

punc t u a t i o n

A really useful
quick-guide for
Australian writers



Punctuation is important. It is to writing as volume, tone, gestures and so on are to speaking. It helps you make your point. It adds to your meaning.

Punctuation can change, completely, the meaning of your words:

<i>David says Eleni is strange.</i>	(David's opinion is that Eleni is strange.)
<i>David, says Eleni, is strange.</i>	(Eleni's opinion is that David is strange.)
<i>They are my brothers.</i>	(Those people are my brothers.)
<i>They are my brothers'.</i>	(Those things belong to my brothers.)
<i>They are my brother's.</i>	(Those things belong to my brother.)
<i>He ran to the shop.</i>	(He ran to the shop.)
<i>He ran to the shop?</i>	(Did he run to the shop?)

Be as careful with your punctuation as you are with your words.

A clear trend is emerging in the way punctuation is used. Look at a magazine or newspaper from the 1960s. You'll see longer, more heavily punctuated sentences than are normal today. There's greater emphasis today, in all forms of writing, on simplicity of expression. We write shorter sentences, use simpler words, and use punctuation, ideally, only to add to our meaning.

We tend to delete any element in a sentence that's not absolutely necessary. For example, a sentence like *Isaac was born on Saturday, 23rd of August, 1958* is more likely today to be written as *Isaac was born on Saturday 23 August 1958*.

The bits removed from the original version add nothing to the sentence's meaning. By removing them we make the sentence shorter, less cluttered, and easier to read. Before using any punctuation mark, be sure it will add to your meaning. If you decide to use it, use it correctly.

English is alive. Language evolves. The rules change, the experts disagree, usage varies from region to region, and from generation to generation. The advice in this guide is drawn from a range of excellent but sometimes contradictory sources. See it as a reliable guide to good practice in Australia, but use your own judgment when necessary. Don't fret. Write!

Shaun McNicholas

Adelaide © 2022

punctuation	purpose	example	note
<p>apostrophe</p> <p>’</p>	<p>Shows that someone or something in a group of words ‘owns’ something else in the same groups of words.</p>	<p><i>Where is Natalie’s shoe?</i> <i>Andrew’s mandolin is out of tune.</i> <i>Duyen’s work is excellent.</i> <i>The boys’ story (more than one boy).</i> <i>The girl’s story (one girl).</i> <i>The table’s legs.</i></p>	<p>When the owning word ends in the letter s, add an apostrophe to the end of the word (<i>James’ book</i>, <i>Thomas’ story</i>). Note, however, that you have an option with people’s names. If when you say them you would normally add an extra s, you can either add an apostrophe alone (<i>James’ book</i>) or an apostrophe and an s (<i>James’s book</i>). Both versions are correct. Be consistent.</p> <p>If the owning word ends in a letter other than s, an apostrophe and an s (’s) should be added to the end of the word (<i>Jillian’s speech</i>, <i>David’s meal</i>).</p> <p>Apostrophes are never added to the pronouns <i>his</i>, <i>hers</i>, <i>its</i>, <i>ours</i>, <i>yours</i> or <i>theirs</i> because these words – known as possessive pronouns – already imply ownership (<i>Its colour was green</i>, <i>the book was hers</i>). They are, however, added to indefinite and impersonal pronouns, as in <i>one’s mother</i>, <i>somebody else’s problem</i> and <i>anybody’s guess</i>.</p> <p>Use an apostrophe in the word <i>it’s</i> only if you’re using <i>it’s</i> as a contraction of <i>it is</i>, or <i>it has</i>.</p> <p>If there are two or more owners, the apostrophe is added to the last owner only (<i>John and Jane’s shop</i>).</p> <p>It’s increasingly common for apostrophes to be left out in the names of streets, places, brands, businesses and other organisations (<i>State Teachers College</i>). If an organisation uses an apostrophe in its name, you should too.</p>
	<p>Shows that a word you are using is a contraction of other words.</p>	<p><i>I’ve</i> for <i>I have</i>. <i>She’s</i> for <i>she is</i>, or <i>she has</i>. <i>It’s</i> for <i>it is</i>, or <i>it has</i>.</p>	<p>The apostrophe in contractions usually indicates that letters have been dropped (<i>I’ve</i>, <i>she’ll</i>). Note, however, that there are also irregular contractions, such as <i>shan’t</i> from <i>shall not</i> and <i>won’t</i> from <i>will not</i>.</p>
	<p>Clarifies expressions that otherwise would be confusing.</p>	<p>Dot your i’s and cross your t’s.</p>	<p>There are very few of these, but the apostrophe does a useful job.</p> <p>Don’t use apostrophes in abbreviations (<i>QCs</i>, <i>GPs</i>, <i>VIPs</i>) or with numbers (<i>1980s</i>, <i>four 10s</i>) unless leaving them out would cause confusion (<i>the class of ’84</i>).</p>

punctuation	purpose	example	note
bullet point 	A useful tool in business writing to break complex text into easily readable chunks.	<i>Participants should bring their own:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>notebook</i> • <i>pen</i> • <i>dictionary</i> • <i>style guide</i> 	When bullet point items are a simple list, in a brochure or something similar, use a colon to introduce the list, and no other punctuation. Capital letters are optional for the first word after each bullet point, but be consistent. If a list like this appears in an email, report or similar (rather than a brochure), put a full stop after the final bullet point.
		<i>The HR Manager said she would:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>interview all applicants</i> • <i>check referee statements</i> • <i>provide a recommendation to the Board by December.</i> 	When items are effectively part of a single sentence, (1) use a colon to introduce the series of points, (2) start each item with a lower-case letter, (3) have no punctuation at the end of each item and (4) put a full-stop at the end of the final item.
		<i>There are several matters to consider:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Closing the office will upset clients.</i> • <i>If we keep the offices open, the additional project cost will be very high.</i> • <i>We haven't yet considered the possibility of delaying the project until the new financial year.</i> 	If the items are complete sentences (or paragraphs) in themselves, (1) introduce the items with a colon, (2) start each with a capital letter and (3) finish each with a full stop. <i>Many guides don't adequately address how bullet points should be punctuated, and practice varies widely. The advice provided is consistent with current trends. For business writing, check to see if your organisation has a preferred style. Be consistent. Some writers indent their bullet points, some don't. There are no rules. Again, be consistent.</i>

**Show up, show up, show up, and after a
 while the muse shows up too.
 Isabel Allende**

punctuation	purpose	example	note
colon ● ●	Introduces a list.	<i>We need five different vegetables: potatoes, carrots, cabbage, beans, corn.</i> <i>Today we will focus on three things:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • punctuation • spelling • sentence structure. 	<p style="text-align: center;">The main rule of writing is that if you do it with enough assurance and confidence, you're allowed to do whatever you like. So write your story as it needs to be written. Write it honestly, and tell it as best you can. I'm not sure that there are any other rules. Not ones that matter.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Neil Gaiman</p>
	Introduces an example or examples.	<i>I like big cities: New York, Tokyo, Bangkok.</i>	
	Introduces an explanation.	<i>The reasons are clear: I was tired and I was homesick.</i>	
	Introduces a long portion of direct speech.	<i>The Prime Minister declared: 'We must act now, for to delay is to expose ourselves to a high degree of risk, and great uncertainty'.</i>	
	Introduces a subtitle.	<i>Australia: A Brief History.</i>	
	Indicates a ratio.	<i>We are using a scale of 1:10.</i>	

A word is dead when it is said, some say. I say it just begins to live, that day.
Emily Dickenson

punctuation	purpose	example	note
<p>comma</p> <p>，</p>	<p>Indicates additional information – an introduction, an aside, a qualification, or additional description – in a sentence that is complete without it.</p>	<p><i>Martin, as always, was late.</i></p> <p><i>It is possible, despite the loss, that our team will finish on top.</i></p> <p><i>Exhausted, she collapsed on the bed.</i></p> <p><i>Brimming with confidence, we took our place at the starting line.</i></p>	<p>The additional information might be at the start, in the middle, or at the end of a sentence.</p> <p>Dashes or parentheses are sometimes used instead of commas when the additional information appears in the middle of a sentence, especially if the additional information has commas of its own. Note that dashes tend to emphasise the additional information, and parentheses tend to de-emphasise it.</p>
	<p>Separates and emphasises items in a list, or a series of descriptive terms.</p>	<p><i>It was a cold, windy day.</i></p> <p><i>She sang in a clear, soft, beautiful voice.</i></p> <p><i>Trophies were given to the teams from England, Pakistan, Canada and France.</i></p> <p><i>The canteen will provide morning tea, crackers and dips, and fruit platters.</i></p>	<p>If the descriptive terms form a single descriptive unit (<i>He was a good little boy</i>), commas are not needed.</p> <p>Some experts suggest that a comma should be used before the <u>and</u> that introduces the last term in a list (<i>Pakistan, Canada, and France</i>). Others insist a comma is needed only if its omission might confuse (<i>Gilbert and Sullivan, Lennon and McCartney, and Schumann</i>). You decide. If the comma makes your message clearer, use it. I do.</p>
	<p>Separates independent clauses joined by a coordinating conjunction (<i>and, but, or, nor, for, so, yet</i>).</p>	<p><i>We rose in good spirits, for we had slept well.</i></p> <p><i>The piano is okay for a hobby Ludvig, but it won't get you a job.</i></p>	<p>A comma isn't needed if the independent clauses are short and closely related (<i>It was cold and it was wet</i>).</p>
	<p>Prevents a connection being made between words that are not meant to be connected.</p>	<p><i>Please don't hide, Sarah.</i></p> <p><i>Tell me about your problem, child.</i></p> <p><i>Let's eat, Grandma.</i></p>	
	<p>Introduces a short quotation.</p>	<p><i>The team captain said, 'This is our last chance, and we must take it'.</i></p> <p><i>'We can discuss this all night,' she said, 'but we have to make a decision'.</i></p>	

punctuation	purpose	example	note
<p>dash</p> <p>—</p>	<p>Emphasises a word or phrase at the end of a sentence.</p>	<p><i>Only one person could fix the problem I had created – me.</i></p> <p><i>The old house, the smell of jasmine, voices in the distance – I was home.</i></p>	<p>Practice varies, but a longer dash (the m-dash) is usually used for this and for the purpose following. The m-dash is so named because it is the width of the letter m when typed. The n-dash (see below) is the length of the letter n. No surprise there. Be consistent.</p>
	<p>Indicates additional information – an aside, a qualification, or additional description – in a sentence that is complete without it.</p>	<p><i>He arrived – as I knew he would – without the necessary papers.</i></p>	<p>Commas and parentheses are used for the same purpose. A pair of dashes tends to emphasise the additional information more effectively, but too many dashes in a piece of writing can be off-putting for the reader. And it's important that your readers are happy.</p>
	<p>Replaces the word 'to'.</p>	<p><i>The war of 1914-8.</i></p> <p><i>The London-Glasgow line.</i></p> <p><i>The relevant papers are in folios 45-63.</i></p>	<p>The shorter n-dash is usually used for this purpose.</p>
<p>ellipsis</p> <p>● ● ●</p>	<p>Indicates that, for brevity, words have been left out of a quotation.</p>	<p><i>'The future of the company...is assured.'</i></p>	<p>Practice varies, but it's common to have the same space before and after the ellipsis as you have between each of the three points. If you're finishing a sentence with an ellipsis, you don't need a full stop. Although some people will say you do.</p>
	<p>Indicates an unfinished sentence or hesitant speech.</p>	<p><i>'I was hoping...er...I was wondering if...'</i></p>	
<p>exclamation mark</p> <p>!</p>	<p>Conveys strong feeling.</p>	<p><i>I'm shocked!</i></p> <p><i>How could you!</i></p>	<p>Avoid the temptation to use more than one exclamation mark. One will do the job.</p>

punctuation	purpose	example	note
full stop ●	Indicates that a word has been abbreviated. Also known as a period.	<i>T. Smith</i> (for Tom Smith) <i>approx.</i> (for approximately)	It's increasingly common to omit full stops in abbreviations. Use your judgment, but be consistent.
	Indicates the end of a sentence.	<i>Glyn has a good ear for music. He is very talented.</i>	See also Question Mark, Exclamation Mark.
	Indicates a decimal point.	<i>0.75</i> <i>2.4 kilometres</i>	<p style="text-align: center;">Write in a reckless fever. Rewrite in a cardigan. DBC Pierre</p>
	Indicates time.	<i>3.25pm</i> <i>12.00 noon</i>	
	Indicates a date.	<i>26.9.1957</i>	
hyphen -	Joins two or more single words to form a description that might otherwise be unclear or misleading.	<i>She was wide-eyed and restless.</i> <i>He was a happy-go-lucky guy.</i> <i>Twelve travel-weary individuals arrived safely.</i>	
Joins a prefix with the word that follows.	<i>Co-operative</i> <i>Ex-convict</i> <i>Pre-arranged</i>	There is little consistency in the way this rule is used. It's common to read <i>coordinate</i> , <i>cooperate</i> etc. You decide, and be consistent.	

punctuation	purpose	example	note
<p>parentheses (rounded brackets)</p> <p>()</p>	<p>Indicates additional information (an aside, a qualification, or additional description) in a sentence that is complete without it.</p>	<p><i>The owners of the house (who are overseas) have indicated that they are happy for the sale to proceed.</i></p> <p><i>I have a laptop computer (with in-built modem), a printer and a scanner.</i></p>	<p>Dashes and commas can be used for the same purpose.</p>
<p>parentheses (square brackets)</p> <p>[]</p>	<p>Square brackets are used to add an explanatory note of your own to a direct quotation.</p>	<p><i>'They [the owners] will be home within a month', he said.</i></p>	<p>The shorter and the plainer the better. Beatrix Potter</p>
<p>question mark</p> <p>?</p>	<p>Indicates the end of a sentence or statement that is a direct question.</p>	<p><i>Was it you?</i></p> <p><i>Where to now?</i></p>	
<p>Indicates doubt about the validity of a piece of information.</p>	<p><i>Charles Smith (1842?-1901)</i></p>		

There is no right language or wrong language any more than there are right or wrong clothes. Context, convention and circumstance are all.

Stephen Fry

punctuation	purpose	example	note
<p>quotation marks - single</p> <p>‘ ’</p>	<p>Single quotation marks are used to indicate direct speech.</p>	<p><i>'Pass me the book', he said.</i></p> <p><i>'If I could,' she said, 'I surely would'.</i></p>	<p>The placement of punctuation marks in sentences that include quotations should be determined by whether the punctuation applies to the words quoted, or to the sentence as a whole. Note the placement of the second comma in the example below:</p> <p><i>'If I could, I surely would', she said.</i></p> <p>The experts disagree about the placement of the full stop at the end of a quotation that finishes a sentence. Some insist that it should always be placed outside the quotation mark, as in the example below:</p> <p><i>'If I could,' she said, 'I surely would'.</i></p> <p>Others say it relates to the quotation, and that it should be inside the quotation marks, as shown below:</p> <p><i>'If I could,' she said, 'I surely would.'</i></p> <p>A sensible compromise is to place the full stop inside the quotation mark if the entire sentence is a quotation, as in:</p> <p><i>'The future of the company is assured.'</i></p> <p>but outside if the sentence includes any other elements:</p> <p><i>'The future of the company', he said, 'is assured'.</i></p> <p>Whichever rule you follow, be consistent.</p>
<p>quotation marks - double</p> <p>“ ”</p>	<p>Double quotation marks are used to indicate words quoted within a statement that is itself within single quotation marks.</p>	<p><i>'Did I hear you say, "No"?', she asked.</i></p>	

If you can't explain it simply, you don't understand it well enough.
Albert Einstein

punctuation	purpose	example	note
semicolon 	Separates items in a list, or makes broad divisions between items, when the items themselves are punctuated with commas.	<i>The Prime Minister introduced the Minister for Education, Ms Atrill; the Minister for Information Technology, Mr Jackson; and the Minister for Mines and Energy, Ms Barnett.</i> <i>They have offices in Singapore, New York and Canada; retail outlets in every continent; and a chain of cinemas in Australia, North America and South-East Asia.</i>	<p style="text-align: center;">Great writers don't write, they rewrite.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Complete a bad first draft as quickly as possible, and then fix it.</p>
	Joins independent clauses in a sentence without using the conjunction <u>and</u>.	<i>The days passed; my worries disappeared.</i> <i>The sun shone; the children played.</i>	

To do our work, we all have to read a mass of papers. Nearly all of them are far too long. This wastes time, while energy has to be spent looking for the essential points. The aim should be reports which set out the main points in a series of short, crisp paragraphs. Let us not shrink from the short expressive phrase, even if it is conversational. The saving in time will be great, while the discipline of setting out the real points concisely will prove an aid to clearer thinking.

Winston Churchill, 9 August 1940