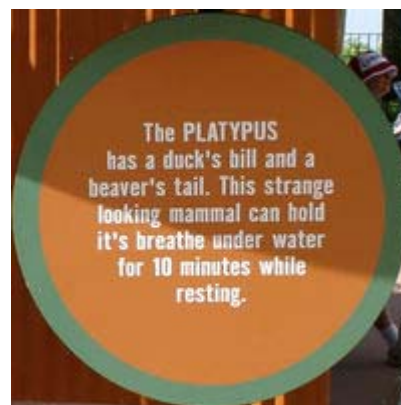


## How to Use English Punctuation Correctly ★

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. Would you like to write a great paper for one of your classes? Maybe you need to submit a polished, impeccable proposal to your boss. If so, it will help to know proper usage of punctuation. Consider this article a crash course in English punctuation, and read on.



### Steps

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1. End your sentences with a period (**full stop**), question mark, or exclamation point (**exclamation mark** or **shout mark**).
  - Use the **period (full stop)** to denote a full stop at the end of a statement. The period ( . ) is one of the most commonly used punctuation marks.
    - *The accessibility of the computer has increased tremendously over the past several years.*
  - The **question mark ( ? )**, used at the end of a sentence, suggests an interrogatory remark or inquiry.
    - *What has humanity done about the growing concern of global warming?*
  - The **exclamation point (exclamation mark, shout mark)( ! )** suggests excitement or emphasis in a sentence.
    - *I can't believe how difficult the exam was!*
2. Use the semicolon and colon properly.
  - The **semicolon ( ; )** has a few uses.
    - Use a semicolon to **separate two related but independent clauses**. Note that, if the two clauses are very wordy or complex, it is better to use a period instead.
      - *People continue to worry about the future; our failure to conserve resources has put the world at risk.*
    - Use a semicolon to **separate a complex series of items**, especially those that contain commas.
      - *I went to the show with Jake, my close friend; his friend, Jane; and her best friend, Jenna.*
  - The **colon ( : )** has multiple uses.
    - Use the colon to **introduce a list**. Be careful not to use a colon when denoting a regular **series**.

Usually, the word *following* suggests the use of a colon. Use only after a full sentence which ends in a noun.

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

- **INCORRECT** - *The Easter basket contained: Easter eggs, chocolate rabbits, and other candy.*

### 3. Understand the differences between a hyphen and a dash.

- The **hyphen** ( - ) was once a common punctuation mark on typewriters, when a long word might have been split between two lines. The hyphen is still used in a number of other areas:

- Use a hyphen when **adding a prefix** to some words. The purpose of this hyphen is to make the word easier to read. If you were to leave the hyphen out of a word like *re-examine*, it would be *reexamine*, which would be harder to read. Understand that some words do not require a hyphen to separate the prefix from the word, such as *restate*, *pretest*, and *undo*. Let a dictionary be your guide for when to use the hyphen after a prefix.

When you use a hyphen, the two words have to rely on each other. Example: re-arrange.

- *Cara is his ex-girlfriend.*
- Use hyphens when creating **compound words** from separate words.
  - *The up-to-date newspaper reporters were quick to jump on the latest scandal.*
- Use a hyphen when **writing numbers out as words**. Separate the two words of any number under one hundred with a hyphen.
  - *There are fifty-two playing cards in a deck.* ("The amount is one hundred and eighty" is a common error in US English, where the "and" is usually omitted. Elsewhere in the English-speaking world, however, the "and" is usually included.)
    - Be careful with spelling out numbers above one hundred—if the number is used as an adjective, it is completely hyphenated, since all compound adjectives are hyphenated (*I have one-hundred tapes*). Otherwise, a hyphen should only occur if a number greater than 100 occurs within the larger number, e.g., *He lived to be one hundred twenty-one.*

- The **dash** ( -- or — ) should be used when making a brief interruption within a statement, a sudden change of thought, an additional comment, or a dramatic qualification. It can also be used to add a parenthetical statement, such as for further clarification, but should still be relevant to the sentence. Otherwise, use parentheses. Keep in mind that the rest of the sentence should still flow naturally. Try to remove the statement within the dash from the sentence; if the sentence appears disjointed or does not make sense, then you may need to revise. There should be spaces before and after the dash in British English.

- *An introductory clause is a brief phrase that comes—yes, you guessed it—at the beginning of a sentence.*

- *This is the end of our sentence—or so we thought.*

### 4. Use the double quotation mark and single quotation mark/apostrophe for different purposes.

- The **double quotation** ( " ) encloses a direct quotation, whether made by a person or taken from a piece of literature.

- *"I can't wait to see him perform!" John exclaimed.*

- *According to the article, the value of the dollar in developing nations is "strongly influenced by its aesthetic value, rather than its face value."*

- The **single quotation mark** or **apostrophe** ( ' ) has a variety of uses.

- Use the apostrophe together with the letter **s** to **indicate possession**. Be aware of the difference in using an apostrophe with singular or plural nouns. A singular noun will use **'s**, whereas the plural version of that singular noun will use **s'**. Also, be mindful of nouns that are always considered to be plural, such as *children* and *people* — here, you should use **'s**. Be aware of pronouns that are already possessive and do not require apostrophes, such as *hers* and *its* (*it's* is used only for the contractions of *it is* and *it*

*has*). *Their* is possessive without apostrophe or *s*, except as a predicate adjective, where it becomes *theirs*.

- *The hamster's water tube needs to be refilled.*
  - A singular noun with possession.
- *In the pet store, the hamsters' bedding needed to be changed.*
  - A pluralized singular noun with possession.
- *These children's test scores are the highest in the nation.*
  - A plural noun with possession.
- Use the apostrophe to combine two words to make a **contraction**. For example, *cannot* becomes *can't*, *you are* becomes *you're*, and *they have* becomes *they've*.
- Use the single quotation mark within a regular quotation to indicate a **quotation within a quotation**.
  - *Ali said, "Anna told me, 'I wasn't sure if you wanted to come!'"*
- Note that an apostrophe is **not** used with 's' to make a plural noun from a singular. This is a very common mistake and should be avoided.
  - **CORRECT** - apple → apples
  - **INCORRECT** - apple → apple's

5. Indicate a break or pause within a sentence with the **comma** ( , ). This is another commonly used punctuation mark. There are several instances where you might use a comma:

- Use the comma when denoting an **appositive**, or a break within a sentence that supplements and adds information to the subject.
  - *Bill Gates, CEO of Microsoft, is the developer of the operating system known as Windows.*
- Use the comma when **denoting a series**. This is a set of three or more "list" items within a sentence. To save space in newspapers, some writers may omit the last comma.
  - *The fruit basket contained apples, bananas, and oranges.*
  - *The computer store was filled with video games, computer hardware and other electronic paraphernalia.*
- Use a comma if your subject has **two or more adjectives** describing it. This is somewhat similar to a series, except that it is **incorrect** to place a comma after the final adjective.
  - **CORRECT** - *The powerful, resonating sound caught our attention.*
  - **INCORRECT** - *The powerful, resonating, sound caught our attention.*
- Use a comma when referring to a **city and state**. It is also necessary to use a comma to separate the city and state from the rest of the sentence.
  - *I am originally from Freehold, NJ.*
  - *Los Angeles, CA, is one of the largest cities in the United States.*
- Use a comma to **separate an introductory phrase** (which is usually one or more prepositional phrases) from the rest of the sentence. An introductory phrase briefly introduces the sentence, but is not part of the sentence's subject or predicate, and it therefore should be separated from the main clause by a comma.
  - *After the show, John and I went out to dinner.*
  - *On the back of my couch, my cat's claws have slowly been carving a large hole.*

- Use the comma to **separate two independent clauses**. Having two independent clauses in a sentence simply means that you can split the sentence into two. If your sentence contains two independent clauses that are separated by a conjunction (such as *and*, *as*, *but*, *for*, *nor*, *so*, or *yet* ), place a comma before the conjunction.
    - **Ryan went to the beach yesterday**, but **he forgot his sunscreen**.
    - *Water bills usually rise during the summer*, *as people are thirstier during hot and humid days*.
  - Use a comma when making a **direct address**. When calling one's attention by name, separate the person's name and the rest of the statement with a comma. Note that this kind of comma is used rarely in writing, because this is something that we do normally while speaking.
    - *Amber*, *could you come here for a moment?*
  - Use a comma to separate **direct quotations**. A comma should come after the last word before a quotation *that is being introduced*. It is not necessary to use a comma in an indirect quote. A comma is usually not necessary if you are not quoting an entire statement.
    - *While I was at his house, John asked me if I wanted anything to eat.*
      - An indirect quotation that does not require a comma.
    - *While I was at his house, John asked, "Do you want anything to eat?"*
      - A direct quotation.
    - *According to the client, the lawyer was "lazy and incompetent."*
      - A partial direct quotation that does not require a comma.
6. Understand the difference between parentheses, brackets, and braces.
- Use **parentheses** ( **()** ) to clarify, to place an afterthought, or to add a personal comment. Be sure to include the period *after* the closing parenthesis.
    - *Steve Case (AOL's former CEO) resigned from the Time-Warner board of directors in 2005.*
      - Used for clarification. Here, commas can replace the parentheses.
    - *You will need a flashlight for the camping trip (don't forget the batteries!).*
      - An afterthought. Note that the period (full stop) follows the last parentheses — *not before the first*. Also note that replacing the parentheses with a comma may not be entirely suitable here, and is better off with a period or a semicolon.
    - *Most grammarians believe that parentheses and commas are always interchangeable (I disagree).*
      - A personal comment.
  - Use **brackets** ( **[]** ) to signify an editor's note in a regular piece of writing. You can also use brackets to clarify or to revise a direct quote so that it appeals to your own writing. Brackets are often used to encompass the word "sic" (Latin for *thus*), suggesting that the previous word or phrase was written "as is", with the error intended to be displayed.
    - *"[The blast] was absolutely devastating," said Susan Smith, a local bystander at the scene of the incident.*
      - *"It was absolutely devastating!"* – the actual quote by Susan Smith.
  - **Braces** ( **{ }** ) are most widely used in denoting a numeric set in mathematics. Though generally uncommon, braces can also be used in regular writing to indicate a set of equal, independent choices.
    - **{ 1, 2, 5, 10, 20 }**
    - *Choose your favorite utensil { fork, knife, spoon } and bring it to me.*
7. Know how to use the slash ( **/** ).
- Use the slash to separate "and" and "or", when appropriate. The phrase "and/or" suggests that a series of

options are not mutually exclusive.

- *"To register, you will need your driver's license and/or your birth certificate."*
- The slash is used when quoting lyrics and poetry to denote a line break. Be sure to add spaces between your slashes here.
  - *"Row, row, row your boat / gently down the stream / Merrily, merrily, merrily, merrily, / life is but a dream."*
- The slash can replace the word "and" to join two nouns. By replacing "and" with a slash, you suggest that there is equal important to both characteristics. Use these replacements in moderation to place greater emphasis where "and" may not do so—as well as as not to confuse the reader. You can also do the same for "or", as in "his/her". However you should *not* use the slash to separate independent clauses, as shown below.
  - *"The student and part-time employee has very little free time."* → *"The student/part-time employee has very little free time."*
  - *"Do you want to go to the grocery store, or would you prefer to go to the mall?"* → *"Do you want to go to the grocery store / would you prefer to go to the mall?"* – **This is incorrect.**

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## Video

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## Tips

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- If you write in a professional capacity, be sure to follow any guidelines or style guides provided by your employer. In some cases, their rules can be at odds with what you read here or elsewhere, but their rules always take precedence. For example, some companies use serial commas (a, b, and c) and others do not (a, b and c).
- Many grammar experts believe that parentheses and commas are often interchangeable when setting off

information. While this is sometimes true, there are some cases where a set of parentheses might be more suitable, such as in indicating one's personal thought.

- Although dashes and parentheses have similar uses, remember that parentheses indicate a stronger "side notion" than dashes.
- There are exceptions to the hyphen-dash rule. In making compound words, when one of the words is itself composed of two words, use an *en dash* ( – ) rather than a hyphen, as in, "He took the Paris–New York route." En dashes are also used between numbers, as in page numbers or years, to denote a range. ("A discussion on personal finance is found in pages 45–62.")
- The placement of punctuation marks before or after a closing quotation mark varies. American English leaves the punctuation mark inside the quotation if it is part of the quotation, "like so." (Commas and periods (full stops) are always put inside the quotation marks for a sentence in American English, regardless of whether the quotation has punctuation at the end. Other types of punctuation marks are put outside the quotation if they are not part of the quotation.) British English tends to leave the punctuation mark outside the quotation, "like so".
  - At times, British English will switch back and forth between the inside and outside, depending on the context. For example, interrogative quotations may keep the question mark inside the quotation, as in, "Do you like this question?"
- In formal writing, try to avoid excessive use of question marks and exclamation points. Most of your sentences should be declarative statements.
- Dashes are usually considered to be informal. You might want to replace the use of a dash with a set of parentheses, or even commas. Similarly, limit the frequency of dash use in your writing; they should be reserved to emphasize a couple of important points.
- If you decide against the serial comma in your work, make sure that the meaning of the sentence can stand without its use. Think about the classic example of a sentence in which the serial comma is needed: "My heroes are my parents, Mother Teresa and the Pope."
- If you find that a sentence seems to drag on, find a way to add a comma or two, so that it is easier on the reader's eyes. If a sentence becomes too long, then consider splitting it into two or more sentences.
- Never be afraid to have short sentences in your writing by splitting up long sentences that contain several points. Your reader will appreciate writing that is clear and concise with briefer statements, as opposed to a one-page paragraph with twenty words per sentence.

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## Warnings

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- While using English punctuation inappropriately may help your writing to flow much more smoothly, generally creating a more "intelligent" appearance, don't overdo it. It's best to err on the side of omission than to add several superfluous apostrophes and commas.
- Try to keep the different languages' punctuation from each other, so you do not confuse languages and their punctuations rule with each other.

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## Related wikiHows

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- [How to Avoid Colloquial \(Informal\) Writing](#)
- [How to Use Apostrophes](#)

- [How to Use Question Marks Correctly](#)
- [How to Use a Dictionary](#)
- [How to Learn English](#)
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## Sources and Citations

[\[edit\]](#)

- [Wikipedia's guide to the Apostrophe](#)

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