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Punctuations

Punctuation is the correct use of the various stops or marks in writing so as to make the meaning of a sentence or a passage clear.

The Principal stops are :-

1. Comma (,)
2. Semi-colon (;)
3. Colon (:)
4. Full Stop / Period (.)
5. Note of Interrogation (?)
6. Note of Exclamation (!)
7. Inverted Commas (" ")
8. Apostrophe (')

PERIODS / FULL STOP

Rule 1. Use a period at the end of a complete sentence that is a statement.

Example: I know him well.

Rule 2. If the last item in the sentence is an abbreviation that ends in a period, do not follow it with another period.

Incorrect: This is Alice Smith, M.D..

Correct: This is Alice Smith, M.D.

Correct: Please shop, cook, etc. We will do the laundry.

Rule 3. Question marks and exclamation points replace and eliminate periods at the end of a sentence.

COMMAS

Commas and **periods** are the most frequently used punctuation marks. Commas customarily indicate a brief pause; they're not as final as periods.

Rule 1. Use commas to separate words and word groups in a simple series of three or more items.

Example. My estate goes to my husband, son, daughter-in-law, and nephew.

Note. When the last comma in a series comes before and or or (after daughter-in-law in the above example), it is known as the **Oxford comma**. Most newspapers and magazines drop the Oxford comma in a simple series, apparently feeling it's unnecessary. However, omission of the Oxford comma can sometimes lead to misunderstandings.

Example. We had coffee, cheese and crackers and grapes.

Adding a comma after crackers makes it clear that cheese and crackers represents one dish. In cases like this, clarity demands the Oxford comma.

We had coffee, cheese and crackers, and grapes.

Fiction and nonfiction books generally prefer the Oxford comma. Writers must decide Oxford or no Oxford and not switch back and forth, except when omitting the Oxford comma could cause confusion as in the cheese and crackers example.

Rule 2. Use a comma to separate two adjectives when the adjectives are interchangeable.

Example. He is a strong, healthy man.

We could also say healthy, strong man.

Example. We stayed at an expensive summer resort.

We would not say summer expensive resort, so no comma.

Rule 3a. Many inexperienced writers run two independent clauses together by using a comma instead of a period. This results in the dreaded **run-on sentence** or, more technically, a **comma splice**.

Incorrect. He walked all the way home, he shut the door.

There are several simple remedies:

Correct. He walked all the way home. He shut the door.

Correct. After he walked all the way home, he shut the door.

Correct. He walked all the way home, and he shut the door.

Rule 3b. In sentences where two independent clauses are joined by connectors such as and, or, but, etc., put a comma at the end of the first clause.

Incorrect: He walked all the way home and he shut the door.

Correct: He walked all the way home, and he shut the door.

Some writers omit the comma if the clauses are both quite short.

Example: I paint and he writes.



Rule 3c. If the subject does not appear in front of the second verb, a comma is generally unnecessary.

Example: He thought quickly but still did not answer correctly.

Rule 4a. Use a comma after certain words that introduce a sentence, such as well, yes, why, hello, hey, etc.

Examples:

Why, I can't believe this!

No, you can't have a dollar.

Rule 4b. Use commas to set off expressions that interrupt the sentence flow (nevertheless, after all, by the way, on the other hand, however, etc.).

Example: I am, by the way, very nervous about this.

Rule 5. Use commas to set off the name, nickname, term of endearment, or title of a person directly addressed.

Examples:

Will you, Aisha, do that assignment for me?

Yes, old friend, I will.

Good day, Captain.

Rule 6. Use a comma to separate the day of the month from the year, and—what most people forget!—always put one after the year, also.

Example: It was in the Sun's June 5, 2003, edition.

No comma is necessary for just the month and year.

Example: It was in a June 2003 article.

Rule 7. Use a comma to separate a city from its state, and remember to put one after the state, also.



Example: I'm from the Akron, Ohio, area.

Rule 8. Traditionally, if a person's name is followed by Sr. or Jr., a comma follows the last name: Martin Luther King, Jr. This comma is no longer considered mandatory. However, if a comma does precede Sr. or Jr., another comma must follow the entire name when it appears midsentence.

Correct: Al Mooney Sr. is here.

Correct: Al Mooney, Sr., is here.

Incorrect: Al Mooney, Sr. is here.



Rule 9. Similarly, use commas to enclose degrees or titles used with names.

Example: Al Mooney, M.D., is here.

Rule 10. When starting a sentence with a dependent clause, use a comma after it.

Example: If you are not sure about this, let me know now.

But often a comma is unnecessary when the sentence starts with an independent clause followed by a dependent clause.

Example: Let me know now if you are not sure about this.

Rule 11. Use commas to set off nonessential words, clauses, and phrases (see the "Who, That, Which" section in Chapter One, Rule 2b).

Incorrect: Jill who is my sister shut the door.

Correct: Jill, who is my sister, shut the door.

Incorrect: The man knowing it was late hurried home.

Correct: The man, knowing it was late, hurried home.

In the preceding examples, note the comma after sister and late. Nonessential words, clauses, and phrases that occur midsentence must be enclosed by commas. The closing comma is called an **appositive comma**. Many writers forget to add this important comma. Following are two instances of the need for an appositive comma with one or more nouns.

Incorrect: My best friend, Joe arrived.

Correct: My best friend, Joe, arrived.

Incorrect: The three items, a book, a pen, and paper were on the table.

Correct: The three items, a book, a pen, and paper, were on the table.

Rule 12. If something or someone is sufficiently identified, the description that follows is considered nonessential and should be surrounded by commas.

Examples.

Freddy, who has a limp, was in an auto accident.

If we already know which Freddy is meant, the description is not essential.

The boy who has a limp was in an auto accident.

We do not know which boy is meant without further description; therefore, no commas are used.

This leads to a persistent problem. Look at the following sentence:

Example. My brother Bill is here.

Now, see how adding two commas changes that sentence's meaning:

Example. My brother, Bill, is here.

Careful writers and readers understand that the first sentence means I have more than one brother. The commas in the second sentence mean that Bill is my only brother.

Why? In the first sentence, Bill is essential information: it identifies which of my two (or more) brothers I'm speaking of. This is why no commas enclose Bill.

In the second sentence, Bill is nonessential information—whom else but Bill could I mean?—hence the commas.

Comma misuse is nothing to take lightly. It can lead to a train wreck like this:

Example. Mark Twain's book, Tom Sawyer, is a delight.

Because of the commas, that sentence states that Twain wrote only one book. In fact, he wrote more than two dozen of them.

Rule 13a. Use commas to introduce or interrupt direct quotations.

Examples.

He said, "I don't care."

"Why," I asked, "don't you care?"

This rule is optional with one-word quotations.

Example. He said "Stop."

Rule 13b. If the quotation comes before he said, she wrote, they reported, Dana insisted, or a similar attribution, end the quoted material with a comma, even if it is only one word.

Examples.

"I don't care," he said.

"Stop," he said.

Rule 14. Use a comma to separate a statement from a question.

Example. I can go, can't I?





Rule 15. Use a comma to separate contrasting parts of a sentence.

Example: That is my money, not yours.

Rule 16a. Use a comma before and after certain introductory words or terms, such as namely, that is, i.e., e.g., and for instance, when they are followed by a series of items.

Example: You may be required to bring many items, e.g., sleeping bags, pans, and warm clothing.

Rule 16a. Commas should precede the term etc. and enclose it if it is placed midsentence.

Example: Sleeping bags, pans, warm clothing, etc., are in the tent.

SEMICOLONS

It's no accident that a **semicolon** is a period atop a comma. Like commas, semicolons indicate an audible pause—slightly longer than a comma's, but short of a period's full stop. Semicolons have other functions, too. But first, a caveat: avoid the common mistake of using a semicolon to replace a colon (see the "Colons" section).

Incorrect: I have one goal; to find her.

Correct: I have one goal: to find her.

Rule 1. A semicolon can replace a period if the writer wishes to narrow the gap between two closely linked sentences.

Examples:

Call me tomorrow; you can give me an answer then.

We have paid our dues; we expect all the privileges listed in the contract.

Rule 2. Use a semicolon before such words and terms as namely, however, therefore, that is, i.e., for example, e.g., for instance, etc., when they introduce a complete sentence. It is also preferable to use a comma after these words and terms.

Example: Bring any two items; however, sleeping bags and tents are in short supply.

Rule 3. Use a semicolon to separate units of a series when one or more of the units contain commas.

Incorrect: The conference has people who have come from Moscow, Idaho, Springfield, California, Alamo, Tennessee, and other places as well.

Note that with only commas, that sentence is hopeless.

Correct: The conference has people who have come from Moscow, Idaho; Springfield, California; Alamo, Tennessee; and other places as well.

Rule 4. A semicolon may be used between independent clauses joined by a connector, such as and, but, or, nor, etc., when one or more commas appear in the first clause.

Example. When I finish here, and I will soon, I'll be glad to help you; and that is a promise I will keep.

COLONS



A **colon** means "that is to say" or "here's what I mean." Colons and semicolons should never be used interchangeably.

Rule 1. Use a colon to introduce a series of items. Do not capitalize the first item after the colon (unless it's a proper noun).

Examples.

You may be required to bring many things: sleeping bags, pans, utensils, and warm clothing.

I want the following items: butter, sugar, and flour.

I need an assistant who can do the following: input data, write reports, and complete tax forms.

Rule 2. Avoid using a colon before a list when it directly follows a verb or preposition.

Incorrect: I want: butter, sugar, and flour.

Correct:

I want the following: butter, sugar, and flour.

OR

I want butter, sugar, and flour.

Incorrect: I've seen the greats, including: Barrymore, Guinness, and Streep.

Correct: I've seen the greats, including Barrymore, Guinness, and Streep.

Rule 3. When listing items one by one, one per line, following a colon, capitalization and ending punctuation are optional when using single words or phrases preceded by letters, numbers, or bullet points. If each point is a complete sentence, capitalize the first word and end the sentence with appropriate ending punctuation. Otherwise, there are no hard and fast rules, except be consistent.

Examples.

I want an assistant who can do the following:

- a. input data
- b. write reports
- c. complete tax forms

The following are requested:

- Wool sweaters for possible cold weather.
- Wet suits for snorkeling.
- Introductions to the local dignitaries.

These are the pool rules:

1. Do not run.
2. If you see unsafe behavior, report it to the lifeguard.
3. Did you remember your towel?
4. Have fun!



Rule 4. A colon instead of a semicolon may be used between independent clauses when the second sentence explains, illustrates, paraphrases, or expands on the first sentence.

Example. He got what he worked for: he really earned that promotion.

If a complete sentence follows a colon, as in the previous example, it is up to the writer to decide whether to capitalize the first word. Capitalizing a sentence after a colon is generally a judgment call; if what follows a colon is closely related to what precedes it, there is no need for a capital.

Note. A capital letter generally does not introduce a simple phrase following a colon.

Example. He got what he worked for: a promotion.

Rule 5. A colon may be used to introduce a long quotation. Some style manuals say to indent one-half inch on both the left and right margins; others say to indent only on the left margin. Quotation marks are not used.

Example. The author of *Touched*, Jane Straus, wrote in the first chapter:

Georgia went back to her bed and stared at the intricate patterns of burned moth wings in the translucent glass of the overhead light. Her father was in "hyper mode" again where nothing could calm him down.

Rule 6. Use a colon rather than a comma to follow the salutation in a business letter, even when addressing someone by his or her first name. (Never use a semicolon after a salutation.) A comma is used after the salutation in more informal correspondence.

Formal. Dear Ms. Rodriguez:

Informal. Dear Dave,

QUOTATION MARKS



The rules set forth in this section are customary in the United States. Great Britain and other countries in the Commonwealth of Nations are governed by quite different conventions. Nowhere is this more apparent than in Rule 3a in this section, a rule that has the advantage of being far simpler than Britain's and the disadvantage of being far less logical.

Rule 1. Use double quotation marks to set off a direct (word-for-word) quotation.

Correct: "When will you be here?" he asked.

Incorrect: He asked "when I would be there."

Rule 2. Either quotation marks or italics are customary for titles: magazines, books, plays, films, songs, poems, article titles, chapter titles, etc.

Rule 3a. Periods and commas always go inside quotation marks.

Examples.

The sign said, "Walk." Then it said, "Don't Walk," then, "Walk," all within thirty seconds.

He yelled, "Hurry up."

Rule 3b. Use single quotation marks for quotations within quotations.

Example. He said, "Dan cried, 'Do not treat me that way.' "

Note that the period goes inside both the single and double quotation marks.

Rule 4. As a courtesy, make sure there is visible space at the start or end of a quotation between adjacent single and double quotation marks. (Your word processing program may do this automatically.)

Not ample space. He said, "Dan cried, 'Do not treat me that way.' "

Ample space. He said, "Dan cried, 'Do not treat me that way.' "

Rule 5a. Quotation marks are often used with technical terms, terms used in an unusual way, or other expressions that vary from standard usage.

Examples.

It's an oil-extraction method known as "fracking."

He did some "experimenting" in his college days.

I had a visit from my "friend" the tax man.



Rule 5b. Never use single quotation marks in sentences like the previous three.

Incorrect. I had a visit from my 'friend' the tax man.

The single quotation marks in the above sentence are intended to send a message to the reader that friend is being used in a special way: in this case, sarcastically. Avoid this invalid usage. Single quotation marks are valid only within a quotation, as per Rule 3b, above.

Rule 6. When quoted material runs more than one paragraph, start each new paragraph with opening quotation marks, but do not use closing quotation marks until the end of the passage.

Example. She wrote: "I don't paint anymore. For a while I thought it was just a phase that I'd get over.

"Now, I don't even try."

PARENTHESES AND BRACKETS

Parentheses and **brackets** must never be used interchangeably.

Parentheses

Rule 1. Use parentheses to enclose information that clarifies or is used as an aside.

Example. *He finally answered (after taking five minutes to think) that he did not understand the question.*

If material in parentheses ends a sentence, the period goes after the parentheses.

Example. *He gave me a nice bonus (\$500).*

Commas could have been used in the first example; a colon could have been used in the second example. The use of parentheses indicates that the writer considered the information less important—almost an afterthought.

Rule 2. Periods go inside parentheses only if an entire sentence is inside the parentheses.

Example. *Please read the analysis. (You'll be amazed.)*

This is a rule with a lot of wiggle room. An entire sentence in parentheses is often acceptable without an enclosed period.

Example. *Please read the analysis (you'll be amazed).*

Rule 3. Parentheses, despite appearances, are not part of the subject.

Example. *Joe (and his trusty mutt) was always welcome.*

If this seems awkward, try rewriting the sentence.

Example. Joe (accompanied by his trusty mutt) **was** always welcome.

Rule 4. Commas are more likely to follow parentheses than precede them.

Incorrect. When he got home, (it was already dark outside) he fixed dinner.

Correct. When he got home (it was already dark outside), he fixed dinner.

Brackets

Brackets are far less common than parentheses, and they are only used in special cases. Brackets (like single quotation marks) are used exclusively within quoted material.

Rule 1. Brackets are interruptions. When we see them, we know they've been added by someone else. They are used to explain or comment on the quotation.

Examples.

"Four score and seven [today we'd say eighty-seven] years ago..."

"Bill shook hands with [his son] Al."

Rule 2. When quoting something that has a spelling or grammar mistake or presents material in a confusing way, insert the term *sic* in italics and enclose it in nonitalic (unless the surrounding text is italic) brackets.

Sic ("thus" in Latin) is shorthand for, "This is exactly what the original material says."

Example. She wrote, "I would rather die then [sic] be seen wearing the same outfit as my sister."

The [sic] indicates that *then* was mistakenly used instead of *than*.

Rule 3. In formal writing, brackets are often used to maintain the integrity of both a quotation and the sentences others use it in.

Example. "[T]he better angels of our nature" gave a powerful ending to Lincoln's first inaugural address.

Lincoln's memorable phrase came midsentence, so the word *the* was not originally capitalized.

APOSTROPHES



Rule 1a. Use the **apostrophe** to show possession. To show possession with a singular noun, add an apostrophe plus the letter s.

Examples.

a woman's hat

the boss's wife

Mrs. Chang's house

Rule 1b. Many common nouns end in the letter s (lens, cactus, bus, etc.). So do a lot of proper nouns (Mr. Jones, Texas, Christmas). There are conflicting policies and theories about how to show possession when writing such nouns. There is no right answer; the best advice is to choose a formula and stay consistent.

Rule 1c. Some writers and editors add only an apostrophe to all nouns ending in s. And some add an apostrophe + s to every proper noun, be it Hastings's or Jones's.

One method, common in newspapers and magazines, is to add an apostrophe + s ('s) to common nouns ending in s, but only a stand-alone apostrophe to proper nouns ending in s.

Examples.

the class's hours

Mr. Jones' golf clubs

the canvas's size

Texas' weather

Care must be taken to place the apostrophe outside the word in question. For instance, if talking about a pen belonging to Mr. Hastings, many people would wrongly write Mr. Hasting's pen (his name is not Mr. Hasting).

Correct: Mr. Hastings' pen

Another widely used technique is to write the word as we would speak it. For example, since most people saying, "Mr. Hastings' pen" would not pronounce an added s, we would write Mr. Hastings' pen with no added s. But most people would pronounce an added s in "Jones's," so we'd write it as we say it: Mr. Jones's golf clubs. This method explains the punctuation of for goodness' sake.

Rule 2a. Regular nouns are nouns that form their plurals by adding either the letter s or -es (guy, guys; letter, letters; actress, actresses; etc.). To show plural possession, simply put an apostrophe after the s.

Correct: guys' night out (guy + s + apostrophe)

Incorrect: guy's night out (implies only one guy)

Correct: two actresses' roles (actress + es + apostrophe)

Incorrect: two actress's roles

Rule 2b. Do not use an apostrophe + s to make a regular noun plural.

Incorrect: Apostrophe's are confusing.

Correct: Apostrophes are confusing.

Incorrect: We've had many happy Christmas's.

Correct: We've had many happy Christmases.

In special cases, such as when forming a plural of a word that is not normally a noun, some writers add an apostrophe for clarity.

Example: Here are some do's and don'ts.

In that sentence, the verb do is used as a plural noun, and the apostrophe was added because the writer felt that dos was confusing. Not all writers agree; some see no problem with dos and don'ts.

Rule 2c. English also has many **irregular nouns** (child, nucleus, tooth, etc.). These nouns become plural by changing their spelling, sometimes becoming quite different words. You may find it helpful to write out the entire irregular plural noun before adding an apostrophe or an apostrophe + s.

Incorrect: two childrens' hats

The plural is children, not childrens.

Correct: two children's hats (children + apostrophe + s)

Incorrect: the teetths' roots

Correct: the teeth's roots

Rule 2d. Things can get really confusing with the possessive plurals of proper names ending in s, such as Hastings and Jones.

If you're the guest of the Ford family—the Fords—you're the Fords' guest (Ford + s + apostrophe). But what if it's the Hastings family?

Most would call them the "Hastings." But that would refer to a family named "Hasting." If someone's name ends in s, we must add -es for the plural. The plural of Hastings is Hastingses. The members of the Jones family are the Joneses.

To show possession, add an apostrophe.

Incorrect: the Hastings' dog

Correct: the Hastingses' dog (Hastings + es + apostrophe)

Incorrect: the Jones' car

Correct: the Joneses' car

In serious writing, this rule must be followed no matter how strange or awkward the results.

Rule 2e. Never use an apostrophe to make a name plural.

Incorrect: The Wilson's are here.

Correct: The Wilsons are here.

Incorrect: We visited the Sanchez's.

Correct: We visited the Sanchezes.

Rule 3. With a singular compound noun (for example, mother-in-law), show possession with an apostrophe + s at the end of the word.

Example. my mother-in-law's hat

If the compound noun (e.g., brother-in-law) is to be made plural, form the plural first (brothers-in-law), and then use the apostrophe + s.

Example. my two brothers-in-law's hats

Rule 4. If two people possess the same item, put the apostrophe + s after the second name only.

Example. Cesar and Maribel's home is constructed of redwood.

However, if one of the joint owners is written as a pronoun, use the possessive form for both.

Incorrect: Maribel and my home

Correct: Maribel's and my home

Incorrect: he and Maribel's home

Incorrect: him and Maribel's home

Correct: his and Maribel's home

In cases of separate rather than joint possession, use the possessive form for both.

Examples.

Cesar's and Maribel's homes are both lovely.

They don't own the homes jointly.

Cesar and Maribel's homes are both lovely.

The homes belong to both of them.

Rule 5. Use an apostrophe with **contractions**. The apostrophe is placed where a letter or letters have been removed.

Examples. doesn't, wouldn't, it's, can't, you've, etc.

Incorrect: does'nt

Rule 6. There are various approaches to plurals for initials, capital letters, and numbers used as nouns.

Examples.

She consulted with three M.D.s.

She consulted with three M.D.'s.

Some write M.D.'s to give the s separation from the second period.

Many writers and editors prefer an apostrophe after single capital letters only.

Examples:

I made straight A's.

He learned his ABCs.

There are different schools of thought about years and decades. The following examples are all in widespread use:

Examples:

the 1990s

the 1990's

the '90s

the 90's

Awkward: the '90's



Rule 7. Amounts of time or money are sometimes used as possessive adjectives that require apostrophes.

Incorrect: three days leave

Correct: three days' leave

Incorrect: my two cents worth

Correct: my two cents' worth

Rule 8. The personal pronouns hers, ours, yours, theirs, its, whose, and oneself never take an apostrophe.

Example: Feed a horse grain. It's better for its health.

Rule 9. When an apostrophe comes before a word or number, take care that it's truly an apostrophe (') rather than a single quotation mark (').

Incorrect: 'Twas the night before Christmas.

Correct: 'Twas the night before Christmas.

Incorrect: I voted in '08.

Correct: I voted in '08.

NOTE

Serious writers avoid the word 'til as an alternative to until. The correct word is till, which is many centuries older than until.

Rule 10. Beware of **false possessives**, which often occur with nouns ending in s. Don't add apostrophes to noun-derived adjectives ending in s. Close analysis is the best guide.

Incorrect: We enjoyed the New Orleans' cuisine.

In the preceding sentence, the word the makes no sense unless New Orleans is being used as an adjective to describe cuisine. In English, nouns frequently become adjectives. Adjectives rarely if ever take apostrophes.

Incorrect: I like that Beatles' song.

Correct: I like that Beatles song.

Again, Beatles is an adjective, modifying song.

Incorrect: He's a United States' citizen.

Correct: He's a United States citizen.

Rule 11. Beware of nouns ending in y; do not show possession by changing the y to -ies.

Correct: the company's policy

Incorrect: the companies policy

Correct: three companies' policies

HYPHENS

There are two commandments about this misunderstood punctuation mark. First, **hyphens** must never be used interchangeably with dashes (see the "Dashes" section), which are noticeably longer. Second, there should never be spaces around hyphens.

Incorrect: 300—325 people

Incorrect: 300 - 325 people

Correct: 300-325 people

Hyphens' main purpose is to glue words together. They notify the reader that two or more elements in a sentence are linked. Although there are rules and customs governing hyphens, there are also situations when writers must decide whether to add them for clarity.

Hyphens Between Words

Rule 1. Generally, hyphenate two or more words when they come before a noun they modify and act as a single idea. This is called a **compound adjective**.

Examples:

an off-campus apartment

state-of-the-art design



When a compound adjective follows a noun, a hyphen may or may not be necessary.

Example: *The apartment is off campus.*

However, some established compound adjectives are always hyphenated. Double-check with a dictionary or online.

Example: *The design is state-of-the-art.*

Rule 2a. A hyphen is frequently required when forming original compound verbs for vivid writing, humor, or special situations.

Examples:

The slacker video-gamed his way through life.

Queen Victoria throne-sat for six decades.

Rule 2b. When writing out new, original, or unusual compound nouns, writers should hyphenate whenever doing so avoids confusion.

Examples:

I changed my diet and became a no-meater.

No-meater is too confusing without the hyphen.

The slacker was a video gamer.

Video gamer is clear without a hyphen, although some writers might prefer to hyphenate it.

Writers using familiar compound verbs and nouns should consult a dictionary or look online to decide if these verbs and nouns should be hyphenated.

Rule 3. An often overlooked rule for hyphens: The adverb *very* and adverbs ending in *-ly* are not hyphenated.

Incorrect: *the very-elegant watch*

Incorrect: *the finely-tuned watch*

This rule applies only to adverbs. The following two sentences are correct because the *-ly* words are adjectives rather than adverbs.

Correct: *the friendly-looking dog*

Correct: *a family-owned cafe*

Rule 4. Hyphens are often used to tell the ages of people and things. A handy rule, whether writing about years, months, or any other period of time, is to use hyphens unless the period of time (years, months, weeks, days) is written in plural form.

With hyphens:

We have a two-year-old child.

We have a two-year-old.



No hyphens. *The child is two years old.* (Because *years* is plural.)

Exception. *The child is one year old.* (Or *day, week, month, etc.*)

Note that when hyphens are involved in expressing ages, two hyphens are required. Many writers forget the second hyphen:

Incorrect. *We have a two-year old child.*

Without the second hyphen, the sentence is about an "old child."

Rule 5. Never hesitate to add a hyphen if it solves a possible problem. Following are two examples of well-advised hyphens:

Confusing. *I have a few more important things to do.*

With hyphen. *I have a few more-important things to do.*

Without the hyphen, it's impossible to tell whether the sentence is about a *few things* that are *more important* or a few more things that are all equally important.

Confusing. *He returned the stolen vehicle report.*

With hyphen. *He returned the stolen-vehicle report.*

With no hyphen, we could only guess: Was the *vehicle report* stolen, or was it a report on *stolen vehicles*?

Rule 6. When using numbers, hyphenate spans or estimates of time, distance, or other quantities. Remember not to use spaces around hyphens.

Examples.

3:15-3:45 p.m.

1999-2016

300-325 people

Rule 7. Hyphenate all compound numbers from *twenty-one* through *ninety-nine*.

Examples.

thirty-two children

one thousand two hundred twenty-one dollars

Rule 8. Hyphenate all spelled-out fractions.

Example. *more than two-thirds of registered voters*

Rule 9. Hyphenate most double last names.

Example. *Sir Winthrop Heinz-Eakins will attend.*

Rule 10. As important as hyphens are to clear writing, they can become an annoyance if overused. Avoid adding hyphens when the meaning is clear. Many phrases are so familiar (e.g., *high school*, *twentieth century*, *one hundred percent*) that they can go before a noun without risk of confusing the reader.

Examples.

a high school senior

a twentieth century throwback

one hundred percent correct



Rule 11. When in doubt, look it up. Some familiar phrases may require hyphens. For instance, is a book *up to date* or *up-to-date*? Don't guess; have a dictionary close by, or look it up online.

Hyphens with Prefixes and Suffixes

A **prefix** (*a-*, *un-*, *de-*, *ab-*, *sub-*, *post-*, *anti-*, etc.) is a letter or set of letters placed before a **rootword**. The word *prefix* itself contains the prefix *pre-*. Prefixes expand or change a word's meaning, sometimes radically: the prefixes *a-*, *un-*, and *dis-*, for example, change words into their opposites (e.g., *political*, **a***political*; *friendly*, **un***friendly*; *honor*, **dis***honor*).

Rule 1. Hyphenate prefixes when they come before proper nouns or proper adjectives.

Examples.

trans-American

mid-July

Rule 2. For clarity, many writers hyphenate prefixes ending in a vowel when the root word begins with the same letter.

Example.

ultra-ambitious

semi-invalid

re-elect



Rule 3. Hyphenate all words beginning with the prefixes *self-*, *ex-* (i.e., *former*), and *all-*.

Examples.

self-assured

ex-mayor

all-knowing

Rule 4. Use a hyphen with the prefix *re-* when omitting the hyphen would cause confusion with another word.

Examples.

Will she recover from her illness?

I have re-covered the sofa twice.

Omitting the hyphen would cause confusion with *recover*:

I must re-press the shirt.

Omitting the hyphen would cause confusion with *repress*.

The stamps have been reissued.

A hyphen after *re-* is not needed because there is no confusion with another word.

Rule 5. Writers often hyphenate prefixes when they feel a word might be distracting or confusing without the hyphen.

Examples.

de-ice

With no hyphen we get *deice*, which might stump readers.

co-worker

With no hyphen we get *coworker*, which could be distracting because it starts with *cow*.

A **suffix** (*-y*, *-er*, *-ism*, *-able*, etc.) is a letter or set of letters that follows a root word. Suffixes form new words or alter the original word to perform a different task. For example, the noun *scandal* can be made into the adjective *scandalous* by adding the suffix *-ous*. It becomes the verb *scandalize* by adding the suffix *-ize*.

Rule 1. Suffixes are not usually hyphenated. Some exceptions: *-style*, *-elect*, *-free*, *-based*.

Examples.

Modernist-style paintings

Mayor-elect Smith

sugar-free soda

oil-based sludge



Rule 2. For clarity, writers often hyphenate when the last letter in the root word is the same as the first letter in the suffix.

Examples.

graffiti-ism

wiretap-proof

Rule 3. Use discretion—and sometimes a dictionary—before deciding to place a hyphen before a suffix. But do not hesitate to hyphenate a rare usage if it avoids confusion.

Examples.

the annual dance-athon

an eel-esque sea creature

Although the preceding hyphens help clarify unusual terms, they are optional and might not be every writer's choice. Still, many readers would scratch their heads for a moment over *danceathon* and *eelesque*.

DASHES

Dashes, like commas, semicolons, colons, ellipses, and parentheses, indicate added emphasis, an interruption, or an abrupt change of thought. Experienced writers know that these marks are not interchangeable. Note how dashes subtly change the tone of the following sentences:

Examples.

You are the friend, the only friend, who offered to help me.

You are the friend—the only friend—who offered to help me.

I pay the bills; she has all the fun.

I pay the bills—she has all the fun.

I wish you would...oh, never mind.

I wish you would—oh, never mind.

Rule 1. Words and phrases between dashes are not generally part of the subject.

Example. Joe—and his trusty mutt—**was** always welcome.

Rule 2. Dashes replace otherwise mandatory punctuation, such as the commas after Iowa and 2013 in the following examples:

Without dash. The man from Ames, Iowa, arrived.

With dash. The man—he was from Ames, Iowa—arrived.

Without dash. The May 1, 2013, edition of the Ames Sentinel arrived in June.

With dash. The Ames Sentinel—dated May 1, 2013—arrived in June.

Rule 3. Some writers and publishers prefer spaces around dashes.

Example. Joe — and his trusty mutt — was always welcome.

ELLIPSES

Definition

An **ellipsis** (plural: **ellipses**) is a punctuation mark consisting of three dots.

Use an ellipsis when omitting a word, phrase, line, paragraph, or more from a quoted passage. Ellipses save space or remove material that is less relevant. They are useful in getting right to the point without delay or distraction.

Full quotation. "Today, after hours of careful thought, we vetoed the bill."

With ellipsis. "Today... we vetoed the bill."

Although ellipses are used in many ways, the three-dot method is the simplest. Newspapers, magazines, and books of fiction and nonfiction use various approaches that they find suitable.

Some writers and editors feel that no spaces are necessary.

Example. *I don't know...I'm not sure.*

Others enclose the ellipsis with a space on each side.

Example. *I don't know ... I'm not sure.*

Still others put a space either directly before or directly after the ellipsis.

Examples.

I don't know ...I'm not sure.

I don't know... I'm not sure.

A four-dot method and an even more rigorous method used in legal works require fuller explanations that can be found in other reference books.

Rule 1. Many writers use an ellipsis whether the omission occurs at the beginning of a sentence, in the middle of a sentence, or between sentences.

A common way to delete the beginning of a sentence is to follow the opening quotation mark with an ellipsis, plus a bracketed capital letter:

Example. "...[A]fter hours of careful thought, we vetoed the bill."

Other writers omit the ellipsis in such cases, feeling the bracketed capital letter gets the point across.

For more on brackets, see "Parentheses and Brackets."

Rule 2. Ellipses can express hesitation, changes of mood, suspense, or thoughts trailing off. Writers also use ellipses to indicate a pause or wavering in an otherwise straightforward sentence.

Examples:

I don't know...I'm not sure.

Pride is one thing, but what happens if she...?

He said, "I...really don't...understand this."



Question Marks

Rule 1. Use a question mark only after a direct question.

Correct: Will you go with me?

Incorrect: I'm asking if you will go with me?

Rule 2a. A question mark replaces a period at the end of a sentence.

Incorrect: Will you go with me?.

Rule 2b. Because of Rule 2a, capitalize the word that follows a question mark.

Some writers choose to overlook this rule in special cases.

Example: Will you go with me? with Joe? with anyone?

Rule 3a. Avoid the common trap of using question marks with **indirect questions**, which are statements that contain questions. Use a period after an indirect question.

Incorrect: I wonder if he would go with me?

Correct:

I wonder if he would go with me.

OR

I wonder: Would he go with me?



Rule 3b. Some sentences are statements—or demands—in the form of a question. They are called **rhetorical questions** because they don't require or expect an answer. Many should be written without question marks.

Examples:

Why don't you take a break.

Would you kids knock it off.

What wouldn't I do for you!

Rule 4. Use a question mark when a sentence is half statement and half question.

Example. You do care, don't you?

Rule 5. The placement of question marks with quotation marks follows logic. If a question is within the quoted material, a question mark should be placed inside the quotation marks.

Examples.

She asked, "Will you still be my friend?"

The question is part of the quotation.

Do you agree with the saying, "All's fair in love and war"?

The question is outside the quotation.

EXCLAMATION POINTS

Rule 1. Use an exclamation point to show emotion, emphasis, or surprise.

Examples.

I'm truly shocked by your behavior!

Yay! We won!

Rule 2. An exclamation point replaces a period at the end of a sentence.

Incorrect. I'm truly shocked by your behavior!.

Rule 3. Do not use an exclamation point in formal business writing.

Rule 4. Overuse of exclamation points is a sign of undisciplined writing. Do not use even one of these marks unless you're convinced it is justified.

CAPITALIZATION RULES

Capitalization is the writing of a word with its first letter in uppercase and the remaining letters in lowercase. Experienced writers are stingy with capitals. It is best not to use them if there is any doubt.

Rule 1. Capitalize the first word of a document and the first word after a period.

Rule 2. Capitalize proper nouns—and adjectives derived from proper nouns.

Examples:

the Golden Gate Bridge
 the Grand Canyon
 a Russian song
 a Shakespearean sonnet
 a Freudian slip



With the passage of time, some words originally derived from proper nouns have taken on a life, and authority, of their own and no longer require capitalization.

Examples:

herculean (from the ancient-Greek hero Hercules)
 quixotic (from the hero of the classic novel Don Quixote)
 draconian (from ancient-Athenian lawgiver Draco)

The main function of capitals is to focus attention on particular elements within any group of people, places, or things. We can speak of a lake in the middle of the country, or we can be more specific and say Lake Michigan, which distinguishes it from every other lake on earth.

Capitalization Reference List

- Brand names
- Companies
- Days of the week and months of the year
- Governmental matters
 Congress (but congressional), the U.S. Constitution (but constitutional), the Electoral College, Department of Agriculture. **Note:** Many authorities do not capitalize federal or state unless it is part of the official title. State Water Resources Control Board, but state water board; Federal Communications Commission, but federal regulations.
- Historical episodes and eras
 the Inquisition, the American Revolutionary War, the Great Depression
- Holidays
- Institutions
 Oxford College, the Juilliard School of Music
- Manmade structures
 the Empire State Building, the Eiffel Tower, the Titanic
- Manmade territories
 Berlin, Montana, Cook County
- Natural and manmade landmarks



Mount Everest, the Hoover Dam

- Nicknames and epithets

Andrew "Old Hickory" Jackson; Babe Ruth, the Sultan of Swat

- Organizations

American Center for Law and Justice, Norwegian Ministry of the Environment

- Planets

Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus, Neptune, but policies vary on capitalizing earth, and it is usually not capitalized unless it is being discussed specifically as a planet. We learned that Earth travels through space at 66,700 miles per hour.

- Races, nationalities, and tribes

Eskimo, Navajo, East Indian, Caucasian, African American (**Note:** white and black in reference to race are lowercase)

- Religions and names of deities

Note: Capitalize the Bible (but biblical). Do not capitalize heaven, hell, the devil, satanic.

- Special occasions

the Olympic Games, the Cannes Film Festival

- Streets and roads

Lowercase Reference List

Here is a list of categories not capitalized unless an item contains a proper noun or proper adjective (or, sometimes, a trademark). In such cases, only the proper noun or adjective is capitalized.

- Animals

antelope, black bear, Bengal tiger, yellow-bellied sapsucker, German shepherd

- Elements

Always lowercase, even when the name is derived from a proper noun: einsteinium, nobelium, californium

- Foods

Lowercase except for brand names, proper nouns and adjectives, or custom-named recipes: Tabasco sauce, Russian dressing, pepper crusted bluefin tuna, Mandy's Bluefin Surprise

- Heavenly bodies besides planets

Never capitalize the moon or the sun.

- Medical conditions

Epstein-Barr syndrome, tuberculosis, Parkinson's disease

- Minerals



- Plants, vegetables, and fruits
poinsettia, Douglas fir, Jerusalem artichoke, organic celery, Golden Delicious apples
- Seasons and seasonal data
spring, summertime, the winter solstice, the autumnal equinox, daylight saving time

Rule 3. A thorny aspect of capitalization: where does it stop? When does the Iraq war become the Iraq War? Why is the legendary Hope Diamond not the Hope diamond? Everyone writes New York City, so why does the Associated Press Stylebook recommend New York state? There aren't always easy formulas or logical explanations. Research with reference books and search engines is the best strategy.

In the case of brand names, companies are of little help, because they capitalize any word that applies to their merchandise. Domino's Pizza or Domino's pizza? Is it Ivory Soap or Ivory soap, a Hilton Hotel or a Hilton hotel? Most writers don't capitalize common nouns that simply describe the products (pizza, soap, hotel), but it's not always easy to determine where a brand name ends. There is Time magazine but also the New York Times Magazine. No one would argue with Coca-Cola or Pepsi Cola, but a case could be made for Royal Crown cola.

If a trademark starts with a lowercase word or letter (e.g., eBay, iPhone), many authorities advise capitalizing it to begin a sentence.

Example. eBay opened strong in trading today.

Rule 4. Capitalize titles when they are used before names, unless the title is followed by a comma. Do not capitalize the title if it is used after a name or instead of a name.

Examples.

The president will address Congress.

Chairman of the Board William Bly will preside at the conference.

The chairman of the board, William Bly, will preside.

The senators from Iowa and Ohio are expected to attend.

Also expected to attend are Senators Buzz James and Eddie Twain.

The governors, lieutenant governors, and attorneys general called for a special task force.

Governor Fortinbrass, Lieutenant Governor Poppins, and Attorney General Dalloway will attend.

NOTE

Out of respect, some writers and publishers choose to capitalize the highest ranks in government, royalty, religion, etc.

Examples.

The President arrived.

The Queen spoke.

The Pope decreed.

Many American writers believe this to be a wrongheaded policy in a country where, theoretically, all humans are perceived as equal.

Rule 5. Titles are not the same as occupations. Do not capitalize occupations before full names.

Examples.

director Steven Spielberg

owner Helen Smith

coach Biff Sykes

Sometimes the line between title and occupation gets blurred. One example is general manager: is it a title or an occupation? Opinions differ. Same with professor: the Associated Press Stylebook considers professor a job description rather than a title, and recommends using lowercase even before the full name: professor Robert Ames.

Rule 6a. Capitalize a formal title when it is used as a direct address.

Example. Will you take my temperature, Doctor?

Rule 6b. Capitalize relatives' family names (kinship names) when they immediately precede a personal name, or when they are used alone in place of a personal name.

Examples.

I found out that Mom is here.

You look good, Grandpa.

Andy and Opie loved Aunt Bee's apple pies.

However, these monikers are not capitalized with possessive nouns or pronouns, when they follow the personal name, or when they are not referencing a specific person.

Examples.

My mom is here.

Joe's grandpa looks well.

The James brothers were notorious robbers.

There's not one mother I know who would allow that.

Rule 6c. Capitalize nicknames in all cases.



Examples.

Meet my brothers, Junior and Scooter.

I just met two guys named Junior and Scooter.

Rule 7. Capitalize specific geographical regions. Do not capitalize points of the compass.

Examples.

We had three relatives visit from the West.

Go west three blocks and then turn left.

We left Florida and drove north.

We live in the Southeast.

We live in the southeast section of town.

Most of the West Coast is rainy this time of year. (referring to the United States)

The west coast of Scotland is rainy this time of year.

Some areas have come to be capitalized for their fame or notoriety:

Examples.

I'm from New York's Upper West Side.

I'm from the South Side of Chicago.

You live in Northern California; he lives in Southern California.

Rule 8. In general, do not capitalize the word the before proper nouns.

Examples.

I'm reading the London Times.

They're fans of the Grateful Dead.

In special cases, if the word the is an inseparable part of something's official title, it may be capitalized.

Example. We visited The Hague.

Rule 9. Do not capitalize city, town, county, etc., if it comes before the proper name.

Examples.

the city of New York

New York City

the county of Marin

Marin County

Rule 10. Always capitalize the first word in a complete quotation, even midsentence.

Example. Bill said, "That job we started last April is done."



Rule 11. For emphasis, writers sometimes capitalize a midsentence independent clause or question.

Examples:

One of her cardinal rules was, Never betray a friend.

It made me wonder, What is mankind's destiny?



Rule 12. Capitalize the names of specific course titles, but not general academic subjects.

Examples:

I must take history and Algebra 101.

He has a double major in European economics and philosophy.

Rule 13. Capitalize art movements.

Example. I like Surrealism, but I never understood Abstract Expressionism.

Rule 14. Do not capitalize the first item in a list that follows a colon.

Example. Bring the following: paper, a pencil, and a snack.

For more on capitalization after a colon, go to "Colons," Rules 1, 3, and 4.

Rule 15. Do not capitalize "the national anthem."

Rule 16a. Composition titles: which words should be capitalized in titles of books, plays, films, songs, poems, essays, chapters, etc.? This is a vexing matter, and policies vary. The usual advice is to capitalize only the "important" words. But this isn't really very helpful. Aren't all words in a title important?

The following rules for capitalizing composition titles are universal.

- Capitalize the title's first and last word.
- Capitalize verbs, including all forms of the verb to be (is, are, was, etc.).
- Capitalize all pronouns, including it, he, who, that, etc.
- Capitalize not.
- Do not capitalize a, an, or the unless it is first or last in the title.
- Do not capitalize the word and, or, or nor unless it is first or last in the title.

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