

Punctuation Made Simple

The Colon :

A colon is commonly used to introduce what comes after it, such as an announcement, an example, a quotation, or a list. It can be thought of as a presenter on a stage, announcing to the audience what is to come next. The sentence before the colon must always be complete.

*Disneyland has four locations world-wide: Japan, France, Hong Kong, and the United States.
Ansen's (2007) phrasing indicates absolute disagreement with the judge's verdict: "This is not justice."*

The Semicolon ;

The semicolon is often misused in the place of a colon, but it does not introduce the item following it. Instead, the semicolon connects the items surrounding it. The most common use of the semicolon is to connect two related **but separate** statements without using a conjunction (e.g., *and*), especially if the second statement completes the first statement. This property can be handy if adding a conjunction would make it feel 'wordy' or if it adds a bit of weight to the statement.

*X is the first example of a clause; Y is the second.
Jon jumped the gorge on his motorcycle; he is lucky to be alive.
The gorge was very deep; if he had fallen, he would have been killed.*

The other common use of the semicolon is to separate items in a list that already have commas in them. In this situation, the semicolon performs the separating function normally performed by the comma.

Design of efficient transportation must include affordable, convenient access; upgradable, open-ended component flows; and integrated component recycling and waste strategies.

The Hyphen -

Hyphens are used to connect separate words together to avoid misreading. For example, *the free-falling rock* refers to a rock in free fall, whereas *free falling rock* could refer to the ownership or type of rock. As a general rule, words that end in *ly* (e.g., *slowly*) do not need to be hyphenated when modifying another word. For example, in the phrase "*the rapidly jumping horse*", *rapidly* clearly refers to the nature of the jumping.

The Comma ,

The comma is a kind of catch-all punctuation; it is used for a variety of purposes, making the comma one of the most difficult forms of punctuation to master. A separate guide is available describing comma use.

The Dash – and Parenthesis ()

A dash (–) is not the same as the much smaller hyphen (-).

The most common use of the dash is to offset and emphasize interrupting or concluding elements, but the dash is not the only tool for doing this. Parentheses, commas, and dashes all have their own uses for interrupting statements.

Parentheses are considered the gentlest interruption—they are used to provide extra information within the flow of the sentence. It can be visualized as the narrator leaning over and whispering into the ear of the reader.

Writing (especially the academic type) has so many rules!

Commas are a stronger interruption, forcing the reader to pause and consider the added information.

The professor, after many years of research, had planned to retire that year.

Dashes create the strongest interruption, emphasizing the importance of the information that is added.

The sentence should be complete—if less informative—without a parenthetical statement.

A dash can also be used to set off an emphatic concluding statement.

Calculators, cell phones, and computers—that will be the downfall of Western civilization!

Most word processors will auto-correct a hyphen into an En-Dash after you complete the next word and hit the spacebar. A quick way to input the En-Dash is to hold down the *Alt* button and type 8211.

En Dash and Em Dash

There are actually two types of dashes, in addition to the hyphen. The En Dash is roughly the length of the capital N (En). The Em Dash is roughly the width of the capital M (Em). On typewriters, the dash was indicated by two hyphens in succession (--), which autocorrects to an En Dash in most word processors. There is no dedicated key for the Em Dash on a keyboard, but you can type one by holding Alt and typing 0151 on your number pad.

The Quotation mark “

The quotation mark can be tricky because the rules for placing quotation marks in relation to other punctuation are not fully standardized between North America and the rest of the world. If you frequently read documents from outside of North America (including web content), you might suffer confusion because of the different systems being used. The North American use for quotation marks is the standard against which you will be marked.

The placement of punctuation marks simply depends on whether it came from the original quote or is part of the new sentence. Only place exclamation marks **inside** the quotation marks

if they are part of the quoted material. Think about who “said” the mark. Was it you, or was it the person you are quoting?

The unusual regularity with which the term “inappropriate” appears in Canadian writing is “astounding” (Paget, 2001)! ← In this case, the author is “exclaiming” the sentence, and the mark is **outside** of the quotations.

Like Juneau, I feel that “nobody really understands pork!” (Grosman, 1982) ← In this case, the person being quoted is clearly the excited one. The exclamation mark belongs **inside** the quotation marks.

Commas and periods are placed inside quotation marks at the edge of a quote regardless of whether they were present in the original quote.

Having travelled from Wales to the most eastern shore of Russia, Jones could not have travelled “a step further without falling into the ocean, beyond the unknown, into the abyss,” and with this sentiment in mind he “jumped straight in and began to stroke through the breakers toward the darkening sky.”

When your quote contains a quote of its own, a single quotation mark is used to set apart the second quote. This is the same mark that is usually used as an apostrophe.

The professor gave us this inspirational speech: “It is just like Theodore Roosevelt said: ‘Believe you can, and you are half-way there.’”

The Apostrophe ’

The dreaded apostrophe can be confusing because of its varied uses. The most common use of the apostrophe is for possessive statements, and contractions (shortening or combining words). Formal academic writing should never include contractions, which means the most common usage a university student will encounter is to differentiate a possessive from a plural.

When describing something that belongs to someone, a possessive apostrophe is placed before the s.

This is the professor’s notebook; there is a course title written on its cover. ← “It’s” and “its” are special cases. “It’s” is a contraction of “it is”. “Its” is possessive, referring to the notebook’s cover.

If the possessing object already ends in s, we can avoid some of the awkwardness of extra “s’s” by only adding the apostrophe.

The students’ agreement stated that... ← This is a plural ending in an s, because there are multiple students possessing the agreement.