

Reviewing Basic Punctuation

Period: The period is most commonly used at the end of a sentence. If there is a parenthetical in the sentence (like this), the period will still go at the end of the sentence. If there is an independent clause in the parenthetical (**A period is also referred to as a full-stop.**), a period also goes before the closing parenthesis. The period goes after a parenthetical citation at the end of a sentence.

Question Mark: Use a question mark at the end of an interrogative sentence or if you want your readers to read the sentence as a question. Generally, a question mark goes outside of parentheses or a quotation mark:

Do you really expect me to believe that it snowed 11 inches in “The Lone Star State”?

Exclamation Point: Use an exclamation point at the end of an exclamatory sentence. **Use them sparingly!** You really should only use an exclamation point when expressing a strong emotion or emphatic command.

Comma: Use commas to separate an opening dependent clause from the rest of or a sentence or with a coordinating conjunction (FANBOYS) to connect two independent clauses, You should also use a comma with an appositive phrase (a phrase that renames something), in between two adjectives, or to separate list items:

- Throughout the United States, the amount of yearly snowfall varies greatly, but some regions definitely see more snowfall, more than 40 inches, than others.
- Vermont, Maine, and New Hampshire see the most snowfall each year.
- Alaska, “The Last Frontier,” actually gets fewer inches of annual snowfall than the New England States despite our image of that state as the most frigid, rugged state.

You also use a comma to shift from the main discourse to a quotation *if* the quote is introduced:

Zora Neale Hurston proclaimed about life, “There are years that ask questions and years that answer.”

Colon: Use a colon to introduce a list that is not incorporated into the natural flow of the sentence: in between two independent clauses when the second clause further explains the first; to introduce a quote if the words before it are an independent clause; and to emphasize or clarify a previous point.

Writers should use colons: They can be an effective rhetorical device.

Semicolon: Use semicolons instead of commas when separating list items that are longer or contain punctuation. Semicolons are best used to connect two or more independent clauses that are closely related in thought:

“He was older, wiser, surer of himself; she was subtle, confident, and a mystery to all of them.”

Apostrophe: Use apostrophes to show possession or indicate that you’ve left out letters when using a contraction. Sometimes, writer’s use apostrophes to show that a number is left out. Apostrophes are the most tricky with words that end in “s.” Use a possessive apostrophe when a word ends in “s” unless it is a plural proper noun:

- Chris was born in ‘92, so he is turning 30 this year.
- Chris’s party will be at the Dennys’ house, but we aren’t sending out invitations until he’s confirmed the date.

En Dash (a.k.a. “Dash”): Use the en dash (insert a special character not two dashes) to show a range; basically use it without extra spaces to replace the words “to” or “through.”

- 2019–2022
- I boarded the Chicago–New York overnight train.

Hyphen: Use a hyphen to show a linguistic connection between two words, most commonly to form compound adjectives that precede a noun. Also, use a hyphen with compound numbers between twenty-one and ninety-nine.

Examples: on-campus dining, state-of-the-art offices, black-owned business

Em dash: Considered one of the most versatile punctuation marks, you can use the em dash (insert a special character not three dashes) like a comma, a semicolon, a colon, or even a parentheses. From the days of typesetting, it should be the length of capital M; and the en dash should be the length of a capital N; this is where we get the names for these punctuation marks. Below are some examples of how the em dash can be used.

- **In place of parentheses or commas:** The restaurant was—for various reasons—closed until further notice.
- **As a hard comma (instead of a semicolon):** Surround yourself with family and friends this winter—drink lots of fresh coffee.
- **In place of a colon:** Fine powdered snow covered the December mountains—the slopes were perfect for skiing.

Quotation Marks: Use quotation marks when directly quoting and for titles of works that appear in larger works:

In her song “Shake it Off,” Taylor Swift reminds us not to pay much attention to what other people think since “the haters gonna hate, hate, hate, hate, hate.”

Single Quotation Marks: Single quotation marks have only two common uses: to show quotations marks within quotations marks and to show a translation of a word:

I knew we would be friends when my studymate texted me, “Heill ok sæll! ‘Hello!’ I can’t talk right now. I’m watching ‘The Last Act,’ the series finale of *Vikings*.”

