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# An Introduction to Punctuation

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★ *Punctuation* is the set of marks used to regulate texts and clarify their meanings, principally by separating or linking words, phrases, and clauses. The word comes from the Latin word punctuare meaning "making a point"

Marks of punctuation include ampersands, apostrophes, asterisks, brackets, bullets, colons, commas, dashes, diacritic marks, ellipsis, exclamation points, hyphens, paragraph breaks, parentheses, periods, question marks, quotation marks, semicolons, slashes, spacing, and strike-throughs.

★ The use (and misuse) of punctuation affects meaning—sometimes dramatically—as seen in this "Dear John" letter, where the change in punctuation from one to the next, drastically alters the meaning.

<p>Dear John:</p> <p>I want a man who knows what love is all about. You are generous, kind, thoughtful. People who are not like you admit to being useless and inferior. You have ruined me for other men. I yearn for you. I have no feelings whatsoever when we're apart. I can be forever happy—will you let me be yours?</p> <p>Jane</p>	<p>Dear John:</p> <p>I want a man who knows what love is. All about you are generous, kind, thoughtful people, who are not like you. Admit to being useless and inferior. You have ruined me. For other men, I yearn. For you, I have no feelings whatsoever. When we're apart, I can be forever happy. Will you let me be?</p> <p>Yours, Jane</p>
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Like many of the so-called "laws" of grammar, the rules for using punctuation would never hold up in court.

These rules, in fact, are conventions that have changed over the centuries. They vary across national boundaries (American punctuation, followed here, differs from British practice) and even from one writer to the next.

Understanding the principles behind the common marks of punctuation should strengthen your understanding of grammar and help you to use the marks consistently in your own writing.

As Paul Robinson observes in his essay "The Philosophy of Punctuation" (in *Opera, Sex, and Other Vital Matters*, 2002), "Punctuation has the primary responsibility of contributing to the plainness of one's meaning. It has the secondary responsibility of being as invisible as possible, of not calling attention to itself."

With these goals in mind, we'll direct you to guidelines for correctly using the most common marks of punctuation: periods, question marks, exclamation points, commas, semicolons, colons, dashes, apostrophes, and quotation marks.

## End Punctuation: Periods, Question Marks, and Exclamation Points

There are only three ways to end a sentence: with a period (.), a question mark (?), or an exclamation point (!). And because most of us *state* far more often than we question or exclaim, the period is by far the most popular end mark of punctuation. The American *period*, by the way, is more commonly known as a *full stop* in British English. Since around 1600, both terms have been used to describe the mark (or the long pause) at the end of a sentence.

**Why do periods matter?** Consider how these two phrases change in meaning when a second period is added:

"I'm sorry you can't come with us."	This is an expression of regret.
"I'm sorry. You can't come with us."	The speaker is informing the listener that s/he may not accompany the group.

Until the 20th century, the *question mark* was more commonly known as a *point of interrogation*—a descendant of the mark used by medieval monks to show voice inflection in church manuscripts. The exclamation point has been used since the 17th century to indicate strong emotion, such as surprise, wonder, disbelief, or pain.

Here are the present-day [guidelines for using periods, question marks, and exclamation points](#).

Example of multiple types of punctuation from "Peanuts" by Charles Schulz:

"I know the answer! The answer lies within the heart of all mankind! The answer is 12? I think I'm in the wrong building."

## Commas

The most popular mark of punctuation, the [comma](#) (,) is also the least law-abiding. In Greek, the *komma* was a "piece cut off" from a line of verse—what in English today we'd call a *phrase* or a *clause*.

Since the 16th century, the word *comma* has referred to the mark that *sets off* words, phrases, and clauses.

Keep in mind that these [four guidelines for using commas effectively](#) are *only* guidelines: there are no unbreakable rules for using commas.

Here are several examples of how comma usage can change the meaning of sentences.

### Commas With Interrupting Phrases

The Democrats say the Republicans will lose the election.

The Democrats, say the Republicans, will lose the election.

### Commas With Direct Address

Call me fool if you wish.

Call me, fool, if you wish.

### Commas With Nonrestrictive Clauses

The three passengers who were seriously injured were taken to the hospital.

The three passengers, who were seriously injured, were taken to the hospital.

### Commas With Compound Clauses

Do not break your bread or roll in your soup.

Do not break your bread, or roll in your soup.

## Serial Commas

This book is dedicated to my roommates, Oprah Winfrey, and God.

This book is dedicated to my roommates, Oprah Winfrey and God.

Example of comma usage from Doug Larson:

"If all the cars in the United States were placed end to end, it would probably be Labor Day Weekend."

## Semicolons, Colons, and Dashes

These three marks of punctuation—the [semicolon](#) (;), [colon](#) (:), and [dash](#) (—)—can be effective when used sparingly. Like the comma, the colon originally referred to a section of a poem; later its meaning was extended to a [clause](#) in a sentence and finally to a mark that set off a clause.

Both the semicolon and the dash became popular in the 17th century, and since then the dash has threatened to take over the work of other marks.

Poet Emily Dickinson, for instance, relied on dashes instead of commas. Novelist James Joyce preferred dashes to quotation marks (which he called "perverted commas"). And nowadays many writers avoid semicolons (which some consider being rather stuffy and academic), using dashes in their place.

In fact, each of these marks has a fairly specialized job, and the [guidelines for using semicolons, colons, and dashes](#) aren't especially tricky.

Here, the use of colons and commas completely changes the meaning of the sentence.

A woman without her man is nothing.	A single woman is worth nothing.
A woman: without her, man is nothing.	A single man is worth nothing.

Example of dash usage from "The Secret Sharer" by Joseph Conrad:

"The why and wherefore of the scorpion—how it had got on board and came to select his room rather than the pantry (which was a dark place and more what a scorpion would be partial to), and how on earth it managed to drown itself in the inkwell of his writing desk—had exercised him infinitely."

Colon and semicolon examples by Disraeli and Christopher Morley respectively:

"There are three kinds of lies: lies, damned lies, and statistics."

"Life is a foreign language; all men mispronounce it."

## Apostrophes

The [apostrophe](#) (') may be the simplest and yet most frequently misused mark of punctuation in English. It was introduced into English in the 16th century from Latin and Greek, in which it served to mark the loss of letters.

The use of the apostrophe to signify possession did not become common until the 19th century, though even then grammarians could not always agree on the mark's "correct" use.

As editor, Tom McArthur notes in "The Oxford Companion to the English Language" (1992), "There was never a golden age in which the rules for the use of the possessive apostrophe in English were clear-cut and known, understood, and followed by most educated people."

Instead of "rules," therefore, we offer six [guidelines for using the apostrophe correctly](#). In the examples below, the confusion that results from incorrect apostrophes is clear:

### **Apostrophes With Contractions:** Who is master, man or dog?

A clever dog knows its master.

A clever dog knows it's master.

### **Apostrophes With Possessive Nouns:** Whether the butler is rude or polite, depends on the apostrophe.

The butler stood by the door and called the guests names.

The butler stood by the door and called the guests' names.

## Quotation Marks

[Quotation marks](#) (" "), sometimes referred to as *quotes* or *inverted commas*, are punctuation marks used in pairs to set off a quotation or a piece of dialogue. A relatively recent invention, quotation marks were not commonly used before the 19th century.

Here are five [guidelines for using quotation marks effectively](#)—which is important, as seen from these examples. In the first, it is the criminal who is to swing, in the second, the judge:

"The criminal," says the judge, "should be hanged."

The criminal says, "The judge should be hanged."

Use of quotation marks from Winston Churchill:

"I am reminded of the professor who, in his declining hours, was asked by his devoted pupils for his final counsel. He replied, 'Verify your quotations.'"

## The History of Punctuation

The beginnings of punctuation lie in [classical rhetoric](#)—the art of [oratory](#). Back in ancient Greece and Rome, when a speech was prepared in writing, marks were used to indicate where—and for how long — a speaker should pause. Until the 18th century, punctuation was primarily related to spoken delivery ([elocution](#)), and the marks were interpreted as pauses that could be counted out. This declamatory basis for punctuation gradually gave way to the [syntactic](#) approach used today.

These pauses (and eventually the marks themselves) were named after the sections they divided. The longest section was called a [period](#), defined by Aristotle as "a portion of a speech that has in itself a beginning and an end." The shortest pause was a [comma](#) (literally, "that which is cut off"), and midway between the two was the [colon](#)—a "limb," "strophe," or "clause."

## Punctuation and Printing

Until the introduction of printing in the late 15th century, punctuation in English was decidedly unsystematic and at times virtually absent. Many of Chaucer's manuscripts, for instance, were punctuated with nothing more than periods at the end of verse lines, without regard for [syntax](#) or sense.

The favorite mark of England's first printer, William Caxton (1420-1491), was the forward [slash](#) (also known as the *solidus*, *virgule*, *oblique*, *diagonal*, and *virgula suspensiva*)—forerunner of the modern comma. Some writers of that era also relied on a double slash (as found today in *http://*) to signal a longer pause or the start of a new section of text.

One of the first to codify the rules of punctuation in English was the playwright Ben Jonson—or rather, Ben:Jonson, who included the colon (he called it the "pause" or "two pricks") in his signature. In the final chapter of "The English Grammar" (1640), Jonson briefly

discusses the primary functions of the comma, parenthesis, period, colon, question mark (the "interrogation"), and exclamation point (the "admiration").

## Talking Points: 17th and 18th Centuries

In keeping with the practice (if not always the precepts) of Ben Jonson, punctuation in the 17th and 18th centuries was increasingly determined by the rules of syntax rather than the breathing patterns of speakers. Nevertheless, this passage from Lindley Murray's best-selling "English Grammar" (over 20 million sold) shows that even at the end of the 18th century punctuation was still treated, in part, as an oratorical aid:

Punctuation is the art of dividing a written composition into sentences, or parts of sentences, by points or stops, for the purpose of marking the different pauses which the sense, and an accurate pronunciation require.

The Comma represents the shortest pause; the Semicolon, a pause double that of the comma; the Colon, double that of the semicolon; and a period, double that of the colon.

The precise quantity or duration of each pause, cannot be defined; for it varies with the time of the whole. The same composition may be rehearsed in a quicker or a slower time; but the proportion between the pauses should be ever invariable.

## Increasing Importance in Writing: 19th Century

By the end of the industrious 19th century, grammarians had come to de-emphasize the elocutionary role of punctuation, as John Seely Hart noted in his 1892 "A Manual of Composition and Rhetoric."

"It is sometimes stated in works on Rhetoric and Grammar, that the points are for the purpose of elocution, and directions are given to pupils to pause a certain time at each of the stops. It is true that a pause required for elocutionary purposes does sometimes coincide with a grammatical point, and so the one aids the other. Yet it should not be forgotten that the first and main ends of the points is to mark grammatical divisions."

## Current Punctuation Trends

In our own time, the declamatory basis for punctuation has pretty much given way to the syntactic approach. Also, in keeping with a century-long trend toward shorter sentences, punctuation is now more lightly applied than it was in the days of Dickens and Emerson.

Countless style guides spell out the conventions for using the various marks. Yet when it comes to the finer points (regarding [serial commas](#), for instance), sometimes even the experts disagree.

Meanwhile, fashions continue to change. In modern prose, [dashes](#) are in; [semicolons](#) are out. [Apostrophes](#) are either sadly neglected or tossed around like confetti, while [quotation marks](#) are seemingly dropped at random on unsuspecting words.

And so it remains true, as G. V. Carey observed decades ago, that punctuation is governed "two-thirds by rule and one-third by personal taste."

## Sources

Keith Houston, *Shady Characters: The Secret Life of Punctuation, Symbols, and Other Typographical Marks* (W. W. Norton, 2013)

Malcolm B. Parkes, *Pause and Effect: Punctuation in the West* (University of California Press, 1993).

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