

14

USING PUNCTUATION TO AID CLARITY

Learning how to punctuate well is vital if you wish to be an effective plain English communicator. Where you put — or don't put — punctuation marks can critically affect the way your reader interprets the messages in your documents.

The advice given in this chapter overlaps that given in the discussion of sentence structure (p. 24). This is hardly surprising, as one of the primary uses of punctuation is to give us signals about sentence structure.⁴⁰

Punctuation is also a critical part of the style of an individual writer. All writers use punctuation marks in slightly different ways, to create differences of emphasis and shades of meaning. Another writer, for example, might disagree with your decision to include (or not to include) a comma in a part of a particular sentence. Don't worry unduly about this, as style differences are not all that important, as long as they do not introduce ambiguity or confusion into the words being used. This chapter also overlaps the chapter on ambiguity (pp. 85-91).

Remember that all the tools of expression we consider in *Writing in Plain English* — punctuation, grammar, style, usage — are only means to an end, and that end is clear, unambiguous communication. The test should always be:

Does this punctuation mark help or hinder clarity?

Punctuation, grammar, style, and usage are not ends in themselves, although you will meet many pedants and picky people who seem to believe that this is so. This attitude unfortunately ignores the way in which English has evolved over the centuries in an often haphazard manner, throwing up rules and conventions that usually make sense, but sometimes do not.⁴¹ Prefer common sense to theories, and remember the rule about clarity.

END PUNCTUATION

End punctuation is used to show the end of a sentence.

There are three forms of end punctuation. These are:
FULL STOP, or PERIOD — used at the end of a statement.

I wrote the document.⁴²

QUESTION MARK — used at the end of a direct question.

Can you write that document please?

EXCLAMATION MARK, or POINT — used at the end of a forceful and/or emotional statement.

Write that document now!

Acronyms

Acronyms are a form of abbreviation. Examples are RAM (random access memory) UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation) and SI (Système International). Acronyms are usually formed from the first letters of a group of words, and are rendered in capitals. They sometimes have full stops, but it is more common practice to have them without full stops. Acronyms can usually be pronounced as words.⁴³ Some acronyms are in general use, while others are quite technical.

Some common words started out as acronyms, such as *scuba* (self-contained underwater breathing apparatus), *radar* (radio detecting and ranging) and *laser* (light amplification by stimulated emission of radiation).

Acronyms can be of use to you as a form of shorthand — you don't have to spell out the full concept. However, they can quickly degenerate into confusing jargon (p. 112). To avoid this, follow these steps:

1. Define the acronym. Either do this in brackets the first time you use it in the text, or else have a list of abbreviations and acronyms at the back of your document. Never presume 'everyone knows this one, so I won't bother to define it'. Err on the side of being obvious, rather than confusing. It's amazing how many people do not know the full meanings of acronyms which are in general, let alone technical, use. Definition is particularly important where the one acronym is used for multiple meanings (for example, PC = personal computer, police constable, politically correct, privy councillor, past commander, petty cash, prices current, per cent, post card).
2. Form plurals without apostrophes (see pp. 140-3) — for example, MECs (miscellaneous expense claims) using upper-case letters for the acronym and a lower-case letter for the 's'.
3. Where possible, avoid existing acronyms. Say or write doctor instead of MD, nurse instead of RN, computer instead of PC.
4. Resist the temptation to form new acronyms, wherever possible. This will make life more bearable. In other words, instead of coming up with a phrase, and then an acronym based on that phrase, try and use a single word. Coin a new word, if necessary. As Ibrahim sardonically suggests:

Imagine if early scientists had forced us to use MTAFM, NHMM, PNHMM, EISPU, MPUV, RCDWT, DEU and UEBO instead of airplane/aeroplane, car, bus, computer, density, velocity, quanta, and appendix (HTAFM: Heavier Than Air Flying Machine; NHMM: No-Horse Moving Machine; PNHMM: Public NHMM; EISPU: Electronic Information Storage and Processing Unit; MPV: Mass Per unit Volume; DEU: Discrete Energy Unit; UEBO: Useless End of Bowel Organ!). (Ibrahim 1989: 28)

5. If an acronym seems unavoidable, try and make it a pronounceable one. Don't distort normal English word order too much to do this, of course. Resist the temptation to make the acronyms humorous and/or in problematic taste — for example, BURP = (spacecraft) backup rate of pitch; EGADS = Electronic Ground Automatic Destruct System. If you feel you have to do this, so that your acronym will be memorable within the welter of acronyms used in your field, see this as a warning signal: you — and your professional peers — are using too many acronyms, and may be seriously out of touch with the rest of the world.

Question marks

Question marks are used for direct questions, but not indirect ones. Remember that a question mark, like an exclamation mark, has the same punctuation weight or value as a full stop or period, and therefore does not require any additional punctuation to terminate a question. Thus:

She asked, 'Is it plugged in?'

is wrong. The full stop or period is quite unnecessary.

Questions in a series each take a question mark, even though each question may not be a complete sentence:

We have to consider every possible aspect of this contract. What are the terms? Who benefits? What price will they offer? Over the market value? Under? About the average?

Question marks are sometimes used to signal to the reader that the writer has doubts about a date or figure:

Charlemagne (742?-814) was the first Holy Roman Emperor.

We lost 300 (?) files in that fire.

This usage is acceptable for brief statements of things such as birth dates and death dates about which there is uncertainty, but try to avoid it for other situations. Convey uncertainty or approximation with words like *about*.

We lost about 300 files in that fire.

You should also try to avoid conveying sarcasm or irony with a question mark:

You'll love the excellent (?) food in the cafeteria.

Exclamation mark

To maximise the impact of exclamation marks, minimise their use. Try to avoid constructions such as the following:

We've really got to perform well this year! No if's but's or maybe's! It's number one or nothing at all for us! We've got to get the numbers up! All of us!

You may think that you are being persuasive and inspirational, but others may think that you are merely being shrill and hysterical. Excessive use of exclamation marks, like excessive use of capitalisation, is the visual equivalent of shouting: if you verbally communicate only by shouting, then after a while no-one pays attention to you. In other words, over-use weakens the impact.

Try to avoid using the exclamation mark to convey amazement, sarcasm or irony to the reader, or at least minimise this use:

Joe thinks that the average employee will be able to master Windows '96 in 5 (!) hours.

If you have doubts about a situation, and you are willing to draw attention to such doubts in print by the use of the exclamation mark, express the doubts in words, so that people are aware of what you are really saying:

Joe thinks that the average employee will be able to master Windows '96 in five hours. My personal view is that we may run into difficulties if we only budget for such a low average training time.

THE COMMA

Commas can be used in sentences with conjunctions or linking words like *for*, *and*, *nor*, *but*, *or*, *yet* and *so*:⁴⁴

She called my name, but I heard nothing.

The new model will be blue in colour, and it should be available next week.

In shorter sentences, the comma can be dispensed with:

The new model was available and it was affordable.

The run-on sentence or comma splice

Consider one of the sentences above:

She called my name,	but	I heard nothing.
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The groups of words on either side of the linking word *but* are known as *independent clauses*. An independent clause is a group of words containing a subject (or actor) and a verb, and which could stand by itself as a sentence.⁴⁵

Note that the comma is too weak a connector to link two independent clauses:

The new model will be blue in colour, it should be available next week.

Fill in the form, ensure that you do it in ink and not in pencil.

These are run-sentences or comma splices, and they should be avoided. The thoughts conveyed in independent clauses should be given their full weight or value in the overall rhythm of the sentence. Looking at or listening to run-on sentences is like listening to a drummer who can't keep time and who keeps hitting the beat too soon. Don't be in such a hurry.

People do sometimes talk in sentences like these, but written English and spoken English are different. You probably would be most unhappy if an unedited version of your spoken words appeared word for word in a written document; you would want to impose a more disciplined pattern upon them when you 'put it in writing'.

If you are linking independent clauses, use one of these means:

Link	Clauses/sentences
conjunction + comma	We ran down the street, but they had already gone
semicolon	I was angry with her; she was angry with me.
colon	Our department has really excelled itself; our figures are up 43 per cent on last year.
full stop/period (break into two sentences)	We can't get there from here. We'll have to take the long way around.

Use commas to separate items in a series.

Opinions vary on using commas in series.

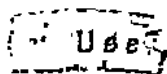
We will need costings on computers, printers, screens and modems.

They walked in, looked around, and then walked out again.

Whether a comma should come before the final *and* in such sentences is more than a matter of personal taste. You will have to consider the meaning of the sentence, and determine whether a pause — signalled by a comma — will help that meaning. The emphasis in the second sentence seems to call for a comma before the *and*, while with the first sentence, such a comma is optional.

If a list is complex, particularly if the items are modified by groups of words that in turn are set off with commas, then it is better to use semicolons as the major form of punctuation:

That document will need to be signed by Mr Staines, the treasurer; by Ms Fenwick, the manager of the Eastern Division; and by Mr Chen, the board's representative on these matters.



commas to separate coordinate adjectives.

Nouns name things or people: *James, woman, field, anger, dog.*

Pronouns stand in the place of nouns: *he, him, she, her, their, it.*

Adjectives modify the meaning of nouns or pronouns: *tall woman, angry dog.*

Coordinate adjectives modify the same noun or pronoun. They are separated by coordinating conjunctions (*for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so*) or by a comma. If their order is reversed, the meaning of the sentence does not change.

This was going to be a long, drawn-out negotiation.

The noisy, smoky cafeteria is not my ideal place to eat.

Adjectives are not coordinate when one adjective modifies another adjective, which then modifies a noun or pronoun.

The expensive portable computer had broken down.

The angry assistant manager was irritating the customers.

A comma would be inappropriate between the adjectives in these sentences. A conjunction between adjectives would not be appropriate, and meaningful reversal of adjectives could not take place.



commas at sentence beginnings.

Sentences often begin with introductory words and groups of words. The comma can provide the pause needed to separate such introductions from the major message of the sentence. Examples of such introductory units are given in table 14.2.

Table 14.2: Commas at the beginnings of sentences⁴⁶

Introductory word/s	Example in sentence
however, still, indeed, finally, consequently	<i>Finally, we come to the Z200 model.</i>
on the other hand, in addition to, for example, as a result, in conclusion	<i>For example, consider the Z200.</i>
over the border, down the street	<i>Over the border, we felt free at last.</i>
Walking down the street, opened only yesterday	<i>Walking down the street, he noticed her there.</i>
To win the lottery, to fly to the moon	<i>To win the lottery, we may need to buy a lot of tickets.</i>
Training funds now being available, other things being equal	<i>Training funds now being available, she was able to improve her knowledge of spreadsheets.</i>
Before you begin that course, unless we hear from you	<i>Unless we hear from you, we will begin at the official time.</i>

Some writers prefer to leave out these types of commas, arguing that such commas are just clutter, and are unnecessary. It is true that commas can be overdone (see pp.137-8), but commas can help to reduce ambiguity and avoid confusion. Consider, for example, these sentences:

He painted rose and left.

When the operator has completed the wiring display voltage may decline.

If all letters are signed quickly post them.

For some people are just no good.

DOS performance is not sacrificed providing instantaneous screen updates in the latest games.

With added investigative powers available to police Victoria's rate of apprehending criminals is the best it's been for 18 years.

Some of these ambiguities relate to words that can be either verbs or nouns, depending upon context. Plain English should be simple and unambiguous. Your reader should not have to work hard to decipher your meaning. Your reader should only have to read your words once, not twice or a number of times. Even multiple readings may not yield the true meaning you are trying to get across if the ambiguity is deep in the structure of the sentence. For example, which of the following do you mean?

When the operator has completed the wiring	,	display voltage may decline.
--	---	------------------------------

or

When the operator has completed the wiring display	,	voltage may decline.
--	---	----------------------

Any misunderstandings arising from such confusion might be minor, but they could well be major in certain circumstances.

Note that legal writers, for example drafters of legislation and contracts, often leave out punctuation such as commas, apparently due to fears that such punctuation might introduce ambiguity. While this occasionally may be true, omission can also introduce ambiguity, as we have just seen. Omission can also make the reader work and can create a most user-unfriendly feel to documents. In fact, not only may such documents feature too few commas but also too few full stops with the result that sentences are over-long, forbidding and confusing.

Use commas to set off non-restrictive elements.

Groups of words⁴⁷ act as modifiers in sentences. Some of these sentence elements need to be punctuated with commas, and some do not. Consider, for example, these sentences:

Companies, battling downsizing pressures and inflation, are finding this year to be a tough one.

Companies using this software may have an advantage.

Both sentences feature groups of words modifying or telling us about the same subject, *Companies*. In the first sentence, the phrase *battling downsizing pressures and inflation* could be chopped out, and the sentence would still be meaningful and fairly specific:

Companies are finding this year to be a tough one.

In the second sentence, the word group *using this software* cannot be removed as tidily. If removed, the sentence now reads:

Companies may have an advantage,
which is almost so general as to be meaningless.

Such *non-restrictive elements* can be removed from a sentence without doing too much damage to the basic meaning of the sentence. These elements are usually set apart with commas, although sometimes parentheses (brackets) or dashes are used. Restrictive elements cannot be removed without changing or destroying the meaning of the sentence, and should not be set off with punctuation like commas.⁴⁸ Examples of such elements are shown in table 14.3.⁴⁹ Remember, if space dictates a pair of commas, don't forget to include the second one.

Table 14.3

Restrictive	Non-restrictive
Companies <i>using this software</i> may have an advantage.	Companies, <i>battling downsizing pressures and inflation</i> , are finding this year to be a tough one.
All members of our staff <i>who are qualified</i> are eligible to apply for training programs.	All members of our staff, <i>who have been worried about their skills level for some time</i> , are eligible to apply for training programs.
The computer manufacturer <i>IBM</i> has had a difficult year.	IBM, <i>the large computer manufacturer</i> , has had a difficult year.

Other uses of the comma

After salutations:

Dear Mary,
Ladies and gentlemen,

After closings:

Yours sincerely,
Prakesh Shastri, Manager, Acquisitions Division
Robert Sanborn, Jr.
Celeste Sanborn, Ph.D.

With titles:

With addresses:

2056 Lagrange Grove, Oldtown 68023

Comma overload: more comma faults

Some writers believe that text should be punctuated to reproduce the way people speak. Avoid this practice, because it does not always help the reader to clarify meaning, and may in fact be confusing. Punctuating in this manner might lead to passages such as this one:

Accounting Department staff, should not be unduly concerned, about the alterations being made, to the fire escape on the east wall, today.

It is quite possible for writers to use commas in a technically correct fashion but still produce sentences that are unclear, or just sheer hard work. For example:

The quality evaluation team, based, for this month only, in the Human Resources Department, will need to, and I must be emphatic, indeed, *very* emphatic, about this, rapidly, consistently and thoroughly consider all quantitative, as opposed to qualitative, measures which relate to work flow, especially that of the western wing of the main complex, as budget changes for any type of restructuring of facilities need to be considered by June 4, at latest, if not, indeed, sooner.

such, meaningless sentences may be used. They are not used in documents they have no place in practical documents created today. If a sentence contains more than three commas, you should carefully consider whether you need to recast that sentence, or split it into two or more smaller sentences. Punctuation and sentence structure are thus merely two sides of the one coin.



COMMAS

Correct any errors you find in the document below.



GIGABANK PTY LTD

INTERNAL MEMORANDUM

To: Melissa Strang Data
Resources

From: Joanne Wensley
South Team Coordinator

Re: Sundry, accounts

Date: 14 September, 1996

Thanks for your memo, was I surprised to hear about those Malaysian currency transfers? I'll get onto, those right away. The Kuala Lumpur manager, Ron Shadbolt has since informed me that electronic, funds transfers, between the two countries, have had their problems (i) of late, perhaps that's the cause of our problems.

I think because of this, that we need to develop a policy, to the effect that all branches, that are handling international electronic funds transfer, need to have priority access to head office computer specialists especially when we know systems pc's faults are increasing.

I attach copies of an account that has had money wrongly credited to it, if you can immediately fix this debit it appropriately, if not? get back to me right, away.

THE SEMICOLON

Use: semicolons to separate independent clauses not joined by coordinating conjunctions.

Independent or main clauses are often separated by coordinating conjunctions (*for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so*), but they can also be separated by semicolons, colons and full stops or periods.

The full stop or period is used to break the clauses into separate sentences, and is chosen when the writer wants to emphasise the differences of the thoughts embodied in the clauses/sentences.

Writers use semicolons and colons when they want to emphasise the linkage between the two (or more) clauses. The semicolon is used when the clauses are relatively equal and balanced, and when the writer wants to create mild suspense or expectation in the reader.

Here is the first statement; here is the second statement.

On the one hand I say this; on the other hand I say that.

I was angry with her; she was angry with me.

Handling databases was one of her skills; handling spreadsheets was another.

The semicolon is sometimes an invitation to read the first part of the sentence with a rising inflection, and the second part of the sentence with a falling inflection.

Use: semicolons to separate independent clauses linked by conjunctive adverbs.

Conjunctive adverbs are words such as *accordingly, also, anyhow, anyway, besides, consequently, furthermore, hence, however, indeed, meanwhile, moreover, namely, nevertheless, similarly, still, therefore* and *thus*. These words link independent or main clauses. The semicolon is used to link such clauses, the comma being too weak for such a purpose and the full stop or period being too strong.

She has the qualifications; *consequently*, she must be considered to be a candidate for the job.

The machine is only producing 305 units an hour; *therefore*, we know that something is amiss.

The semicolon can be replaced by a comma (or by nothing) if a coordinate conjunction is added to the link between independent clauses:

She has the qualifications, *and* therefore she must be considered to be a candidate for the job.

Use: semicolons to prevent ambiguity.

The semicolon is a medium pause signal, being halfway in strength between the comma (short pause) and the full stop or period (long pause). It can be usefully employed when a sentence contains a number of phrases and clauses already separated by commas:

That document will need to be signed by Mr Staines, the treasurer; by Ms Fenwick, the manager of the Eastern Division; and by Mr Chen, the board's representative on these matters.

Consider, for example, how you might punctuate the following passage in order to communicate the idea that three people, not four, are involved:

The document will need to be signed by Mr Staines Ms Fenwick the manager of the Eastern division and Mr Chen

The clearest way is by using semicolons, together with a comma:

The document will need to be signed by Mr Staines; Ms Fenwick, the manager of the Eastern division; and Mr Chen.

THE COLON

Use: colons to introduce new information.

The colon is used primarily to link an independent or main clause to a word, phrase or dependent (subordinate) clause which amplifies, exemplifies or summarises the independent clause.

This system has even greater capacity; it can hold 4.2 gigabytes of data.

We have only one aim this year: to beat the competition hands down.

My fantastic success can be explained by one personal quality: humility.

Some writers use a capital letter for the first word after a colon, but logically speaking, there is no justification for this: the colon does not have the full weight of end punctuation, and thus a capital letter for the first word — indicating a new sentence — is inappropriate. (Capital letters are, of course, appropriate in the first word after the colon if that word is a proper name.)

Use: colons to introduce quotations or series.

The colon is also used to introduce a list or series:

Production levels, in the final analysis, will depend upon three factors: good weather, low equipment downtime, and harmonious industrial relations.

The colon is also used to introduce a quotation: (see, there's one there)

One expert sums it up thus: 'The greenhouse effect could be substantially slowed if people simply walked, used bicycles, or drove electric cars!'

Other uses of the colon

After salutations:

In memos:

To separate hours, minutes, seconds:

In Bible citations:

Dear Mary:

To: You

From: Me

Re/subject: The Meaning of Life

Date: 4th June, 2004

10:32:16 PM

Psalms 23:6

THE APOSTROPHE

The apostrophe has three uses: to show possession or ownership in nouns and indefinite pronouns, to show that one or more letters have been omitted from a word, and to form plurals of letters and numerals.

Use apostrophes to show the possessive case in nouns and indefinite pronouns.

With singular nouns, the apostrophe plus an *s* — hereafter known as 's — is placed at the end to indicate possession:

the boy's book
the child's crying
Indonesia's economy
a week's salary

With plural nouns, only an apostrophe is placed at the end to indicate possession:

the boys' books
the two countries' economies
two weeks' salary

If a plural noun does not need an *-s* suffix to form a plural — for example, *children, sheep, women* — then the plural noun behaves like a singular, taking the apostrophe before the *-s*:

the children's laughter
the women's refuge

Indefinite pronouns include *anybody, anyone, everybody, everyone, everything, neither, nobody, no-one, one, some* and *somebody*. These behave like singulars, even if plural reference is obvious:

Everybody's property usually means *nobody's* property.

When singular nouns end in *-s*, add *'s* to indicate possession:

the glass's contents
Santa Claus's beard
Barry Thomas's anger



When plural nouns end in -s, add the apostrophe alone to indicate possession:

- the glasses' contents
- the Santa Clauses' beards
- the Thomases' anger

In compound words or word groups, add the -s only to the last word:

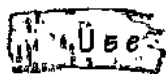
- her sister-in-law's phone number
- the comrades-in-arms' morale
- the plant manager's schedule

When two or more words show individual or separate possession, add -s or an apostrophe to each of them:

- Laurel's and Hardy's differing styles
- Personnel's and Marketing's parking slots
- Barry's and Melinda's results

When two or more words show joint or combined possession, add -s or an apostrophe only to the last word:

- Linda and Michael's wedding
- Marks and Spencer's sale
- the Thomases and Johnsons' fence



Use apostrophes to show omission.

Apostrophes can be used to show that letters, numbers or words have been omitted or abbreviated:

Original form	Shortened form	Original form	Shortened form
can't	can not	shan't	shall not
we've	we have	we'll	we will/shall
who's	who is/has	they're	they are
you're	you are	doesn't	does not
I'm	I am	let's	let us
won't	will not (contraction of <i>wonnot</i> , an assimilation of <i>wol not</i>)	aren't	are not
surfin' (non-standard)	surfing	talkin' (non-standard)	talking
o'clock	of the clock	'97	1997 (but context may suggest another century, e.g., 1897)

Use an apostrophe to form plurals of letters, numbers and words used as terms.

Mind your *p*'s and *q*'s.

I can't tell his 2's from his 7's.

There's no *if*'s, *but*'s or *maybe*'s about this.

Note that usage of apostrophes for these purposes, as with full stops used to denote abbreviations, can vary.

Don't misuse apostrophes.

Apostrophes are not used to form plurals of normal words:

Vegetable's for sale

Vegetables for sale

The workers' are not happy.

The workers are not happy.

Apostrophes are not needed in verbs:

He walk's

He walks

It barks'

It barks

Apostrophes are not needed to show possession in personal pronouns. Pronouns like *his*, *hers*, *its*, *ours*, *yours* and *theirs* are already possessives, and do not require an apostrophe to show possession:

What's *our*'s is *yours*'

What's ours is yours

It's bark

Its bark

It's/its causes much confusion. Remember that the apostrophe in *it's* shows omission, not possession. If in doubt, expand any *its/it's* you see to *it is*. If this expansion makes sense, then the *it's* in question is actually *it is*; if it doesn't make sense, then the *its* is a possessive:

The dog is here on the verandah. *It's* wagging its tail.

It is wagging makes sense; therefore *it's* is punctuated correctly.

It is tall makes no sense; therefore *its* is punctuated correctly.

The dog is here on the verandah. Its wagging *it's* tail.

Its wagging makes no sense within this sentence as a possessive pronoun before *wagging*; therefore *its* is punctuated incorrectly.

It is tall makes no sense; therefore *it's* is punctuated incorrectly.

Capital letters are UPPER CASE letters (A, B, C), as opposed to lower case letters (a, b, c).

Use capitals to begin a sentence.

Please walk down the street.
Walk down the street!
Will you walk down the street?

Use capitals for complete quotations.

Hamlet said, 'To be or not to be.'
However, note this construction:
'To be,' Hamlet said, 'or not to be.'

Here, a capital begins the sentence, and begins the quotation, but a capital is not used for the second part of the quotation — lower case is quite adequate.

Use capitals for proper nouns and proper adjectives.

Proper nouns are those which identify persons by name or by title, divine/sacred entities, geographical places, religions, days, months, festivals, organisations, family members (name, not role), common nouns when personified and given unique reference, publications, languages, nationalities, and proprietary/brand objects (see p. 162). Proper adjectives are those adjectives formed from proper nouns.

Proper nouns	Proper adjectives
England	English
Russia	Russian
Mahler	Mahlerian

Notice that some proper nouns become common nouns when a general, rather than a specific, meaning is called for:

His last word was 'Mother', but his mother was nowhere to be seen. In the last minutes, he thought he was in Heaven, but the battlefield was not the most heavenly of places.

Over time, some proper nouns become common nouns — zeppelin, kleenex, mafia — and have thus expended with capital letters.

PARENTHESES AND BRACKETS⁵⁰

Parentheses, brackets and dashes are all punctuation marks that allow a writer or speaker to convey additional information, usually subsidiary to the main thrust or import of the sentences.

Commas can also be used for this purpose, of course:

She performed, unlike the others, extremely well in the test.

Such items of punctuation — commas, parentheses, brackets, and dashes — occur in pairs — one before, and one after the additional information. One of the most common errors made by writers is to forget the second half of the punctuation pair. Watch out for this when you edit your document. The dash, as we have just seen in the first sentence on this page, can appear in pairs, or singly. Just to complicate matters, such additional information is usually referred to as parenthetical material (even though punctuation apart from parentheses, or curved brackets, may be being used).

When reading aloud sentences which contain material set apart with commas, parentheses, brackets or dashes, the convention is to lower the pitch of the voice for the duration of the material set apart:

She performed extremely well in the test.
unlike the others

Use

parentheses to provide relevant but not vital information.

Information such as explanations, digressions, examples and references can be contained within parentheses. Abbreviations and acronyms (pp.131-2) should be accompanied by an explanation or expansion in parentheses the first time they are mentioned, and then the abbreviated form can be used subsequently.

His research was concerned with understanding the similarities between tsunamis (large waves caused by underwater earthquakes) and maelstroms (very large whirlpools).

Ragged right justification is discussed elsewhere in this book (see pp.35-6).

The beach was bathed in bright moonlight (a sight which reminded me of another beach, in another place, at another time).

Further research, this time funded by WHO (World Health Organisation), produced findings that were quite different.

Place the main sentence punctuation outside parentheses:

She sat down at the machine, (a Compaq Pentium Pro,) and proceeded to show us just how fast she could type. (120 words per minute)

She sat down at the machine (a Compaq Pentium Pro), and proceeded to show us just how fast she could type (120 words per minute).

Use

parentheses with numbers and letters used in lists or series.

To travel safely in that area, you are by law required to have (1) a four-wheel drive vehicle, (2) a winch fitted to the vehicle, and (3) a two-way radio.

We were confused and upset, and didn't know whether we should (a) stay where we were, (b) walk along the highway, or (c) try and make our way back over the hills.

Use

brackets for parenthesis within parenthesis.

For further information, consult an authoritative source (for example, Smithers, Jacob, *Sportin Taxidermy: Advanced Techniques* [Aberdeen: Lallans Press, 1968]).

Consider an original passage from which you may choose to quote:

'Given the changes proposed, the best place for the Personnel Department will be on the twelfth floor. They will be closer to Central Administration, and they will be best placed to begin using the new mainframe virtually on the day it is to be installed. We believe that all these changes can be put in place by January, 1897.'

Brackets can be used to show quoted material:

- with capital letters adjusted to fit the sentence in which you quote it:
'[T]he best place for the Personnel Department will be on the twelfth floor' is the only recommendation I would take issue with in this report.
- with explanations and expansions:
The good news in this report for our department is that '[the Personnel Department] will be closer to Central Administration, and they will be best placed to begin using the new mainframe virtually on the day it is to be installed [July 23, 1996].'
- with mistakes not edited out of the original:
The report concludes, 'We believe that these changes can be in place by January, 1897 [sic].'

Sic is the Latin word for 'thus' or 'so' and is used when a writer needs to quote the original passage without tampering with it, even though the original has a mistake in it.

THE DASH



the dash to show abrupt changes in tone or thought.

He submitted his report — if we can dignify it with such a term — three weeks late.

They chose me — why does it always have to be me? — to do the presentation to the board of directors.



the dash to show hesitation or suspense.

'I don't know whether I should tell you about —' she said, turning aside.
The final outcome was — disaster.



the dash to emphasise other parts of sentences.

The focus of their deliberations — whether such a large budget item should be approved or not — was being lost.

The paint that they had chosen — mixed especially for them — was ghastly.



the single dash to follow an introductory series and final series and explanation.

Famine, disease, war — all of these had hit the small country in the past three years.

The small country had had numerous afflictions in the past three years — famine, disease, war.

Of the afflictions they had suffered in the past few years, the villagers feared one above all — the bloody civil war that would rip their country apart again.

THE HYPHEN

The hyphen can be considered as being part of punctuation, but equally it may be considered as part of spelling.

Use hyphens to show word division.

Hyphens are used when words are divided between lines, usually because there is not enough room in the line to give the word in its unbroken form. For example:

It is important when breaking a word between lines to ensure that the hyphen-ation does not cause confusion.

Try to ensure that the hyphen falls between naturally occurring syllables, and try to ensure that there are two or more letters of the word at the end of a line and three or more letters at the beginning of a line — for example:

hyphen-ation, not *hyp-benation* or *hyphenati-on* or *b-yphenation*

Avoid hyphenating single-syllable words. Also try to avoid hyphenating words in a manner which might cause confusion. For example, if you hyphenate *teething* as *tee-thing* or *redress* as *re-dress*, you may confuse your reader.



Use hyphens with compound adjectives.

A compound adjective is formed when two or more words are placed before a noun and modify that noun. Hyphens are used for such compound adjectives:

He was the author of a *little-known* novel.

He read the *ten-page* document.

When such compound adjectives occur after a noun, rather than before it, the hyphens are not used:

That novel is *little known* around here.

The document was *ten pages* long.

Use suspended hyphens appropriately.

A suspended hyphen is used in parallel compound adjectives:

The figures showed a clear contrast between *pre-* and *post-war* inflation rates.

The *first-* and *second-quarter* figures were not impressive.

Prefixes such as *self-*, *all-*, *ex-* and *quasi-* usually take hyphens: *self-control*, *all-inclusive*, *ex-boyfriend*, *quasi-governmental*

Use hyphens with numbers.

Hyphens are also used with numbers, such as:

- fractions (*three-quarters*)
- double-digit numbers (*sixty-six*)
- number-word combinations (*20-10-1 odds, 70-minute recording*)

QUOTATION MARKS

Use quotation marks to show direct quotation.

'I'm just not getting the productivity out of these machines that I expected,' Maria observed.

Indirect quotation is used when the actual words of a person are being reported, but not necessarily word for word:

Maria said that she was just not getting the productivity out of those machines that she expected.

Use alternate types of quotation for quotes within quotes.

There are two types of quotation marks: double quotation marks (" ") and single quotation marks ('). Usage varies considerably, but there is no compelling reason to choose one over the other for basic punctuation. Choose one style, but then use it consistently to avoid confusion.

The two types of quotation marks can be useful for showing quotations within quotations:

Mary whispered, "Did you notice that he said 'Some departments will be exempt from these cutbacks?'"

Mary whispered, 'Did you notice that he said "Some departments will be exempt from these cutbacks?'"

Use quotation marks only for short quotations.

What is short? How long is a piece of string? Over time, the conventions have developed that if you wish to quote poetry of less than three lines' length, or prose of less than four lines' length, then you should simply incorporate it into your sentences, setting the words off with quotation marks. If, however, you wish to quote poetry of more than three lines' length, or prose of more than four lines' length, then dispense with quotation marks altogether, lead into the quote with a colon, and indent the text:

One expert sums it up thus: "The greenhouse effect could be substantially slowed if people simply walked, used bicycles, or drove electric cars." (short quotation).

One expert sums it up thus:

The greenhouse effect could be substantially slowed if people simply walked, used bicycles, or drove electric cars. Electric vehicles powered from fossil-fuel-burning power plants are not necessarily a solution, of course, but if solar panels are installed on domestic garage roofs, then solar power can be collected throughout the day and stored in batteries. This battery power can then be transferred to cars overnight.

Correct any errors you find in the document below.



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INTERNAL MEMORANDUM

To: Priscilla Khan

Subject: new Markets

From: George Shaw

Date: 4 August 1998

Thank's for you're memo's of the 31st June and: 1st August ill pass the technical data from the first memo along to my technical staff

As our Pentium Pro sales grow old stock (e.g., the : 121 386s; the 192 486-Sx, the 154 486DXes' will need to be cleared out at what price is the real question; of course? We also need to examine our stocks of the palm top-computers my inventory datas' on those' is'nt all that good

Your right about software sales, we need to meet with the board on tho'se questions?

There are, three main issues namely; [1 how much further can we cut our prices' given thatthe major overseas' suppliers' are still cutting theirs' , (2.) Should we make an offer to the Surprise co for their presentation package? 3. And 3. Should we press our own CDS'.

Ill put it on the agenda however id like to talk to you beforehand