

Exploring Punctuation

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Mastering the use of one's own language, both written and verbal, is probably the single most effective thing one can do to ensure their academic, professional, and personal success.

Punctuation:

- comma
- dash
- semicolon
- colon
- hyphen
- apostrophe
- quotation marks
- end punctuation

Overview of Punctuation

Punctuation consists of visual signs that help a reader distinguish between words and sentences and help the reader understand the relationships between words.

Technically, capitalizing, spaces between words, and indentations at the start of paragraphs are all forms of punctuation. But usually when we speak of punctuation, we speak of the symbols we use to mark sentences – the punctuation marks – that help the reader understand the writer's intentions.

In English, the following punctuation marks are normally used: period, question mark, exclamation point, comma, semicolon, colon, quotation marks, single quotation marks, italics, underlining, dash, hyphen, parentheses, brackets, ellipsis, and virgule.

Comma

What follows is a discussion of the four circumstances that generally require the use of commas.

1) Between Items in a Series

When presenting a list of three or more items in a sentence, a comma is placed between each item in the list.

Example: *Mr. Lightstone used today's class time to teach the class about commas, dashes, colons, semi-colons, and quotation marks.*

The writer has the *option* to choose whether to include the final comma preceding the last item. This final comma is referred to as an "Oxford" comma. The Oxford comma can be useful in clarifying where the second last item ends and the last item begins – especially in complex sentences such as the one presented below.

Example: *Mr. Lightstone teaches grammar when we have a time left after a test, when we have a few moments at the end of a lesson, or when a number of students are absent for a given class.*

2) Between Two Independent Clauses in a Compound Sentence

When a writer joins two independent clauses together with a conjunction, the writer must also include a comma.

Example: *Mr. Lightstone has just created a new PowerPoint on punctuation, and he has agreed to postpone the upcoming essay to allow students more time to learn grammar.*

The bottom line is this: when connecting two *independent* clauses with a conjunction, the writer must also include a comma because the conjunction and comma work together as a team.

If a sentence is *very* short (perhaps 5 to 10 words), one does have the option of omitting the comma between what is, technically, two independent clauses.

Example: *Mr. Lightstone is eccentric and he is pathological.*

3) After an Introductory Element

Introductory elements serve to create a transition into a sentence, or provide preliminary information regarding the content of a sentence. Introductory elements can include a conjunctive adverb, an appositive, an introductory phrase, or an introductory clause.

Example with a conjunctive adverb:


However, Joan is a successful salesperson.

Example with an introductory phrase:

Barking insistently, Bandit got us to throw a stick for him.

Example with an introductory clause (that is, beginning with a dependent clause):

Although he teaches law and economics, Mr. Lightstone is fanatical about teaching grammar.




4) On Both Sides of a Parenthetical Clause or an Appositive

A parenthetical clause or phrase provides additional information for the reader, but it is information that could be left out of the sentence without altering its basic message.

Example: *The practice of teaching grammar, **originally pursued by only a few English teachers**, has now become standard practice in all Grade 12 courses.*

Example: *The teachers in the Bjork board, **although understaffed and under funded**, manage to maintain orderly and effective learning environments.*

In each of the above examples, the words between the commas could be left out without changing the core meaning of the sentence. Including a parenthetical clause allows the writer to add ancillary information without writing a separate sentence. After all, if separate but related concepts were always separated out into their own sentences, one's writing would become extremely choppy and mechanical.



Punctuating Restrictive versus Non-restrictive Clauses


Parenthetical clauses are non-restrictive clauses. If a clause is restrictive (intended to clearly narrow or identify a subject) then it should not be separated with commas.

Restrictive clauses are dependent clauses that begin with relative pronouns (who, whom, that, whoever, whomever, whichever) and are not surrounded by commas.

*The elephant **that trampled the village** was drunk on fermented fruit.*

Non-restrictive clauses are dependent clauses that begin with relative pronouns (who, whom, which, whoever, whomever, whichever) and are surrounded by commas.

*Andy, **who always admired John Lennon**, was very sad to hear he was killed.*




Appositives

Appositives are punctuated in a similar manner to parenthetical phrases or clauses. However, an appositive serves specifically as a noun or pronoun – often with modifiers. Appositives are placed beside another noun or pronoun in order to explain or identify it. Essentially, appositives serve to rename or restate another noun in the sentence.

Example: *The law teacher, **a grammar enthusiast**, emphasized the need to learn sentence structure and the parts of speech.*

Punctuation: If the sentence would be clear and complete without the appositive, then commas are necessary. In these cases, we would place one comma before and one comma after the appositive. In some cases, however, the noun being explained would be too general to be understood without the appositive. If the appositive is essential to the meaning of the sentence, then we do not place commas around the appositive.

Example: *The popular English prime minister **Winston Churchill** was well known for his eloquent and inspirational speeches.*



Dash

The dash is essentially used to emphasize an explanatory comment. Two basic uses of the dash are discussed below.

1) Inserting an Explanatory Comment within a Sentence


While one can use commas to set off explanatory comments, at times one might wish to use dashes to place special emphasis on such comments. For example, compare the following sentences:

Mr. Lightstone, a grammar fanatic, will announce the new mandatory English Proficiency Test in assembly this morning.

Mr. Lightstone – a grammar fanatic – will announce the new mandatory English Proficiency Test in assembly this morning.

Dashes can even be used to insert a complete sentence within another sentence.

Mr. Lightstone – his students call him the Guru of Grammar – will announce the new mandatory English Proficiency Test in assembly this morning.



2) Adding a Comment to the End of a Sentence

A dash can allow one to attach material to the end of a sentence.


The dash can elaborate on the noun preceding the dash:

In assembly this morning, Mr. Lightstone will announce the date for the Mandatory English Proficiency Test – a new initiative intended to promote writing skills in the senior school.

Or the dash can denote a shift in perspective:

Today in class, Mr. Lightstone decided to teach criminal adjudication procedures – as opposed to lecturing about grammar.

Final Note: Dashes should be used only when the writer wishes to show special emphasis. If they are used too often, then their capacity to show emphasis is diminished.



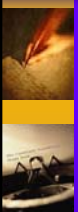
Semicolon

What follows is a discussion of the two circumstances that generally require the use of semicolons.

1) Between Two Independent Clauses in a Compound Sentence

When two independent clauses are joined together *without* the use of a conjunction, then a semicolon must be used between the clauses.

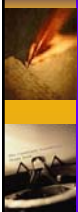
Example: *Mr. Lightstone has just created a new PowerPoint on punctuation; this is the last PowerPoint in the English Proficiency series.*



2) Between Complex or Lengthy Items in a Series

When presenting a series of three or more complex items (items that contain commas), a semicolon is placed between each item in the list.

Example: *My favorite punctuation marks are the semicolon, which joins independent clauses; the dash, which emphasizes explanatory notes; and the colon, which introduces any variety of elements.*



Colon

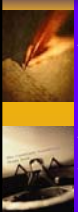
In prose, a colon basically has one function: it *introduces*. A colon can introduce a word, a phrase, a sentence, a quotation, or even a list.

Examples:

Mr. Lightstone is fanatical about one thing: grammar.

Mr. Lightstone always says: "If you learn grammar now, you're going to be much better off in university."

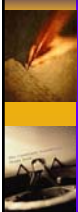
The class concentrated on three aspects of grammar: parts of speech, sentence structure, and punctuation.



Hyphen

A hyphen is used to connect words together to create compound nouns and modifiers.

- 1) To avoid multiple letters. [*reevaluate can be written re-evaluate*]
- 2) If the root word is capitalized. [*pre-Christmas, anti-European*]
- 3) With specific prefixes and suffixes. [*self-sacrificing, all-seeing, ex-wife, vice-chairman, president-elect*]
- 4) To avoid ambiguity or awkward pronunciation. [*un-ionised would otherwise be interpreted as unionised*]
- 5) To form compound nouns. [*sit-in, stand-out, Mother-In-Law*]
- 6) In compound adjectives that modify nouns that they precede. [*blue-chip company, devil-may-care attitude, up-to-the-minute news*]
- 7) With fractions, as well as numbers between 21 and 99. [*one-half, three-quarters, twenty-four, eighty-five*]
- 8) Words that start with a capital letter [*X-ray, T-shirt, U-Turn*]



Apostrophe

What follows is a discussion of the two circumstances that require the use of apostrophes.

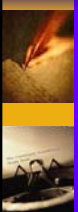
1) To Create Contractions

A contraction is simply two words collapsed into one.

Examples of contractions:

| | | |
|----------|---|--------|
| cannot | → | can't |
| do not | → | don't |
| it is | → | it's |
| we are | → | we're |
| will not | → | won't |
| you are | → | you're |

Note: Contractions are primarily used in informal writing. Suffice to say, the only thing you need to know about contractions in the context of my course is that you're not allowed to use them in essays.

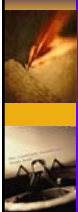


2) To Form Possessives

The apostrophe is also used to denote the possessive. The possessive tells the reader that an entity (person, institution, country) *owns* or *possesses something*, or *that a characteristic is attributed to something*.

Examples of possessives:

- *Billy's computer*
- *the accountant's journal*
- *the corporation's net income*
- *the nation's GNP*
- *this year's forecast*
- *Sally's gentle grace*
- *Mrs. Wong's sense of humour*
- *the result of Mr. Lightstone's hard work*



Quotation Marks

Quotation marks are used to denote where another person's exact words (spoken or written) begin and end.

Within the quotation marks, we use a capital letter for the first word when quoting a whole sentence. However, we do not use a capital letter with the first word when quoting part of a sentence. If the quotation is interrupted and then continues, we do not capitalize the second part of the quotation.

Mr. Lightstone said, "I intend to ensure that all Grade 12 students at HTS master English grammar before graduating."

Mr. Lightstone said, "I intend to ensure that all Grade 12 students at HTS master English grammar" especially if they are "planning on going into law."

Note: We enclose periods, exclamation marks, and question marks within the quotes *IF* they faithfully reproduce the original statement. If we intend to add our own end punctuation that would change the original statement, then that end punctuation is placed outside of the quotation marks.

End Punctuation



The punctuation marks used to signal the end of a sentence are the period, the exclamation mark, and the question mark.

A period is used to terminate a sentence.



Example: *All Grade 12 students should learn grammar.*

An exclamation mark conveys a sense of urgency or strong emotion.

Example: *All Grade 12 students should learn grammar!*

(Note: Exclamation marks are rarely used in formal writing.)

A question mark presents the statement as a direct question.

Example: *Should all Grade 12 students learn grammar?*

(Note: Indirect questions are simply statements, and therefore end with a period. *I wonder if all students should learn grammar.*)