Detailed Punctuation Help

When speaking aloud, you punctuate constantly—with body language. Your listener hears commas, dashes, question marks, exclamation points, and quotation marks as you shout, whisper, pause, wave your arms, and wrinkle your brow. In writing, punctuation plays the role of body language. It helps readers hear you the way you want to be heard.

Comma [ , ]

This is the most widely used mark of all. It’s also the toughest and most controversial. Editors can almost come to blows over the comma! If you can handle it without sweating, the others will be easy. Here are a few tips:

- Use a comma after an introductory phrase or clause: After stealing the crown jewels from the Tower of London, I went home for tea.

- Use a comma in if/then statements: If I had eaten beforehand, then I wouldn’t have been able to fit into my master thief pants.

- Use a comma to separate elements in a series: I robbed the Denver Mint, the Bank of England, the Tower of London, and my piggy bank.

- Use a comma to separate independent clauses that are joined by a conjunction like and, but, for, or, nor, yet, or so. I shall return the crown jewels, for they are too heavy to wear.

- Use a comma to set off a mildly parenthetical word grouping that isn’t essential to the sentence: Tommy, a ventriloquist prodigy, is helping me in the heist.

- Do not use commas if the word grouping is essential to the sentence’s meaning: The ventriloquist prodigy named Tommy is helping me in the heist.

- Use a comma in direct address: Your majesty, please hand over the crown.

- And between proper names and titles: Montague Sneed, Director of Scotland Yard, was assigned the case.

- And to separate elements of geographical address: Director Sneed comes from Chicago, Illinois, and now lives in London, England.

Generally speaking, a comma often goes where you’d pause briefly in speech. For a long pause or completion of thought, however, use a period. If you confuse the comma with the period, you’ll get a comma splice: The Bank of England is located in London, I rushed right over to rob it. Don’t use comma splices!
Semicolon [ ; ]

The semicolon separates two main clauses, but it keeps those two thoughts more tightly linked than a period can: I steal crown jewels; their sparkle intrigues me. Or I steal crown jewels; consequently, their sparkle intrigues me.

Dash [ — ] And Parentheses [ ( ) ]

Warning! Use sparingly. The dash SHOUTS. Parentheses whisper. Shout too often, people stop listening; whisper too much, people become suspicious of you.

- The dash creates a dramatic pause to prepare for an expression needing strong emphasis: I’ll marry you—if you’ll rob Topkapi with me.

- Parentheses help you pause quietly to drop in some chatty information not vital to your story: Despite Betty’s daring spirit (“I love robbing your piggy bank,” she often said), she was a terrible dancer.

Quotation Marks [ “ “ ]

These tell the reader you’re reciting the exact words someone said or wrote: Betty said, “I can’t tango.” Or: “I can’t tango,” Betty said.

Colon [ : ]

A colon is a tip-off to get ready for what’s next: a list, a long quotation, or an explanation. This article is riddled with colons. Too many, maybe, but the message is simple: “Be prepared; I’m about to tell you something important.” Just remember to use a complete thought preceding the colon, as can be seen in the two instances of colon usage in this paragraph.

Apostrophe [ ’ ]

Apostrophes are used to show when a noun is possessive.

- If the noun is singular, add an ’s: I hated Betty’s tango.
- If the noun is plural, simply add an apostrophe after the s: Those are the girls’ coats.
- The same applies for singular nouns ending in s, like Dickens: This is Dickens’ best book.
- Exception alert: If you write it’s, you are not marking possession, you’re saying “it is.” The possessive form of “it” does not take a comma: its.

Remember

While punctuation marks help make a sentence clear, they cannot save a sentence that is badly put together. If you have to struggle over too many commas, semicolons, and dashes in a single sentence, you’ve probably built a sentence that’s going to be difficult to read no matter how you tinker with it. When that happens, try rephrasing the sentence entirely using a simpler construction. The better your sentence is to begin with, the easier it is to punctuate.