

Making A Mark

Why is punctuation important? Although there are some rules, the main reason we punctuate is to help our reader. Punctuation guides us through, making it clear what we want to say.

Some punctuation marks are used at word level:

- **A hyphen [-]** is used to join two words into a compound word, for example week-end. After a time, when the compound word has become so well used, the hyphen may disappear. This shows that, to some extent, punctuation is a fashion accessory.
- **Apostrophes** show that a letter has been omitted (apostrophe of contraction) or show that something belongs to somebody. Mind you, more mistakes are probably made by inserting apostrophes where they aren't needed than by leaving them out!

The more important punctuation marks are those which help us with sentence construction. There aren't many of them. The One Page Guide below lists them. So, they may be few in number – but they're big in weight. They are the way we can shape and craft our writing.



A One Page Guide to punctuation marks

Stops and other endings

Full stops [.] mark the end of a sentence – a statement that is complete in itself.

Question marks [?] and exclamation marks [!] are both types of stop, so they follow the same rule as a full stop. But they show the sentence is either a question or an exclamation rather than a statement. They also imply a change of intonation if reading them aloud.

Sentences don't always get completed. In dialogue, for example, a **dash [-]** suggests that a sentence has been interrupted in some way. A string of **suspension dots [...]** is another way of showing a sentence has been left in mid air.

Commas and other dividing marks

Commas [,] are used within sentences, dividing them into units which are not grammatically complete. Commas help to show the reader how the sentence is constructed – and where the pauses come if you are reading the sentence aloud. Commas are also inserted between items in lists. The rules about commas are less clear than the rules about full stops, and deciding whether to use a comma is

sometimes a matter of personal preference.

Colons and semi-colons have been used in various ways over the years. Both these punctuation marks can be seen as “half stops”.

Semi-colons [;] are used in place of a full stop to link two statements which are grammatically independent, but related in meaning. Modern writers tend to use less semi-colons and more full stops, so that sentences are shorter. Like commas, they can also be inserted between items in lists, especially where the items are phrases rather than single words.

The main purpose of a **Colon [:]** is to introduce a list, or a quotation, or an explanation. Only one colon should be used per sentence.

Inverted commas [“xxxx”] (also Speech Marks, or Quotation Marks) surround the words spoken directly by a character in a story, or quoted from a speaker (e.g. in a newspaper article). Their function is to distinguish the different voices in a single piece of writing.

Activity 1:

1. The extract below, from *'Grey is the Colour of Hope'*, a memoir written in 1988 by Russian writer and poet Irina Ratushinskaya, has had all the punctuation removed. Re-write it, inserting the appropriate punctuation marks.

at first there was one locker for every prisoner and the surplus lockers were removed only a year later even so it was a tight squeeze try to picture it for yourself my readers go through your cupboards and wardrobes and pick out what you would consider to be the barest essentials to serve you for the next seven years dont forget to include your maximum allowance of five books letters photographs of your nearest and dearest whom you wont see for years to come stamps envelopes those treacherous underclothes a couple of towels

2. Compare your punctuated version with a partner's attempt. Are there differences? Discuss why each of you chose to punctuate it the way you did. Would you say rules had been broken in either version? Or could the variations be accepted as matters of personal preference?
3. Now compare your versions with the way Irina Ratushinskaya originally punctuated her piece. Are there differences? Why do you think she chose to punctuate it in the way she did?

At first, there was one locker for every prisoner and the 'surplus' lockers were removed only a year later. Even so, it was a tight squeeze. Try to picture it for yourself, my readers: go through your cupboards and wardrobes and pick out what you would consider to be the barest essentials to serve you for the next seven years. Don't forget to include your maximum allowance of five books, letters, photographs of your nearest and dearest (whom you won't see for years to come), stamps, envelopes, those treacherous underclothes, a couple of towels...

Activity 2:

1. Working in pairs, look at the statements below and investigate whether you think they apply to any sections of the extract from Charles Dickens' *Tale of Two Cities*.

1. The sentences are long and complicated
2. The sentences are mainly simple ones, with just one clause.
3. The sentences often involve two or three parts.
4. Minor sentences are used for dramatic effect.
5. A lot of detailed description is packed into the longer sentences
6. Simple actions are expressed in simple sentences.
7. At tense moments the sentences become shorter and simpler
8. Lists within a sentence build tension
9. There are several types of sentences, for example exclamations, questions, statements, commands.

There is terror in the carriage, there is weeping, there is the heavy breathing of the insensible traveller.

"Are we not going too slowly? Can they not be induced to go faster?" asks Lucie, clinging to the old man.

"It would seem like flight, my darling. I must not urge them too much; it would rouse suspicion."

"Look back, look back, and see if we are pursued!"

"The road is clear, my dearest. So far, we are not pursued..."

Out of the open country, in again among ruinous buildings, solitary farms, dye-works, tanneries, and the like, cottages in twos and threes, avenues of leafless trees. Have these men deceived us, and taken us back by another road? Is not this the same place twice over? Thank Heaven, no. A village. Look back, look back, and see if we are pursued! Hush! the posting-house.

Activity 3:

Working with the same partner, explore the use of punctuation in the following extract from the radio sketch, Applicant, by Harold Pinter. All we know about the interview is the short statement which appears before the dialogue begins:

An office. LAMB, a young man, eager, cheerful, enthusiastic, is striding nervously, alone. The door opens. Miss PIFFS comes in. She is the essence of efficiency.

PIFFS. *Would you say you were an excitable person?*

LAMB. *Not- not unduly, no. Of course, I –*

PIFFS. *Would you say you were a moody person?*

LAMB. *Moody? No, I wouldn't say I was moody -well, sometimes occasionally I –*

PIFFS. *Do you ever get fits of depression?*

LAMB. *Well, I wouldn't call them depression exactly.*

PIFFS. *Do you often do things you regret in the morning?*

LAMB. *Regret? Things I regret? Well, it depends what you mean by often, really -I mean when you say often –*

PIFFS. *Are you often puzzled by women?*

LAMB. *Women?*

PIFFS. *Men.*

LAMB. *Men? Well, I was just going to answer the question about women –*

PIFFS. *Do you often feel puzzled?*

LAMB. *Puzzled?*

PIFFS. *By women.*

LAMB. *Women?*

PIFFS. *Men.*

LAMB. *Oh, now just a minute, I... Look, do you want separate answers or a joint answer?*

PIFFS. *After your day's work do you ever feel tired? Edgy? Fretty? Irritable? At a loose end? Morose? Frustrated? Morbid? Unable to concentrate? Unable to sleep? Unable to eat? [...] [Pause].*

LAMB [thinking]. *Well, it's difficult to say really...*

1. What 'rules' does Pinter break in this extract?
2. What effect do you think Pinter is trying to achieve by the way he uses question marks and dashes?
3. Are Piffs' questions different from Lamb's?

Activity 4:

Working on your own, you are now going to use either the Dickens or the Pinter extract as the starting point for your own creative writing.

- Continue the story/script by "writing on" your own extra section.
- Try to keep the style of the original text