

## WRITING CENTER

### Punctuation Marks and their Common Uses

#### Period ( . )

To indicate the end of a declarative sentence

*Example:* Here is the place.

To indicate that letters are used as abbreviations

*Example:* Dr. Carle D. Reynolds

To indicate decimal fractions

*Example:* 16.34

#### Three Periods--Ellipses (...)

To indicate that a portion of quoted matter is omitted

*Example:* "To receive, obey, and pass on..."

#### Comma ( , )

To separate independent clauses joined by a conjunction

*Example:* This is the street, but I don't know the number of the house.

**Note: no comma is used unless each statement is independent.**

*Example:* You will police the area and maintain a fire watch.

To separate parts of a series

*Example:* Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday

To separate coordinate or "equal" adjectives in a series

*Example:* a loud, sharp blast

**Note:** Unless the adjectives modify the same noun in the same way, they are not in series and no comma is used. To test, check if the adjectives can be reversed. If not, no comma.

*Example:* heavy woolen clothing

To separate introductory statements beginning with such words as when, while, since, if, because, until, although, and whenever (or other subordinate conjunctions)

*Example:* When the rain was falling, there was very little wind.

To set off introductory prepositional phrases (starting with on, in, at, to, by, for, of, through, etc.)

*Example:* By the time she crawled into bed, she was too exhausted to sleep.

**Note:** Short prepositional phrases (3 words or less) are not always followed by commas.

*Example:* In Japan he served as platoon commander.

To separate non-essential elements from the rest of the sentence. A non-essential element is a word or group of words that gives additional identifying information about someone or something already identified; it's non-essential because the sentence is still clear without it.

*Examples:* The President, who is the Commander-in-Chief of the armed forces, rates a salute.

I visited Albany, the capital of the state of New York.

**Note:** Commas are NOT placed around essential elements—those that limit meaning or give identifying information about someone or something not already identified.

*Example:* The procedure that you are required to follow is explained in TM 5-250.

To set off introductory phrases beginning with verb participles ending in -ing, -ed, -en, etc.

*Example:* Having turned off the lathe, I stopped the motor.

To set off such expressions as you, no, well, on the other hand, you might say, and of course, (such expressions are called interrupters)

*Example:* He was, of course, the first person I saw.

To set off such expressions as *he said* from direct quotations

*Example:* "That decision," he explained, "must be your own."

**Note:** No comma is used to separate such expressions from the rest of the sentence if the sentence is an indirect quotation (often introduced with the word *that*).

*Example:* He explained that the decision must be my own.

To separate contrasting elements

*Example:* The wall is gray, not blue.

To prevent misreading

*Example:* Undressing, the child ran into the bathroom.

To set off the name of a person addressed

*Example:* Frank, may I borrow your skill saw?

## Semicolon ( ; )

To separate independent statements that are not joined by a coordinating conjunction (and, but, or, nor, for, yet, so)

*Example:* Black is a mixture of all colors; white is the complete opposite.

**Note:** If the independent statements are short, a comma may be used.

*Example:* Horses sweat, men perspire.

To separate independent statements when the second statement begins with such conjunctive adverbs or phrases like therefore, however, thus, otherwise, on the other hand, for example, in fact, that is, etc.

*Example:* I submitted a request six months in advance; still, I did not receive a permit in time for the departure.

To separate independent statements joined by conjunctions if such statements are long or they contain internal punctuation

*Example:* Classic science fiction sagas include *Star Trek*, with Mr. Spock and his large pointed ears; *Battlestar Galactica*, with its Cylon Raiders; and *Star Wars*, with Han Solo, Luke Skywalker, and Darth Vader.

## Apostrophe ( ' )

To show possession (if the word does not end in s, add an apostrophe and an s.)

*Example:* The doctor's advice, the housewife's choice, man's clothing, Martin's house

**Note:** If the word is singular and ends in s or an s sound, use apostrophe and an s

*Example:* Mr. Schultz's car

**unless** pronunciation is awkward:

*Example:* Miss Simmons' coat

To indicate the omission of letters in contractions

*Examples:* can't, won't, doesn't, haven't, it's

To form the plural of letters, words, and symbols that do not have logical plurals

*Example:* three 2's, too many &'s, and seven c's

## Dash ( — )

To indicate a sudden, abrupt break of an unfinished word or sentence

*Example:* "She will take charge of this post and – Wait a minute. Who are you?"

To set off a summary of a preceding series

*Example:* Food, clothing, shelter, and a sense of humor – those are the things a man needs to survive.

## Hyphen ( - )

To join two or more words serving as a single adjective before a noun

*Example:* a one-way street, chocolate-covered peanuts

Use a hyphen with compound numbers

*Example:* forty-six, sixty-three

Our much-loved teacher was sixty-three years old.

To avoid confusion or an awkward combination of letters

*Example:* re-sign a petition (vs. resign from a job)  
semi-independent (but semiconscious)  
shell-like (but childlike)

Use a hyphen with the prefixes *ex-* (meaning *former*), *self-*, *all-*; with the suffix *-elect*; between a prefix and a capitalized word; and with figures or letters

*Example:* ex-husband, self-assured

To divide words at the end of a line if necessary, or show a break between syllables

*Example:* pre-fer-ence, sell-ing

## Quotation Marks (“ ” and ‘ ’)

To set off quoted matter (including punctuation marks, usually. See a handbook for details.)

*Example:* “I saw it,” he replied.

**Note:** Indirect quotes are not set off by quotations.

*Example:* He said that the decision must be my own.

To indicate a quotation within a quotation (single quotation marks)

*Example:* I replied, “When I asked him if he had ever heard of the American Revolution, he said, ‘I saw it.’”

To enclose titles of short stories, poems, magazine articles, portions of books, and individual television show episodes

*Example:* Good diagrams can be found in the chapter entitled “Engine Constructions” in Dean Austin’s book *Automotive Mechanics*.

## Italics

To indicate the titles of books, plays, magazines, long musical compositions, works of art, movies, and television show series

*Example:* I highly recommend *The Technique of Clear Writing*, by Robert Gunning.

To indicate use of foreign words

*Example:* And there I was, *en dishabille*.

To indicate that the writer is referring to a word rather than to the sense that it conveys

*Examples:* He mistook *was* for *saw*.

Can you spell *precede*?

**(Note: Letters, figures, and symbols, when used as such, are also italicized.)**

*Examples:* The *m* looks like a *w*.

Type *&* rather than *and*.

## Parentheses ( )

To set off digressions or elements which provide extra information

*Example:* The progress report (Form #78) is submitted each week.

I told him (Travers) exactly what to do.

To enclose numbers and letters enumerating parts

*Example:* The principal parts are (1) the present tense, (2) the past tense, and (3) the past participle.

## Brackets [ ]

To set off material inserted in a direct quotation

*Example:* Audubon reports that “if there are not enough young to balance deaths, the end of the species [California condor] is inevitable.”

## Colon ( : )

Used after an independent clause (complete sentence) to direct attention to a list, an appositive, or a quotation

*Example:* He laid down three rules: no smoking, no idle talk, and no sleeping.

*Example:* A rainbow consists of the following colors: red, orange, yellow, green, blue, and violet.

*Example:* The speaker quoted a popular saying: “We grow too soon old and too late smart.”

To separate two independent clauses (complete sentences) when the second one summarizes or explains the first

*Example:* Faith is like love: it cannot be forced.

## Slash ( / )

To indicate the end of a line of poetry

*Example:* Here with a Loaf of Bread beneath the Bough, / A Flash of wine, a Book of verse – and Thou

To set off phonemic transcriptions

*Example:* In French the /e/ is pronounced as /A/.

To separate paired terms (use sparingly)

*Example:* pass/fail

producer/director