

Punctuation

Punctuation includes the use of commas (,), semi-colons (;), colons (:), dashes (--), hyphens (-), parentheses (...) and quotation marks ("..."). This helpsheet provides a simple primer for how to use these essential elements of written language.

Commas (,)

Commas are used in six main ways:

1. To set off introductory phrases or connector words: *"To start with, I want to support ..."*, *"Secondly, we have to consider ..."*, *"However, this can be questioned"*.
2. To show symmetrical contrast: *"The higher the cost, the greater the risk"*.
3. To separate clauses in a sentence (NB: a clause contains a subject and a main verb): *"There was a way forward, but I was concerned it was the wrong one"*.
4. To separate items in a simple list: refer to the list of punctuation that begins this helpsheet.
5. To make the meaning of a sentence clear when it could be ambiguous without commas: *"Let's eat, Grandma!"* (Compare with: *"Let's eat Grandma!"*).
6. To replace parentheses when a closer relationship between the parenthetical items and the main sentence is needed: *"The man stepped forward, with certainly and confidence, to claim the prize"*.

Semi-colons (;)

Semi-colons are confusing for many people. They are required when a writer wishes to indicate closely-related ideas which could, in principle, stand as separate sentences if necessary. By using a semi-colon, a writer is placing an emphasis on the connection between the ideas. There are three main uses of them:

1. To show a relationship between independent clauses: *"Some supported the company manager; others resigned in protest"*.
2. Before a connector word in the middle of a sentence: *"There was a chance for a reconciliation; however, the manager did not wish to take it."* (NB: Note the comma following the connector word).
3. To separate items in a complex list that also needs commas: *"The company had several important stakeholders: the CEO, Bob Smith; the President, Winston Johnston; the Operational Manager, Jill Dawes; and the Treasurer, Frank Williams."*

Colons (:)

Colons have numerous uses:

1. To indicate that a list of items is to follow: see above *"Colons have several uses: "*
2. To amplify and draw attention to points to follow: *"There are three important issues: 1)... 2... 3)..."*
3. To indicate that a direct quote is to follow: *"According to Thomasson: 'There has never been ...'"*
4. To indicate that direct speech is to follow: *Jack said: 'But I don't want to go'.*
5. To indicate time (US use): *5:53pm*
6. To separate the title and sub-title of written work: e.g., *Harry Potter: A Study in Magic.*
7. For business and other greetings: *To Whom it May Concern: ... Dear Sir:*

Dashes (-, —, —)

There are three types of dashes: the en-dash (–), the em-dash (—), and the hyphen (-). The hyphen is the shortest and is dealt with overleaf.

En-dash (–)

The *en-dash* is used to join years in dates, pages, or months, e.g., 1993–1994; pp. 23–35; July–November. The en-dash is slightly longer than a hyphen.

Em-dash (—)

The *em-dash* is used in the following ways:

1. to draw attention to something: “The CEO—who was 87 years old—passed away quietly”. (Note that if parentheses were used (...) if the insertion would be considered tangential to the sentence.)
2. To separate an inserted clause from a main clause for emphasis: “*The CEO died—and a lonely death it was too*”
3. To indicate interruptions or continuation of dialogue: “*I don’t want to—*”. *He stopped in his tracks and looked up—“Now?”*

Note: en- and em-dashes can be found in Word. Go to the Insert menu tab and click on: Insert/Symbol/More Symbols

Hyphens (-)

Hyphens are used in natural breaks in words when a word needs to spill across lines in text (e.g., pre-eminent, over-emphasis, inter-racial), but they are also used to avoid ambiguity. To take over something is different from a take-over, to hand something over is different from a hand-over, and so on. Attention to usage is important. Check a dictionary if you are unsure.

Parentheses (...)

Parentheses, or round “brackets” are used when additional material is included in a sentence which could be easily left out without loss. This information can be a single word, a sentence fragment, or complete sentences. The information in brackets must not be grammatically integral to the surrounding sentence. If it is, the sentence should be re-written. The sentence should make sense without the information in the (...).

- Correct: *The CEO (and the treasurer) travelled by limousine.*
- Incorrect: *The CEO (and the treasurer) were intent on changing the company for the better.*

Parentheses are typically used to provide an after-thought, or an example, and not to draw attention to the information. This makes the use of parentheses different from the use of an em-dash.

Quotation marks (‘...’; “...”)

These are used to indicate direct speech or for direct quotations (i.e., word-for-word transcriptions of source material). They are also used for emphasis:

e.g., *She exclaimed—“Fire!”, and everyone left the building.*

Style manuals require one kind of quotation mark for quotes and another for emphasis, e.g., single (‘...’) for quotes and double (“..”) for emphasis; or vice-versa. Both are acceptable. Note also that it is possible to have a quote within a quote, and in this case, both single and double quotation marks are required. If in doubt, ask your lecturer/teacher/tutor for their preference.

Other helpsheets available

- Apostrophes
- Capitalisation
- Sentence Structure
- Writing in an Academic Style