcoming audit**:** (a) copies of all bank statements over the last year; (b) a letter from the bank confirming the company’s signatories; (c) any receipts for business-related purchases made this year; (d) a profit and loss report for the year to date.”

However, if such lists are structured **vertically**, then we typically only use an end parenthesis after the number or letter. (This is the only instance in which it is acceptable to use a single parenthesis mark on its own.) Here are the same two lists structured vertically:

“Your assignment for the evening is as follows:

1) Interview an older relative about his or her experiences growing up.
2) Write down your own experiences for the same time period.
3) Write a one-page report that compares and contrasts your experiences to those of your relative.”

“We’ll need four things for the upcoming audit:

a) Copies of all bank statements over the last year
b) A letter from the bank confirming the company’s signatories
c) Any receipts for business-related purchases made this year
d) A profit and loss report for the year to date”

Years of birth and death

When writing biographical information about a particular person (especially in

academic writing), we often list the years of his or her birth and death in parentheses after his or her name. This is expressed as a range, so we often use an en dash to join the two numbers, as in:

- "John F. Kennedy **(1917–1963)** was the 35th president of the United States."

Note that we can also use this form for similar date ranges as well, such as when listing the period of time in which a person has served in a particular position. For instance:

- "During her time as CEO **(2007–2011)**, she helped to spearhead the new product line."

Time zones and telephone numbers

We can also use parentheses to specify the time zone when we indicate a particular hour:

- "So we're agreed: the next board meeting will take place on June 23 at 8 AM **(PST)**."

If we are clarifying what the hour will be in a different time zone with parentheses, then we do not need a separate set of parentheses:

- "Voting will begin across the UK at 7 AM **(2 AM EST)** on Thursday."

Another technical use of parentheses in North America is to separate an area code from the rest of a telephone number, but styles vary by country.

Quiz

1. Which of the following can appear within a sentence when enclosed by parentheses?

a) Single words
b) Phrases
c) Dependent clauses
d) Complete sentences
e) A & B
f) A, B, & C
g) All of the above

2. Which of the following sentences is punctuated correctly?

a) “Can you show me how to change a tire (I never learned how?)”
b) “Where did you buy your dress (if you don’t mind my asking)?”
c) “Do you come here often (or at all?”
d) “I was wondering (It may be a silly question.): why doesn’t America use the metric system?”

3. Which of the following must we do if a parenthetical element is functioning as a separate sentence?

a) Capitalize the first word
b) Use a period, question mark, or exclamation point at the end
c) Put the end parenthesis before the final punctuation of the previous sentence
d) A & B
e) B & C
f) A & C

4. Which of the following sentences uses a parenthetical element **incorrectly**?

a) “My brother (and his wife) are going to have a baby in a few months.”
b) “No matter where you travel (whether near or far), you always have a home here.”
c) “My friend earns nearly five hundred dollars a week (!) just from ad revenue on his blog.”

d) “If your health insurance covers it (you do have health insurance, right?), then I think it would be a very beneficial procedure.”

See the answers

Brackets

Definition

Brackets (**[ ]**), sometimes known as **square brackets**, are similar to parentheses in that they are used to contain information that does not impact the overall grammatical structure of the sentence. However, rather than indicating information that is supplemental or incidental, brackets are usually used within quoted speech to indicate that a writer has added material to the quotation to provide clarifying or explanatory information. There are also a number of more technical uses, which we’ll look at further on.

Using brackets for clarification

The most common use of brackets is to enclose information that clarifies or explains an ambiguous element in a quoted sentence. For example:

- "She **[the governor]** insisted that the restructured budget would not result in funding shortfalls for schools."

We can also use brackets to replace a word so the quotation fits with the natural flow of the sentence, such as by changing a capital letter to a lowercase (or vice versa), using the correct pronoun to fit the sentence's grammatical person, or creating the correct subject-verb agreement. For instance:

- Original sentence: "I have always been sure to file my taxes on time."
- As a quotation: The senator said he "**[has]** always been sure to file **[his]** taxes on time."

- Original sentence: "The U.N. will ultimately have oversight over reunification."
- As a quotation: The acting president has confirmed that "**[t]**he U.N. will ultimately have oversight over reunification."

- Original sentence: "Yesterday, December 7, 1941—a date which will live in infamy—the United States of America was suddenly and deliberately attacked by naval and air forces of the Empire of Japan."
- As a quotation: "**[A]** date which will live in infamy," as then-President Franklin D. Roosevelt famously called it, the bombing of Pearl Harbor by Japan on December 7, 1941, acted as a catalyst that propelled America into the Second Word War.

Remember: Do **not** use parentheses instead of brackets when making changes to quoted material. Using parentheses implies that the information is an original part of the quotation, rather than a change or addition made by the person using the quote.

× "They **(the CEOs of the two major corporations)** have agreed on a time frame for the historic merger." (incorrect)
✓ "They **[the CEOs of the two major corporations]** have agreed on a time frame for the historic merger." (correct)

Finally, if there are already square brackets in the original quote, we must make

a note of it after the quotation so the reader doesn't think it is an addition by the writer. For instance:

- According to Dobson: "Caesar's famous line '*Et tu, Brute* **[And you, Brutus]?**' is most likely a product of artistic license rather than historical fact." **(Brackets in original; Dobson 203.)**

(We will address how to use brackets to indicate translations within a quotation later in this article.)

Other uses

Indicating added emphasis

When we wish to emphasize a part of a quotation by *italicizing* (or, less commonly, underlining) it, we must be sure to mark that the emphasis was not included in the original quotation. Most commonly, we add the words "emphasis added," "emphasis mine," "italics added," or "italics mine."

If we are making note of this change within the quotation itself, we must use brackets around this note so that it remains clear that the change was done by the person using the quotation. For example:

- In his literary analysis of the play, Thompson claims that "the entire second act serves to underscore the *inevitability of mortality* that is always present in our subconscious mind **[emphasis added]**."

We can also use parentheses for this, but the notation must occur outside of the quotation. This is especially useful if we are including page numbers as part of a citation, as in:

- In his literary analysis of the play, Thompson claims that "the entire second act serves to underscore the *inevitability of mortality* that is always present in our subconscious mind" **(emphasis added; Thompson, 121)**.

Alternatively, you could make this parenthetical element a separate minor sentence after the quotation; just be sure to put a period at the end of both sentences:

- In his literary analysis of the play, Thompson claims that "the entire second act serves to underscore the *inevitability of mortality* that is always present in our subconscious mind." **(Emphasis added; Thompson 121.)**

[*sic*]

When a quotation contains a mistake, such as a spelling mistake or grammatical error, but we wish to preserve the quotation exactly as it was written, we can mark it with the word *sic* (Latin for *thus* or *so*) in brackets to let the reader know that the error was not our own. Note that *sic* is usually italicized, but not always (the brackets around it, however, are **never** italicized).

- "For the last few weeks, our team has demonstrated a resolutoin **[*sic*]** to win that has simply defied the odds."
- The protester held up a sign reading, "Its **[sic]** Time for Literacy!"
- "Every single member of our union have **[*sic*]** voted for a strike," a spokesman said.

Note that the use of *sic* to indicate errors can sometimes be seen as a pedantic way of highlighting other writers' errors. It should generally just be used when preserving the quotation in its original state is specifically important; otherwise, consider rearranging the quotation to omit the error, or else put the correct word in brackets in its place, as in:

- "Every single member of our union **[has]** voted for a strike," a spokesman said.

Translations within quotations

When we use a foreign word or phrase within our own (unquoted) writing, we can put the translation in parentheses beside it. If the foreign word (or words) occurs within a quotation, however, we can provide the translation within brackets to ensure the reader knows that we've added it ourselves. For example:

- The only thing I know how to say in German is *danke schön* (thank you).
- The principal said during his speech, "I would like to extend a warm *fáilte* **[welcome]** to all of our visiting Irish students."

Parentheses within parentheses

Occasionally, we might have a larger parenthetical element that contains one or more smaller ones. Conventionally, the smaller parenthetical element will be enclosed within brackets to distinguish it from the parentheses of the larger text. While it is not uncommon to see multiple sets of parentheses used within one another (sometimes known as **nested parentheses**), this is generally frowned upon, especially in more formal or academic writing. For example:

× "The authors maintain that the correlation is strong enough to assume causation (though they make this claim 'with caution' **(Wilson, Dobs, et al., 2010; p. 32)**)."

✓ "The authors maintain that the correlation is strong enough to assume causation (though they make this claim 'with caution' **[Wilson, Dobs, et al.,**

2010; p. 32])."

× "At least I'll have some extra spending money this summer. (My cousin got me a job at my uncle's **(his dad's)** warehouse.)" (less correct, but acceptable in informal writing)
✓ "At least I'll have some extra spending money this summer. (My cousin got me a job at my uncle's **[his dad's]** warehouse.)" (preferred)

Censorship

When using a quotation that contains vulgar, offensive, or objectionable words, we can use brackets around a word like "expletive" or the longer "expletive deleted." Occasionally these words are put in capital letters, especially in more formal writing such as court transcripts. For example:

- The defendant told the court that he "knew the [EXPLETIVE DELETED] had been stealing from the company for several years."
- "My father was a real **[expletive]**," Smith told reporters, "but I never stopped loving him."

We can also use two or three dashes (without brackets) in place of offensive or objectionable language. Informally, many writers also choose to simply substitute the word with other characters, especially asterisks. For example:

- "My father was a real **——**," Smith told reporters, "but I never stopped loving him."
- "My father was a real ********," Smith told reporters, "but I never stopped loving him."

With ellipses

One final use of brackets is to enclose an **ellipsis** (**…**), which is used to indicate that a portion of the quoted text has been omitted, usually because it is not directly important to the writer's meaning and including it would make the quotation overly verbose. This is especially common in writing that features long excerpts, such as academic papers. For example:

- "It's no surprise," the superintendent told me, "that people have been leaving so quickly. After all **[…]** no one wants to wake up with half their house underwater."
- "For on the issue of sovereignty, no one can argue that the country is any

> less politically sovereign than **[…]** before the crisis. But in handing power from the hands of their electorate to the wealthy elite, the interests of the nation will be **[…]** inevitably left up to the interests of corporations.”

Note that brackets in this case are not mandatory; though some style guides recommend their use, it is very common to see ellipses without brackets as well. Check the preference of your organization’s or school’s style guide, and be sure to be consistent.

Other types of brackets

In addition to parentheses and square brackets, there are two other types of brackets: **braces** (**{ }**) and **angle brackets** (**< >**).

Braces (Curly Brackets)

Braces (also known as **curly brackets**) are commonly used in mathematics to express sets of numbers, as well as in computer programming languages.

In non-mathematical and non-programming writing, braces occasionally serve the purpose of linking multiple lines of text to show a shared meaning or connection between them, but this is generally only seen in handwriting (since there is no straightforward way to create multiple-line-spanning braces in modern typesetting).

It's also possible for them to be used to represent a series of possible choices, as in:

- You may choose one meat filling {chicken, pork, beef} and one type of cheese {cheddar, Swiss, pepper jack, mozzarella} for your sandwich.

However, they are used very rarely for this purpose.

Note: Braces should never be used in place of parentheses or brackets.

Angle Brackets

Angle brackets (sometimes known as **chevrons**) are also used primarily in mathematics. In writing, we also can use angle brackets to indicate Internet URLs or email addresses, as in:

- "Further information is available at **<www.thefreedictionary.com>**."

However, this tendency fell out of common use as URLs and email addresses became more commonplace. However, you may still encounter angle brackets used in this way to indicate URLs in the Works Cited pages of research papers, or to separate a person's name from their email address in the recipient line when composing an email.

Quiz

1. Which of the following is the primary function of brackets?

a) To indicate parenthetical information within a quotation
b) To introduce a vertical list
c) To indicate information that clarifies part of a quotation
d) To indicate quoted speech within a parenthetical element

2. Which of the following would we enclose in brackets to indicate a spelling or grammatical mistake?

a) *sic*
b) emphasis added
c) expletive
d) *error in original*

3. When can brackets be used to indicate parenthetical information?

a) When they are used in quoted speech
b) When they appear within a larger parenthetical element
c) When the text is in the first person
d) In academic or formal writing

4. Which of the following is **not** a technical use for brackets?

a) To indicate emphasis that was added to a quote
b) To provide parenthetical information within a quote
c) To provide a translation within a quote
d) To indicate an ellipsis within a quote

See the answers

Quotation Marks

Definition

Quotation marks are most commonly used to indicate the exact words that someone else said. This is known as **direct speech** or **direct quotation**.

There are two forms of quotation marks: **double quotation marks** (**“ ”**) and **single quotation marks** (**‘ ’**). American English almost exclusively uses double quotation marks, while British English tends to favor single quotation marks (although it is not uncommon to see double quotation marks used in British English as well).

Punctuating direct speech

Quotation marks make it clear when speech is being quoted in writing. However, there are a few other punctuation rules that we use to help make it clear what was said by the person being quoted, as opposed to the person quoting him or her.

Most of the time, we introduce quoted text with a **reporting verb**, such as *said*, *told*, *asked*, *remarked*, etc. If we are quoting an entire sentence, we set the quotation apart with one or two commas. For example:

- John said, **"I'll never live in this city again."**
- Mary told him, **"I want to have another baby,"** which took him by surprise.
- The other day, my daughter asked, **"Mommy, why do I have to go to school, but you don't?"**

However, if we are quoting a fragment of speech that is used as an integral part of the overall sentence, then no commas are used. For instance:

- John said he feels **"really bad"** about what happened.

Direct speech before a reporting verb

We can also put direct speech before the reporting verb. Again, we usually use a comma to separate the quoted text from the unquoted text, as in:

- **"I can't wait to see daddy,"** my son said.

However, if a question mark or exclamation point is used in the direct speech, then we do **not** use a comma no matter where the quotation is located:

- **"Where are we going?"** asked Sally.
- **"This is going to be great!"** Tom exclaimed.

End punctuation: American vs. British English

In American English, a period or comma used at the end of direct speech always appears within the quotation marks.

In British English, however, if the quotation ends in a period or comma, it is

usually placed outside the quotation mark, as in:

- The CEO said, **‘This is a great day for the company’.**
- **‘I want to be a doctor when I grow up’,** Susy told us yesterday.

Note that if a quoted sentence ends in a question mark or exclamation point that belongs to the quotation, it will appear within the quotation marks. If the question mark or exclamation point belongs to the **overall** sentence (that is, it isn’t actually part of the quotation), it will appear outside the quotation marks. This is the same in **both** American and British English. For example:

- Samantha asked, **‘How long will it take to get there?’**
- But I don’t want to just **“see how things go”!**

Using multiple sets of quotation marks

If a sentence already uses quotation marks and quoted text appears within it, then we have to differentiate between the two quoted elements. If we are already using double quotation marks, then we have to put the quoted speech in single quotation marks; likewise, if the main sentence is in single quotation marks, then the newly quoted text is put into double quotation marks. The rest of the punctuation in the sentence does not change. For example:

- “They told us, **‘We don’t have the budget for more staff.’**”
- ‘The prime minister is reported to have said that he is **“in disagreement with the president’s remarks”,** which prompted a quick response from the White House.’

Using quotation marks across multiple paragraphs

Quotation marks almost always travel as a pair, with a closing quotation mark (**”**) required anytime an opening quotation mark (**“**) is used. There is one specific exception to this rule, however, which occurs when quoted text spans multiple paragraphs. When this happens, we put an opening quotation mark at the beginning of each quoted paragraph, but we only put a closing quotation mark after the last paragraph. For example:

> **“***When I was young, my father told me about the many adventures he had traveling across southern France on his motorbike. Ever since, I’ve had a burning desire to make a similar journey of my own. It wasn’t until nearly 40 years later, though, that I had the chance.* (**The quotation continues**

into the next paragraph, so no closing quotation mark is used here.)
"*Having lost my job during the recession, I decided to sell my house and most of my belongings. I found an ex-pat living in Paris from whom I could buy a motorbike at a good price, so I booked a flight and made my way across the Atlantic, with nothing but a tattered map of France, a notebook, and my father's old rucksack.****"*** (**This is the end of the quotation, so a closing quotation mark is now necessary.**)

Other uses

In addition to indicating quoted speech, quotation marks also serve to indicate the titles of smaller pieces of creative work, as well as to highlight particular words or phrases that are uncertain or questionable.

Indicating titles

While we use *italics* or occasionally underlining to indicate the title of a complete body of creative work (such as a novel, music album, play, or film), we use quotation marks to indicate the titles of smaller bodies of works (such as short stories, articles, or poems) or sections of a larger work (such as chapters, songs, or television episodes). For example:

- The final chapter of *Moby-Dick*, called “The Chase – Third Day,” is a truly thrilling piece of writing.
- Did you ever see *The Simpsons* episode “King Size Homer”? It’s one of my favorites.
- “The Road Not Taken” by Robert Frost is often studied in American Literature classes.

However, note that longer poems or stories (that are or could be published as standalone books) can take italics rather than quotation marks, as in:

- T.S. Eliot’s poem *The Wasteland* is deservedly regarded as a masterpiece, as is his shorter work, “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock.”

Highlighting certain words

We can also use quotation marks to place emphasis on a word or phrase we feel is strange or dubious, or about which we are not certain. Putting such words in quotation marks suggests to the reader that the thing indicated is peculiar or even untrustworthy. For example:

- Everyone calls him Honest Joe, but from my experience there’s nothing “honest” about him.
- Well, their “sale” is really just a $5 coupon that’s only valid if you spend over $100 in the store.

In a similar fashion, we can use quotation marks to highlight terminology that is considered novel or outside the mainstream lexicon. For instance:

- One of the emerging “neo-Gothic revivalists,” the artist has seen several of his latest pieces fetch extraordinary prices.
- The tech company is continuing to develop their line of “office on the move” smart phones.

Quiz

1. What type of speech is used when quoting the exact words someone else has said or written?

a) Indirect speech
b) Direct speech
c) Silent speech
d) Free indirect speech

2. In **American English**, where do commas and periods at the end of a quotation always appear?

a) Outside the quotation marks
b) Inside the quotation marks

3. What is the only exception to the rule that quotation marks must travel in pairs?

a) When a quotation appears within another quotation
b) When a quotation is used in British English
c) When a quotation spans multiple paragraphs
d) When quotation marks indicate a peculiar or questionable word or phrase

4. Which of the following types of titles would be set within quotation marks as opposed to *italics*?

a) Books
b) Songs
c) Poems
d) Plays
e) A & B
f) B & C
g) C & D

See the answers

Ellipses

Definition

An **ellipsis** is a series of three consecutive periods known as **ellipsis points** (**. . .**) used to indicate where words have been omitted from quoted text, or (informally) to represent a pause, hesitation, or trailing-off in thought or speech.

Forming an ellipsis

There are two different styles for how an ellipsis is formed, and each is equally common. The more conventional way to form an ellipsis is to put a space between each of the three ellipsis points, as in: “There are many things **. . .** that you must learn.”

In modern writing, the spaces between these are often left out, leaving three ellipsis points right in a row: “There are many things **…** that you must learn.” The advantage of this form is that it can be hard-coded as a single symbol in most word processors, meaning it will not be broken if it hits the margin of the page.

To create this second form on a computer running Windows, hold Control + Alt and press the “period” key. To create it on a Mac computer, hold Option and press the “semicolon” key. Some word processors will also create the symbol automatically when you type three periods in a row.

This guide has opted to use the first of these two versions. If your school’s or employer’s style guide does not require one over the other, use whichever style you prefer, but be consistent.

Spacing around an ellipsis

Most style guides recommend using a space on either side of an ellipsis, except for when it is adjacent to a quotation mark. For instance:

- At the press conference, the president had this to say: “Today, we are forced to confront certain truths **. . .** that we are obliged to deal with.”
- “**. . .** [T]he committee recommends a minimum six-week suspension of the deputy commissioner,” the report concludes.
- “If we’re able to get the wiring right, I could **. . .**” my dad muttered, trailing off.

However, it is very common to see no spaces on either side of an ellipsis, or a single space on one side but not the other. For example:

- “I don’t think the decision today reflects the**. . .**opinion of most Americans.”
- “I don’t think the decision today reflects the **. . .**opinion of most Americans.”
- “I don’t think the decision today reflects the**. . .** opinion of most Americans.”

If you are writing formal, academic, or professional content, you should include a space on both side of the ellipsis; otherwise, use whichever style looks best to you, but be consistent. (In this guide, we’ll be adding spaces to both sides.)

Omitting text from a quotation

The most formal way ellipses are used is to indicate that some text has been omitted from a quoted sentence or passage. This is done to simplify a quotation, eliminating information that is not necessary for or important to the writer's purposes. This usually occurs in the middle of an in-text quotation; it is more uncommon for an ellipsis to be used at the beginning or end of a quotation.

Omitting text in the middle of the sentence

Most commonly, the ellipsis is used to bridge two parts of the same sentence by omitting extraneous information in between. When this is the case, we simply put a space-ellipsis-space in place of the text we wish to leave out. Let's look at an original sentence, and then see how it might be abridged using an ellipsis in a quotation.

- *Original*: "I don't think the decision today reflects the *honest, complete, and well documented* opinion of most Americans."
- *Abridged quotation*: The president said of the senate's vote: "I don't think the decision today reflects the **. . .** opinion of most Americans."

Note that we also omit any punctuation that originally surrounded the text that is being removed <u>unless</u> it has grammatical importance to the structure of the shortened quoted sentence. For example:

- *Original*: "I'm sure of one thing in life, though not much else: I value family over all other things, especially in times of trouble, and I will never forget it again."
- *Abridged quotation*: The final passage sums up the protagonist's view: "I'm sure of one thing in life **. . .:** I value family over all other things**, . . .** and I will never forget it again."

Occasionally, an omission may span across two or more sentences. If the quotation is being presented as a single sentence, we simply use an ellipsis in the same way as above. If, however, the quotation divides into two complete sentences with omitted material in between, we use a period to terminate the first sentence (even if the original sentence has been shortened) followed by an ellipsis and the second quoted sentence. This is sometimes known as a **four**

point ellipsis. If any letters need to be capitalized or made lowercase, or any words need to be changed to fit the subject-verb agreement of the newly abridged sentence, we use brackets to indicate that we've altered the original text. For instance:

- *Original*: "Advocates from around the state are rallying around a new law aimed at reducing the number of roadside accidents in rural communities, which often have disproportionately high numbers of crashes due to low numbers of police on the roads. Still, there are some critics (especially in bigger cities) who feel the law will have a greater and more negative impact on commuters."
- *Abridged quotation*: Our local correspondent told us that "[a]dvocates from around the state are rallying around a new law aimed at reducing the number of roadside accidents**. . . .** Still, there are some critics **. . .** who feel the law will have a greater and more negative impact on commuters."

Omitting text at the end of a sentence

Most style guides discourage the use of an ellipsis when an abridged quotation occurs at the end of a sentence, arguing that it is unnecessary to specify that there is more information beyond what you chose to quote. In this case, we simply end the quotation with a full stop and an end quotation mark. For example:

- *Original*: "Despite the challenges, the correct course of action is clear, no matter what your political affiliation may be."
- *Abridged quotation*: Davidson maintains that "[d]espite the challenges, the correct course of action is clear."

However, other style guides **do** recommend using an ellipsis after a quotation that ends a sentence. In this case, we end the sentence with a period, followed by a space, an ellipsis, and an end quotation mark. For example:

- Davidson maintains that "[d]espite the challenges, the correct course of action is clear**. . . .**"

Note that if a quotation is being used within an overall question, we place a question mark outside the end quotation mark regardless of whether we use an ellipsis or not:

- *Original*: "Parents will know when the time is right to let their children explore on their own, without constant supervision."

- *Abridged quotation (with ellipsis)*: But just how exactly are moms and dads supposed to "know when the time is right to let their children explore on their own **. . ."?**
- *Abridged quotation (without ellipsis)*: But just how exactly are moms and dads supposed "know when the time is right to let their children explore on their own**"?**

Omitting text from the beginning of a sentence

Generally speaking, it is not necessary to include an ellipsis if a quotation omits words from the beginning of a sentence—simply use an opening quotation mark:

- *Original*: "We must all be careful not to be drawn into scaremongering over the issue."
- *Abridged quotation*: The prime minister was quick to ask the public "not to be drawn into scaremongering over the issue."

If the middle of a quotation is used as the beginning of an overall sentence, we must be sure to capitalize the first letter of the first word quoted. In more formal, academic writing, we should indicate this change with brackets, but this is often not considered mandatory in less formal writing. Some writers also prefer to include an ellipsis before a change like this to make it absolutely clear that information was omitted, but it is not necessary and even discouraged by most style guides:

✓ "Be careful not to be drawn into scaremongering," warned the prime minister.
✓ "[B]e careful not to be drawn into scaremongering," warned the prime minister.
× ". . .[B]e careful not to be drawn into scaremongering," warned the prime minister.

Using brackets around ellipses

If you are quoting material that already uses one or more ellipses, you should place your own ellipses in **brackets**. This will make it clear to the reader which ellipses are your own and which were already in the text. For example:

- *Original*: Dixon said to Cassie, "This life, it's so . . . unpredictable. I don't know what strange, beautiful, wonderful things will come next."

- *Abridged quotation*: The main theme comes through in Dixon's speech to Cassie: "This life, it's so . . . unpredictable. I don't know what **[. . .]** will come next."

Alternatively, instead of using brackets around any added ellipses, we can also make a note of which ellipses were original or added in parentheses after the quotation (remember to put the period <u>after</u> this):

- The main theme comes through in Dixon's speech to Cassie: "This life, it's so . . . unpredictable. I don't know what **. . .** will come next" (first ellipsis in original).

or:

- The main theme comes through in Dixon's speech to Cassie: "This life, it's so . . . unpredictable. I don't know what **. . .** will come next" (second ellipsis added).

Informal uses

While shortening quoted material is the “official” use of the ellipsis, it is perhaps more commonly used in informal or creative writing to denote a pause, hesitation, faltering, or trailing-off of speech or thought. When used in this way, it’s quite common to eliminate the space traditionally used between the ellipsis and the word it follows. For example:

- “Is Tom wearing**. . .** a pirate costume?”
- “Everything is so **. . .** different.”
- “We’re not**. . .** I didn’t**. . .** Oh, stop pestering me already!”
- “Hmm, I’m not sure which I’d prefer**. . .**”

Many people use an ellipsis as a sort of “stand-in” for a comma, creating a break in the flow of their writing. However, the suggestion created by an ellipsis used this way is that the speaker is unsure of or hesitant about what he or she is trying to say, or else has more to say but is reluctant or unable to finish the thought. For this reason, ellipses should be used sparingly, especially in written correspondence.

Quiz

1. Which of the following is the **formal** use for an ellipsis?

a) Indicating a pause in the text
b) Indicating an omission from a quote
c) Introducing parenthetical information within a quote
d) Introducing clarifying information in a quote

2. What are the **conventional** rules for spaces around an ellipsis?

a) One space before and one space after
b) One space before and no space after
c) No space before and one space after
d) No space before or after

3. In general, where in a sentence is an ellipsis **usually** used to indicate an omission?

a) At the beginning
b) In the middle
c) At the end
d) B & C
e) All of the above

4. When must a period be used with an ellipsis?

a) Whenever an omission ends a quoted sentence
b) When an ellipsis is used alongside another punctuation mark
c) When an omission spans multiple sentences and the quotation reads like a single sentence
d) When an omission spans multiple sentences and the quotation is treated as two sentences

5. When are brackets used around an ellipsis?

a) In formal and academic writing
b) When an omission spans multiple sentences

c) When an ellipsis indicates a pause or hesitation in the text
d) When a quote already contains an ellipsis, and another is added by the writer

See the answers

Other Signs and Symbols

In addition to the primary punctuation marks used in English, there are a number of signs and symbols that often appear in day-to-day writing but aren't considered standard punctuation. This section will give a brief overview of these miscellaneous typographical symbols and how they are (or might be) used in modern English.

Note that this section is not meant to be complete or exhaustive; there are many other typographical marks in existence that serve various functions. We're just going to look at those that we are most likely to encounter in everyday writing.

The Asterisk

The **asterisk** (*****) is perhaps the most commonly occurring nonstandard symbol used in English writing. It is primarily used to indicate a **footnote** (a clarifying, explanatory, or illustrative note placed at the bottom of the page), though it can also be used to replace omitted letters or words. Note that we pronounce the "-isk" at the end of the word; it is not pronounced "aster**ix**."

Indicating footnotes

When something we are writing requires a detailed explanation or clarification that will not fit neatly into the sentence or paragraph, we can create a footnote at the bottom of the page or later in the text to provide additional information without disrupting the flow of our writing.

When an asterisk is used this way, it appears immediately and without a space after the word or sentence linked to the footnote. If it appears after a word that is already followed by a punctuation mark, the asterisk comes after that mark, with the exception of an em dash. When we introduce the footnote at the bottom of the page, the asterisk always comes first (unless the footnote is in parentheses) followed without a space by the first word of the footnote. Let's look at some examples:

> Join now to get three months of free Internet!*
> *Terms and conditions apply; after three months, cost increases to $50 per month.

> We can see by his own statements* that Robertson doesn't hold this principle to be always true.
> *These were recorded in an interview with KYYL Radio on August 24, 1998.

> In the majority of cases,* there is a reasonable correlation between the two events.
> (*343 out of 370 individual cases studied.)

> It's important to emphasize this fact*—even though (and perhaps because) many will try to dispute it.
> *Verified by PolitiFact on June 7, 2015.

Note that if we have multiple footnotes on the same page, we simply add multiple asterisks—one for each footnote used. We then use the corresponding number of asterisks to introduce each footnote at the bottom of the page, so it's easier for the reader to see which piece of information correlates to which part of the main text.

For instance:

> During his time as governor,* Smith presided over the largest budget surplus in the state's history** but still managed to bankrupt the state by the time his term finished.***
> *1998–2002
> **$2.8 billion as of January 1998
> ***As of December 2002, the state had a budget deficit of $1.3 billion

However, if you are writing something that requires a large number of footnotes, such as an academic paper, you should use numbers or letters to organize them instead of asterisks. Check your school's or employer's style guide for the proper or preferred way to format footnotes.

Replacing omitted text

A less formal function of the asterisk is to stand in place of words or letters that have been omitted from a text. This is often due to the word(s) being considered vulgar, offensive, or objectionable, though not exclusively. Generally speaking, we use as many asterisks as there are letters being omitted (though this is by no means a concrete rule), and we maintain all original punctuation in the sentence.

For example:

- "My father was a real ********," Smith told reporters, "but I never thought he'd be capable of this."
- "Don't be such an **a********, Steve."
- "I was speaking with **E****, and he told me that he was visiting **R******* later this week."
- "With the page torn, all I could read was, 'Please, find a **fr******.' Who knows what it's supposed to mean."
- "My client, ************, has requested not to be referred to by name again during this inquest."

More formally, we would use em dashes to mark words or letters that have been

left out or are missing from the text. If we are replacing part of a word, we use two dashes; if we are replacing an entire word, we use either two or three (just be consistent). For example:

- “My father was a real ———,” Smith told reporters, “but I never thought he’d be capable of this.”
- “Don’t be such an **a——**, Steve.”
- “I was speaking with **E——**, and he told me that he was visiting **R——** later this week.”
- “With the page torn, all I could read was, ‘Please, find a **fr——**.’ Who knows what it’s supposed to mean.”
- “My client, ———, has requested not to be referred to by name again during this inquest.”

Finally, be aware that an omission from a **quotation** for the purposes of shortening it must be done with an ellipsis (. . .), **not** asterisks or dashes. See the section on Ellipses for more information about how this is done.

As a multiplication symbol

It’s also worth mentioning that the asterisk is sometimes used as a symbol of multiplication instead of the more traditional ×. For example:

- 2*2 = 4
- 5*4 = 20

The Ampersand

The **ampersand** (**&**) is a symbol used in informal (and occasionally formal) writing to represent the word *and*. The symbol is actually a stylized ligature that combines the two letters of the Latin word *et* (meaning "and") into a single symbol.

The ampersand is especially common in commercial names of companies and brands, and it is often featured in logos and graphic designs. Commonly recognized abbreviations that feature the word *and* often use ampersands as well. For example:

- "Daniels & Jones Insurance Co."
- "I just need some R&R [rest and relaxation]."
- "My brother loves hip-hop, but I'm more of an R&B [rhythm and blues] fan."
- "During the course of the audit, we will need P&L [profit and loss] reports for the last three fiscal years."

In more formal or academic writing, some style guides also recommend using an ampersand for parenthetical citations of sources written by two or more authors, as in:

- However, the authors assert that reliance on "antiquated methodology and outdated preconceptions" is still rampant in many government agencies (Smith, Burke, & Robertson, 2002).

However, other style guides recommend spelling out *and* completely, so check your school's or employer's preferred style guide to be sure which you should use. If in doubt, use *and*.

Finally, because the ampersand represents *et*, it was formerly used to write the abbreviated form of the Latin *et cetera* (meaning "and so on"), appearing as *&c.*. For example, "Various contracts, receipts, invoices, **&c.**, were strewn about the office." In modern English, though, this looks rather peculiar, and it is much more common to write the abbreviation as *etc.*

The Swung Dash

The **swung dash** (**~**), also known as a **tilde*** or a **wavy dash**, is a mark that has come to mean "approximately" in informal, conversational English—it is used primarily before numbers to indicate that the number is not exact or precise. For example:

- "I think we should have ~40 guests coming today."
- "Please be here ~7 PM."

The swung dash was formerly used in a more formal way to represent letters or words previously mentioned in a text. This was sometimes used in dictionary definitions as a way of saving space, but it has fallen into disuse. Another former use was to stand in for an omitted word or letter, but this function has largely been taken over by dashes and ellipses. Here are some examples of how swung dashes might be used in these ways:

> quiet *adj*. Making no sound; silent: *a ~ library; a ~ town; a shy and ~ child.*

> "The defendant, ~, is accused of grand larceny and corruption."

However, it is exceptionally rare to encounter a swung dash in modern writing that means anything other than "approximately." (Remember, it should only be used in this way in very informal writing).

(**Note*: Technically speaking, a tilde is an accent mark placed above certain letters in other languages to indicate a particular pronunciation, as in the Portuguese *não* ("no"). However, the tilde and the swung dash are becoming near-synonymous terms, due to their similarity in appearance.)

The Percent Sign

The **percent sign** or **percent symbol** (**%**) is used, as the name suggests, to indicate a numerical percentage—that is, a ratio or fraction of 100. It appears immediately <u>after</u> the number it accompanies, without a space. For example:

- "Sales have dropped by about **15%** this quarter, but we're expecting a **35%** overall increase for the year."
- "I'm about **99%** certain that this is correct."

Note that, unless you're writing a more technical or scientific document, it is generally recommended that you write out the word *percent* (or *per cent*, a common alternative in *British English*). The first example would thus look like this:

- "Sales have dropped by about **15 percent** this quarter, but we're expecting a **35 percent** overall increase for the year."

The At Sign

The **at sign** or **at symbol** (**@**) was originally an accounting symbol meaning "at a rate of." It still might be used in this way when writing out foreign currency conversions, as in:

- "The bank will be selling US dollars for euros @ 1.1014 euros per dollar."

In everyday writing, it is much more commonly used to identify the host domain in email addresses or to identify someone's username on a social media platform, in which case it reads aloud simply as the word "at." For example:

- "If you have any other questions, please email us at **info@tfd.com**."
- "In response to @user1, your comments were totally illogical!"

Very informally, we might see @ used to represent the actual word *at*, as in quick, shorthand notes or text messages. For instance:

- "Hi Tom, **@** store now, home soon."
- "Meeting w/ Jeff & Mary **@** 7 PM."

The Number Sign

The **number sign** (**#**)—also known as the **pound sign** (in American English) or **hash** (in British English)—is primarily used to indicate numbers, standing in for the word *number* in a sentence. For instance:

- “This is my **#1** favorite place to eat.”
- “I’ve always loved Beethoven’s Symphony **#5**.”
- “Our address is 123 East Avenue, Apartment **#12**.”

This is an especially common usage in American English, whereas British English tends to favor “No.” (the abbreviated form of *number*) instead:

- “This is my **no. 1** favorite place to eat.”
- “I’ve always loved Beethoven’s Symphony **No. 5**.”
- “Our address is 123 East Avenue, Apartment **No. 12**.”

The number symbol is also used in social media, where it is known as a “**hashtag**.” It is used to mark a word or unspaced phrase that acts as a trend or theme, which can then be used by multiple people to comment on the same topic. For example:

- “Looking forward to voting in the **#election**.”
- “I can’t wait to see all my family and friends in New Orleans! **#noplacelikehome**”
- “We all need to be kinder to each other! All you need is **#love**!”

The Interpunct

An **interpunct** (·), also known as a **midpoint**, **middle dot**, or **centered dot**, is rather rare in everyday writing, but it has a few specific formal uses in English.

Indicating syllables

One use of the interpunct is to indicate syllable breaks within a word. This is most commonly found in dictionary entries to help demonstrate how a word is pronounced:

> ex·cel·lent
> ha·ppy
> ir·ri·ta·ble

As a decimal point

In addition to representing syllables, interpuncts are also occasionally used as the decimal point in a number. This used to be especially common in British English, particularly before the spread of modern word processors when a period (full stop) became much easier and quicker to type. It is now much less common to see an interpunct used in this way in everyday writing, even in British English, but it is not unheard of. Let's look at some examples that use interpuncts rather than periods as decimal points:

- "I bought this for just £450·50!"
- "We found that X equals 43,456·21."

As a multiplication symbol

Finally, it's worth noting that, like the asterisk, the interpunct is also sometimes used as a symbol of multiplication instead of the more traditional ×. For example:

- 2·2 = 4
- 5·4 = 20

Quiz

1. Which of the following is **not** how an asterisk (*) is used?

a) To indicate a footnote
b) To replace omitted text
c) As a decimal point
d) As a multiplication symbol
e) A & B
f) C & D

2. Which of the following sentences uses a swung dash (~) **correctly**?

a) “I’m really disappointed in your decision ~ I was hoping you would accept the offer.”
b) “There should be ~$2,000 left in the account after the vacation.”
c) “It’s always nice to enjoy a well~deserved break on the weekends.”
d) “I think about 100~150 people will be coming.”

3. Which of the following uses an interpunct (·) **incorrectly**?

a) re·ver·ber·ate
b) 93,549·62
c) 374·473 = 176,902
d) “I hope you like working in a fast·paced environment.”

4. What is the ampersand (&) used in place of?

a) The word *and*
b) The Latin word *et*
c) “And so on”
d) A & B
e) B & C
f) A & C

5. Which of the following symbols would be **most commonly** found in writing on **the Internet or social media**?

a) The at sign (@)
b) The percent sign (%)
c) The number sign (#)
d) A & B
e) B & C
f) A & C

See the answers

Quiz answers

Article: Question-Answer

English Punctuation: 1-d, 2-b, 3-b, 4-a, 5-c
Periods: 1-a, 2-c, 3-a, 4-f
Exclamation Points: 1-b, 2-a, 3-g, 4-a
Question Marks: 1-c, 2-b, 3-f, 4-a
Commas: 1-b, 2-c, 3-b, 4-d, 5-e, 6-a
Semicolons: 1-b, 2-d, 3-c, 4-a
Colons: 1-c, 2-a, 3-e, 4-c, 5-b
Hyphens: 1-c, 2-f, 3-b, 4-d, 5-a
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& (ampersand)
( ) (parentheses)

- Dashes
- Parentheses

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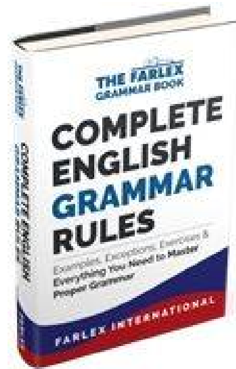

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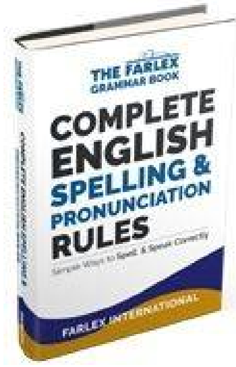
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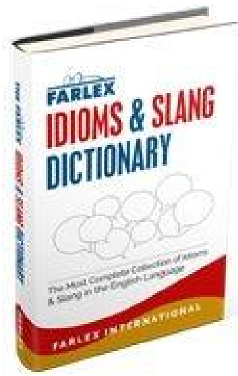
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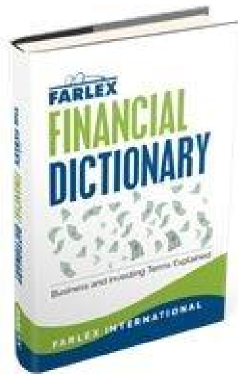
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