

# Punctuation

Punctuation marks are special symbols used in writing. They make it easier to understand written sentences. This page tells you about the main punctuation marks.

## Apostrophe ’

You use an apostrophe for showing that one or more letters have been left out of a word, for example *I'm* (for *I am*) or *they'll* (for *they will*). The apostrophe stands for the missing part of the word.

An apostrophe is also used for showing that something belongs to someone or to something else – this is the possessive use of the apostrophe. In the sentence *This is the girl's book*, the *'s* shows that the book belongs to *the girl* (one girl), and in the sentence *These are the girls' books* the *'s* shows that the books belong to *the girls* (more than one girl). Be careful to put the apostrophe in the correct place – before the *s* when there is only one and after the *s* when there is more than one.

Take care also not to confuse *'s* with plural *s*. Write *I can see the girls*, not *I can see the girl's*.

## Brackets ( ) [ ] { }

Brackets are used in pairs. You can put them around words to give extra information in a sentence, for example *My bike cost a lot of money (more than my parents could afford)*.

## Capital letter

A *capital* or *capital letter* is a large letter (such as A, B or C). Capital letters are used at the beginning of names (for example *Alice, Manchester, Wales, Tuesday, August*). You always use a capital letter at the beginning of the first word of a sentence.

Capital letters are not punctuation marks but, like punctuation, they make it easier to understand written sentences. People don't always use capital letters in informal writing such as text messages, but in everyday and careful writing it is important to use them correctly.

## Colon :

You use a colon before an explanation (*There's something I want you to know: I can't play chess*), a quotation (*It was Shakespeare who wrote: 'To be or not to be. That is the question'*) or a list of different things (*I speak three languages: English, French and Spanish*).

## Comma ,

Commas help to make reading a sentence easier because they separate the different parts of the sentence (*As you can see, it's raining*).

Commas are also used for separating parts of a sentence that contain extra information about the main sentence (*My mobile phone, which I bought last week, doesn't work*). You can easily leave out the part between the commas without changing the basic meaning of the sentence.

You also use commas for separating different things in a list (*I love apples, pears, oranges and bananas*).

## Dash –

A dash is slightly longer than a hyphen. You use it to separate parts of a sentence when you add an explanation or opinion or say something strongly.

You can use a dash on its own, for example *When I grow up, there's one thing I want to be – happy*. Or you can use two dashes in one sentence, for example *There is nowhere – nowhere in the world – I'd want to live except Scotland*.

A dash is used in a similar way to a comma but often separates a part of the sentence that is very different from the main sentence and doesn't belong to it (such as *nowhere in the world* in the last example).

## Exclamation mark !

You use an exclamation mark after a word, phrase or sentence as a way of showing a particular feeling. For example, you can show that you are angry (*I'll never speak to you again!*); surprised (*Look at that!*); disappointed (*Pity!*); happy about something (*What a beautiful dress!*); unhappy about something (*Sorry!*); agreeing (*Yes!*) or disagreeing (*No!*).

You can also use an exclamation mark with a command (*Go away! Don't run! Help me!*) and to give special importance to a word or sentence (*I've been to Spain three times!*).

In informal writing, a number of exclamation marks can be used together to show that your feelings are very strong (*Your plan is completely crazy!!!*).

## Full stop .

A full stop is used for showing the end of a sentence (but you do not use one after a question mark or exclamation mark). It is always followed by a capital letter at the beginning of the first word of the next sentence.

A full stop is sometimes used in words that have been shortened, for example *etc.* (short for Latin *et cetera* 'and so on') or *p.* (short for page).

## Hyphen -

A hyphen is slightly shorter than a dash. It is used in writing for joining words or parts of words together (*old-fashioned, merry-go-round*).

It is also used when there is not enough room for a whole word at the end of a line of writing. The word then has to be divided into two parts: the first part is at the end of the line with a hyphen after it and the rest is at the beginning of the next line.

## Question mark ?

You use a question mark after a word (*What?*), phrase (*How many?*) or sentence (*Where do you live?*) for showing that you are asking someone a direct question. If the question is read aloud, the question mark tells you there must be rising intonation (your voice becomes higher at the end).

## Quotation marks ‘ ’ “ ”

Quotation marks can also be called **inverted commas** or **speech marks**.

You use either single ‘ ’ or double “ ” quotation marks around words to show they are the exact words that someone is using (*'I'm tired,' said Josh. "Where are we?" asked Bimla*).

Quotation marks can also be used around titles, for example of books, films or paintings (*We're reading 'Oliver Twist'. "Starry Night", a famous painting by Van Gogh*).

You also use quotation marks to show that words have a meaning that is slightly different from their usual meaning (*I don't like the look of this 'food' you've put on my plate*).

## Semicolon ;

You can use a semicolon instead of a full stop for separating two sentences whose meanings are closely related (*I heard a loud bang; it frightened me*). You often do this when the second sentence starts with an adverb (*I like apples and oranges; however, I prefer pears*).

You can also use a semicolon instead of a comma in a long or complicated list of words or sentences where a comma would not be clear enough (*The menu gave us a choice between these dishes: fish, chips and peas; vegetarian lasagne with salad; chicken curry, rice and naan bread; lamb kebabs with chilli mayonnaise*).