PUNCTUATION

When you speak to another person, you can use tone of voice, facial expressions, and gestures to let your audience know what aspects of your speech to focus on, as well as whether your words are friendly or hostile, certain or confused, sincere or sarcastic. When you're communicating in writing, however, these options aren't available. You can't always be around to help your reader interpret what you wrote, which is why punctuation is so important.

Punctuation includes a number of familiar symbols such as periods, question marks, commas, hyphens, and apostrophes. Punctuation also includes typographical effects such as capitalization, bolding, and italicization. Thoughtfully placed punctuation tells audiences how to read, interpret, and understand our sentences. When we read aloud, punctuation helps us know when to pause, what tone to use, and what words or phrases to emphasize. When reading silently, punctuation similarly helps us "hear" the writer's voice, and it also prevents misunderstanding.

In the past, you might have learned some rules for punctuating sentences. For example, you might have learned to capitalize the first letter in a sentence, place a period at the end of a sentence, or include a comma before the conjunction in a series of three or more items. Following punctuation conventions like these is important because missing or misused punctuation could cause your audience to have difficulty reading your writing, misunderstand what you're saying, or simply become annoyed. Imagine, for example, how difficult it would be to read a paragraph with no punctuation at all. Without any periods, readers would find it difficult to know when one sentence ends and another begins. Without question marks after your questions, would readers understand what you were asking?

Punctuation does more than just make reading easier for your audience; it literally shapes meaning. In some cases, including or leaving out a punctuation mark can significantly change what a sentence says. Consider the difference between these two sentences:

1. I invited two teammates, Marissa and Joey, to the party.
2. I invited two teammates, Marissa, and Joey to the party.

The difference in punctuation is subtle—the first sentence has two commas, while the second has three—but the addition or subtraction of a comma completely changes the meaning. In the first sentence, the commas act like parentheses, telling us that Marissa and Joey are the writer's teammates. The second sentence, on the other hand, tells us that the speaker has invited Marissa and Joey to the party, as well as two unnamed teammates for a total of four guests. Imagine you encountered this sentence with all the commas removed. Would you be able to tell which meaning the writer intended? Probably not.

Even when a specific punctuation choice is not strictly required to prevent confusion, thoughtful use of punctuation can convey subtleties of meaning and make your writing more suited to its rhetorical situation. Consider the use of punctuation in these examples:

1. At the end of the director's new film, an elephant walks onto the set.
2. At the end of the director's new "film," an *elephant* walks onto the set!

The first sentence likely strikes you as more neutral in tone, while the quotation marks around "film," the italicization of *elephant*, and the ending exclamation mark make it clear the writer of the second sentence thinks the movie is overrated. In addition to reflecting the writer's opinion, the punctuation of each sentence suggests a different rhetorical context. If you were writing a review of the movie for a newspaper, the punctuation in the first example might be appropriate, since it would sound professional and informative. If you were leaving an informal one-star review of the movie online, however, the second sentence's punctuation might be welcomed by your audience. The point is this: rhetorical context matters when choosing how to punctuate your writing.

Read "Punctuation's Rhetorical Effects" by Kevin Cassell.

In summary, punctuation is a powerful tool. It helps your audience read your writing, prevents misinterpretations, and conveys nuance. Next time you read a published piece of writing, try to pay attention to the punctuation choices the writer has made. The more you study examples of punctuation, asking yourself why the punctuation is effective or not effective, the easier it will be to make purposeful punctuation choices.

There are many types of punctuation used in written English, and there are varying ways of using them. Below is an overview of some of the most common punctuation marks you'll use in academic, personal, and professional writing. For more explanation of each punctuation type, start with one of these resources:

- "Brief Overview of Punctuation," Purdue OWL
- "A Quick Guide to Punctuation," University of Lynchburg

Periods, Exclamation Marks, and Question Marks

Periods, exclamation marks, and question marks help readers know where one sentence ends and another begins. Because they signal that a sentence is finished, these three types of punctuation are sometimes called end marks.

The end mark you include at the end of your sentence also helps communicate tone. Sentences that end with periods, the most commonly used end mark, tend to feel neutral and polite in tone, unless the content of your sentence suggests otherwise. The period doesn't add much emphasis to your sentences either. It's just a regular, reliable option.

Examples:

- The period is an underappreciated punctuation mark.
- Alex's sister asked if he could drive her home.

Exclamation marks add emphasis to your sentences! Unlike the period, which tends to feel neutral, an exclamation mark can make your words sound cheerful, excited, urgent, angry, frightened, or surprised, depending on context. Exclamation marks can be powerful tools. Just

note that they can lose their impact and become annoying to readers if they're used too frequently.

Examples:

- We're looking forward to seeing you at the bake sale!
- While they may look cute, beavers have a nasty bite!
- Call an ambulance!

The final end mark is the question mark, which is used to indicate that a sentence is asking a question. You'll most likely want to use this type of punctuation to end sentences that begin with question words like *who*, *what*, *when*, *where*, *why*, and *how*, as well as any other time your sentence is asking a question. Additionally, you might use a question mark to end a sentence when you want it to sound uncertain or prompt a response from the reader.

Examples:

- Who is actually buying these products, and why are the prices so high?
- Is this the correct way to punctuate this sentence?
- That meeting was on Wednesday?

Semicolons

Semicolons are punctuation marks you can use to join two independent clauses (complete sentences) together. In other words, you can place a semicolon in the spot where you would usually place a period. When used this way, the semicolon bonds the clauses together, indicating a relationship between them without requiring you to add any extra words. Writers often choose to use semicolons when the second half of the sentence restates the first or when they want to contrast the clauses before and after the semicolon. Additionally, semicolons can be used to punctuate lists when the individual list items already contain commas.

Examples:

- Beach pollution is a significant but preventable problem; vacationers can help by disposing of trash properly and asking others to do the same.
- Many students are intimidated by semicolons; however, they're easy to use correctly if you understand independent clauses.
- Our company is hiring staff to work at our Seattle, WA; Spokane, WA; and Coeur d'Alene, ID, locations.

Colons

Colons are similar to semicolons since you can use them to join two independent clauses. However, the colon also has some abilities the semicolon doesn't have. You can place a colon at the end of a full sentence to introduce a list, a quote, a dependent clause, or even a single word.

The colon adds emphasis to whatever comes after it. Using a colon, then, is basically like setting up an expectation and then fulfilling it.

Examples:

- Clouds are grouped into three classes based on altitude: high-level, mid-level, and low-level.
- Writers should think about using punctuation to clarify their writing, even if they're not worried about errors impacting their grades: "we should care about punctuation not because of the rules but because of our readers" (Cassell 12-13).
- Superstitious attitudes are surprisingly common in recreational settings: athletes, dancers, actors, and musicians all identify rituals and behaviors they associate with good and bad performance in their fields.

Commas

Commas are some of the most challenging punctuation marks to master. In the past, you might have been told to read your sentences out loud and place a comma every time you pause. This can be a helpful trick, but it's not foolproof. Commas have many uses, and it can be helpful to familiarize yourself with the most common ones.

1. Use a comma with a conjunction to join independent clauses.

A comma can be used with a conjunction to join multiple independent clauses into one compound sentence. This function of the comma is useful in part because it allows you to indicate complex relationships between ideas. Conjunctions—which include connecting words like *and*, *but*, *or*, and *so*—tell the reader how to interpret one independent clause in relation to others.

Just remember that if you want to connect two independent clauses using a comma, the conjunction needs to be there. To connect independent clauses without including a conjunction, consider using a semicolon, colon, or em-dash instead.

Examples:

- The book was overdue, so I had to pay a fine.
- I was going to explain how to use a comma in a compound sentence, but you've nailed it already!
- I asked Millie to turn off her phone, but she didn't listen, and everyone in the auditorium turned to look when her phone rang.

2. Use commas between items in a list.

When listing three or more items, place a comma after each item in the series except the last.

Examples:

- Her hobbies included running, painting, and singing.
- Breakfast comes with toast and your choice of raspberry, strawberry, or blackberry jam.
- The process took longer than expected: we had to purchase the materials, transport them to the workshop, assemble the pieces, and add three coats of paint.

When a conjunction comes before the last list item, the final comma (also called the Oxford comma or serial comma) is optional. Some discourse communities always omit this comma, while others always include it. In general, you should include the serial comma in your sentence when leaving it out could cause a misunderstanding. Consider the difference between these three sentences, for example:

1. I went on a walk with my dogs, Hannah and Joseph.
2. I went on a walk with my dogs, Hannah, and Joseph.
3. I went on a walk with Hannah, Joseph, and my dogs.

The first sentence communicates that your dogs are named Hannah and Joseph. However, if Hannah and Joseph are your friends from school, including the Oxford comma, as in the second sentence, would add clarity. Better yet, you could rearrange the items in the list to avoid any chance of confusion. The third version of the sentence will convey the same meaning whether the final comma is included or not.

3. Use a comma after introductory material.

When you begin a sentence with an introductory phrase, dependent clause, or prepositional phrase, a comma directly after the opening material helps readers quickly determine where the "main" part of your sentence starts. This type of comma is particularly important to include when the introductory phrase or clause is long.

Examples:

- Running as quickly as they could, the kids chased down the ice cream vendor.
- After we said goodbye to the hosts and left the party, we drove straight home.
- Because I barely passed the first test, I knew I would have to study hard.

4. Use commas to set off nonessential information.

Sometimes, you want to include information in your sentence that's nice to know but not essential for understanding. You might punctuate this type of information by placing it inside parentheses or em-dashes. If you would prefer not to emphasize the information visually, however, you can also set off nonessential information using commas.

To determine whether you can use commas around a particular part of your sentence, try lifting out the material and reading the sentence without it. If the sentence is still grammatically correct and the meaning is accurate, you can most likely surround the nonessential material in commas without issue.

Examples:

- The author's first book, published in 1998, is still their most popular novel.
- Sebastian's twin sister, Jessica, won the tournament for her team.
- The book's new edition, unlike the original, contains a chapter on writing for social media.

Em-Dashes

Em-dashes are less familiar than punctuation marks like commas and question marks, but they have several helpful functions which you can use to great rhetorical effect. One function of the em-dash is to separate asides and interruptions from the rest of your sentence. Unlike parentheses, em-dashes emphasize interrupting content, making it stand out. When you want to include an aside in the middle of your sentence, place an em-dash on either side.

You can also use em-dashes to emphasize content at the end of a sentence. Writers often use this function of the em-dash to highlight phrases that redefine or add information about a noun.

Examples:

- When the mixture is fully combined—this usually takes about five minutes—remove the pan from the heat.
- The new options added to the menu—a crème brulee doughnut and a chocolate-raspberry lava cake—make it difficult not to order dessert.
- Revenue increased significantly due to the hard work of Mari, Tim, and Jorge—our employees of the month.

When using em-dashes, keep in mind the impact that they will have on your writing's tone. Em-dashes are loud—they emphasize what comes after them. This means they can become tiresome for readers when they're used frequently.

Hyphens

Hyphens are a small but important type of punctuation, as they ensure readers understand the intended meaning of certain words and phrases. These tiny dashes are used to create compound modifiers when they appear before the noun they're describing. Compound modifiers are groups of words that work together to describe a noun. To understand the difference a hyphen can make, consider these examples:

1. A man eating shark
2. A man-eating shark

Though a little clunky, the first phrase indicates that a man is eating a shark. The second phrase, however, describes a shark capable of eating a man. In the second example, the hyphen connects

the two words before the noun (“shark”) to show that they are working together to serve as one descriptor.

Here are a few other examples of hyphens creating compound modifiers:

- The greasy-skinned, wrinkled sphinx cat squeaked as it stretched and yawned.
- The event coordinators decided to go with the black-and-white color scheme.
- He was less of a build-people-up kind of guy and more of a tear-them-down-at-all-costs kind of guy.

Apostrophes

Apostrophes are used to punctuate contractions and possessives. Contractions combine two or more words into one. Examples of contractions include words like “don’t” (do not), “won’t” (will not), and “should’ve” (should have). To create these words, place the apostrophe in the spot where letters have been subtracted to create the new word.

Apostrophes are also used to form possessives, which indicate one thing belongs to another. When a noun is singular, you can form the possessive version of the word by adding an apostrophe followed by the letter s. However, if a noun is plural or a proper name ending in s, the rules are different:

- For a singular noun: The bear’s paws (the paws belonging to one bear)
- For a plural noun: The bears’ paws (the paws belonging to multiple bears)
- For a proper name ending in letter s: Markus’s favorite animal is the bear.

There are also some common exceptions to the rule that you use an apostrophe to form a possessive word. For example, pronouns have different forms to indicate possession—as in, “*his* backpack,” “*their* car,” or “that book is *hers*.” The hardest-to-remember exception is the pronoun “it.” The version of the word with the apostrophe included (“it’s”) is actually a contraction meaning “it is.” The possessive form of “it” is “its” with no apostrophe.

Don’t forget the details when proofreading your writing. Even one apostrophe can impact how your audience interprets your words!