

Punctuation

Ten Basic Marks

Period. Use:

1. After abbreviations and initials: D.C., Mr., Ph.D., A.M., G. B. Shaw
In the abbreviations of the names of many well-known organizations, periods are not required: NASA, FBI, CBS-TV, AFL.
2. After a complete declarative or imperative sentence.
Now is the time to go home.
Be sure to turn out the light.

Question Mark. Use:

1. After a direct question.
Was your lawyer present when you were interrogated?
2. In parentheses (?) to indicate a doubtful fact.
Smith was forty (?) years old when he was drafted.

Exclamation Point. Use:

1. After an exclamatory expression, reflecting strong or sudden emotion.
What a beautiful performance!
2. To indicate a strong command.
Come here at once!
3. To indicate surprise.
I never expected to see you!

Comma. Use:

1. After each word, phrase, or clause in a series.
Everyone but my parents, relatives, and close friends was surprised that the wedding ceremony was so short.
We walked hastily along the narrow path, across the grassy field, and down the hill to the stone cottage where I was born.
We were told at the examination when we were to listen, when we were to write our answers, and when we were to stop.
2. Before the coordinate conjunction—*and, but, or, nor, so, yet*—in a compound sentence.
The young children were permitted to visit the museum, but they were warned not to finger the exhibits.
Meg did not want to go on the trip, nor were her parents inclined to pressure her to do so.
3. To set off an introductory phrase—participial, infinitive, elliptical, nominative absolute—or a long prepositional phrase.

Having studied through most of the night, Steve was ready to take the law exam.

To understand the issues thoroughly, Linda listened to experts, read relevant books and articles, and interviewed the victims of several irresponsible drivers.

Caesar having conquered Gaul, the Roman forces made ready to return home. [The introductory phrase here is a nominative absolute construction.]

Before a huge pit in the forest outside the town, the victims waited numbly.

4. To set off the introductory clause in a complex sentence.

Before they set out on their voyage, the captain informed the crew of the dangers they would encounter.

5. To set off the name or names of a person or persons directly addressed.

Ladies and gentlemen, have you reached a verdict?

6. To set off an appositive, including an appositive preceded by *or* or *especially*.

I reported for duty at the barracks, an ugly metal structure near a wire fence. [The comma is omitted if the appositive identifies the person or thing: the novelist Tolstoy, the year 1939.]

Card games, especially bridge, do not interest me at this time.

7. To set off a parenthetical expression, one that interrupts the normal order of the sentence.

This painting, it appears to me, is one of the lesser works of the master.

8. To set off a nonrestrictive adjective clause, one that is not essential to the meaning or gives additional information.

The soldiers, who had been in the army for many years, entered the village and looked for a place to get a drink.

9. To set off the word "yes" or "no" at the beginning of a sentence.

Yes, this hotel on the ocean is the paradise you have been seeking these many years.

10. To set off a contrasting expression introduced by the word "not."

This will result in psychological, not physical, trauma.

11. To set off a direct quotation. [Here the comma always precedes the quotation marks.]

"I will not relinquish my position here," said the minister, "since you, my son, have no desire to take my place when I retire."

12. To clarify meaning or prevent misreading.

Whatever is, is right.

Outside, the rain fell in torrents and threatened to inundate the valley.

The day after, John fell into a state of depression and would speak to no one.

Semicolon. Use:

1. To separate the clauses in a compound sentence when the conjunction is omitted.

Karen carefully laid the logs on the andirons; she then stuffed some paper and twigs into the fireplace and lit them.

2. To separate coordinate parts of a long compound sentence.

For a long time Wordsworth's poems were described as silly, childish things, distinguished by meanness of language and inanity of thought, and containing no more merit than is found in the parodies and pretended imitations of them; but, as Coleridge pointed out, if these criticisms had been valid, the poems would long since have passed into oblivion.

3. Before such words as "accordingly," "consequently," "hence," "nevertheless," "moreover," "therefore," when they introduce a new idea.

Socrates transmitted no writing of his own to posterity; nevertheless, his thoughts and his sayings have been handed down to us.

[This rule applies also to expressions like "that is," "for example," "for instance," "at least," "on the contrary," when they connect principal clauses.]

Colon. Use:

1. To introduce a list of items or a long or formal quotation or statement.

The shopping list my mother had given me included three vegetables: potatoes, corn, and broccoli.

The minister took as her text the second verse of The Thirtieth Psalm: "Lord my God, I cried unto thee, and thou hast healed me."

2. After an introductory word or expression such as "this," "thus," "the following," "as follows."

Suddenly we were faced with this question: how would we respond to the angry letter from our neighbor?

Dash. Use:

1. To indicate an abrupt change in the thought or structure of a sentence.

The dean advised Tom—I am sure he was motivated by dislike for the abrasive young man—to give up the study of law.

2. To make parenthetical, appositive, or explanatory matter stand out clearly.

Many of the stories about actors and actresses—especially the ones that appear in the sensational papers and magazines sold at supermarket check-out counters—are vicious, malicious, and often untruthful.

3. Before a word that sums up preceding details.

Physical strength, courage to face dangers, the ability to make decisions quickly—these are qualities I seek in those who will join me on this voyage.

Parentheses. Use:

1. To enclose numbers in a listing within a sentence.
To convince me of your ability to serve as a teacher, bring with you (1) transcripts of your college record, (2) a resume of your past experience, (3) observation reports of lessons taught, and (4) a doctor's statement that you are in good health.
2. To enclose comment or information that does not affect the structure of the sentence.
The genius of Michelangelo (see his distorted self-portrait in "The Last Judgment") was manifested not only in painting and sculpture but in architecture as well.

Brackets. Use to indicate comment or information inserted in a quotation.

"The representatives of the Humanists in the nineteenth century [Matthew Arnold, John Stuart Mill, Robert Browning, John Ruskin, and others] take their stand upon classical education as the sole avenue to culture as firmly as if they were still in the Renaissance."

Ellipsis Marks. To mark an omission in a quotation, use three periods. If the omission comes at the end of the quoted sentence, four periods are required—three for the omission and the fourth to conclude the sentence.

Montaigne has said of books, "They relieve me from idleness, rescue me from company I dislike, and blunt the edge of my grief. . . ."

Some Additional Rules

1. When you quote the title of a literary work that is not an entire book—a chapter, article, essay, lecture, song, short poem, short story—use quotation marks. Underline titles of complete works.
2. Unspoken thoughts do not require quotation marks.
I must be careful, thought the dancer, not to antagonize the director.
3. When you quote a passage that has three or more paragraphs, use quotation marks at the beginning of each paragraph and at the end of the last paragraph you quote.
4. Single quotation marks surround a quotation within a quotation.
"I have just read Christopher Morley's 'What Men Live By,' " said my son.
5. Place a period or a comma inside quotation marks.
6. Place a colon or a semicolon outside quotation marks.
7. Place a question mark or an exclamation point inside when it is part of the quotation, otherwise outside.
"Did you recite Tennyson's 'Ulysses' in class today?" asked my mother. Did the boss hear you say, "I plan to go home early today"?