

# Punctuation

## Introduction

The exact usage of punctuation can vary somewhat. This lesson gives advice that is acceptable in most quarters. It omits alternative advice that is more controversial or that can lead to problems for inexperienced writers.

- 1. Use a period at the end of any sentence that is a statement, a command, or an indirect question.
  2. Use a period after initials in a name.
  3. Do not add an extra period to the end of a sentence if the sentence ends in an abbreviation that takes a period.

### Examples

1

The meeting ended after midnight.

Ensure that all staff are informed of the changes.

The secretary asked why there was no signature on the letter.

2

He referred to the work of J. K. Rowling.

3

The company is opening an office in the U.S.

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### Correct placement

1. Use a comma to set off parenthetical elements, which are inessential asides added to a sentence.
2. Use a comma between independent clauses that are joined by a coordinating conjunction.
3. Use a comma to set off three or more elements in a list.

4. When an introductory element comes before an independent clause, use a comma after the introductory element.

5. Use commas to set off contrasting phrases or a shift in thought.

6. Use commas to set off adjectives that could conceivably be joined by **and**.

## Examples

1

My boss, who is wonderful, is hoping to retire next year.

Vancouver, Canada, is a very rainy city.

The company is, of course, prepared to investigate the allegation.

The man, knowing full well that he was tired, drove anyway.

2

We are hoping to complete the project on time, **but** that may not be possible.

More places are being made, **so** you might be lucky.

The company is having financial difficulties, **and** it will soon close down.

(In the above sentences, notice that **but**, **so**, and **and** join two elements that could both stand alone as sentences. These elements are independent clauses.)

3

We intend to send the plans to Mary, the photos to John, and the music to Susan.

The new worker needs paper, pens, a stapler, and a lamp.

4

Due to the high price of journals, the library cannot afford to buy many.

Although the journals are expensive, the library will order them.

Because the journals are expensive, the library will not order them.

While the clients were at the meeting, the secretary copied the letters.

To take advantage of the offer, you need to act quickly.

5

The company bought six, not sixteen, computers.

We hired her, not him.

She seemed tired, almost lifeless.

She might come third, possibly second.

The company is expected to make an announcement, isn't it?

6

That is an elegant, coherent argument.

Those old, pathetic, weak excuses do not convince me.

### Incorrect placement

1. Do *not* use commas to set off elements that are essential to the meaning of a sentence.
2. Do *not* use a comma before a parenthetical element if it is preceded by a coordinating conjunction.
3. When an independent clause comes before material that could have been used as an introductory element do *not* use a comma.
4. *Never* use a comma between a subject and its predicate.
5. Do *not* use a comma before a conjunction that joins an independent clause to a nonindependent clause.

### Examples

1

(Note! Look back to **correct placement rule 1** and its examples and compare them with these examples. The examples here contain essential elements).

The student **who receives the highest mark** will be given an award.

(The phrase **who receives the highest mark** is essential because it describes which student will be given an award).

The program **that was written in just ten lines** was the best.

(The phrase **that was written in just ten lines** is essential because it is describing which program the writer is talking about.)

The person **wearing the best costume** will receive a trophy.

(The phrase **wearing the best costume** is essential to the meaning of the sentence because it describes which person will receive a trophy.)

2

We believed they would win, but **of course**, they lost. ✓

(There is no comma before **of course**.)

We were hoping for a victory, yet **despite our hopes**, they lost. ✓

(There is no comma before **despite our hopes**.)

3

**The library cannot afford to buy journals** due to their high price. ✓

**The library cannot afford to buy journals,** due to their high price. ✗

**The library will order the journals** although they are very expensive. ✓

**The library will order the journals,** although they are very expensive. ✗

**The library will not order the journals** because they are very expensive. ✓

**The library will not order the journals,** because they are very expensive. ✗

**The secretary copied the letters** while the clients were at the meeting. ✓

**The secretary copied the letters,** while the clients were at the meeting. ✗

**You need to act quickly** to take advantage of the offer. ✓

**You need to act quickly,** to take advantage of the offer. ✗

4

**Knowing I could succeed** is what kept me going. ✓

(A comma is inappropriate before **is**, just as it would be in the sentence **That is what kept me going.**)

**My new boss** hopes to retire next year. ✓

(A comma is inappropriate before **hopes**, just as it would be in the sentence **She hopes to retire next year.**)

5

The speaker turned on the computer and **turned out the lights.** ✓

(The phrase **turned out the lights** is not an independent clause and so the coordinating conjunction **and** does not need to be preceded by a comma.)

The secretary collected the faxes but **forgot the mail.** ✓

(The phrase **forgot the mail** is not an independent clause because it could not stand alone as a sentence. Therefore, the coordinating conjunction **but** does not need to be preceded by a comma.)

The project manager told me that the project was nearing completion and **that it was under budget.** ✓

(Because the phrase **that it was under budget** is not an independent clause, the conjunction **and** does not need to be preceded by a comma.)

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1. Use a semicolon to join two sentences when you wish to show your reader the close relationship between the ideas expressed in the two sentences.

2. When two sentences have been joined by a conjunction and the first sentence contains commas, you may use a semicolon before the conjunction.

3. Use a semicolon to help your reader understand a list that has complex elements.

4. You may use a semicolon to join a sentence and a word that introduces a list of three or more items.

### Examples

1

The manager is planning to leave early; he is concerned that there will be delays at the airport.

The builder suggested several ideas; however, the company is likely to adopt only one.

The designers are very talented; they are very creative.

2

After the meeting is finished, there will be plenty of time for fun; and there is no doubt we will have fun.

The auditors will, I am sure, notice the problem; and this will certainly lead to problems.

3

The company will be hiring Sandra Vogle, a programmer; Peter Noonan, a designer; and Jo Tran, a systems analyst.

We are planning to visit Melbourne, Victoria; Brisbane, Queensland; and Sydney, New South Wales.

4

All staff should bring their own equipment; for example, pens, paper, staplers, and rulers.

Our firm requires three things of staff; namely, loyalty, honesty, and perseverance.

■

1. Use a colon after a sentence that introduces a list.
2. Use a colon after a sentence that is an introduction to an idea.
3. Use a colon after a sentence that introduces a quotation.
4. Use a colon to introduce a list in tabular form.

## Examples

1

Our firm requires three things of staff: loyalty, honesty, and perseverance.

The play will require the following characters: a chef, a nurse, a teacher, and a child.

We need someone to volunteer for the following tasks: packing boxes, writing labels, and addressing envelopes.

2

The professor emphasised one point: attend all lectures and tutorials.

The speaker gave the programmers good advice: always comment your code.

3

The manager made the following surprising announcement: "Due to superior profits this month, all workers may leave work at noon today".

4

The company expects employees to be:

a. loyal

b. honest

c. punctual

(Notice that in a tabular list, the element before the colon does not need to be a sentence.)

## ?

1. Use a question mark at the end of a direct question.

2. You do not need a question mark at the end of a polite request that is phrased like a question.

## Examples

1

Did the company make a profit last quarter?

She brought the projector, didn't she?

Does the new receptionist come from the **U.S.?**

(Notice that when an abbreviation takes a period, the question mark is added after the period.)

2

Will you please move to the front of the lecture theatre.

(Although this is phrased like a question, it is really a request and does not require a question mark.)

# !

1. Use an exclamation mark at the end of an emphatic command.
2. Use an exclamation mark to convey a sense of urgency.
3. Use an exclamation mark to express surprise.

**Note:** Exclamation marks are rarely used in business letters or in academic prose.

## Examples

1

Make sure you return the books!

2

You have been warned not to leave early!

3

We trebled our profits last month!

# \

1. Use an apostrophe to create the possessive form of a noun.
2. Use the apostrophe for gerundive (-ing constructions) where a noun phrase can be replaced with a possessive pronoun.
3. Use an apostrophe in contracted forms to show that a letter or letters have been omitted; however, you should avoid contractions in academic prose.

## Examples

1

The client's ideas were accepted.

The painters will arrive soon to paint the secretary's office.

Several clients' files were lost.

2

The company will allow **the women's hiring** of the room to proceed.

(The phrase **the women's** could be replaced by the possessive pronoun **their**.)

I gather that **the manager's inviting** me to the meeting was quite unexpected.

(The phrase **the manager's** could be replaced by a possessive pronoun such as **her** or **his**.)

3

I am sure **they're** (they are) going to propose a new idea.

I **don't** (do not) think you are correct.

We believe **it's** (it is) a wonderful idea.

**It's** (it is) been a wonderful day.

**Let's** (let is) have a meeting soon.

**Who's** (who is) going to be at the meeting?

I think **they'll** (they will) be here soon.

- 
1. Use dashes to set off parenthetical elements that you wish to emphasise.
  2. Use dashes to set off parenthetical elements that contain punctuation.
  3. Use dashes to set off a parenthetical element that is a sentence.
  4. Use a dash to separate a list from a sentence that explains what the elements of the list have in common.
  5. Use a dash or dashes to show or emphasise an abrupt change in thought.
  6. Use a dash to add more information to a sentence that would seem quite complete by itself.

## Examples

1

My boss — a wonderful man — is retiring next year.

(The dashes could be replaced by commas, but the dashes put more emphasis on the fact that the boss is a wonderful man.)

2

All of my subjects — accounting, economics and marketing — are taught in the evening.

(The dashes could be replaced by commas, but the dashes clarify the sentence structure.)

3

The current design — the designers hope it will be the final design — is very good.

4

Programming, project management, and design — all of these subjects are quite practical.

5

The design should win the award — unless, of course, the judges are corrupt. My colleague — the one who was sick last week — is giving the speech tonight.

6

I decided to take on a new subject this semester — marketing principles.

## “ ”

1. Use quotation marks to set off material that quotes exactly what someone said.
2. Do not use quotation marks with indirect speech.

## Examples

1

The client replied, “I will definitely take your suggestions into account”.

She politely asked, “May I leave?”

Did she say, “I will not go with you?”

**Beware!** In North America, the period at the end of the sentence would come before the quotation mark. When writing for a particular place, look at the relevant literature to see whether to put periods or commas before or after a quotation mark. Other types of punctuation, such as exclamation marks and question marks, always go in the place to which they logically belong — before the quotation mark if the quote is an exclamation or a question, but after the quotation mark if it is the entire sentence that is an exclamation or a question.

2

The client said that **“he would definitely take our suggestions into account”**. **X**

(The client said that he would definitely take our suggestion into account. **✓**)

## [ ]

1. Use brackets to surround material that you have added to a quotation.
2. Use [sic] to show that the material just quoted contains an error that is not yours, but was in the original material being quoted.
3. Use brackets to include a note that you have added emphasis to a quotation.

## Examples

1

Most and Owen (2000) noted that “all the students liked the material developed for the **[mathematics]** subject.

(Original statement quoted from: “The study showed that all the students liked the material developed for the Discrete Maths and Logic subject.”)

According to the company’s report, “profits were marginally higher this year **[2002]**”.

(Original material quoted from: “ Our profits were marginally higher this year”.)

According to OzWeb, “evidence shows that **[their]** products are regarded by consumers as second to none”.

(Original material quoted from: “The evidence shows that our products are regarded by consumers as second to none”.)

2

Johnson and Smith (1999) developed a new technique “to ensure that all project **manegers** [sic] apply appropriate standards”.

(The word managers was incorrectly spelt in the original as **manegers**.)

3

Griffin and Forrest (1996) claim to have a new interpretation of the data that “will undoubtedly *revolutionise* the world [emphasise added]”.

(Original material quoted from: “Our new interpretation of the data will undoubtedly revolutionise the world”.)

...

Use an ellipsis when you have omitted something from a quotation.

## Example

In the latest review by Howell (2002), the new discovery is referred to as “the most important... since the turn of the century”.

(Original material quoted form: “There is no doubt that this is the most important discovery since the turn of the century”.)

( )

1. Use parentheses to enclose parenthetical elements that you wish to de-emphasise.

2. Use parentheses to enclose material that you have included as a clarification.

3. Use parentheses to enclose numbers given for a list of items.
4. Use parentheses to enclose an abbreviation that is used for the first time in a document

### Examples

1

A store manager (from Harvey Norman) suggested that the company buy a scanner.

2

The deal is worth ten thousand dollars (\$10 000).

3

The company agreed to give its employees (1) a pay rise, (2) medical insurance, and (3) an extra paid holiday.

4

The computing services at Griffith University (GU) are located in the library.

/

Use a slash to indicate a choice.

### Example

The subject is graded on a pass/fail basis.

## Punctuation Quizzes

### Punctuation 1

*For each of the following pairs of sentences, select the one that exhibits better punctuation.*

- The book, that was chosen, is not expensive.
- The book that was chosen is not expensive.
  
- Brochures were sent to Toronto, Canada; London, England; and Paris, France.
- Brochures were sent to Toronto, Canada, London, England, and Paris, France.

- We are sure of one thing: a profit will not be made.
- We are sure of one thing, a profit will not be made.
  
- Dont respond to the email.
- Don't respond to the email.
  
- All of our staff; the chefs, waiters, and cashiers; are happy.
- All of our staff — the chefs, waiters, and cashiers — are happy.
  
- Staff at Griffith University (GU) have been given a pay increase.
- Staff at Griffith University [GU] have been given a pay increase.
  
- The boss said that "he would collect the information".
- The boss said that he would collect the information.
  
- The boss said, "I will collect the information".
- The boss said I will collect the information.

## Punctuation 2

*Add the most appropriate punctuation to the following sentences.*

Since last year a year in which the company made a loss seven people have been retrenched.

Lets meet tomorrow.

The assistants wondered where the manager had gone

The school that submits the best poster will win an award

Materials will be sent out this afternoon so you will have them soon.

## Answers

### Punctuation 1

- The book, that was chosen, is not expensive.
- The book that was chosen is not expensive. ✓  
(That's correct. Essential elements should NOT be set off with commas).

Brochures were sent to Toronto, Canada; London, England; and Paris, France. ✓  
 Brochures were sent to Toronto, Canada, London, England, and Paris, France.  
(Correct. You can use semicolons to help your reader understand a list that has complex elements).

We are sure of one thing: a profit will not be made. ✓

We are sure of one thing, a profit will not be made.

(Correct. A semicolon can be used after a sentence to introduce an idea).

Dont respond to the email.

Don't respond to the email. ✓

(Yes. If you use a contracted form, you need an apostrophe to show that a letter has been omitted. However, you should avoid contractions in academic prose).

All of our staff; the chefs, waiters, and cashiers; are happy.

All of our staff — the chefs, waiters, and cashiers — are happy. ✓

(Correct. You can use dashes to set off parenthetical elements that contain punctuation).

Staff at Griffith University (GU) have been given a pay increase. ✓

Staff at Griffith University [GU] have been given a pay increase.

(Yes. Parentheses are used to enclose an abbreviation that is used for the first time in a document).

The boss said that "he would collect the information".

The boss said that he would collect the information. ✓

(Correct. You should NOT use quotation marks with indirect speech.)

The boss said, "I will collect the information". ✓

The boss said I will collect the information.

(Yes. Use quotation marks to set off material that quotes exactly what someone said.)

## Punctuation 2

Since last year, a year in which the company made a loss, seven people have been retrenched.

(The phrase "a year in which the company made a loss" is not essential and should be set off with commas.)

Let's meet tomorrow.

(The word "Let's" means "let us".)

The assistants wondered where the manager had gone.

(This is just a simple sentence).

The school that submits the best poster will win an award.

(The phrase "that submits the best poster" is an essential part of the sentence.)

Materials will be sent out this afternoon, so you will have them soon.

(Use a comma between independent clauses that are joined by a coordinating conjunction.)