

PUNCTUATION GUIDE

Punctuation marks are small marks inserted into text that separate words, phrases, and sentences. Writers use these marks to clarify sentences and to effectively convey their meaning.

This guide covers six common forms of punctuation: **commas, colons, semicolons, dashes, parentheses, and brackets.**

Punctuation clarifies the meaning of your sentences. For example, “the panda eats shoots and leaves” (indicating that the panda eats plants) and “the panda eats, shoots, and leaves” (indicating that the panda eats first, then fires a weapon, then lastly flees the scene) have very different meanings!

COMMAS*

1. **Separate Items in a Series** – use commas to separate items in a list of three or more items.
2. **Join Independent Clauses** – use a comma and a conjunction to join two independent clauses together.
3. **Set Off Introductory Elements** – an introductory element is an adverbial phrase that modifies a complete sentence. Use a comma after an introductory element.
4. **Set Off Parenthetical Elements** – a parenthetical element is a phrase that adds detail to a sentence but can be removed without making the sentence a fragment. Use a comma before and after a parenthetical element.
5. **Separate Coordinate Adjectives** – coordinate adjectives are two adjectives used to modify the same noun. Use a comma in between coordinate adjectives.
6. **Set Off Direct Quotes** – use a comma before introducing a quote.
7. **Set Off Contrasts** – use a comma to set off phrases that express contrast. **NOTE:** Be careful not to create a “comma splice” by joining two independent clauses without a conjunction.

Note: For examples and a more detailed review of comma rules, see our “Guide to Comma Usage.”

COLONS

1. **Introduce a list.**
 - Ben needed three things from the store: napkins, stirrers, and paper cups.
2. **Introduce dialogue.**
 - Kelsey called from her desk: “We need more calculators!”

SEMICOLONS

1. **Divide a complex list of items that contain commas.**
 - I have a dog, a poodle; a cat, a Siamese; and a bird, a parakeet.
2. **Combine two complete thoughts using a coordinate phrase.**
 - The office door was wide open; however, no one appeared to be inside.

DASHES

1. **Offset a parenthetical phrase that contains commas.**
 - The style manuals—APA, MLA, and Turabian—are sometimes hard to navigate.
2. **Indicate a shift in tone or thought.**
 - I waited in the line at Starbucks for thirty minutes—and they got my order wrong!

PARENTHESES

Offset information from the sentence. Because the information inside parentheses is not technically part of the sentence, **you must format your subjects and verbs normally, and your subjects and verbs must agree.** You must also include appropriate punctuation within the parentheses.

- Eleanor walked her dogs (a dachshund, a dalmatian, and a Dobermann) to the park.
- Kana (and her siblings) was excited to go to Disney World.
- Colin was early (he forgot to set his clock according to Daylight Savings Time).

BRACKETS

Use *only* within direct quotes to add information. In scholarly writing, writers use brackets within quotes to add information or include comments.

- “Witnesses saw him [the father] at the scene of the crime.”
- “[F]emurs are the strongest and largest bones in the body.”

PRACTICE NOW