

Take the quiz to discover which punctuation mark you are. Then, spend fifteen minutes using it! Write a piece that includes your punctuation mark as many times as possible. Let us know your punctuation mark and share your practice on our **Instagram @cbsouth_writingcenter**

We can break down the punctuation marks into five categories, as follows:

- **Sentence endings: period, question mark, exclamation point**
- **Comma, colon, and semicolon**
- **Dash and hyphen**
- **Brackets, braces, and parentheses**
- **Apostrophe, quotation marks, and ellipsis**

Period (.)

This one is probably the most straightforward. Also referred to as a full stop, the period denotes the end of a sentence. A full sentence is considered as one that is complete and declarative.

Here's an example of a period at the end of a sentence:

- The dog ran under the fence.

Periods are also used in abbreviations, such as in names or titles. Here are examples of how to use a period in abbreviations:

- Dr. Smith read his patient's chart.
- Mr. H. Potter opened his front door.

Question Mark (?)

A question mark also ends a sentence; however, it ends a sentence that is a direct question.

Here's how to use a question mark in a sentence:

- How do you like your eggs?
- Why didn't you like the movie last night?

Generally, a question mark also denotes a shift in tone in a sentence if it is being read out loud, so this is something to take note of. Typically sentences that are questions begin with what, how, when, where, why, or who BUT you may also infuse RHETORICAL QUESTIONS or HYPOPHORA (see rhetorical devices or join a session on argumentation writing).

Exclamation Point (!)

An exclamation point or exclamation mark is also used at the end of a sentence when that sentence expresses an intense emotion. The expression can be a variety of things, from excitement, disgust, anger, joy, or anything else. Exclamation points are meant to add emphasis to a sentence. Use sparingly in academic writing.

Here's how to use one in a sentence:

- "Look out behind you!" she yelled.
- I'm so excited to go to the park tomorrow!

Comma (,)

Commas are used to insert a pause into a sentence. The purpose of the pause can be for different reasons, such as to separate ideas, phrases, or even alter the structure of a sentence.

Commas have a few different uses. Commas are used for a direct address, such as:

- Joe, it was nice to see you again.

They're also used to separate two complete sentences:

- He went to the library, and then he went out for lunch.

Commas can also be used to list items in a sentence:

- She went shopping and bought shoes, a dress, two shirts, and a pair of pants.

Commas are one of the most misused punctuation points, and its misuse often results in a comma splice. A comma splice is when you join two independent clauses with a comma instead of a conjunction. For example:

- It's almost time for dinner, I'm not hungry.

Instead of using a comma, the sentence should read:

- It's almost time for dinner and I'm not hungry.

Oxford commas are often debated within academics and the English language, and using one often comes down to preference. An Oxford comma is when a final comma is placed on the last item of a list. For example:

- He likes to eat fruits, cake, vegetables, and pasta.

For more practice and information on commas, see our comma handout and join our sessions on grammar.

Colon (:)

A colon has a few primary uses. One way to use it is when introducing something, such as a quote, an example, a series, or an explanation.

- She took four classes last semester: history, biology, arts, and economics.

A colon can also be used to link two independent clauses if the second clause clarifies or completes the first one. For example:

- They didn't have time to waste: it was already late.
- Finally, a colon can also emphasize a subject in a sentence:
- I only hate one vegetable: brussel sprouts.

Semicolon (;)

Similar to a colon, a semicolon links two independent clauses. However, in this case, the clauses are more closely related than when you would use a colon. For example:

- I have a meeting tomorrow morning; I can't go out tonight.

Both clauses are independent enough to be their own sentences, but instead of using a period, it's possible to use a semicolon to show both clauses are connected.

Another (less common) use for semicolons is within a list that uses commas. Have a look:

- Last summer we traveled to London, England; Paris, France; Rome, Italy; and Athens, Greece.

Dash (-)

There are two types of dashes that vary in size and use.

En dash: Typically shorter in length, the en dash is used to denote a range, such as between numbers or dates. For example:

- The company was operational from 1990-2000.
- He took the Chicago-New York train last night.

Em dash: this dash is longer, and is sometimes used instead of other punctuation marks, like commas, colons, or parentheses. Here's an example: Her answer was clear — Yes!

Em dashes can be used to mark off a non-essential clause or phrase (like a comma) or introduce a list or explanation (like a colon). If dashes are used with non-essential clauses or phrases, you can't mix them with commas.

Hyphen (-)

Not to be confused with a dash, a hyphen is used in compound words when two or more words are connected. Here are some examples of hyphenated words:

- Step-by-step Mother-in-law Ex-boyfriend

Brackets ([])

Brackets are used to clarify something or for technical terms or explanations. It can also be used to clarify a subject when quoting another person or text. For example:

- She [Mrs. Smith] agrees that cats are better than dogs.
- Adam said that “[summer] is my favorite time of year.”

Brackets within quotations signify that the writer has made a change in the quoted material.

Braces ({ })

It's unlikely you'll need to use braces very often unless you're writing a mathematical or technical text. However, it's still good to know so you don't accidentally use them instead of brackets or parentheses. Braces are usually used in operations, for example:

- $6\{3x+[28+2]\}=xy$

Parentheses (())

Parentheses are used to supply further details or information or as an aside. Parentheses can often be replaced with commas and the sentence would retain its same meaning. Here's an example:

- Kate (who is Matt's wife) likes to go for walks.

You also use parenthesis to show where you found quoted or paraphrased material. Note that the period goes outside parenthesis:

Scout introduces the slow pace of Maycomb by calling it a “tired old town” (Lee 1).

Apostrophe (')

Apostrophes are meant to show that a letter or letters have been omitted and also to indicate the possessive or contractions. It can also be used to pluralize lowercase letters. Here are some examples:

- I've been working from home for 6 months and it's great.
- Rebecca's dog had surgery yesterday.

When texting, people often drop this mark BUT it is important to know and use!

Quotation Marks (“ ”)

Quotation marks are used to denote text, speech, or words spoken by someone else. It is also used to indicate dialogue.

- “I don’t like this,” said Mark.
- She told him that she “prefers not to think about that.”
- Single quotation marks (‘ ’), not to be confused with apostrophes, are often used for a quote within a quote.
- Jill told her mother “Jack ran up the hill and he said he was going to ‘fetch a pail of water’ before he fell.”

Ellipsis (...)

An ellipsis is three periods used together to represent an omission of words or letters. They are often used to jump from one sentence or phrase to another while omitting unnecessary or obvious words. It is also used when quoting someone and unnecessary words are left out.

Here are some examples:

- At midnight, she began to count down: “ten, nine, eight...” and then the ball dropped.
- When Martin Luther King said “I have a dream...” he was talking about civil rights and an end to racism.

For example, if you take material from the end of a sentence, keep the period in as usual.

- “The boys ran to school, forgetting their lunches and books. Even though they were out of breath, they made it on time.”
- “The boys ran to school. . . . Even though they were out of breath, they made it on time.”

QUIC TEST:

1. Lobsters are cannibalistic and will feed on each other this is one reason they are difficult to raise in captivity.
 - A. NO CHANGE
 - B. other, this
 - C. other; and this
 - D. other. This

2. He had the heart of a lamb, he had the hide of a wolf.
 - A. NO CHANGE
 - B. lamb, but he
 - C. lamb. Although he
 - D. lamb. While he

3. The college's plans for expansion included a new science building and a new dormitory if the funding drive was successful there would be enough money for both.
 - A. NO CHANGE
 - B. dormitory, if
 - C. dormitory; if,
 - D. dormitory. If

4. There is not much difference between the decision to enter politics and the decision to jump into a pit full of rattlesnakes in fact you might find a friendlier environment in the snake pit.
 - A. NO CHANGE
 - B. rattlesnakes. In fact,
 - C. rattlesnakes, in fact,
 - D. rattlesnakes, in fact

5. I never really enjoyed science math is my favorite class.
 - A. NO CHANGE
 - B. science, math
 - C. science, math,
 - D. science; math