

QUICK GUIDE TO PUNCTUATION

The English punctuation system only consists of a few common marks on the page: the period, comma, semicolon, colon, apostrophe, hyphen (-), dash (–), question mark, and exclamation point. Besides these common marks, writers more rarely use parentheses (), ellipses (. . .), brackets [], italics (underlining), quotation marks, and capital letters. If you think of these marks as a system primarily indicating complete sentences and key sentence parts, you will be able to eliminate almost all punctuation errors from your own writing. Then you can use a book like A Writer's Reference to look up exceptions.

Punctuating Complete Sentences

You must have a subject, verb, and object (or its equivalent) to have a complete sentence, a main or independent clause. You can link main clauses (SVO units) (and avoid X) as follows:

SVO. SVO.

SVO, and SVO. (Coordinating conjunction after a comma)

SVO; SVO. (Semicolon links two related sentences of equal importance)

SVO: SVO. (Colon leans forward into the second sentence)

SVO because SVO. (Subordinating conjunction beginning a subordinate or dependent clause)

X S. VO. (Fragment)

X SVO SVO. (Run-on or fused sentence)

X SVO, SVO. (Comma fault or comma splice)

Other Use for the Semicolon: in a series with internal commas

Other Use for the Colon: after a complete sentence and before a list

Most Punctuation with Commas

Use a comma for the following structures:

Introductory phrase or clause, main SVO.

S, phrase renaming the subject (appositive), VO.

SVO, explanatory phrase or clause.

Do not use a comma for the following structures:

X S, V, O. (No single commas are allowed between main sentence elements)

X S, phrase necessary to identify the subject, VO. (Restrictive phrase or clause)

X SVO, phrase necessary to identify the object.

Other Punctuation Marks

apostrophe: shows possession and contraction

hyphen: shows parts of words or phrases that function as a unit

dash: shows interruptions or emphatic phrases

parentheses: show interruptions or in-text citations

ellipses: show words left out or time passing

brackets: show insertions or parentheses inside parentheses

italics: show titles of large works, words used as words, emphasis

capital letters: show first word of a sentence or proper nouns

quotation marks: show direct quotations and titles of small works

single quotation marks: show a quotation within a quotation