

Otten's Practical Punctuation Guide

Using punctuation correctly is essential to effective writing; mistakes interfere with the communication of ideas from writer to reader.

Here is a list of basic, practical punctuation rules. It is not complete because obscure cases have been omitted. For basic writing, these are the most important rules.

I) The period (.) should be used

A) to indicate the end of an imperative or declarative sentence.

B) to indicate abbreviations Ex.: lb. oz. Mr. St. N.J.

C) as a decimal point it appears in numbers and financial notations

Ex.: 45.7% of the population drinks Coke or Pepsi. That umbrella costs \$6.99.

II) The ellipsis (three successive periods ...) indicates that something has been omitted.

III) The question mark (?) is used to indicate the ending of an interrogative (one that asks a question) sentence or quotation.

Ex.: "Are you serious?" asked Betty. How old are you? Should we go to lunch now?

IV) The exclamation point (!) is used to indicate the ending of an exclamatory (strong or violently emotional) sentence or quotation

Ex.: You are a pig! I hate your guts! "I will never marry you!" screamed Walt.

V) The semi-colon (;) should be used to link the two or more independent clauses of a compound sentence when no coordinating conjunction (and, but, or, nor, for, yet, so) is used. There should be a complete simple sentence on either side of a semi-colon.

Ex.: John left early; Harry will conduct the meeting.

VI) The colon (:) should be used

A) to introduce lists of things

Ex.: Please buy me these things at the store: eggs, soap, beer, rice, and yeast.

B) in telling time between the hour and minute numerals

Ex.: The train is due at 3:35 p.m. It is now 11:15. The bus left at 1:09.

VII) The hyphen (-) should be used

A) in certain combination words (Ex. mother-in-law); consult your dictionary when in doubt

B) to break a word of at least three syllables which will not fit at the end of the line; the hyphen indicates that the word is continued on the next line.

VIII) The asterisk (*) is used to indicate that further information is found at the bottom of a page or elsewhere; the asterisk is used when footnote numbers are not used. On a diner menu, for example, an asterisk after the breakfast heading would tell you to look at the

bottom of the page where you would find out that breakfast is served only at certain times of the day.

IX) Underlining (____) should be used

A) to indicate the titles of books or long works such as operas, ballets, plays, etc.

Ex.: Moby Dick is my favorite novel. I saw Aida in Philadelphia

B) to indicate the names of newspapers, magazines, ships, TV programs, movies

Ex.: I refused to see Jaws and Jaws II. I read reviews in Time and Newsweek.

C) to indicate foreign words or phrases which have not been assimilated into English.

Ex.: The play's action began in medias res. Gina called you a faccia brutta.

D) to indicate special emphasis occasionally

Ex.: No, you may not spend the weekend at Lefty's. This is unconditionally guaranteed.

X) Quotation marks (") should be used

A) to indicate the titles of poems, short stories, speeches, songs, essays and other short works
Ex.: "Some Enchanted Evening" was the band's first song.

B) to indicate the beginning and end of the exact words of a speaker

Ex.: Ken said, "I forgot the mail." Jessie asked, "Do you need a pen?"

XI) The apostrophe should be used

A) to indicate nouns which show ownership (but possessive pronouns don't use apostrophes). Possessive nouns add 's to the noun unless it already ends in -s, then only the apostrophe is added after the -s.

Ex.: Gary's wallet was stolen. I broke Fran's watch. His dog's collar broke.

B) to indicate contractions (word combinations) to replace the letters omitted

Ex.: I'll see you later. You're a good man, C.B. She doesn't go to church.

XII) The comma should be used

A) in a compound sentence which contains a coordinating conjunction (and, or, but, for, nor, yet, so) before the coordinating conjunction

Ex.: He is happy, but she is miserable. I broke my arm, and I don't have any pain.

B) in a complex sentence when the dependent clause comes before the independent clause

Ex.: When Bud died, his relatives were overwhelmed. As the sun sets, we head for home

C) after the identification of the speaker in a quotation sentence when the identification precedes the quotation

Ex.: Seri said, "Watery beer makes me sick." Ethel remarked, "I love sunny days."

D) at the close of a declarative or imperative quotation when the identification of the speaker comes last in the sentence

Ex.: "I am depressed today," said Doris. "Leave my sister alone," said Wendy.

E) to indicate the interruption of a quotation when the identification of the speaker is given during the exact words of the speaker, two commas are used

Ex.: "When I was a boy," said Grandpa Kennedy, "life was much slower."

"As the horses near the first turn," said the announcer, "Magic Lantern leads."

F) to separate two or more items of geographical information from each other

Ex.: I recently moved here from Brooklyn, New York. How long have you lived in Trenton, N.J.? They left for Yokohama, Japan, during the winter storm.

G) to separate date information from the year

Ex.: Stella was born on July 14, 1956. The forms must be submitted by Dec. 31, 1978.

H) to set off direct address (naming the person to whom you are speaking within the sentence)

Ex.: Put down that gun, Norman! Lydia, would you do the dishes tonight?

I) to separate elements in a series from one another

Ex.: I bought wine, beer, soda, punch, and gin for the party. Esther, Lana, Judy, Paulette, and Hedy attended the movie premiere.

J) after the opening and closing of a friendly letter and after the complimentary close of a business letter

Ex.: Dear Bertha, Yours truly, Respectfully, With much love,

K) after introductory words and phrases that precede the subject in a sentence

Ex.: To the south, explorers noticed unusual rock formations. No, they were not frightened. Next, they made camp for the night.

L) before and after words and phrases which break into the flow of the sentence

Ex.: That novel, in my opinion, is just trash. Furthermore, it's too expensive. The plot, to tell the real honest truth, has been used many times before.

M) to set off appositives (rename with other words something which has just been named) from the rest of the sentence

Ex.: Jack Abrahms, captain of the football team, was given a citizenship award. My father's secretary, a girl from New Orleans, sings in the choir.

N) to separate a person's degrees, titles or occupational designation from his name Ex.:
Sonia Lewis, D.D.S., spent the weekend with Farley Tobbs, C.P.A.
The lecture was given, by Ronald Verbiage, Ph. D.

O) to set off non-restrictive clauses (which provide irrelevant information) from the rest of the sentence
Ex.: Harriet Smith, who wears a size eleven shoe, was late for the party.