

A (VERY) BASIC GUIDE TO PUNCTUATION

Full stop

Every sentence should end with a full stop.

Exclamation Mark

An exclamation mark goes at the end of a sentence!

Question Mark

May I remind you that a question mark should only be used for direct questions. Do you understand?

Semicolon

A semicolon links together two clauses that are closely related and could stand as two separate sentences.

The road runs through a beautiful wooded valley; the railway line follows it closely.

Colon

The colon links two phrases together, where the second concludes the first statement.

The jacket is available in two colours: red and navy.

See how the second phrase, 'red and navy', offers a conclusion to the first phrase, 'The jacket is available in two colours'. Whilst the first phrase works as a standalone sentence, the second phrase doesn't.

Colons can be used instead of writing, *namely, that is, for example, for instance.*

Round Brackets

Brackets (also known as parentheses) can be used to provide additional information.

In the sentence above, the phrase 'also known as parentheses' is additional information. If you delete this phrase and the brackets from the sentence, you are still left with a complete sentence, like so:

Brackets can be used to provide additional information.

Square Brackets

Square brackets are used mainly for comments, corrections, or translations made by another author/editor.

"It is said that they [the voters] will make their choice next Thursday."

Here, the square brackets have been used by an editor to clarify to the reader who 'they' are, that the interviewee is referring.

There's more ...

Commas

Ah! The bane of many a writer!

Here are the basics:

To mark off items in a list:

I saw pens, pencils, paper, rubbers and files on his desk.

To separate two or more adjectives connected to a noun:

He is a talented, prolific writer.

To provide additional information:

The editor, who is a very busy man, arrived at the office early.

(In this instance, commas are used in the same way as brackets.)

To add a phrase to the end of a sentence:

You can telephone the editor to discuss your idea, although she prefers email.

To add a phrase to the beginning of your sentence:

Standing on the lawn, Percy waved to his parents.

(In both of the examples above, if you remove from the sentence the extra phrase the comma is being used to separate, you are still left with a complete sentence that makes sense.)

To separate dialogue from other text within the same sentence:

Tommy muttered as he sat down in the shade, "Gosh, it's so hot today!"

The Serial, or Oxford Comma

When using a comma in a list, it is standard practise not to use a comma before the 'and':

I saw pens, pencils, paper, rubbers and files on his desk. (no comma after 'rubbers' and before the 'and')

However, sometimes, a serial, or Oxford, comma can clarify the text further:

The pub offered cider, real ales, meat and vegetable pies, and sandwiches.

Without the comma after 'pies', it could suggest that the pub offered 'vegetable pie and sandwiches' – an interesting menu option!