

PUNCTUATION GUIDELINES: ENGL 1340. INTRODUCTION TO LITERARY ANALYSIS (SECTION A01)

Punctuation is a feature of written language. It is hard to imagine using punctuation in conversations with friends or class responses. Occasionally, and for an especially dramatic effect, one might say, “I will read no more about punctuation, period.” Such a statement would have the odd result of making its speaker seem both ignorant and nerdy, and it is probably better left unsaid. Punctuation developed to meet the demands of a society increasingly dependent on written communication and silent reading, first in manuscripts and then in printed books. Although punctuation marks have taken on many different forms, they have a shared purpose: to allow writers to express meaning accurately even when they are not able to clarify verbally.

Your use of punctuation is intimately tied to your command of the language. It should help you to communicate ideas to your reader. Punctuation should serve your writing, as Lynn Truss suggests when she describes the many different ways that it can be defined:

Some grammarians use the analogy of stitching: punctuation as the basting that holds the fabric of language in shape. Another writer tells us that the punctuation marks are the traffic signals of language: they tell us to slow down, notice this, take a detour, and stop. I have even seen a rather fanciful reference to the full stop and comma as “the invisible servants in fairy tales--the ones who bring glasses of water and pillows, not storms of weather or love.” But best of all, I think, is the simple advice given by the style book of a national newspaper: that punctuation is “a courtesy designed to help readers to understand a story without stumbling.” (7)

Punctuation is a matter of convention: it did not arise from instinct or from some deity’s pronouncement. We all probably agree both red lights and periods mean stop, although there is no absolute reason why this should be the case. Nonetheless,

challenging either convention would be perilous. There will be some cases where the conventions are less obvious or universally accepted. For instance, academics in Britain primarily use single quotation marks and drive on the left-hand side of the road. When in Britain, a North American might be excused for using double quotation marks; however, s/he would find less sympathy if s/he insisted on driving on the right-hand side of the road. At the end of the day, we follow conventions—traffic signals or punctuation—because they help us. Used effectively, punctuation will ensure that a reader grasps the meaning and nuance of your argument.

The following pages describe the forms of punctuation that will be relevant to your writing. Before you get to them, you might consider Pico Iyer’s conclusions:

Punctuation, then, is a matter of care. Care for words, yes, but also, and more important, for what the words imply. Only a lover notices the small things: the way the afternoon light catches the nape of a neck, or how a strand of hair slips out from behind an ear, or the way a finger curls around a cup. And no one scans a letter so closely as a lover, searching for its small print, straining to hear its nuances, its gasps, its sighs and hesitations, poring over the secret messages that lie in every cadence.” (272).

Try to work out, by re-writing, punctuating, and capitalizing, why Iyer would have been pleased or disappointed to scan the following letter:

dear jack i want a man who knows what love is all about you are generous kind thoughtful people who are not like you admit to being useless and inferior you have ruined me for other men i yearn for you i have no feelings whatsoever when we're apart I can be forever happy will you let me be yours jill

Perhaps it is overstating the case to say that punctuation affects not only the way that we read and write, but also the way we live and love. Nonetheless, punctuation does convey meaning, and it shapes the way that we understand the written word.

1. End Punctuation

1.1 Period or Full Stop (.)

- 1.1.1 Use a period or full stop (a) to close a statement, (b) a mild command, or (c) an indirect question.

(b) The sentence above is an example of a mild command (a) while this sentence is an example of a mild statement.

(c) Let me ask if this is a good example of an indirect question.

- 1.1.2 Use a period for abbreviations that do not use the first and last letter.

St. is the abbreviation for “Street.” St is the abbreviation for “Saint.” However, you will find that this rule is not hard and fast, and you may want simply to put a period at the end of any abbreviation using lower-case letters—like Dr., Mr., Mrs., Ph. D.—even if they do not technically require them.

- 1.1.3 A period is generally not needed for acronyms unless they are explicitly included.

There is no full stop in NATO, which seems evident.

1.2 Question Mark (?)

- 1.2.1 Use a question mark to close a direct question.

When did Geoffrey Chaucer live?

- 1.2.2 A question mark may also be used to indicate doubt.

Geoffrey Chaucer was born in 1340 (?) and died at the end of his life.

1.3 Exclamation Mark (!)

- 1.3.1 An exclamation point can be used to close (a) an emphatic statement, (b) an interjection, or (c) a command:

(a) Exclamation points are often overused!

(b) Alas!

(c) Avoid them at all costs!

2. Comma (,) (SGWL 260-61; 262-64)

- 2.1 Commas can be used to set off.

- 2.1.1 Use a comma to set off most introductory elements, whether they are (a) subordinate clauses, (b) verbal or verbal phrases, (c) prepositional phrases, or (d) transitional expressions.

(a) Even though I know I should, I often find it difficult to drive on the left side of the road while in Britain.

(b) Ignoring all that he had heard, the double quotation mark user decided that driving on the right-hand side of the road in Britain was also a North American’s right.

(c) Nonplussed, she gave up trying to find any humour in the punctuation examples.

(d) Of course, it is hard to come up with so many examples.

- 2.1.2 Use a comma to set off nonessential or non-restrictive elements, whether (a) phrases and clauses, (b) non-essential appositives, (c) absolute phrases, or (d) parenthetical and transitional expressions.

(a) Winnipeg’s weather, which is extreme at the best of times, is especially trying in the winter.

(b) The very short story by Dave Eggers that we read in class, “She Needed More Nuance,” tells the story of a woman named Wendy Berlin.

(c) Having re-read the story carefully, I believe that Wendy Berlin’s name may represent the political division in a major German city.

(d) Interestingly, Berlin was once divided into East and West. Earl Berlin’s name, on the other hand, may be connected to East Berlin, the communist part of the city prior to the dismantling of its wall in 1989.

NB: Sometimes you will need to determine whether or not the element is non-restrictive or not. See *SGWL* 264.

2.1.3 Commas can also be used to set off (a) phrases of contrast, (b) tag questions, (c) yes and no, (d) words of direct address, and (e) mild interjections.

(a) Punctuation should help, not hinder, your written expression.

(b) Reading so many sentences about it dulls the senses, does it not?

(c) Yes, it certainly does.

(d) Professor Watt, will you please give it a rest now.

(e) Well, I guess so.

2.2 Commas can be used to separate. For possible problems with these instances, see misplaced modifiers and dangling modifiers (*SGWL* 264).

2.2.1 Commas separate two independent clauses linked by coordinating conjunctions (*for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so*).

Commas can be used in many situations, yet they should not be used indiscriminately.

2.2.2 Commas separate information in (a) dates, (b) addresses, and (c) titles.

(a) Our final exam for this course is set for December 14, 2006.

(b) The English Department is located at 625 Fletcher Argue Building, University of Manitoba, Winnipeg, Manitoba.

(c) See 2.1.2 example (b), which is also an example of a non-essential appositive.

2.3 Use commas to separate items in a series.

Margaret Atwood is known for writing essays, short stories, novels, and poetry.

2.4 Use commas between two or more adjectives that equally modify the same word (but not when they are not equal—check by seeing if you can reverse the order of the adjectives: if you can, put a comma between them).

Atwood is a celebrated Canadian writer whose challenging, provocative texts often appear in University courses.

2.5 Commas can introduce quotations.

In “Marrying the Hangman,” Atwood writes that, “History cannot be erased” (14).

2.6 Commas **cannot** be used to join two clauses.

The hangman is a social outcast, the woman who marries the hangman becomes doubly condemned.

For ways of identifying this problem, a comma splice, see *SGWL* 262.

3. Semi-colon

- 3.1 A semi-colon may be used to join two main clauses. The two clauses may be related by a conjunctive adverb (*accordingly, consequently, therefore, thus, hence, furthermore, moreover, besides, likewise, nevertheless, however, otherwise, still*), but should not be related by a coordinating conjunction (*and, but, or nor, for, so, yet*).

In most cases you can check if a semi-colon is right by seeing if you could replace it with a period; however, you might prefer to use the semi-colon if you are trying to establish a close relationship between the two clauses.

- 3.2 A semi-colon may be used to separate series items containing commas.

We will study a variety of genres in this course: essays, which will be represented by Swift's marvellous piece, "A Modest Proposal"; drama, which will include a consideration of comedies by Shakespeare and Wilde; prose fiction, which will include Malory's *Tale of Gareth*, Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, and King's "Borders"; and poetry written by authors from the Middle Ages to the present day.

4. Colon

- 4.1 A colon may introduce (a) an explanation, (b) a series, or (c) a quotation.

(a) I have no reason to include more examples here: I have already used a colon to introduce the series of genres we will study in this course in example 3.2 (b) and the Truss quotation on the first page (c).

- 4.2 A colon is also used after (a) the salutation of some letters, (b) between a title and subtitle, and (c) between divisions of time.

(a) To Whom It May Concern:

(b) *Eats, Shoots, & Leaves: The Zero Tolerance Approach to Punctuation*

(c) This class begins at 10:30 and is supposed to end at or before 11:20.

5. Dash and Hyphen (*SGWL* 266)

- 5.1 A pair of dashes sets off parenthetical information. A pair of dashes works like a pair of commas or parentheses, but is usually more emphatic.

Dashes—often called double, long, or em-dashes—can be written by typing two hyphens (--) in order; many computers will convert them to one continuous dash. They are becoming increasingly popular—although it is probably more appropriate to use a comma, colon, or ellipsis to include concluding explanations or continuations like this one.

- 5.2 A hyphen can be used to indicate a span between numbers.

I urge you to consult *A Short Guide to Writing about Literature*, pp. 46-51 before you hand in any of your essays.

- 5.3 A hyphen can be used to join words that are used (a) as a single adjective or to join certain compound nouns.

(a) The best way to understand the first case is to compare the use of a date as a noun or an adjective:

London was the centre of England's book trade in the *fifteenth century* (noun).

Fifteenth-century London was the centre of England's book trade (adjective).

(b) Words like tax-free and hand-operated retain the hyphen

NB: Often hyphens first appear in neologisms (newly coined words), but then disappear over time, as in e-mail or email and post-modern or postmodern.

6. Apostrophe

6.1 An apostrophe indicates the omission of letters or numbers.

The Stanley cup wasn't awarded in '05.

6.2 Using an apostrophe and an "s" indicate a possessive in singular nouns, plural nouns not ending in "s" and some plural nouns ending in "s." Many plural nouns ending in "s" do not require an additional "s".

You may test for possession by asking whether or not you could describe the relationship between the two nouns by altering their order and using "of."

The books of the student were lost.	The student's books were lost.
-------------------------------------	--------------------------------

The books of the children were lost.	The children's books were lost.
--------------------------------------	---------------------------------

The books of the students were lost.	The students' books were lost.
--------------------------------------	--------------------------------

A major point of confusion often occurs with the possessive pronoun "its" which does not have an apostrophe and the contracted form of "it is": "it's." Formal writing should avoid contractions, so it should also avoid this problem.

Possessive pronouns

	Singular	Plural
1st	mine	our(s)
2nd	Your(s)	your(s)
3rd	his	their(s) (masculine)
	her(s)	their(s) (feminine)
	its	their(s) (neuter)

6.3 Some writers believe that one should use an apostrophe to indicate the plurals of words—do's and don't's—but I would prefer it if you do not use an apostrophe to form the plural.

7. Punctuation used for Citations

7.1 Quotation Marks. See *SGWL* 282-285 for more examples.

7.1.1 Double quotation marks introduce direct quotations.

Atwood ends her short story with the cryptic assertion that, "They both kept their promises" (14).

7.1.2 Single quotation marks enclose a quotation within a quotation.

When someone expresses surprise that the mason in Giles Vigneault's short story repairs the wall so carefully, he "replied as if he had expected the question all along. 'What pleasure would there be in escaping from a prison that was poorly built?' (4).

7.1.3 Double quotation marks enclose titles of short texts (short poems or short stories) or texts that are part of longer texts (a chapter in a book or an article in a journal).

"The Wall" is a short, provocative story.

- 7.1.4 Quotation marks may be used to enclose words being used in a special sense. These are sometimes called “scare quotes.”

If you know *Friends*, think of the one where Joey tells everyone that he is “sorry.”

- 7.1.5 Place commas and periods inside quotation marks, but colons and semi-colons outside quotation marks. The exception is when you are citing. See examples throughout this handout and in SGWL 282-284 for these conventions.

7.2 Parentheses and Square Brackets

- 7.2.1 Parentheses enclose parenthetical expressions. They always come in pairs.

Punctuate any sentence with parentheses (which enclose non-essential information) as if that part of the sentence is not even there.

- 7.2.2 Use parenthesis to include citation information. In short quotations, the period should follow the parenthetical information.

The authors of *A Short Guide to Writing about Literature* insist that, “Learning to write is in large measure learning to read” (3).

- 7.2.3 Use square brackets to include parentheses within parentheses, following the same rule as the single quotation marks inside double quotation marks, or to indicate that you have altered part of a citation.

The authors of *A Short Guide to Writing about Literature* continue by stating that, “The text you must read most carefully is the one you write, an essay you will ask someone else to read. [...] To produce something that another person will find worth reading, you yourself must read each draft

with care, trying to imagine the effect your words are likely to have on your reader” (3).

7.3 The ellipsis

- 7.3.1 Use an ellipsis mark and square brackets to indicate when you have omitted material in a citation, as in the example of 7.2.3.

- 7.3.1 An ellipsis can also indicate when a sentence trails off without...

Bibliography

Aaron, Jane and Murray McArthur. *The Little, Brown Compact Handbook*, 3rd Canadian Edition. Toronto: Pearson, 2006.

Atwood, Margaret. “Marrying the Hangman.” *A Short Guide to Writing about Literature*, 2nd Canadian Edition. Sylvan Barnet, Reid Gilbert, and William E. Cain. Toronto: Pearson Longman, 2004. 13-14.

Babington, Doug and Don LePan. *The Broadview Guide to Writing*, 3rd Edition. Peterborough: Broadview Press, 2005.

Barnet, Sylvan, Reid Gilbert, and William E. Cain. *A Short Guide to Writing about Literature*, 2nd Canadian Edition. Toronto: Pearson Longman, 2004.

Iyer, Pico, “In Praise of the Humble Comma.” *Essay Writing for Canadian Students with Readings*. Kay L. Stewart, Chris J. Bullock, and Marian E. Allen. Toronto: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2004. 270-272.

Truss, Lynn. *Eats, Shoots, & Leaves: The Zero Tolerance Approach to Punctuation*. London: Profile Books, 2003.

Vigneault, Giles, “The Wall.” Trans. Jacqueline de Puthod. *A Short Guide to Writing about Literature*, 2nd Canadian Edition. Sylvan Barnet, Reid Gilbert, and William E. Cain. Toronto: Pearson Longman, 2004. 3-4.