Practical Punctuation Guide

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Introduction

This Practical Punctuation Guide evolved from two projects of the Writing Center at Tidewater Community College, Virginia Beach Campus. First, because our students wanted handouts to clarify the use of various punctuation marks, in particular the comma and the apostrophe, we developed explanations for students to read and understand without instructor assistance. Second, because members of the community requested straightforward explanations to guide their personal and professional writing, we offered punctuation workshops with a business emphasis and designed handouts for the workshops. Based on these handouts, Practical Punctuation Guide contains simple, yet direct explanations and illustrations that reflect current business and academic usage.

Commas

Commas separate sentence elements to provide clarity, and commas follow certain conventions of usage. The following rules are not comprehensive but include the most common areas of concern for business and student writers.

1. Use a comma to separate independent (main) clauses that are connected by a coordinating conjunction (FANBOYS – for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so). Two independent clauses can usually each stand alone as a sentence, but they can be joined using a coordinating conjunction which depicts their relationship.

   Harold Stith submitted the proposal last week, but his supervisor did not approve it. (contrast)

   His supervisor disliked the proposal, so Harold became discouraged. (as a result)
   Harold Stith promised to write more concise reports in the future, for his boss complained about reading wordy proposals. (causation)

   NOTE: Do not use a comma before a coordinating conjunction when connecting only two words, phrases, or dependent (subordinate) clauses.

   The personnel director and the payroll officer (2 phrases) arrive before 8 a.m. on Wednesdays and Thursdays (2 words) whenever new shipments arrive or when the boss holds early meetings (2 dependent clauses), but they come to work at 9 a.m. on normal business days (2 independent).
2. **Use commas to separate items in a series of three or more.** Place a comma after each item except the last. For clarity, follow the traditional practice of using a comma before the connecting word unless the style preference for your office or the convention of your field omits the serial comma in front of the connector.

Clear: We ordered paper, pencils, correction fluid, and erasers.

Dr. Jones considered hiring a bookkeeper, renting a computer, or purchasing software.

Acceptable: We ordered paper, pencils, correction fluid and erasers.

Confusing: Pat ordered a cashmere coat, a case of champagne, a car with leather upholstery and a compact disc player.

He had small shoulders, a thick chest holding a strong heart and heavy thighs.

3. **Use a comma after a long introductory element (more than three words) and after any introductory element containing a verb form.**

After the fire in the stockroom, our insurance premiums increased. (long introductory element)

Because our inventory workers are efficient, they finish their work early. (introductory dependent clause containing a verb form)

Walking through the typing pool, I noticed several new secretaries. (introductory participial phrase containing a verb form)

To earn a promotion, Tony worked overtime. (introductory infinitive phrase containing a verb form)

Running, he tripped over the computer cable. (introductory participle – a verb form)

NOTE: Be careful not to treat verbal subjects as introductory elements: Running (gerund subject) is dangerous in the computer room. To earn a promotion (infinitive phrase subject) is Tony’s goal.

4. **Use a comma to separate coordinate adjectives, which are of equal importance and which modify the same noun.** They can usually be expressed in reverse order; in addition, the word “and” could replace the comma.

We met in a hot, stuffy, smoke-filled room. Robin was an honest, ambitious supervisor.

5. **Use a comma (or pair of commas) to distinguish parenthetical expressions (transitional words or phrases and interrupters), names in direct address, and interjections.**

**Parenthetical expressions:** On the other hand, the board defeated our proposal. The new copying machine, according to the sales clerk, will make twice as many copies per hour as the old machine made.

**Direct address:** I can assure you, Ms. Green, that I have finished the report. We hope to have the items in stock next week, Mr. Gravas.

**Interjection:** Well, Ms. Green always has too much to do. Oh, no, Mr. Gravas cannot come to the phone right now.

6. **Use a comma to signal the introduction of a direct quotation and to separate the speaker’s identity from the direct quotation.** Use a pair of commas when the identification interrupts a sentence. Use a period as shown when the quotation forms two sentences. Commas and periods always go within the closed quotation mark.

“Finish the report by Thursday,” said Ms. Green.
Ms. Green said, “Finish the report by Thursday.”

“Finish the report by Thursday,” Ms. Green said, “and you can take Friday off.”

“Finish the report by Thursday,” said Ms. Green. “If you finish early, you can take Friday off.”

7. Use commas to separate the major portions of dates and geographical areas and in figures according to convention. Note that some business styles permit omission of the final comma with dates and states.

Our main offices are being remodeled on Thursday, October 25, 2002, along with our branches in Austin, Texas, and Norfolk, Virginia; however, our Houston office will not be renovated until March 1990.

8. Use commas to help signal contrasted items.

This memo should be reproduced by the printer, not by the duplicating machine.

9. Use commas to help prevent confusion, misunderstanding, or misreading.

When I turned forty, three people congratulated me.

A few days before, I saw him at the store.

10. Use a comma (or a pair of commas) to separate nonrestrictive modifiers and appositives. Note that restrictive elements (not set off by commas) are essential elements that restrict, limit, or define the terms they relate to.

Restrictive modifiers: The proposal that urged arbitration did not satisfy the union. The proposal which the union wanted to adopt included a seven percent pay increase. Furthermore, the negotiator who moderated the discussion seemed biased.

Nonrestrictive modifiers: Management’s final proposal, which urged arbitration, did not satisfy the union. The negotiating committee’s proposal, which the union wanted to adopt, included a seven percent pay increase. Furthermore, the union’s negotiator, who moderated the discussion, seemed biased.

Restrictive appositive: My employee Robin White is efficient.

Nonrestrictive appositive: My boss, Pat Hawthorne, is efficient.

Semicolons

1. Use a semicolon to connect independent clauses that are closely related but that lack a coordinating conjunction. Use the semicolon alone, or for increased clarity, use with a conjunctive adverb or transitional expression.

The new employee quit after a week; the pressure was too great for him.

The new employee quit after a week; apparently, the pressure was too great for him.

The new employee quit after a week; nonetheless, our department increased its productivity.
2. **Use a semicolon to separate independent clauses if the clauses are long or complex, or if either or both contain internal commas.**

   Our department increased productivity by 75 percent last month; when we asked for raises to demonstrate management’s appreciation, we were told that we would receive increases in two months, in six months, and again in one year. Naturally, we were pleased, having clearly demonstrated our allegiance to the corporate goals, so our department celebrated by taking our supervisor, Leslie Hope, to dinner at The Golden Palate, one of the finest restaurants in town.

3. **Use semicolons to separate items in a series if the items contain internal commas or if the items are long or complex.**

   We planned for several months to purchase new computers for the payroll office, the personnel office, and the marketing department; a copying machine for each department that needed one; and facsimile machines for the information director, the bookkeeper, and the public relations director.

**Colons**

1. **Use a colon to signal a list, a summary, a specific example, or a long or formal quotation.**

   The new plan has three merits: clarity, efficiency, and economy.

2. **The colon follows formal introductions such as the following or as follows, however, the colon does not follow terms such as includes, contains, is, are, consists of, or for example.**

   The merits of the new plan are as follows: clarity, efficiency, and economy.

   The merits of the new plan are clarity, efficiency, and economy.

   **When an independent clause follows a colon, capitalization is optional.**

   The facts lead to one conclusion: Students hope to earn more than $20,000 a year within five years of graduation from college.

   The facts lead to one conclusion: students hope to earn more than $20,000 a year within five years of graduation from college.

**Dashes**

   Typed as a double hyphen without space before or after, a dash sets off and draws attention to words or word groups that interrupt the main sentence structure or that show emphasis or climax at the end. To maintain the emphasis of dashes, writers should use them sparingly.

   Hoping to win the company prize for the most new accounts in a single month and having worked twelve-hour days throughout March in order to achieve their goal, Pat and Robin opened the envelope from headquarters and read the announcement that they were -- fired.

   We do not agree -- our position is firm -- with your recommendation.

   **Dashes may be used to signal a broken thought (sharp turn in thought or interrupted speech).**

   Such accidents cannot possible occur -- but, of course, that one did happen.

**Parentheses and Brackets**

   Parentheses signal a separation from the continuous thought of the sentence or paragraph. The
Little, Brown Handbook describes parenthetical elements as “minor digressions that may aid understanding but are not essential to meaning.” Parentheses de-emphasize while dashes emphasize. Parenthetical elements may define, identify, clarify, or comment.

Jane’s recent report (and all her reports, as a matter of fact) demonstrated her expertise. (All of Jane’s reports are thorough – even when she is rushed.)

**For parentheses within parentheses, use brackets or parentheses.**

The report was thorough. (All of Jane’s reports are thorough [even when she is rushed].)

(All of Jane’s reports are thorough (even when she is rushed).)

**Brackets are used primarily for interpolations within quotations.**

Wallace Stevens wrote that “after the final no there comes a yes [demonstrating his optimism about the human condition]” in one of my favorite poems.

**Ellipsis Points**

A three-dot (point) ellipsis signals omission of words in a quoted sentence. A fourth period (or a question mark or an exclamation point) indicates the end of a sentence. Academic work spaces the ellipsis points and precedes them with a period to signal the end of a sentence.

The contract specifically stated: “We will refrain from all punitive actions....”

**Quotation Marks**

Place the exact words of a speaker or author in quotation marks. For citing fragments, include only the speaker’s precise words without altering or rearranging. Capitalize the first word of a quotation only when it is a proper noun or the beginning of a sentence.

The chief executive officer left the meeting and said, “I have no comment.”

After the meeting, the stockholders claimed they had “no comment.”

**With Commas and Periods**

There are two styles for periods and commas with quotation marks. Most widespread in the U. S. is the inside method, which always places those marks within the quotation marks.

Each country has “rights,” and each seeks “justice.”

“Tomorrow,” the new supervisor promised, “you shall receive a raise.”

**With Semicolons and Colons**

Semicolons and colons go outside the quotation marks.

The typewriter is a “collector’s item”; in fact, it is a rare Remington.

The typewriter is a “collector’s item”: a rare Remington portable.
With Other Marks

Alternate double and single quotation marks, avoiding more than two inner quotations.

Tony Tyler asked, “What did they mean when they said, ‘We won’t deliver’?”

Pat remarked, “I wonder what they meant when they wrote, ‘We deliver only “collector’s items.”’”

Tyler repeated: “Their excuses were as follows; ‘We don’t have enough courage.’”

Special Marks


Three dashes inside quotation marks indicate broken-off speech:

“I can’t quite remember the details ---”

Three dashes outside quotation marks indicate a sentence broken off after speech:

“The details weren’t memorable; I can hardly recall a one”---

Three asterisks indicate an omission or unprintable words:

“You ***!” she yelled.

Apostrophes

The apostrophe has two main functions: forming contractions and forming possessives. In addition, some symbols and lower case letters form their plurals with the addition of ‘s (two t’s, two 2’s).

Forming Contractions – the apostrophe signals omission of one or more letters:

it’s = it is                   couldn’t = could not                     I’ll = I will

Forming Possessives – using the possessive form for the owner or possessor, not for the thing possessed. Note that a possessive noun functions as an adjective.

the desk of George = George’s desk             a vacation of two weeks = two weeks’ vacation

payment for one day = one day’s payment

Add apostrophe plus s (‘s) to form the possessive of all singular words except when pronunciation would be difficult.

the car of Ms. Jones = Ms. Jones’s car         the dial on a phone = a phone’s dial

a vacation of one week = a week’s vacation

Exceptions: Jesus’ teachings, Charles’ xylophones
Since most nouns form their plurals with the addition of s, most plural possessives add the apostrophe alone. Add apostrophe s (‘s) to form the possessive of plural words only when the plural word does not end in s.

cars of the Joneses = the Joneses’ cars   desks of the secretaries = secretaries’ desks

books by the women = women’s books

Do not use apostrophes to form the possessive of possessive pronouns; they are already possessive in form:

their, theirs, ours, its, her, hers

Be careful to distinguish between simple plurals, verbs ending in s, and possessive forms:

Neither the cows nor the horses eat oats; in fact, the cow’s favorite food is carrot cake, and the horse’s favorite is candy.

To ensure correct formation of possessives, use a two-stage technique:

First, establish the singular or plural nature of the base word.

Second, form the possessive of the base word. For clarity when handwriting with apostrophes, leave a space rather than join letters separated by apostrophes.