

Common Punctuation Errors

Places you're likely to make a mistake:

1. At the end of a sentence
2. When you have quotations, citations, or parentheses
3. When you haven't memorized the rules
4. When you need to make a judgment call

Watch out for these common errors!

At the ends of sentences:

1. The doubled period
 - **Rule: One period at a time, please!**
 - Don't do this: I forgot to bring my I.D..
2. Unnecessary emoting
 - **Rule: If it's a statement, a period will suffice.**
 - *Beowulf* is an epic adventure story that is as fresh today as ever!
 - In this essay, I focus on Grendel's apparent lack of motivation for his actions...

When you have quotations, citations, and parentheses:

1. Introducing a quotation improperly
 - **Rule: Introduce a quotation with an initial phrase and a comma or an initial clause and a colon.**
 - According to Jones, "Blah blah blah."
 - The shortest verse in the Bible makes a powerful emotional statement: "Jesus wept."
2. Using too much punctuation
 - **Rule: If introduce a quotation by fitting it grammatically into the sentence, omit the comma or colon.**
 - We know from John 11:35 that "Jesus wept."
3. Putting the comma in the wrong place or using it unnecessarily
 - **Rule: If the sentence continues after the quotation, you'll usually need a comma after your quotation but before your final quotation mark.**
 - "I wish this workshop were over," John said.
 - "Not me," Mary replied, "I've got to go to the dentist this afternoon."
 - **Rule: If the quotation ends in an exclamation point or question mark, omit the comma.**
 - "I hate going to the dentist!" John bellowed.
 - "Why are you talking so loudly?" asked Mary.

4. Putting punctuation outside the quotation marks
 - **Rule: If the sentence ends with the quotation (and if there is no parenthetical citation), put your final mark of punctuation *inside* the quotation marks.**
 - "That dog is bigger than a Denali!"
 - "I don't think so; Denalis are quite large."

5. Punctuating citations improperly
 - **Rule: If your sentence ends with a footnote, put the superscript number *after* your final mark of punctuation.**
 - According to Car and Driver, the Denali is "among the most agile of full-sized sport utility vehicles."¹⁵
 - According to Car and Driver, the Denali is "among the most agile of full-sized sport utility vehicles" (Csere 20).
 - **Rule: If the sentence ends with a parenthetical citation, omit the punctuation at the end of the quotation (unless it is a ? or a !).**
 - Smith urges clients to ask, "What are you doing with your life?" (qtd. in Jones 15).

6. Letting your quotation take over your sentence
 - **Rule: Remember that the end-of-sentence punctuation must fit with the *whole* sentence—not just the quotation.**
 - If Csaba Csere says that the Denali is "among the most agile of full-sized sport utility vehicles" (20), then why shouldn't I get one for my sixteenth birthday, Dad?

7. Failing to indicate a quotation within a quotation
 - **Rule: If you have a quotation within a quotation, standard American usage indicates that you double the outermost quotes (") and use single quotes for the inner quotations (').**
 - My dad said to me, "Your so-called 'best friend' was just over here asking if you could loan her some money. I told her 'absolutely not.'"

8. Setting off parenthetical phrases or clauses improperly
 - **Parenthetical phrases and clauses need to fit the grammar of the whole sentence.**
 - My brother was driving, and I was jealous. (I was only thirteen that winter.)
 - My brother was driving, and I was jealous (I was only thirteen that winter).
 - My brother was driving (I was thirteen), and I was jealous.
 - My brother was driving, and I was jealous (was I thirteen that winter?).
 - **Avoid overusing parentheses in academic writing.**

When you need a rule:

1. Capitalization
 - a. Always capitalize the first word of a sentence.
 - b. Except in special cases (e.e. cummings), always capitalize proper names or official titles.
 - c. Preserve capitalization in quotations unless you have good reason for doing otherwise (a publisher's standards, for instance). If you must change the case of a letter, put the letter in brackets.

d. Do not capitalize abstract nouns.

2. Commas

a. Use a comma to join two sentences with "and," "but," or "or."

- You cook, and I'll do the dishes.
- I'll cook and do the dishes

b. Use a comma after an introductory word group.

- If you cook, I'll do the dishes.

c. Use a comma between items in a series.

- I'd rather not do the cleaning, laundry, or dishes.

d. Use a comma to set off added information only if that information is not absolutely necessary.

- My mother, who is a college professor, hates her job.
- I am looking for a college professor who hates his job. [no comma]

e. Use commas to set off transitions.

- It was cloudy this morning, but, in fact, it did not rain.
- It was cloudy this morning; however, it did not rain.

f. Use commas to make reading easier.

- Unlike Joe, Catherine loves to sing.
- To err is human; to forgive, divine.
- Well, things didn't go well; what happened, happened.

g. Use commas to set off direct address or quotations.

- John, would you come over here?
- "John," she shouted, "would you come over here?"

h. Do *not* use a comma every time you breathe.

i. Do *not* use a comma whenever it seems like you (maybe, perhaps, possibly) should.

3. Apostrophes

a. Apostrophes create contractions.

- I don't like him very much.
- Steak 'n' Shake is a great restaurant.

b. Apostrophes indicate possession.

- My mother's job is better than all my brothers' jobs put together.
- Dickens's later works are much darker than his early novels.

c. Do *not* use an apostrophe to form a plural.

d. Remember: "it's" = "it is," but "its" is the possessive form.

Judgment calls:

1. Colons versus Semicolons

a. Colons and semicolons express a relationship between two halves of a sentence.

b. Colons indicate that the second half of the sentence proceeds from the first half. Colons mean "that is" or "what I mean by that is..."

c. Semicolons create a list (but no stronger relationship than that). They mean "and" or "also."

d. Colons

- i. Use them when the second half of the sentence further explains the first half:
 - John is a very emotional person: he cries at the drop of a hat.
 - I got just what I wanted for my birthday: a Denali.

- ii. Use them to introduce a list that does not flow naturally with the rest of the sentence:
 - The classroom was a cacophony of the sound sounds of 2007: iPods, cell phones, and laptops.
 - iii. You do not need a colon if the list fits into the grammar of the sentence:
 - My favorite foods are chicken cacciatore, boeuf en daube, and Cheesy Westerns.
 - e. Semicolons
 - i. Semicolons connect independent clauses in a “both-and” relationship.
 - My brother was sixteen years old that winter; I was thirteen.
 - He had a Mustang; I, however, wanted a Denali.
 - ii. Semicolons separate items in a list when commas are not strong enough to do so.
 - I bought fruits such as apples, pears, and bananas; meats such as chicken and pork; and cereals such as Cheerios, Kix, Crispix, and Circus Fun.
2. Dashes
- a. Dashes indicate a full stop—a very strong pause in the sequence of a sentence:
 - I cannot write without dashes—I sprinkle them like salt and pepper in my prose.
 - b. Dashes set off appositives (parenthetical expressions):
 - My mother—a college professor—encouraged me to take my math classes my freshman year.
 - c. Hyphens and dashes are not the same thing.
 - d. Avoid overusing dashes in formal writing (often colons or semicolons can be substituted).
3. Hyphens
- a. Hyphens create compound words.
 - I have ninety-four Penguin editions.
 - b. Hyphens make adjectives out of nouns.
 - The woman was an African American. à The woman was African-American.
 - I like literature from the nineteenth century. à I like nineteenth-century literature.
 - c. Do *not* use hyphens to introduce quotations.
4. Ellipses
- a. Ellipses indicate that something has been omitted.
 - Paul urges, “Present your bodies . . . holy and acceptable to God” (Rom. 12:1).
 - b. If you end a sentence with an ellipsis, you need FOUR periods instead of three.
 - c. Do *not* use ellipses to create dramatic effect (especially in formal writing).
 - The results of this study were surprising to the researchers. . . .
 - d. Ellipses may or may not be enclosed in brackets (depending on your citation style).
 - e. If at all possible, avoid using too many ellipses.

Remember: If in doubt, ask your professor!