

Mechanics of Writing

Punctuation

Full stop or period

Question mark

Exclamation mark

Comma

The colon, The semicolon, Ellipses



Punctuation

With the dawn of the Internet, the birth of Internet slang, and the growing age of SMS, many individuals are forgetting the fundamental aspects of **English punctuation**. You use punctuation marks to structure and organise your writing. In speech, we have a variety of devices for clarifying our meaning: **stress, intonation, rhythm, pauses, hand or body movements**. In text, we have only the words and the punctuation; and poor punctuation enables the same words to have different or unclear meanings. Thus, Punctuation is, in part, an attempt to capture in writing the emphasis we are able to deliver orally. Additionally, punctuation is a tool we use to organize word arrangements to facilitate readability. There are clear rules for the use of punctuation marks and they are not difficult to learn and to apply.

The most common punctuation marks are the period (or full stop in British English), the comma, the exclamation mark, the question mark, the colon and semi-colon, the quote, the apostrophe, the hyphen and dash, and parentheses and brackets. Capital letters are also used to help us organize meaning and to structure the sense of our writing.

The period (.), the question mark (?), and the exclamation mark (!) are end marks.

- Full stop or period (.)**

The period is one of the most commonly used punctuation mark.

- Use the period (full stop) at the end of a declarative sentence or an imperative sentence. E.g.

- The accessibility of the internet has increased tremendously over the past years. (**declarative**)

- Be here at 10am tomorrow. (**imperative**)

- The period is also used at the end of most abbreviations or initials

- Dr. John, Mr. and Mrs. John, Miss. Taku, James D. Mbong B.A. degree (B.A) (BA)

•Question mark (?)

The question mark follows a direct question. It suggests an interrogatory remark or inquiry.

Examples

1. Have you seen her?
2. Where are they going?
3. What's that white stuff in your hair?

Note that **indirect questions** do not take question marks. (An indirect question tells the reader about a question rather than asks it directly.) They end with periods.

Peter asks the teacher whether she has brought the scripts.

- **Exclamation mark (!)**

It shows that a word or statement expresses excitement or another strong feeling.

1. Watch your steps!
2. Look out for that child!
3. I've won the lottery!

If exclamation marks are used too frequently they lose their power. When they are used occasionally and for good reason, they add drama to a paragraph.

• **Comma (,):** It shows a pause, (between words or groups of words in a sentence). It also makes meaning clearer in a sentence.

Rules for using commas

-to separate words in a series: - In my bag there is a pen, a book, a cell phone and an eraser.

-after introductory words/phrases: 1. In fact, Jane is very sick.
2. Oh no, what is wrong with her?

-to set off a noun in direct address: 1. Pad, can you be here at 12 noon?
2. I'd like to visit you, James.

-to set off interrupting words (that are not essential to our understanding of the noun they follow):

1. Peter, *who is in the third year*, has come.
2. My aunt, *who is a nurse*, has been sick for 5 years.

-After a dependent clause that begins a sentence:

1. If I go to Kenya, I will visit Mt. Kenya.
2. When I get to town, I will buy a computer.

-To separate a tag question from the rest of the sentence:

1. She is late, aren't she?
2. You won't go out, will you?

- **The colon (:)**: It says, in essence, that the reader should keep reading because something important is coming.

Use the colon to introduce a list. Usually, the word *following* suggests the use of a colon.

The professor has given me three options: to retake the exam, to accept the extra credit assignment, or to fail the class.

A colon could also be used to introduce a long or literary quotation.

Then the rich man declared: “It is my personal pleasure to announce that I have decided to open a hospital in this village.”

It is also used to introduce a final fact or explanation.

There is only one explanation for her behavior: she is jealous.

- **The semicolon (;) has a few uses.**

Unlike the colon, which indicates “Go on,” the semicolon says “Pause here.” It is used between two complete thoughts in two ways:

To join two complete thoughts not connected by a joining word: *Ben cleans the house and cooks; Dan does the laundry and the grocery shopping.*

Other transitional words that may come after a semicolon include however, moreover, furthermore, thus, also, consequently, otherwise, nevertheless, then, now, in addition, in fact, and as a result.

To join two complete statements with a transitional word: *He will be out for a month; therefore, he will not be present at the party*

Use a semicolon to separate a complex series of items, especially those that contain commas.

I went to the show with James, my close friend; his friend, Jane; and her best friend, Gina.

- **Ellipses (...):** Ellipses are periods. A series of three spaced periods in a sentence indicates an omission from a quoted sentence. The following example indicates that there is an omission at the beginning of the sentence and another omission at the end of the sentence.

". . . but during the second semester we expect substantial improvement in Students performances. . . ."

Note that there are four periods at the end of the sentence. The fourth period represents the normal punctuation mark. The final period at the end of the sentence should be replaced with a question mark or exclamation mark if the original author used a question mark or exclamation mark.

