

Common Punctuation Errors

Most Common Areas

Here are the areas where most of the punctuation occurs in writing:

- ▶ At the end of a sentence
- ▶ Quotations, citations, or parentheses
- ▶ Unsure of the punctuation rules
- ▶ When needing to make a judgment call

End of a Sentence

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.

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.**
 - The shortest verse in the Bible makes a powerful emotional statement: "Jesus wept."
2. Using too much punctuation
 - **Rule: If introducing 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.”
 - 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.

Unsure of the Punctuation Rules

1. Capitalization
 - Always capitalize the first word of a sentence.
 - Except in special cases(e.e. cummings), always capitalize proper names or official titles.
 - 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.
 - Do not capitalize abstract nouns.
2. Commas
 - 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.
 - Use a comma after an introductory word group.
 - If you cook, I’ll do the dishes.
 - Use a comma between items in a series.
 - I’d rather not do the cleaning, laundry, or dishes.

- 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]
 - 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.
 - 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.
 - Use commas to set off direct address or quotations.
 - John, would you come over here?
 - "John," she shouted, "would you come over here?"
 - **Do not use a comma every time you breathe.**
 - **Do not use a comma whenever it seems like you (maybe, perhaps, possibly) should.**
3. Apostrophes
- Apostrophes create contractions.
 - I don't like him very much.
 - Steak 'n' Shake is a great restaurant.
 - 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.
 - Do not use an apostrophe to form a plural.
 - Remember: "it's"="it is," but "its" is the possessive form.

When Needing to Make a Judgment Call

1. Colons versus Semicolons

- Colons and semicolons express a relationship between two halves of a sentence.
- 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..."
- Semicolons create a list (but no stronger relationship than that). They mean "and" or "also."
- Colons
 - Use them when the first complete sentence explains what follows. (*Note*: Colons should not follow an incomplete sentence.)
 - 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.
 - Use them to introduce a list that does not flow naturally with the rest of the sentence.
 - The room was a cacophony of sounds from 2007: iPods, cell phones, and laptops.
 - 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.

- Semicolons
 - 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.
 - When the items within a series list already include commas, use semicolons to separate.
 - 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

- 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.
- Dashes set off appositives(parenthetical expressions):
 - My mother—a college professor—encouraged me to take math classes this year.
- Hyphens and dashes are not the same thing.
- Avoid overusing dashes in formal writing (often colons or semicolons can be substituted).

3. Hyphens

- Hyphens create compound words.
 - I have ninety-four Penguin editions.
- Hyphens make adjectives out of nouns.
 - I like literature from the nineteenth century. I like nineteenth-century literature.
- Do not use hyphens to introduce quotations.

4. Ellipses

- Ellipses indicate that something has been omitted.
 - Paul urges, “Present your bodies. . . holy and acceptable to God” (Rom. 12:1).
- If you end a sentence with an ellipsis, you need **four** periods instead of three.
- Do not use ellipses to create dramatic effect(especially in formal writing).
- The results of this study were surprising to the researchers....
- Ellipses may or may not be enclosed in brackets(depending on your citation style).
- If at all possible, avoid using too many ellipses.