

# ESSENTIAL PUNCTUATION

For explanations of further punctuation marks, go to:  
<https://www.englishclub.com/writing/punctuation.htm>

## THE FULL STOP

1. Use a full stop at the end of a sentence:

- The man arrived. He sat down.

2. Use full stops with abbreviations (in an abbreviation the last letter of the word and of the abbreviation are not the same):

- Co. (Company)
- etc. (et cetera)
- M.P. (Member of Parliament)

3. Do not use full stops with contractions (in a contraction the last letter of the word and of the contraction are the same):

- Ltd (Limited)
- Dr (Doctor)
- St (Saint)

## THE COMMA

A comma in writing is like a pause inside a sentence when speaking. We use commas **inside** sentences. Commas separate parts of a sentence into logical elements. Commas have no meaning, but they help us to see the structure and therefore the meaning of the sentence.

Put a space **after** a comma. Do not put a space before a comma.

XXX, XXX	correct
<del>XXX</del> , <del>XXX</del>	incorrect
<del>XXX</del> , <del>XXX</del>	

1. Use a comma between items in a series or **list**. In a sentence, the last two items usually do not need a comma between them as they are separated by "and". However, if one or both of the last two items are long, a comma may be useful.

- **coffee, tea, sugar, milk, eggs, butter, salt**
- My favourite sports are **football, rugby, swimming, boxing** and **golf**.
- Hunsu was wearing **blue jeans, black shoes, his brand new white shirt**, and a **brown and green cap**.

2. Use a comma between three or more **adjectives** or **adverbs**.

- I like the **old, brown, wooden** table.
- He bought an **old, red, open-top** Volkswagen.
- He ran **quickly, quietly** and **effortlessly**.

3. For **two adjectives**, use a comma where you could use "and".

- It was a **short, simple** film. (It was a short and simple film.)
- I have a big black dog. (~~I have a big and black dog.~~)

4. Use a comma for **numbers** over 999. (In English, commas separate thousands and periods separate decimals. Note that some languages use the opposite [system](#).)

- 1,000 (one thousand)
- 1,569
- \$73,050.75
- 2,000,000
- 3,400,500
- 10.5 (ten point five *or* ten and a half) - note the use of the [period](#), not comma

5. Use a comma for **addresses**, some **dates**, and **titles** following a name.

- 911 Avenue Mansion, Petchburi Road, Bangkok, 10400, Thailand
- Los Angeles, California
- November 4, 1948 (but 4 November 1948)
- Fred Ling, Professor of English

6. Use a comma before or after **direct speech**. Do not use a comma for reported speech.

- He said, "**I love you**."
- "**I love you**," he said.
- He told her that he loved her.

7. Use a comma before a **coordinating conjunction** (for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so) to join two independent clauses. If the independent clauses are short and well-balanced, a comma is optional.

- He didn't want to go, **but** he went anyway.
- I want to work as an interpreter, **so** I am studying Russian at university.
- She is kind so she helps people.

8. Use commas for **parenthetical elements**. A "parenthetical element" is any part of a sentence that can be removed without changing the real meaning of the sentence.

- John Geton, **who is chairman of the company**, is quite old.
- Andrew, **my wife's brother**, cannot come.
- Andrew (my wife's brother) cannot come.
- The objective, **to find peace in both countries**, is hard to reach.

9. Use a comma after an **introductory element**. A comma is optional for short, simple introductory elements.

- **Rushing to catch the flight**, he forgot to take his phone.
- **As the year came to an end**, he realised the days were getting shorter.
- By evening we were getting worried.
- **After a hefty meal cooked by his host's wife**, he went to sleep.
- After a snack he went to sleep.

10. **Sentence adverbs** (words like *however*, *unfortunately*, *surprisingly* that modify a whole sentence) often require one or two commas, depending on their position in the sentence.

- **However**, Anthony did arrive.
- Anthony, **however**, did arrive.
- We were, **unfortunately**, too late.
- He had, **not surprisingly**, lost his temper.

11. An **adverbial clause** often needs a comma when it comes at the beginning of a sentence (but not at the end of a sentence).

- **If I win the lottery**, I will buy a castle.
- I will buy a castle **if I win the lottery**.

12. Do not use a comma to separate two complete sentences. In this case, use a full stop (period) or semi-colon.

- Ram wants to go out. Anthony wants to stay home.
- ~~Ram wants to go out, Anthony wants to stay home.~~

Tara, Ram and Anthony enjoyed their holiday, which they spent in Rio Claro, Trinidad, from December 17, 2010 to January 6, 2011. Unfortunately, although the weather was good, if rather hot, it rained a lot during their last week. Ravi, Tara's uncle, said, "When I was young we had very little rain, but now we have a lot of rain." Ravi, a wealthy, good-looking man, lives in the north of the island.

## THE SEMI COLON

1. We sometimes use a semi-colon instead of a full stop or period. This is to separate sentences that are grammatically independent but that have closely connected meaning.

- Josef likes coffee; Mary likes tea.
- Tara is a good speaker; she speaks very clearly.
- You did your best; now let's hope you pass the exam.
- Ram wants to go out; Anthony wants to stay home.

Note that in the above examples it is **not** correct to use a comma instead of the semi-colon.

2. Use a semi-colon as a kind of "super comma". When we have a list of items, we usually separate the items with commas. If the list is complicated, we may prefer to use semi-colons in some cases.

- ABC Investments has offices in five locations: Kensington, London; Brighton & Hove; and Oxford, Cambridge and Manchester.
- Rental cars must be returned on time; with a full tank of petrol; in undamaged condition; and at the same location as they were collected from.

## THE COLON

The job of the colon is simple: to introduce.

1. Use a colon to introduce a **list**:

- There are three countries in North America: Mexico, the USA and Canada.
- We can see many things in the sky at night: the moon, stars, planets, comets, planes and even satellites.

2. Actually, you can use a colon to introduce a **single item**, especially when you want to emphasize that item:

- We were all waiting for the hero of the evening: John.
- There is one thing that he will not accept: stupidity.
- The job of the colon is simple: to introduce.

3. Use a colon to introduce **direct speech** or a **quotation**:

- He stood up and said loudly: "Ladies and Gentlemen, please be seated."
- John whispered in my ear: "Have you seen Andrea?"

- As Confucius once wrote: "When words lose their meaning, people lose their freedom."

4. Use a colon to introduce an **explanation**:

- We had to cancel the party: too many people were sick.
- There is no need to rush: the meeting will be starting one hour late.

5. Use a colon to introduce **examples**, as shown above. For example, item 1 above reads "Use a colon to introduce a list" and ends with a colon followed by two example sentences.

## THE APOSTROPHE

1. Use an apostrophe in **possessive** forms:

- the ball of the boy > the boy's ball
- Tara's sister
- my friend's mother
- New York's nightmare scenario
- the moon's phases

2. Use an apostrophe in **contracted** forms (the apostrophe shows that letters have been left out):

- cannot > can't
- they have > they've
- I would (*or* I had) > I'd
- it is (*or* it has) > it's
- who is > who's

Certain words are sometimes written with an apostrophe (to show that they are really a shortened form of the original, longer word):

- influenza > 'flu (*or* flu)
- telephone > 'phone (*or* phone)

Some people use an apostrophe when the first two figures of a year are left out:

- 1948 > '48

3. You can use an apostrophe to show the **plural** of letters and numbers:

- You should dot your i's and cross your t's.
- Do you like music from the 1950's?

You can use an apostrophe to show a plural form for words that are not normally plural:

- Your plan is good, even if there are lots of but's in it.

## QUOTE/SPEECH MARKS

We use quotation marks to show (or mark) the beginning and end of a word or phrase that is somehow special or comes from outside the text that we are writing. Quotation marks can be double ("...") or single ('...') - that is really a matter of style (but see below for more about this).

Quotation marks are also called "quotes" or "inverted commas".

1. Use quotation marks around the title or name of a book, film, ship etc:

- The second most popular book of all time, "Quotations from the Works of Mao Tse-tung", has sold over 800,000,000 copies and was formerly known as "The Red Book".
- 'Titanic' is a 1997 movie directed by James Cameron about the sinking of the ship 'Titanic'.

Note that in the above case, we may use "italics" instead of quotation marks. So the above examples would then appear as:

- The second most popular book of all time, *Quotations from the Works of Mao Tse-tung*, has sold over 800,000,000 copies and was formerly known as *The Red Book*.
- *Titanic* is a 1997 movie directed by James Cameron about the sinking of the ship *Titanic*.

Obviously, the use of italics is not possible in handwriting or with old-style typewriters.

2. We use quotation marks around a piece of text that we are quoting or citing, usually from another source:

- In *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of The English Language*, David Crystal argues that punctuation "plays a critical role in the modern writing system".

3. Use quotation marks around dialogue or direct speech:

- It was a moonlit night. James opened the door and stepped onto the balcony, followed by Mary. They stood in silence for a few moments, looking at the moon. Then Mary turned to him and said: "Do you love me, James?"

4. Use quotation marks around a word or phrase that we see as slang or jargon:

- The police were called to a "disturbance" - which in reality was a pretty big fight.

5. Use quotation marks around a word or phrase that we want to make "special" in some way:

- Note that sometimes we use "italics" instead of quotation marks.