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Quotation marks are primarily used to indicate material that is being reproduced word for word, as well as some other important uses. Though not necessarily logical, the American rules for multiple punctuation with quotation marks are firmly established. (See here for a brief explanation of the British style.) Commas and periods that are part of the overall sentence go inside the quotation marks, even though they aren't part of the original quotation. Correct "The best investments today," according to Smith, "are commodities and emerging-market stocks." Incorrect "The best investments today", according to Smith, "are commodities and emerging-market stocks". Unless they are part of the original quotation, all marks other than commas or periods are placed outside the quotation marks. Correct She provides a thorough list of problems in her most recent article, "Misery in Paradise"; she doesn't provide a solution. Incorrect She provides a thorough list of problems in her most recent article, "Misery in Paradise," she doesn't provide a solution. Correct Wasn't it Dickens who wrote, "He was the best of times, it was the worst of times?" Incorrect Wasn't it Dickens who wrote, "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times?" For more on the proper use of multiple punctuation at the end of a sentence, see here. There are two ways to incorporate quotations into your writing, run-in quotations and block quotations. Short quotations can generally be run in to the main text using quotation marks. Example In his novel White Noise, Don DeLillo neatly summarizes the materialist philosophy: "It's all this activity in the brain and you don't know what's you as a person and what's some neuron that just happens to fire or just happens to misfire." Longer quotations should be set off from the main text, and are referred to as block quotations. Because the quoted material is set off from the main text, it is not necessary to use quotation marks. Style varies, but at a minimum a block quotation should have a bigger left-hand margin than the main text. In contrast to the main text, a block quotation might also have a bigger right-hand margin, be in a smaller or otherwise different font, and have reduced line spacing. Example In Walden, Henry David Thoreau makes the case for following one's dreams: I learned this, at least, by my experiment: that if one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams, and endeavors to live the life which he has imagined, he will meet with a success unexpected in common hours. He will put some things behind, will pass an invisible boundary: new, universal, and more liberal laws will begin to establish themselves around and within him; or the old laws be expanded, and interpreted in his favor in a more liberal sense, and he will live with the license of a higher order of beings. How do you determine if your quotation is short (allowing it to be incorporated into the main text) or long (requiring a block quotation)? It depends. For academic writing, the MLA Handbook requires block quotations whenever the quoted material exceeds four lines, while the American Psychological Association (APA) requires block quotations for anything exceeding forty words. The Chicago Manual of Style suggests 100 words or more as a general rule, but offers many factors other than length to be considered. The comma is the mark most frequently used to introduce quoted material. Examples The flight attendant asked, "May I see your boarding pass?" Buddha says, "Even death is not to be feared by one who has lived wisely." Colon A colon should be used when the text introducing the quoted material could stand as a sentence on its own. It is also the mark most commonly used to introduce a block quotation. Example In Food Rules, Michael Pollan summarizes his extensive writing about food with seven words of advice: "Eat food. Not too much. Mostly plants." Period A period can be used to introduce a block quotation when the introductory text stands on its own as a complete sentence. In such cases, a colon is also proper—and sometimes preferable. No punctuation When the quoted material flows directly from your introductory text, no punctuation should be used before the quotation. A very short quotation may also be introduced without punctuation. The unpunctuated lead-in is most commonly used with run-in quotations, but it is also appropriate for introducing block quotations that flow directly from the introductory text. Examples In her closing statement, the prosecutor spoke forcefully of the defendant's "callous disregard for human life." Though marshaling little evidence, the authors claim that "over half of British prisoners come from single-parent households." We tried to persuade him, but he said "No way." The phrase "be that as it may" appears far too often in this manuscript. When a run-in quotation contains quotation marks within the quoted material itself, use single quotation marks in their place. When the material being quoted contains a quotation within a quotation (i.e., something in single quotation marks), use double quotation marks. Example The author's final argument is less convincing: "When Brown writes of 'interpreting the matter through a "structuralist" lens,' he opens himself to the same criticism he made earlier in his own paper." Quotation marks can be used when referring to a specific word or letter. (Some writers instead use italics for this purpose, as I have in this guide.) Example In the previous sentence, "letter" was properly spelled with two "t"s. As an alternative to parentheses, quotation marks can be used to enclose a translation. In this case, it is necessary to set the translation off with commas. Example His knowledge of Portuguese is limited to obrigado, "thank you," and adeus, "goodbye." Less commonly, single quotation marks are used in place of parentheses, in which case the translation is not set off with commas. Also, any punctuation other than the comma required by the structure of the sentence is placed outside the single quotation marks. Example His knowledge of Portuguese is limited to obrigado "thank you" and adeus "goodbye". Semicolon Semicolons (also known as sneer quotes) are used to cast doubt on a word or phrase, or to emphasize that the word or phrase is being used as a euphemism. Examples He rarely spoke of the "incident" that caused him to leave his previous employer. The think tanks' "analysis" of the issue left much to be desired. When inserted in the middle of a person's actual name, a nickname should appear in quotation marks. Example Henry M. "Hank" Paulson Jr. Greg "The Shark" Norman In informal writing, feet and inches are sometimes expressed as, for example, 5' 10" (read: five feet and ten inches). Technically, the mark designating feet is a prime; the mark designating inches is a double prime. These marks are available in most word processors, though many people simply use single and double quotation marks: 5' 10". Periods and commas are placed outside the prime and double prime marks. The comma might be the most troublesome punctuation mark. This is largely due to the many different ways the comma is used. Sometimes, the comma indicates a pause that would occur if the sentence were spoken aloud. Other times, the comma separates grammatical components of the sentence. Finally, there are mechanical and stylistic uses of the comma that are simply conventional. The presence or absence of a comma can change the meaning of a sentence—sometimes dramatically. In extreme cases, an erroneous comma can make a sentence mean the exact opposite of what the writer intended. A careful writer must be a careful user of commas. There are several uses of the comma that can best be described as conventional or mechanical. The use or omission of the comma is well established, and writers need only to apply the rules. Most authorities, including The Associated Press Stylebook and The Chicago Manual of Style, recommend a comma after the first digit of a four-digit number. The exceptions include years, page numbers, and street addresses. Examples We sold 1,270 rare books last year; the most expensive sold for \$5,255. On page 1270 of the report, his address is listed as 5255 Ocean View Drive as of February 5, 2008. The trend with these labels is to omit the comma. Examples David White Jr. is the father of David White III. He was formerly a senior vice president at Apple Inc. When a degree or certification is shown after a person's name, it should be set off with commas. Examples The report was prepared by Christopher Smith, PhD. Jane Jones, Esq., has joined the board of directors. Tom Roberts Jr., MD, FACS, will be the keynote speaker at next year's conference. When directly addressing someone, the person's name or title should be set off with commas. Examples We could not have done it without you, Lisa. Thank you, Governor, for your support. Lori, please stop by my office before you leave for the day. When a date consists of the day of the month followed by the year, the day of the month should be followed by a comma. When the day of the week is provided before the month, the day of the week should be followed by a comma. When the date appears in the middle of a sentence, commas should appear both before and after the year. Examples The store closed its doors for good on Wednesday, October 15, 1958. Her arrival on Monday, April 11, 1988, was considered a turning point for the company. When a date is used as an adjective, most authorities require a comma following the year. Yet at least one significant authority (Bryan Garner, in his fourth edition of Garner's Modern English Usage) omits it. Given the uncertainty, it is best to recast the sentence. Uncertain The July 10, 2011, meeting was canceled due to a hurricane watch. Revised The meeting scheduled for July 10, 2011, was canceled due to a hurricane watch. No comma is used between the month and the year when they are the only two elements in the date. Correct Cyclone Gabrielle devastated parts of New Zealand's North Island in February 2023. Incorrect Cyclone Gabrielle devastated parts of New Zealand's North Island in February, 2023. The British style, sometimes used by American writers, reverses the month and day, which eliminates the need for a comma. (See also the essay discussing British and American usage.) Example Her arrival on 11 April 1988 was considered a turning point for the company. Commas should be used to separate geographic elements, as in the examples below. The final geographic element should also be followed by a comma when it appears in the middle of a sentence. Examples The mayor of New York was the first guest to arrive; the mayor of Athens, Georgia, was the last to arrive. His family moved from Bristol, England, to Portsmouth, New Hampshire, when he was eight. The company has headquarters in Sydney, New South Wales, Australia. Though not necessarily mechanical, the use of commas in lists is well established. In this usage, the comma separates a series of words, phrases, or independent clauses. Do not place a comma after the last item in the list (see fourth example below) unless the structure of the sentence otherwise requires it (see third example below, in which the comma after audience is required to separate an introductory dependent clause from the main clause). Examples For your entree, you may choose vegetarian pasta, beef, chicken, or salmon. Jane will bring the food, Jose will bring the drinks, John will bring the music, and Jackie will bring the cops. With dignity, grace, and a tremendous empathy for his audience, he delivered the most moving eulogy. I am taking art history, Russian literature, microeconomics, and macroeconomics next semester. The final comma in a list of items is known as an Oxford comma or serial comma. Some writers omit it, but doing so can cause confusion. In the example immediately above, the serial comma makes it clear that the writer is taking two separate economics courses next semester. Omitting the serial comma makes this unclear. Is it one course covering both microeconomics and macroeconomics, or is it two separate courses? Even though not all sentences will be unclear with the omission of the serial comma, its consistent use is a good habit. (See also the essay on style.) When a noun is modified by more than one adjective, each of which independently modifies the noun, the adjectives should be separated by a comma. In this usage, the comma substitutes for the conjunction and. Examples The wine offered a fragrant, captivating bouquet. It was a long, noisy, nauseating flight. When there are three or more modifying adjectives, it is perfectly acceptable to treat them as a conventional list and include the conjunction and. Example It was a long, noisy, and nauseating flight. If sequential adjectives do not individually modify a noun, they should not be separated by a comma. In the example below, the balloon is bright red, not bright red and white. Correct: He held a bright red balloon. Incorrect: He held a bright, red balloon. When an adjective or adverb is repeated for emphasis, a comma is required. Correct This is a very, very violent movie. Incorrect This is a very, very violent movie. After lists, the most important function of the comma is to set off nonrestrictive or nonessential information. Compare the two sentences below, in which the presence or absence of a comma indicates important information. Example I will give the document to my brother, Tom. Explanation: The writer has only one brother. The brother's name is (grammatically) nonessential and therefore set off with a comma. Example I will give the document to my brother Tom. Explanation: The writer has more than one brother. In this case, the specific brother—Tom—is essential information and should not be set off with a comma. Correct Nathaniel Hawthorne's novel The Scarlet Letter has been made into several movies. Explanation: Hawthorne wrote more than one novel. Incorrect Nathaniel Hawthorne's novel, The Scarlet Letter, has been made into several movies. Correct Nathaniel Hawthorne's first novel, Fanshawe, was published anonymously in 1828. Explanation: Hawthorne had only one first novel. Incorrect Nathaniel Hawthorne's first novel Fanshawe was published anonymously in 1828. When an explanation or definition occurs as an appositive, it should be set off with commas. Examples Mary Smith, a staff writer at the Times, recently wrote a book on that subject. The building's window placement, referred to by architects as fenestration, is among its most distinctive features. These words are frequently misused. That serves as a restrictive pronoun and therefore does not take a comma. Example John's cars that are leased are never kept clean. Explanation: In this case, the dirty cars that are leased are specifically those that John leased; John might have non-leased cars that are kept clean. Which serves as a nonrestrictive pronoun and therefore requires a comma. Example John's cars, which are leased, are never kept clean. Explanation: In this case, all of John's cars are dirty. The fact that those cars are leased is not essential to the meaning of the sentence. When a nonessential word or phrase occurs in the middle of a sentence, it should be set off with commas. Examples Your work has been, frankly, awful. The hotel, once we finally found it, was very nice. When a word or phrase occurs at the beginning of a sentence, a comma should usually separate it from the main clause. Examples Yes, we expect to attend the Christmas party. No, you shouldn't respond to a rhetorical question. Honestly, why would you ever think that? To be honest, I didn't enjoy the food. In my opinion, the movie was more compelling than the book. When a word or phrase follows the main clause at the end of a sentence, it should normally be set off with a comma. Examples I found the painting rather dull, to be honest. You will be joining us for dinner, won't you? Leave some food for me, please. We will not be attending the reception, however. When a sentence ends with an adverb that is essential to the meaning of the sentence, the adverb should not be set off with a comma. Examples We visited Berlin too. We took the train instead. This is where things get tricky. Mastering the proper use of the comma in these situations is impossible without at least some understanding of grammar. The rules are easiest to learn and deploy if you first understand four common sentence types: compound, simple, complex, and compound-complex. A compound sentence contains two or more independent clauses linked by a coordinating conjunction. Independent clauses are those that can stand alone as complete sentences. The most common coordinating conjunctions are and, but, and or. In certain cases, nor, yet, so, and for act as coordinating conjunctions. Rule: Use a comma before a coordinating conjunction that joins two independent clauses. Examples She purchased the car, but she declined the extended warranty. The prime minister's plan seemed quickly and sloppily put together, and the opposition party immediately attacked it. Are you traveling in first class, or does your employer limit you to business class on international flights? I lost my job, so I can't afford to go to Europe this summer. Exception to the rule: When the independent clauses are closely connected and short, you may omit the comma. Example Elizabeth flew to the conference and Nancy drove. A simple sentence contains only one independent clause and no dependent clauses. When a simple sentence contains a conjunction, you might be tempted to insert a comma before the conjunction, as you do with a compound sentence. With a simple sentence, however, the general rule is to omit the comma. Rule: Do not use a comma before a coordinating conjunction if the sentence contains only one independent clause. Examples She purchased the car but not the extended warranty. Are you traveling in first class or in business class? Exception to the rule: If omitting the comma leads to confusion or lack of clarity, insert the comma. Example The alumni's fundraising was better this year than last, and better than expected. A complex sentence contains an independent clause and one or more dependent clauses. A dependent clause, unlike an independent clause, cannot stand on its own as a complete sentence. The conjunctions and prepositions most commonly used to introduce a dependent clause include if, because, while, as, although, since, and unless. Rule: If the dependent clause comes before the independent clause, separate it with a comma. Examples If you can't see without your glasses, you shouldn't be driving. Because of the thunderstorm, our flight has been delayed. Though I don't doubt his sincerity, I cannot agree with his position on that issue. When a sentence begins with two dependent clauses that both apply to the subsequent independent clause, insert only a single comma after the second dependent clause. Example If you eat a balanced diet and exercise for a few hours each day, you will feel healthier. Rule: If the independent clause comes before the dependent clause, omit the comma. Examples You shouldn't be driving if you can't see without your glasses. Our flight has been delayed because of the thunderstorm. Exception to the rule: If the dependent clause is not essential to the meaning of the sentence, it should be set off with a comma. Example I cannot agree with his position on that issue, though I don't doubt his sincerity. Explanation: Not doubting his sincerity is not the reason I cannot agree with his position; it is merely an additional piece of information. Rule: If the dependent clause occurs in the middle of a sentence, use commas if it is nonessential; do not use commas if it is essential. Examples The guests, who were all close friends of the president, refused to speak about the events that evening. The guests who arrived more than an hour late were greeted coolly by the host. A compound-complex sentence contains two or more independent clauses, each of which contains at least one dependent clause. Rule: When a sentence contains two or more independent clauses, each of which contains at least one dependent clause, use commas to separate the independent clauses. Example After three weeks on set, the cast was fed up with his direction (or, rather, lack of direction). The em dash can be used in place of a colon when you want to emphasize the conclusion of your sentence. The dash is less formal than the colon. When a dependent clause occurs between two independent clauses and applies only to the second, the dependent clause should be set off with commas. Example The prime minister's plan seemed quickly and sloppily put together, and when they saw it, the opposition party immediately attacked it. When you diligently apply the rules described above, you sometimes end up with a sentence nearly bursting with commas. For example: Example I originally wanted to be a rock star, but I decided to become an investment banker. This is a compound sentence (i.e., one with two independent clauses joined by the conjunction but), the rule for which is to insert a comma before the conjunction. If you want to add a nonessential comment before the second clause, you end up with this: Example I originally wanted to be a rock star, but, in the end, I decided to become an investment banker. This sentence appears to follow the rules described above. There is a comma before the conjunction (but), and the nonessential comment (in the end) is set off with a pair of commas. There was a time when this sentence would be punctuated exactly this way. Today, such a sentence is considered over-punctuated. There are two schools of thought on how best to lighten the punctuation of such a sentence. The traditional approach, advocated by William Strunk Jr. in The Elements of Style, removes the comma after the conjunction. Thus: Example I originally wanted to be a rock star, but in the end, I decided to become an investment banker. With this approach, the commas reflect the natural pausing points if the sentence were to be read aloud. Yet some writers object to this. They argue that whatever is inside a pair of commas should be capable of being removed without turning the sentence into nonsense. In this case, applying that test results in this: Example I originally wanted to be a rock star I decided to become an investment banker. That sentence does not make sense. The contemporary school of thought instead removes the comma before the conjunction: Example I originally wanted to be a rock star but, in the end, I decided to become an investment banker. Now when you remove the comma-bracketed material you get: Example I originally wanted to be a rock star but I decided to become an investment banker. The resulting sentence makes sense. But it's missing the comma that is ordinarily required before the conjunction linking two independent clauses. What's the solution? There are at least two possibilities. The nonessential in the end comment doesn't really need to be bracketed by commas; the meaning is clear enough without them. Example I originally wanted to be a rock star, but in the end I decided to become an investment banker. The other approach is to introduce a semicolon. This eliminates the troubling conjunction (but). Example I originally wanted to be a rock star; in the end, I decided to become an investment banker. The em dash is perhaps the most versatile punctuation mark. Depending on the context, the em dash can take the place of commas, parentheses, or colons—in each case to slightly different effect. Notwithstanding its versatility, the em dash is best limited to two appearances per sentence. Otherwise, confusion rather than clarity is likely to result. Do not mistake the em dash (—) for the slightly narrower en dash (–) or the even narrower hyphen (-). Those marks serve different purposes and are further explained in other sections. A pair of em dashes can be used in place of commas to enhance readability. Note, however, that dashes are always more emphatic than commas. Example And yet, when the car was finally delivered—nearly three months after it was ordered—she decided she no longer wanted it, leaving the dealer with an oddly equipped car that would be difficult to sell. A pair of em dashes can replace a pair of parentheses. Dashes are considered less formal than parentheses; they are also more intrusive. If you want to draw attention to the parenthetical content, use dashes. If you want to include the parenthetical content more subtly, use parentheses. Note that when dashes are used in place of parentheses, surrounding punctuation should be omitted. Compare the following examples. Examples Upon discovering the errors (all 124 of them), the publisher immediately recalled the books. Upon discovering the errors—all 124 of them—the publisher immediately recalled the books. When used in place of parentheses at the end of a sentence, only a single em dash is used. Examples After three weeks on set, the cast was fed up with his direction (or, rather, lack of direction). After three weeks on set, the cast was fed up with his direction—or, rather, lack of direction. The em dash can be used in place of a colon when you want to emphasize the conclusion of your sentence. The dash is less formal than the colon. Examples After months of deliberation, the jurors reached a unanimous verdict—guilty. The white sand, the warm water, the sparkling sun—this is what brought them to Fiji. Two em dashes can be used to indicate missing portions of a word, whether unknown or intentionally omitted. Examples Mr. J—— testified that the defendant yelled, "Die, a—," before pulling the trigger. From the faded and water-damaged note, we made out only this: "Was ne—y going to m— K—, but now —t." When an entire word is missing, either two or three em dashes can be used. Whichever length you choose, use it consistently throughout your document. Surrounding punctuation should be placed as usual. Example The juvenile defendant, ———, was arraigned yesterday. The em dash is typically used without spaces on either side, and that is the style used in this guide. Most newspapers, however, set the em dash off with a single space on each side. Example Most newspapers — and all that follow AP style — insert a space before and after the em dash. Many word processors will automatically insert an em dash when you type a pair of hyphens. Otherwise, look for an "insert symbol" command. If you are using a typewriter, a pair of hyphens is the closest you can get to an em dash. There are two major styles of English punctuation: American (commonly followed also in Canada) and British (commonly followed also in Australia and New Zealand). Over the years, these two styles have converged. The few major differences that remain are described below. American style uses double quotes (") for initial quotations, then single quotes (') for quotations within the initial quotation. American style "Economic systems," according to Professor White, "are an inevitable byproduct of civilization, and are, as John Doe said, 'with us whether we want them or not.'" British style uses single quotes for initial quotations, then double quotes (") for quotations within the initial quotation. British style "Economic systems," according to Professor White, "are an inevitable byproduct of civilization, and are, as John Doe said, 'with us whether we want them or not.'" The above examples also show that the American style places commas and periods inside the quotation marks, even if they are not in the original material. British style (more sensibly) places unquoted periods and commas outside the quotation marks. For all other punctuation, the British and American styles are in agreement: unless the punctuation is part of the quoted material, it goes outside the quotation marks. Mr., Mrs., and Ms. all take periods in American English. In British English, the periods are omitted. British usage dictates a period between the hours and minutes when writing the time (e.g., 10.30). American usage dictates a colon (e.g., 10:30). Though not necessarily a matter of punctuation, there is one important distinction between American and British usage when it comes to dates. American usage puts the month followed by the day, and then the year. Hence, 12/5/2010 means December 5, 2010, in American usage. The British practice (followed in most of the world) is to put the day first, followed by the month. Hence, 12/5/2010 means May 12, 2010, in British usage. The International Organization for Standardization (ISO) has established the YYYY-MM-DD format, in which December 5, 2010, would be written 2010-12-05. Whether this will catch on with American writers remains to be seen. In the meantime, writing out the month will avoid confusion. Parentheses (always used in pairs) allow a writer to provide additional information. The parenthetical material might be a single word, a fragment, or multiple complete sentences. Whatever the material inside the parentheses, it must not be grammatically integral to the surrounding sentence. If it is, the sentence must be recast. This is an easy mistake to avoid. Simply read your sentence without the parenthetical content. If it remains grammatically correct, the parentheses are acceptable; if it doesn't, the punctuation must be altered. Correct The president (and his assistant) traveled by private jet. Incorrect The president (and his assistant) were expected to arrive by 10:00 a.m. When a parenthetical sentence stands on its own, the closing punctuation mark for the sentence is placed inside the closing parenthesis. Example The idea that theoretical physics can be taught without reference to complex mathematics is patently absurd. (But don't tell that to the publishers of such mathematics-free books—or the people who buy them.) When parenthetical content occurs at the end of a larger sentence, the closing punctuation mark for the sentence is placed outside the closing parenthesis. Example After three weeks on set, the cast was fed up with his direction (or, rather, lack of direction). When parenthetical content occurs in the middle of a larger sentence, the surrounding punctuation should be placed outside the parentheses, exactly as it would be if the parenthetical content were not there. Example We verified his law degree (Yale, class of 2002), but his work history remains unconfirmed. When a complete sentence occurs in parentheses in the middle of a larger sentence, it should neither be capitalized nor end with a period—though a question mark or exclamation point is acceptable. Example We verified his law degree (none of us thought he was lying about that) but not his billion-dollar verdict against Exxon (how gullible did he think we were?). Numbered or lettered lists should use a pair of parentheses to enclose the numbers or letters. Example Please submit the following four items with your application: (1) a cover letter, (2) a resume, (3) a college transcript, and (4) a list of professional references. Time zones are usually enclosed in parentheses following the time. Example The conference call will be held at 9:00 a.m. (EST). Area codes are sometimes enclosed in parentheses. Example If you have any questions, please call me at (212) 555-7875. Short translations in unquoted text can be placed in parentheses. (Use brackets for translations in quoted text.) Example His knowledge of Portuguese is limited to obrigado (thank you) and adeus (goodbye). In some writing, a person's year of birth and year of death are provided in parentheses when the person is first mentioned. If there is uncertainty about the year, a question mark should follow it. Note that an en dash, rather than hyphen, is used between the years. Example Guido Cavalcanti (1257?-1300) had a profound influence on the writings of Dante. On the first use of an abbreviation or acronym that might not be understood by your readers, the full term can be provided in parentheses. Example John Smith has been appointed CKO (chief knowledge officer) of the merged company. In reverse, an acronym or abbreviation can be provided in parentheses upon its first use, and then used in place of the full term in the remainder of the document. Example In conducting the study, researchers relied on positron emission tomography (PET) and, to a lesser extent, functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI). The slash (/), also known as the virgule, has several uses, most of which should be avoided in formal writing. Never use a backslash (\) in place of a slash. The one arguably acceptable use of the slash in formal writing pertains to poetry. The slash, with one space on either side, indicates a line break. Example In choosing your path in life, you might consider the words of Robert Frost, in his poem "The Road Not Taken": "I took the one less traveled by / And that has made all the difference." The slash sometimes serves as shorthand for per. Examples An \$800/month salary. A top speed of 250 km/h. The slash sometimes serves as shorthand for and. Example He is enrolling in the JD/MBA program at Harvard. The slash sometimes serves as shorthand for or. The use of "and/or," as in the third example below, is often ambiguous and therefore best avoided. A possible rewrite: "The deficit reduction will be achieved by spending cuts or tax increases or both." Examples Each week must present his/her ticket prior to entry. Once the new president is elected, he/she will have little time to waste. The deficit reduction will be achieved by spending cuts and/or tax increases. The Latin preposition cum means "combined with," "also used as," or "along with being." The slash is sometimes used to convey the same meaning. Examples He worked in his office/cum-dining room. He worked in his office/dining room. She felt burned out after working for fifteen years in Hollywood as a manager/therapist. She felt burned out after working for fifteen years in Hollywood as a manager/therapist. Certain abbreviations are formed with a slash. Examples c/o (care of) P/E ratio (price-to-earnings ratio) w/ (with) The slash is used to separate the numerator from the denominator in fractions. The slash is sometimes used to represent a conflict or connection between two things. As explained here, the en dash can perform the same role. Slash The Paris/London train leaves in an hour. This perfectly illustrates the nature/nurture debate. En dash The Paris–London train leaves in an hour. This perfectly illustrates the nature–nurture debate. The slash is sometimes used to indicate something spanning two years. Examples Everyone is still talking about the 1995/96 winter windstorm. This audit covers only the 2005/6 fiscal year. The Punctuation Guide.com Terminal points Posing points Hyphens and dashes Quotations Other punctuation Other matters About this guide Contact the editor © 2011-2023 thepunctuationguide.com. All rights reserved. Privacy policy For most writers, the hyphen's primary function is the formation of certain compound terms. The hyphen is also used for word division, which is briefly explained here. Never use a hyphen in place of an en dash or an em dash. Compound terms are those that consist of more than one word but represent a single item or idea. They come in three styles. Open (or spaced) compounds are written as separate words. Open printing press car wash chief of staff Hyphenated compounds use hyphens between the words. Hyphenated eye-opener chugging in free-for-all Closed (or solid) compounds are written as a single word. Closed lifestyle bookstore whodunit Compound nouns are the easiest to deal with: most of them can be looked up in a good dictionary. Keep in mind, though, that many compound nouns start out spaced or hyphenated before eventually becoming solid, with dictionaries often lagging behind current usage. Compound verbs (e.g., waterproof, highlight, rubber-stamp, nickel-and-dime) are also typically included in a dictionary. The most difficult compound terms to deal with are the compound adjectives. For one thing, most of them will not be found in any dictionary. For another, whether they are hyphenated or not depends on their position within a sentence. Whether to hyphenate or not is often a matter of style. Some basic guidance is offered below. Two or more words that collectively act as an adjective should be hyphenated when they appear immediately before the noun they modify. This helps prevent misreading. Examples Voters are fed up with this do-nothing congress. The victim is being described only as a twenty-five-year-old man. Does this come with a money-back guarantee? The house comes with a state-of-the-art security system. Though the one-bedroom apartments are sold out, we still have several two-, three-, and four-bedroom units available. The major exception is when the compound adjective begins with an adverb ending in -ly. In that case, since a misreading is unlikely, the hyphen is unnecessary. If the -ly adverb is part of a larger compound adjective, use a hyphen. Examples This is a poorly produced movie. He followed up with a not-so-poorly-produced sequel. Certain particularly complex compounds can be formed with an en dash rather than a hyphen, as explained here. In professionally printed material (particularly books, magazines, and newspapers), the hyphen is used to divide words between the end of one line and the beginning of the next. This allows for an evenly aligned right margin without highly variable (and distracting) word spacing. The rules for such word division are beyond the scope of this guide; they are also beyond the needs of most writers. If you are writing for a publication that requires it, the word division will be handled by the typesetter. 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In contrast with the examples above, when the question mark is part of a title of work, a syntactically necessary comma is retained. Note in the first example below that when the question mark is part of the title of a work that is set in italics, as it is in the cited novel, the question mark is italicized. The adjacent comma, which is not part of the title, is not italicized. The question mark that ends the example sentence below is not part of the title of the cited movie, so it is not italicized even though the movie title is. (For more about using italics with titles of works, see here.) Examples Have you read Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep? The Philip Dick novel that inspired the movie Blade Runner? "Is He Living or Is He Dead?" by Mark Twain, is one of my favorite stories. When the question mark in the title comes at the end of a sentence that would itself require a question mark or period, the additional question mark or period is omitted. 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Hence, 12/5/2010 means December 5, 2010, in American usage. The British practice (followed in most of the world) is to put the day first, followed by the month. Hence, 12/5/2010 means May 12, 2010, in British usage. The International Organization for Standardization (ISO) has established the YYYY-MM-DD format, in which December 5, 2010, would be written 2010-12-05. Whether this will catch on with American writers remains to be seen. In the meantime, writing out the month will avoid confusion. Parentheses (always used in pairs) allow a writer to provide additional information. The parenthetical material might be a single word, a fragment, or multiple complete sentences. Whatever the material inside the parentheses, it must not be grammatically integral to the surrounding sentence. If it is, the sentence must be recast. This is an easy mistake to avoid. Simply read your sentence without the parenthetical content. If it remains grammatically correct, the parentheses are acceptable; if it doesn't, the punctuation must be altered. Correct The president (and his assistant) traveled by private jet. Incorrect The president (and his assistant) were expected to arrive by 10:00 a.m. When a parenthetical sentence stands on its own, the closing punctuation mark for the sentence is placed inside the closing parenthesis. Example The idea that theoretical physics can be taught without reference to complex mathematics is patently absurd. (But don't tell that to the publishers of such mathematics-free books—or the people who buy them.) When parenthetical content occurs at the end of a larger sentence, the closing punctuation mark for the sentence is placed outside the closing parenthesis. Example After three weeks on set, the cast was fed up with his direction (or, rather, lack of direction). When parenthetical content occurs in the middle of a larger sentence, the surrounding punctuation should be placed outside the parentheses, exactly as it would be if the parenthetical content were not there. Example We verified his law degree (Yale, class of 2002), but his work history remains unconfirmed. When a complete sentence occurs in parentheses in the middle of a larger sentence, it should neither be capitalized nor end with a period—though a question mark or exclamation point is acceptable. Example We verified his law degree (none of us thought he was lying about that) but not his billion-dollar verdict against Exxon (how gullible did he think we were?). Numbered or lettered lists should use a pair of parentheses to enclose the numbers or letters. Example Please submit the following four items with your application: (1) a cover letter, (2) a resume, (3) a college transcript, and (4) a list of professional references. Time zones are usually enclosed in parentheses following the time. Example The conference call will be held at 9:00 a.m. (EST). Area codes are sometimes enclosed in parentheses. Example If you have any questions, please call me at (212) 555-7875. Short translations in unquoted text can be placed in parentheses. (Use brackets for translations in quoted text.) Example His knowledge of Portuguese is limited to obrigado (thank you) and adeus (goodbye). In some writing, a person's year of birth and year of death are provided in parentheses when the person is first mentioned. If there is uncertainty about the year, a question mark should follow it. Note that an en dash, rather than hyphen, is used between the years. Example Guido Cavalcanti (1257?-1300) had a profound influence on the writings of Dante. On the first use of an abbreviation or acronym that might not be understood by your readers, the full term can be provided in parentheses. Example John Smith has been appointed CKO (chief knowledge officer) of the merged company. In reverse, an acronym or abbreviation can be provided in parentheses upon its first use, and then used in place of the full term in the remainder of the document. Example In conducting the study, researchers relied on positron emission tomography (PET) and, to a lesser extent, functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI). The slash (/), also known as the virgule, has several uses, most of which should be avoided in formal writing. Never use a backslash (\) in place of a slash. The one arguably acceptable use of the slash in formal writing pertains to poetry. The slash, with one space on either side, indicates a line break. Example In choosing your path in life, you might consider the words of Robert Frost, in his poem "The Road Not Taken": "I took the one less traveled by / And that has made all the difference." The slash sometimes serves as shorthand for per. Examples An \$800/month salary. A top speed of 250 km/h. The slash sometimes serves as shorthand for and. Example He is enrolling in the JD/MBA program at Harvard. The slash sometimes serves as shorthand for or. The use of "and/or," as in the third example below, is often ambiguous and therefore best avoided. A possible rewrite: "The deficit reduction will be achieved by spending cuts or tax increases or both." Examples Each week must present his/her ticket prior to entry. Once the new president is elected, he/she will have little time to waste. The deficit reduction will be achieved by spending cuts and/or tax increases. The Latin preposition cum means "combined with," "also used as," or "along with being." The slash is sometimes used to convey the same meaning. Examples He worked in his office/cum-dining room. He worked in his office/dining room. She felt burned out after working for fifteen years in Hollywood as a manager/therapist. She felt burned out after working for fifteen years in Hollywood as a manager/therapist. Certain abbreviations are formed with a slash. Examples c/o (care of) P/E ratio (price-to-earnings ratio) w/ (with) The slash is used to separate the numerator from the denominator in fractions. The slash is sometimes used to represent a conflict or connection between two things. As explained here, the en dash can perform the same role. Slash The Paris/London train leaves in an hour. This perfectly illustrates the nature/nurture debate. En dash The Paris–London train leaves in an hour. This perfectly illustrates the nature–nurture debate. The slash is sometimes used to indicate something spanning two years. Examples Everyone is still talking about the 1995/96 winter windstorm. This audit covers only the 2005/6 fiscal year. The Punctuation Guide.com Terminal points Posing points Hyphens and dashes Quotations Other punctuation Other matters About this guide Contact the editor © 2011-2023 thepunctuationguide.com. All rights reserved. Privacy policy For most writers, the hyphen's primary function is the formation of certain compound terms. The hyphen is also used for word division, which is briefly explained here. Never use a hyphen in place of an en dash or an em dash. Compound terms are those that consist of more than one word but represent a single item or idea. They come in three styles. Open (or spaced) compounds are written as separate words. Open printing press car wash chief of staff Hyphenated compounds use hyphens between the words. Hyphenated eye-opener chugging in free-for-all Closed (or solid) compounds are written as a single word. Closed lifestyle bookstore whodunit Compound nouns are the easiest to deal with: most of them can be looked up in a good dictionary. Keep in mind, though, that many compound nouns start out spaced or hyphenated before eventually becoming solid, with dictionaries often lagging behind current usage. Compound verbs (e.g., waterproof, highlight, rubber-stamp, nickel-and-dime) are also typically included in a dictionary. The most difficult compound terms to deal with are the compound adjectives. For one thing, most of them will not be found in any dictionary. For another, whether they are hyphenated or not depends on their position within a sentence. Whether to hyphenate or not is often a matter of style. Some basic guidance is offered below. Two or more words that collectively act as an adjective should be hyphenated when they appear immediately before the noun they modify. This helps prevent misreading. Examples Voters are fed up with this do-nothing congress. The victim is being described only as a twenty-five-year-old man. Does this come with a money-back guarantee? 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