

4. PUNCTUATION RULES

Good punctuation helps the reader to understand what the writer means. Here are some guidelines to the use of common punctuation. Remember, however that there are always exceptions to the rule!

Comma (,)

A comma is used:

- a) To separate words and phrases to make clear the meaning of a sentence. When reading aloud, pause at a comma.
- b) To separate more than two adjectives, e.g.
The jacket was in a homespun, soft pale green fabric.
- c) To separate words in a list, e.g.
This item is available in blue, green, red, yellow and white.
- d) To separate description and name e.g.
The Principal, Mrs James, announced the awards.
Vic Molena, a spectator at the show, described the feat as breathtaking.
- e) To separate numbers, e.g.
In 1980, 250 school canteens were inspected
- f) Before and after direct speech, e.g.
Bronwyn said, "Hello". "Hello," said Steve
- g) To prevent misunderstanding, e.g.
 - (i) The children who are wearing shoes will go on the hike.
 - (ii) The children, who are wearing shoes, will go on the hike.

The first sentence means that only those children wearing shoes will go on the hike. The second sentence means that all the children are going on the hike but adds the information that they are wearing shoes. In this case, if you remove the part of the sentence between the commas, it still means that all the children will go on the hike – a phrase that is incidental to the main point is placed between commas.

Full stop, Period or Full Point (.)

- a) A full stop is used at the end of a sentence, except where an exclamation mark or question mark is used instead.
- b) It is also often used to indicate that a word has been abbreviated:
max. maximum Aust. Australia e.g. (*exempli gratia*) for example.

The general 'rule of thumb' is that abbreviations which end with the last letter of the word do not require full stops:

Mr Mister Dr Doctor hr Hour

Other abbreviations which do not require full stops are those denoting measurement or quantity:

kg kilogram km kilometre cm centimetre

However, there are always exceptions to every rule, so it would pay to check with lists of abbreviations in a dictionary or encyclopaedia.

Semicolon (;)

A semicolon shows a separation not so complete as that shown by a full stop but greater than that shown by a comma. It is used:

a) To separate subjects when commas alone do not make the meaning clear:

Present at the Valley School assembly were: Mrs J. Collins; Principal; Mr S. Coster, Deputy Principal; Mr T. Wells, Senior Teacher; Ms P. Nicol, Secretary; and several members of the school committee.

b) Where separate statements are linked together to show a relationship:

In youth we believe many things; in old age we doubt many truths.

Colon (:)

A colon may be used:

a) Where a list or example follows:

Bring to camp: sleeping bag, sturdy shoes, waterproof jacket, swimsuit, sweater, toilet bag, towel, two changes of clothes and underwear.

b) Before a formal quote:

In the words of William Sansom: 'A write lives, at best, in a stae of astonishment.'

c) To separate reference to Bible chapter and verse:

Romans 11:33

d) To separate book title and subtitle:

In Step: Guideline for Marching Teams.

Exclamation Mark (!)

An exclamation mark is used:

a) To stress a word or sentence: Help! He did it!

b) To show surprise: Hey! Ah-ha!

c) For a command: Stop!

Question Mark (?)

Do you need to have a question mark explained?

Apostrophe (')

This is a form of punctuation with which a lot of people have trouble. It generally shows possession or 'belonging to'.

- a) For the belongings of one person, put the apostrophe before the s: Jane's bag, a child's ball, a writer's pen.
Impersonal pronouns also use an apostrophe before the s to show possession:
anyone's desk, someone's book.
NB: Personal pronouns **do not** have an apostrophe when they end in s: yours, hers, theirs.
- b) For the belongings of more than one person, put the apostrophe after the s:
a writers' group (i.e. a group of writers)
- c) Where the word itself is already plural, put the apostrophe before the s:
children's playground (a playground for children), old people's club (a club for old people)
- d) If the word already ends in s, add apostrophe s:
James's dog, St. Thomas's Church.
- e) For classical names and qualities which end in s, add only an apostrophe:
Zeus' daughter, for goodness' sake.

An apostrophe is also used for contractions, where figures or letters are left out:

'45 (1945) o'er (over) I'll (I will) you're (you are) it's (it is)*

NB: Only use an apostrophe in 'it's' when it means 'it is', not when showing possession, e.g., *It's chasing its own tail.*

Brackets or Parentheses ()

Brackets are used:

- a) To enclose remarks made by the writer that are separate from the main statement:
Next week the class (and any parents who wish to) will visit a farm.
- b) To insert an explanation not belonging to the main statement:
For centuries (no exact time is known) the treasure lay buried.
- c) To give the Botanical name of plants or animals: the broadleaf (*Griselinia littoralis*), the starfish (*Astropecten*).....

Quotation or Speech Marks (“ “ or ‘ ’)

Quotation marks are used:

- a) To enclose direct speech: James said, "I will come back"
- b) For direct quotations from speech or written work: The Road Code states: "Where there is adequate cycle tracj, use it."
- c) For book or film titles: 'Possum Perkins' by Willaim Taylor.
- d) Around words or phrases that may be debatable:
Many 'experts' disagree.
Or around words that have made up for a particular purpose and which are not the proper words:
That mixture has a wonderful 'schloopiness' to it.
- e) If a quotation is made within direct speech, use single quotation marks inside double quotation marks:
Mark said, "I don't know what 'Pride goes before a fall' means."

Dash (-)

A dash shows an interruption stronger than a pause for a comma – use sparingly.

- a) Dashes may be used in pairs to enclose matter that could also be put in parenthesis:
If it is true – and no one is sure that it is – we must do something about it.
- b) They may also be used singly to indicate a sharp break in a sentence: “I can’t see a thing in here – ouch!”

Hyphen (-)

The hyphen is used:

- a) To divide a word that doesn’t fit at the end of a line. Check with your dictionary for the rules of word division, but some general rules are:
 - (i) divide words between syllables (words of one syllable must be split)
 - (ii) ensure that the pronunciation of the first part of the word is apparent before the eye reaches the second line (e.g., coincidence should be divided to *co-incidence* to ensure that it is not confused with coin-age, etc.)
 - (iii) divide words between double consonants (e.g, com-mon) unless both consonants form the stem word (e.g., miss-ing)
- b) To prevent ambiguity:
Consider the difference in meaning between ‘The 20-odd members of the group’ and ‘The 20 odd members of the group’. Also, ‘the deep-blue sea’ and ‘ the deep blue sea’.
- c) In composite adjectives *before* a noun:
a wall six metres high: a girl 14 years old.
- d) Some other composite words are also hyphenated, e.g. merry-go-round, happy-go-lucky, grown-up, heart-to-heart. If you are unsure whether or not a word should be hyphenated, check it in your dictionary.