

Punctuation Quick Guide

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Dialogue, quotes, and quotation marks: use quotation marks (“ ” or " "), to indicate direct quotes. Commas and periods go inside; semicolons and colons go outside; question marks, exclamation marks, and dashes go inside if they are part of the quotation, outside if not.

“Quotations are capitalized and punctuated like this.”	quote
“Quotes,” Mrs. Whitehouse said in class today, “have to be punctuated correctly.”	interrupted quote
“Is that correct?” she asked.	with question mark
“Yes!” he replied.	with exclamation mark
“Am I wrong in thinking Mrs. Whitehouse said, ‘Use single quotes for quotes within quotes?’” Jane asked.	quote within quote
Who said, “Give me liberty or give me death”?	punctuation outside a quote
Mrs. Whitehouse said, “Start each person’s dialogue as a new paragraph to make it easier to distinguish who is speaking.”	new speaker new paragraph
Mrs. Whitehouse said we should never use quotation marks for indirect quotes, like this one.	NOTE indirect quotes
While she was talking I thought, “This is getting boring.”	directly quoted thought
Although quotes start with the first word capitalized, as Mrs. Whitehouse said, when a quote is blended into another sentence “the first word is not capitalized.”	blended quotes
“This is paragraph one of a multi-paragraph quote. . . . “This is paragraph two—the last paragraph. Only the last paragraph has a closing quotation mark. The preceding paragraph(s) have opening quotation marks only.”	multi-paragraph quotes
I like Hemingway’s <i>Old Man and the Sea</i> and some of his short stories like “The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber,” “In Our Time,” or “The Snows of Kilimanjaro”; however, I never liked “The Killers.”	short literary works.
When I use the word “term” as a word or term, it is set off in quotation marks, or they are italicized.	a word used as a term

Apostrophes: use an apostrophe (’ or ') to indicate possession or contractions

The meeting’s purpose is to show you how to vote. Tom’s vote will count. Everyone’s vote will count.	singular possessive
The meetings’ purpose is to show you how to vote. The citizens’ votes will count.	plural possessive
E.E. Cummings’ or E.E. Cummings’s. [Not Jesus’s, where it is awkward.]	possessive words ending in s
Simon and Schuster’s book list [taken as a group]; however, Montaigne’s and Locke’s essays are interesting [members of a group taken separately].	compound possessives
The meetings are intended to teach you about voting.	NOTE not possessive
The choice is hers to make, or are you saying it is yours?	possessive pronouns
Didn’t (did not), ’em (them), should’ve (should have)	contractions

Let's try to get the tent posts set before Tom lets go of the rope.	Let's try (let us try) ...lets (let, lets, letting)
Its name is hard to pronounce; so it's hard to remember.	Its name (the name of it) ... so it's (so it is)

Colon: the colon (:) has almost the weight of a period (as a stop), but it connects what precedes it with what follows. As Garner (*MAU*) says, it “promises the completion of something just begun.”

The Speaker of the House left some chips on the table: if the President agreed to the amendment, the House would vote on the bill.	linking two separate clauses or phrases to indicate a step forward
Man proposes: God disposes.	structural balance
The sources are: <i>Modern English Usage</i> , <i>Modern English Usage</i> , <i>Writer's Guide and Index to English</i> , and <i>A Manual of Style</i> .	introducing a list of things
Regarding the use of a colon to separate and link two separate sentences, Garner says: “Authorities are divided on whether the first word should be capitalized.”	formally introducing a quote
Despite is testimony to the court, his behavior can be summed up in one word: cowardice.	emphasis
Dear Mr. Smythe:	after a salutation, formal
The ratio of boys to girls in third grade is 1:1.4.	between numbers in a ratio
The meeting starts at 5:45.	between hours and minutes

Comma: the comma (,) is the least emphatic most varied of the punctuation marks. There are two styles of use: open, which has fewer commas, and close, which has more commas and tends to have fewer miscues. There are nine common uses.

The birds, the primates, and the large cats were all we had time to see.	items in a series
Students will go to room 207, and teachers will go to the lounge.	coordinated main clauses
After the lunch break, we will all meet in the gym.	introductory phrases
I promise, however, it won't happen again. He said to me, as if it wasn't important, that he would take care of the matter.	parenthetical (nonrestrictive) word, phrase, or clause
The old, rusted, red, broken-down wagon was half buried under the wet leaves.	adjectives
Mr. Jackson said, “The forms don't need to be completed until Saturday.”	direct, not indirect, speech
Having finished his work, he left work early. David, didn't we talk about the meeting before?	participial or verbless, phrases, vocatives
Dear Jean,	after a salutation, informal
On March 27, 2009, we'll meet at 1336 East Central, Glendale, Arizona.	parts of an address or date

Dash: the em-dash (—) marks an interruption in a sentence.

I like the dash—it adds a lighter more open look to a page of type—but most people prefer parentheses or commas.	parenthetical
The purpose of punctuation is obvious—it makes it easier to understand the written word.	replacing a colon
“I was thinking—” “You weren't hired to think.”	interrupted dialogue

When you wash your hands—use warm water and soap.	emphasis
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Ellipsis: the ellipsis points (. . .) indicate that something has been omitted

I like the dash . . . but most people prefer parentheses or commas. [see complete sentence above, under Dash]	omission
Our variety of fruit flavored ice creams (mango, lemon, orange, papaya . . .) is what we're famous for.	unenumerated series, et cetera
"I was bothered by the report. It made me wonder . . ."	trailing thought or pause
The bank robber held the gun close to the teller's head. "I would suggest . . . you cooperate."	unstated alternative

Exclamation Mark: an imperative sentence ("Stop at the stop sign.") may end with a period. Use the exclamation mark (!) to show strong emotion or urgency ("Stop! Didn't you see the stop sign?").

I hate Mrs. Whitehouse!	strong exclamation
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Hyphen: the hyphen (-) is used to show a end-of-line word break, phrasal adjectives, to join compound words.

This use occurs at the end of a line of type. If this were the end, its use is evident, don't you think?	end-of-line break
tenement-house, brother-in-law, one-half, vice-president, thirty-two	compound word
bookcase, crosswalk, schoolhouse, housekeeper, thunderstorm . . . (see http://www.rickwalton.com/curricul/compound.htm)	NOTE hyphenless compound words
pay-as-you-go, up-to-date, first-class, narrow-minded	phrasal adjective
pro-Clinton, ex-President Bush	prefixes
re-collect/recollect, re-sign/resign, re-cover/recover	meaning and clarity

Parentheses: parentheses (()) enclose words, phrases, or sentences that provide interpolated or supplementary material, without altering the meaning of the actual sentence.

	interpolations and remarks
Mrs. Whitehouse taught tenth-grade English (no one liked her) for thirty years.	asides
Fowler (<i>The King's English</i> , Oxford University Press, 1936) is quite opinionated when it comes to punctuation.	references
We will send you four (4) books.	numbers

Period: use a period (.) to end most sentences, with abbreviations, and with numbers as a decimal point.

Most sentences end with a period.	ending a declarative sentence
She wondered why this took so long.	ending an indirect question

Dr.	Mrs.	i.e.	abbreviations are followed by a period
Ph.D.	Ms.	e.g.	
A.M.	B.C..	etc.	
OH	AZ	NATO	NOTE agencies and states have no period
IRS	IBM	FTC	
SEC	UN	ACLU	
It costs \$95.27.			decimal point

Question Mark: use the quotation mark (?) at the end of a direct quote.

Where is Mrs. Whitehouse?	direct question
I wonder where Mrs. Whitehouse went. Jane asked me where she went too.	indirect question has no question mark
Is the rental car available tomorrow? deluxe? insured? fully gassed?	separate emphasis to interrogative elements
Socrates 469BC (?) - 399BC	in parentheses to show doubt
Do not write: I read some of John's short stories (?) before he submitted them.	NOTE do not use for irony or humor

Semicolon: the semicolon (;) is used to separate independent clauses not joined by a coordinating conjunction (and, but, or, nor); to separate independent clauses linked by a conjunctive adverb (however, moreover, therefore); and it is used between a series of items containing commas.

He got the job because of his experience; he kept the job through hard work.	no coordinating conjunction
He got the job because of his experience; however, he lost it through his laziness.	conjunctive adverb
I like movies, especially westerns; mystery novels; and classical music, early music in particular.	series with commas