

Punctuation

Introduction to Punctuations

Imagine yourself driving a racing car. What do you do in a car race? You drive as fast as you can, and try to beat your opponents to the finish line. If the racing track is an absolutely straight path, then there would not be much of a problem. But what if the racing track is full of twists and turns? Do you think that only driving fast will do? No. You will have to learn the art of guiding your car through the twists and turns without crashing.

Now imagine that your car is the fastest. However, its brakes are faulty and the steering wheel doesn't do what its name suggests--'steer'. Do you think you will be able to finish on the 'podium'? Forget winning the race, will you be able to complete the race with your bones and senses intact? The answer seems easy enough--'no'.

Consider the following statement:

He is dumb.

This seems easy enough in that it makes its meaning clear. What if this statement is part of a larger group of statements?

What was the difference between the two versions? The difference was the presence of certain **marks or signs** in the latter and the absence of the same from the former. These marks and signs are called **punctuation marks**.

Punctuation marks are used for punctuating sentences, in order to make them readable and understandable. **Punctuating is the act of interrupting and punctuation marks are the interruptions.**

We had begun with the example of a fast racing car, with faulty brakes and steering wheel. The brakes and the steering wheel give the driver of the car a certain amount of control over the vehicle he drives. If these are faulty, then you can well imagine what will happen. It is the same case with a sentence or paragraph or passage without punctuation marks.

They give the reader of the sentence or paragraph or passage a certain amount of control over the meaning of the same. It is no good having the fastest car when the brakes and the steering wheel are faulty. Similarly, a brilliantly written, yet unpunctuated, passage doesn't have much of an impact upon the reader of the same.

The thing with punctuation marks is that different writers use them in different ways. However, there are certain general rules regarding each, which you should know so that you can punctuate your way to a better understanding of English.

Full Stop or Period

It is used for ending imperative and declarative sentences.

Close the door properly.

This is an example of an imperative sentence. Imperative sentences are the request and command sentences. Here, the full stop brings to a close the command of closing the door properly.

Meera is a funny woman.

This is an example of a declarative sentence. Declarative sentences make some sort of declaration or statement. Here, the full stop brings to a close the declaration that Meera is a funny woman.

It is used for ending an abbreviated word.

*The phrase 'exempli gratia or for example' is abbreviated as **e.g.***

*The phrase 'id est or that is' is abbreviated as **i.e.***

*The phrase 'et cetera or and so forth' is abbreviated as **etc.***

Interrogation and Exclamation Marks

Question or Interrogation Mark

It is used for ending an interrogative sentence.

Why are you so tired?

Is he really going to be the next Prime Minister?

Interrogative sentences are the question sentences. In both these examples, a direct question is being asked. Hence, appropriately, the question mark is placed at the end of each sentence.

Exclamation Mark

It is used for ending an exclamatory sentence.

What a beautiful weather!

Exclamatory sentences are the ones which display a strong feeling or emotion. In the given sentence, the use of the exclamation mark suggests the feeling of delight that the beautiful weather evokes in the speaker.

It is used after an interjection.

Oh no! This can't be happening to me!

An interjection is a word or phrase that conveys an emotion. In the given example, the interjection 'Oh no' suggests feelings of helplessness and despair, and the exclamation mark after it serves to emphasise these feelings.

Colon

It is used for introducing a quotation.

On seeing his mother, the boy exclaimed jubilantly: "Mom! My results are out. I have managed to pass this time!"

It is used for introducing an explanation.

The reason for the rusting of iron is as follows: iron reacts with air in the presence of moisture to form rust.

It is used for introducing an example.

Herbivores are organisms that eat only plants: cows, deer and rabbits are examples of the same.

It is used for introducing a list.

There are three types of substances: transparent, translucent and opaque.

It is used for separating hours from minutes.

The train left the station at 12:15 P.M.

Semicolon

It is used for joining closely related independent clauses that cannot be joined with a conjunction.

I did not create these circumstances; these circumstances created me.

Here, the two clauses 'I did not create these circumstances' and 'these circumstances created me' are independent as they can stand by themselves as separate sentences. However, as they are related, it is better to include them as part of one sentence. Sentences can be combined either by using conjunctions (e.g., 'and', 'but', 'or'), or by connecting them with a semicolon (as in the given case)

It is used before transitional words and phrases that join independent clauses.

I am not allowed to do this;however, in your case I am willing to make an exception.

Here, the clause 'in your case I am willing to make an exception' follows logically from the clause 'I am not allowed to do this'. Transitional words (therefore, for example, nevertheless, however, generally) are used for making the required connection between such clauses. As the clauses are related, it is better to include them as part of one sentence. Hence, a semicolon is used in such a case.

It is used for separating a series of items that contain internal commas.

The number of wickets taken by Joginder and the teams against which he did so are as follows: 39, South Africa; 35, England; 26, Australia; 24, Pakistan; 19, West Indies; 15, Sri Lanka; 15, New Zealand.

Comma

It is used for separating 3 or more items in a series.

My favourite players are Sachin Tendulkar, V. V. S. Laxman, Virendra Sehwag and Rahul Dravid.

It is used for separating 2 or more adjectives.

She is a smart, witty and highly talented woman.

It is used for breaking up dates and addresses.

You can find him at 67/3A, Rajouri Garden, New Delhi-27.

He was born on Friday, February 29, 2008.

It is used after introductory expressions.

Having taken part in the debate, Ravi has now conquered his stage fear.

After having eaten our dinner, we went out for a long walk.

It is used for indicating parenthetical information or relative clauses that are not restrictive.

The boys are playing in a playground, which is surrounded by a ten-feet-tall fence.

Relative clauses give more information about a noun. Here, the relative clause 'which is surrounded by a ten-feet-tall fence' gives more information about the noun 'playground'. The following two sentences can be made out of the given sentence: The boys are playing in a playground; The playground is surrounded by a ten-feet-tall fence.

The given relative clause is non-restrictive since the sentence would mean the same even in its absence, i.e., 'the boys are playing in a playground'.

Dev, who is notorious for his laziness, has been adjudged the best employee of the month.

Here, the relative clause 'who is notorious for his laziness' gives more information about the noun 'Dev'. The following two sentences can be made out of the given sentence: Dev is notorious for his laziness; Dev has been adjudged the best employee of the month.

Also, the given relative clause is non-restrictive since the sentence would mean the same even in its absence, i.e., 'Dev has been adjudged the best employee of the month'.

I do not, as a habit, sleep before eleven at night.

Parenthetical information is the information that is additional in nature. In this example, 'as a habit' is not necessary for the meaning of the original sentence, which is: 'I do not sleep before eleven at night'.

It is used before a conjunction joining two independent clauses.

He likes *rasgullas* and *gulab jamuns*, but he likes *laddoos* and *sohn halwa* even more.

Parentheses and Hyphen

Parentheses

It is used for indicating additional information.

Rishi and Diana (who were seen together in the movie “CID Casefiles”) have been finalised to play the leads in Anurag Dhaansu’s next flick.

Hyphen

It is used in compound nouns.

What are the advantages of door-to-door advertising?

It is used in an adjectival form comprising two words.

The nineteen-year-old, green-eyed girl is the one I am looking for.

It is used after prefixes.

He has a multi-faceted personality.

Apostrophe and Inverted Commas

Apostrophe

It is used for indicating the omission of numbers or contraction of word.

In the year '90, brain drain was at its highest.

I can't go on like this.

It is used for indicating the possessive case of singular and plural nouns.

Jeetu's dog barks loudly.

(Singular noun)

Ross' birthday falls on the same day as mine.

(Singular noun ending with the letter 's')

Mom! Take me to the children's park.

(Plural noun)

Sara is going to live in a girls' hostel.

(Plural noun ending with the letter 's')

Inverted Commas

It is used for indicating direct speech or quote.

Gini said, “Don’t step in the house!” (American English)

Gini said, ‘Don’t step in the house!’ (British English)

Here, the double and single inverted commas indicate the direct speech of Gini or in other words, the words spoken by her.

In his autobiography, Gandhi makes it clear that he wished to tell the story of his “numerous experiments with truth.”

(American English)

In his autobiography, Gandhi makes it clear that he wished to tell the story of his ‘numerous experiments with truth’.

(British English)

Here, the double and single inverted commas indicate a quote from Mahatma Gandhi’s autobiography.

It is used for marking a specific word or phrase.

Last evening, I saw the movie “Charade.” **(American English)**

Last evening, I saw the movie ‘Charade’. **(British English)**

Note: The usage of single or double inverted commas varies. In British English, the single inverted commas represent the main quote, while the double inverted commas represent a quote within the quote. In American English, it is the opposite.