

Quick Guide: The other punctuation marks

We've recently looked at how to use commas, semi-colons and colons, so this time we will look at how to use the other punctuation marks. They are not as troublesome but here are the answers to questions that we're most often asked on courses.

- 1. The full stop (.)** Used to end sentences so the most common mark used. There is no need to use full stops in people's names, abbreviations or acronyms: **Mr M Mouse, BBC, eg, ie, etc.** Unless of course the abbreviation ends the sentence!
- 2. Exclamation mark (!)** Used after exclamations of surprise, shock or dismay. Use sparingly and singly!!! Do not use if trying to be funny; it can indicate sarcasm instead.
- 3. Question mark (?)** Use after a direct question. There is no need for one if the question is a polite demand: **Will you please let me have your figures by tomorrow.**
- 4. Dash (—)** Sometimes used singly to show the start of an aside, explanation or addition. Or it can be used in pairs to draw attention to the phrase they surround: **Visitors may stay overnight — or for longer if they wish — in the local barn.** A pair of commas or brackets could have been used instead; it is your choice.
- 5. Hyphen (-)** Used in four ways:
 - within words after a prefix or to show a word break: **non-negotiable, self-employed**
 - between linked words eg compass points and compound terms: **South-East, value-added goods**
 - to avoid confusion: **dirty-book salesman** or **dirty book-salesman**
 - when without it the word could mean something else: **re-form, re-act.**
- 6. Quotation marks ("...") – for direct speech.** Used to indicate opening and closing of direct speech. **The minister stated, "There is no alternative so we will just go on as before." Or, "There is no alternative," said the minister. "We will just go on as before."** Note the punctuation mark always comes before the last quotation mark and you must use punctuation between the action and the first speech mark.
- 7. Quotation marks ('...') – for quoting.** Use single quotation marks for highlighting a word or phrase; slogans and straplines; and for the titles of book chapters, journal and magazine articles. If there is a quote within direct speech use double quotation marks for the direct speech and singles for the quote.
- 8. Brackets (1)** Used to surround an aside, explanation or addition that is relatively unimportant to the main text. If a whole sentence is a bracket, start with a capital letter and end with a full stop inside the bracket. If using an acronym several times, spell it out on the first occasion and put the acronym in brackets. You can use the acronym after this.
- 9. Brackets [2]** Square brackets show that the text within does not belong to the document or quotation but is being inserted for clarity: **He [Mr Smith] told me to go home.**
- 10. Ellipsis (...)** An ellipsis indicates omitted text. For example, if you were including a quotation but only wanted the first and last parts, you could use an ellipsis to indicate the middle part. You should use only three dots and there is no space before or after.

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