

Quick  
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Tips™

**Grammar Girl's™**

**PUNCTUATION**

**911**

**Your Guide to Writing It Right**



**MIGNON FOGARTY**

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# Grammar Girl's™ Punctuation 911

YOUR GUIDE TO  
WRITING IT RIGHT

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# PUNCH UP YOUR PUNCTUATION

**YOU'VE BRUSHED UP ON YOUR** grammar, you know how to choose the right words, and you've gotten over your writer's block by ignoring all the biddies who say you can't start a sentence with *however*, *and*, and the like. Now all you need is to string all those words together so they actually make sense. Punctuation helps with that.

Punctuation may seem like extraneous little hacks and splashes on the page, but those marks actually help readers stay on track. Punctuation is a polite gesture toward your reader: *Here, dear reader, allow me to guide you through this sentence. It's a long one, and it might be a little confusing, but I've provided clues and signposts along the way. I promise you won't get lost.*

We're going to start out easy with the period and work our way up to the more exotic punctuation marks like ellipses and asterisks. If we make it all the way to the interrobang, I might have to put on an evening gown!

## PERIODICITY

The period is quite a straightforward punctuation mark. I think it's safe to say everyone knows that a period ends a sentence. What everyone doesn't know is how many spaces should come after a period and how to deal with periods in acronyms.

## Space: The Final Frontier

If you learned to type on a typewriter, you were probably taught that you should leave two spaces after a period at the end of a sentence. The space bar on a typewriter makes a space that is the same size regardless of whether you are at the end of a word or the end of a sentence, which is the reason typewriter fonts are called monospaced fonts. In order to make a strong visual break between sentences on a typewriter, you need to type two spaces.

Now that most writing is done on computers, it is no longer necessary to type two spaces after a period at the end of a sentence. Word processing and typesetting software recognizes periods at the end of sentences, and if you are using a proportional font (which most fonts are these days), font designers have already made sure a properly sized space will be inserted between sentences.

Technically, whether you put one or two spaces after a period is still a matter of style. Some editors still prefer two spaces, but most style guides recommend one space, and page designers have written in begging me to advise people to leave only one space. They have told me that using two spaces can create unappealing rivers of white space throughout a document, and that if you are writing something that layout or design people will ever get their hands on, they will almost certainly have to go through your document and take out the extra space. So I recommend using only one space.

## **Acro-nymo-batics**

No strict rule governs whether you should put periods after each letter in an acronym or initialism. Some publications put periods after each letter, arguing that because each letter is essentially an abbreviation for a word, periods are necessary. Other publications don't put periods after each letter, arguing that the copy looks cleaner without them and that because they are made up of all capital letters, the fact that they are abbreviations is implied.

## **Abbreviation Information**

Any shortened form of a word is an abbreviation, for example, *etc.* for *etcetera* and *Oct.* for *October*; but acronyms are special kinds of

abbreviations, such as *ROFL* (*rolling on the floor laughing*) and *OPEC* (*Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries*), that can be pronounced as words. This makes them a subset of abbreviations. All acronyms are abbreviations, but not all abbreviations are acronyms.

Initialisms are another type of abbreviation. They are often confused with acronyms because they are made up of letters, so they look similar, but they can't be pronounced as words. *FBI* and *CIA* are examples of initialisms because they're made up of the first letters of *Federal Bureau of Investigation* and *Central Intelligence Agency*, respectively, but they aren't usually pronounced as words. (People have written in to tell me that insiders often say "fibby" for *FBI*, but it's not something I've ever heard used among the general public.) *NASA*, on the other hand, is an acronym because even though it is also made up of the first letters of the department name (*National Aeronautics and Space Administration*), it is pronounced as a word, *NASA*, and not by spelling out the letters *N, A, S, A*.

When you have an abbreviation at the end of a sentence, don't use a second period. The period at the end of the abbreviation becomes a super period (not the technical term) that does the task of both shortening the abbreviation and ending the sentence. (If you think losing the clear ending to a sentence will confuse your readers, it's best to rewrite the sentence so the abbreviation doesn't come at the end, or write out the full word instead of using the abbreviation.) On the other hand, when you end a question or an exclamation with an abbreviation, you do include both the ending period of the abbreviation and the final question mark or exclamation point.

**Squiggly always wanted to work for the F.B.I.**

**Doesn't Aardvark prefer the C.I.A.?**

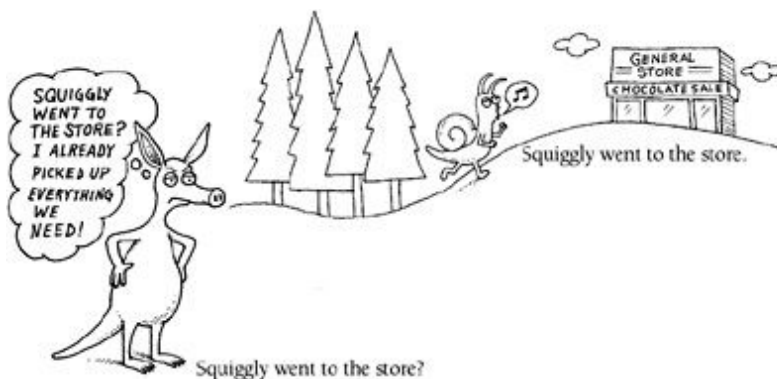
## **THE QUESTION MARK: HUH?**

You think you already know how to ask questions, don't you? I wonder if you're right.



Everybody knows how to write a plain vanilla question: *what's new?* They're called direct questions. But there are trickier scenarios. What happens when a sentence seems to be half statement, half question? What if you're asking an indirect question, asking a question that also seems to require an exclamation point, dealing with a quotation that contains a question, and so on?

## Questions Masquerading as Statements



Sometimes even direct questions are tricky because they can look like statements, and the only way to tell your reader otherwise is to add a question mark. There's a big difference in meaning between *Squiggly went to the store.* and *Squiggly went to the store?* Yet the only difference between the two sentences is that one ends with a period and one ends with a question mark. The question mark makes it a direct question that shows surprise. What the heck was he doing at the store?

## A Question Flurry

What if you have a bunch of questions and you want to string them all together?

I love a scene in the movie *Cats & Dogs* where a dog realizes he can talk. It goes something like this: *You can hear me? Can I have a cookie? two cookies? four cookies? twenty cookies?* Those add-on questions at the end aren't complete sentences but they each get a question mark anyway. Since they aren't complete sentences, you usually don't capitalize the first letter, but the rules are vague. Some guides say to capitalize the first letter if the

questions are nearly a sentence or have sentence-like status, so you have to use your own judgment. I don't consider *two cookies* to be nearly a sentence, but I may consider something like *two cookies and a squeaking ball to chase* to be nearly a sentence, which would make me consider capitalizing it.

## Statements with Tag Questions

Now, what about those little questions that come at the end of a statement? *You didn't forget my birthday, did you? It's fun to play maracas, isn't it?*

Bits like *did you* and *isn't it* are called tag questions, and they turn the whole sentence into a question, so use a question mark at the end.

## Indirect Questions

Do you have a curious nature? Do you wonder about things? When you wonder, your statements may sound like questions, but they're not direct questions, they're indirect questions, and they don't take a question mark. For example, *I wonder why he went to the store*. That's an indirect question—essentially a statement—so there's no question mark. *I wonder if Squiggly would lend me his maracas*. Again, it's not a question.

## Indirect Questions Mixed with Direct Questions

It gets really crazy when you start mixing direct questions with other kinds of clauses. There are multiple ways to write something like *The question at hand is, who stole the cookies?* The simplest way to write that is to put a comma after the first clause and a question mark after the direct question.

Believe it or not, some style guides allow you to capitalize the first word in a direct question, even though it comes in the middle of a sentence: *The question at hand is, Who stole the cookies?* Supposedly, capitalizing the first word in the question places more emphasis on the question, but I think it makes the sentence look disjointed.

And if you think that looks weird, it gets even worse. If you flip the two parts around, you can put a question mark in the middle of your sentence: *Who stole the cookies? was the question at hand.*

It's good to know the rules, but these sentences seem so contorted that I believe it is better to try to rewrite them. I could easily convert the sentence to an indirect question: *Everyone wondered who stole the cookies.* Or I could use a colon to make the punctuation less odd: *One question remained: who stole the cookies?*

## Surprising Questions

We made it to the interrobang! The fun begins, so imagine me in an evening gown. When you're asking a question in surprise such as *What?* it isn't appropriate to use multiple question marks or a question mark combined with an exclamation point. You're supposed to pick the terminal punctuation mark that is most appropriate, and use just one. Is your statement more of a question or more of an outburst?

I've always found that solution unsatisfactory, so I was thrilled to learn that there's an obscure punctuation mark that was designed exclusively for asking questions in a surprised manner. It's called an interrobang, and it looks like an exclamation point superimposed on a question mark.

?

You shouldn't use the interrobang in formal writing, but I would be delighted if people started using it on blogs and in other informal communications. If you have the Wingdings 2 or Palatino font in your word processing program, you can insert an interrobang as a special character.

## SEMICOLONS: THE SENTENCE SPLICERS

Semicolons separate things. Most commonly, they separate two main clauses that are closely related to each other but could stand on their own as sentences if you wanted them to. I think of semicolons as sentence splicers: they splice sentences together.

**It was below zero; Squiggly wondered if he would freeze to death.**

**It was below zero. Squiggly wondered if he would freeze to death.**

One reason you may choose to use a semicolon instead of a period is if you wanted to add variety to your sentence structure; for example, if you thought you had too many short, choppy sentences in a row, you could add variety by using a semicolon to string together two main clauses into one longer sentence. But, when you use a semicolon, the main clauses should be closely related to each other. You wouldn't write, "It was below zero; Squiggly had pizza for dinner," because those two main clauses have nothing to do with each other. In fact, the other reason to use a semicolon instead of a period is to draw attention to the relationship between the two clauses.

## **Semicolons with Coordinating Conjunctions**

An important thing to remember is that (with one exception) you never use semicolons with coordinating conjunctions such as *and*, *or*, and *but* when you're joining two main clauses. If you're joining two main clauses with a coordinating conjunction, use a comma: *It was below zero, and Squiggly wondered if he would freeze to death.*

The one exception is when you are writing a list of items and need commas to separate items within the list.

**This week's winners are Herbie in Des Moines, Iowa; Matt in Irvine, California; and Jan in Seattle, Washington.**

Because each item in the list requires a comma to separate the city from the state, you have to use a semicolon to separate the items themselves.

## Semicolons with Conjunctive Adverbs

Finally, you use a semicolon when you use a conjunctive adverb to join two main clauses. Conjunctive adverbs are words such as *however*, *therefore*, and *indeed*, and they typically show some kind of relationship between the two main clauses. Examples of words that can be used as conjunctive adverbs include the following:

**Accordingly**

**Again**

**Also**

**Anyway**

**Besides**

**Certainly**

**Consequently**

**Finally**

**Furthermore**

**Hence**

**However**

**Incidentally**

**Indeed**

**Instead**

**Likewise**

**Meanwhile**

**Moreover**

**Namely**

**Nevertheless**

**Next**

**Nonetheless**

**Otherwise**

**Similarly**

**Specifically**

**Still**

**Subsequently**

**Then**

**Therefore**

**Thus**

## **SUBORDINATING CONJUNCTIONS**

Subordinating conjunctions join subordinate clauses to other clauses. Following is a list of common subordinating conjunctions:

**After**  
**Although**  
**As**  
**As if**  
**As in**  
**As long as**  
**Because**  
**Before**  
**Despite**  
**Even though**  
**How**  
**If**

**Aardvark is on vacation; therefore, Squiggly has to do extra work in this chapter.**  
**Squiggly doesn't mind doing the extra work; however, he would like to be thanked.**

Sometimes people find it hard to remember to use commas with coordinating conjunctions and semicolons with conjunctive adverbs, so if you can't keep the difference straight in your head, a quick and dirty tip is to remember that commas are smaller than semicolons and go with coordinating conjunctions, which are almost always short two- or three-letter words—small punctuation mark, small words. Semicolons are bigger and they go with conjunctive adverbs, which are almost always longer than three letters—bigger punctuation, bigger words.

## **THE COLON: I CAN'T WAIT TO READ WHAT COMES NEXT**

One of my favorite language books, *Punctuate It Right*, has a wonderful name for the colon: the author calls it the mark of expectation or addition. That's because the colon signals that what comes next is directly related to the previous sentence.

## Colons in Sentences

Colons can be used in a variety of situations, such as in titles, ratios, and writing out the time. But when you are using colons in sentences, the most important thing to remember is that colons are only used after statements that are complete sentences. Never use a colon after a sentence fragment. For example, it's correct to say that Squiggly has two favorite Thanksgiving dishes: stuffing and green-bean casserole. That's correct because *Squiggly has two favorite Thanksgiving dishes* is a complete sentence all by itself.

Notice how the items after the colon expand on or clarify what came before the colon. I referred to Squiggly's favorite dishes before the colon and then specifically named them after the colon. A quick and dirty tip for deciding whether a colon is acceptable is to test whether you can replace it with the word *namely*. For example, you could say *Squiggly has two favorite Thanksgiving dishes, namely, stuffing and green-bean casserole*. Most of the time, if you can replace a colon with the word *namely*, then the colon is the right choice. Nevertheless, there are also instances where you can use a colon and *namely* doesn't work. For example, *The band was wildly popular: they sold out the Colosseum*.

Going back to the complete sentence point, it would be wrong to say *Squiggly's favorite Thanksgiving dishes are: rolls and cranberry sauce* because *Squiggly's favorite Thanksgiving dishes are* is not a complete sentence by itself. You can often fix that problem by adding the words *the following* after your sentence fragment. For example, it would be fine to say *Squiggly's favorite Thanksgiving dishes are the following: stuffing and green-bean casserole* because you've made the thing before the colon a complete sentence by adding the words *the following*.

## Colons in Lists

For some reason, people seem to get especially confused about how to use colons when they are introducing lists, but the good news is that the rules are the same whether you are writing lists or sentences: you use a colon when you could use the word *namely* and after something that could be a complete sentence on its own.

*Squiggly has two favorite Thanksgiving dishes:*

- **Stuffing**
- **Green-bean casserole**

*Squiggly's two favorite Thanksgiving dishes are*

- **Stuffing**
- **Green-bean casserole**

## **Colons in Salutations**

Colons are also used after salutations in business letters.

**Dear Mr. Smith:**

## **Colons and Capitalization**

Everyone always wants to know whether they should capitalize the first word after a colon. The answer is that it's a style issue, and it depends on what is following the colon. Although the most conservative grammarians would say that you should capitalize the first word after a colon when the colon introduces a complete sentence or more than one complete sentence, there are also grammarians who say capitalization isn't necessary. Since you never capitalize the first word after a colon if it is introducing something that isn't a complete sentence, I find it easier to adopt the less conservative lowercase rule for introducing complete sentences, and then all I have to remember is that the first word after a colon is always in lowercase (unless, of course, it is a proper name or something else that's always capitalized).



## Colon Choices

People often ask me what the difference is between a semicolon and a colon. The first difference is that the purpose of a colon is to introduce or define something, and the purpose of a semicolon is to show that two clauses are related. Here's a clear example of a sentence that needs a colon.

- **Squiggly was fixated on something: chocolate.**

Here's a clear example of a sentence that needs a semicolon.

- **Squiggly was fixated; he couldn't get his mind off chocolate.**

The first sentence needs a colon because the second part (chocolate) is the definition of the first part (what Squiggly is fixated on). The second sentence needs a semicolon because the two parts are strongly related to each other. The second clause gives more of a description of what is going on in the first clause.

The second difference between a colon and a semicolon is that when you are joining things, you use a semicolon to join things of equal weight, whereas you can use a colon to join things of equal or unequal weight. For example, you can use either a semicolon or a colon to join two main clauses, but you can only use a colon to join a main clause with a lone noun. Here's an example: *Squiggly missed only one friend: Aardvark*. You couldn't use a semicolon in that sentence because the two parts are unequal.

One way that I remember the difference is to think of the different elements as railroad cars. (In my imagination it's the boxcars from the train in the *Schoolhouse Rock!* cartoon "Conjunction Junction.") I use a semicolon only if I'm joining two equal "boxcars." If I'm joining two unequal elements, such as a boxcar and a caboose, then I know I can't use a semicolon, and I consider whether a colon makes sense. So two equal sentence boxcars are joined by a semicolon, and unequal sentence boxcars and cabooses often get a colon (or a dash).

## DASHES: I'M DASHING OFF TO BUY A GRAMMAR BOOK

The difference between a colon and a dash is subtle: they can both serve to introduce a related element after a sentence, but a dash is a stronger and more informal mark than a colon. Think of a colon as part of the sentence that just ambles along. *Squiggly has two favorite Thanksgiving dishes (and, now I'm going to tell you what they are): stuffing and green-bean casserole.* A colon informs readers that something more is coming along.

A dash, on the other hand—well, it's quite a dramatic thing. A dashing young man is certainly not an ordinary young man, and if you're dashing off to the store, you're not just going to the store, you're going in a flurry. A dash interrupts the flow of the sentence and tells the reader to get ready for an important or dramatic statement. If you added a dash to the "Thanksgiving" sentence it would conceptually read something like this: *Squiggly has two favorite Thanksgiving dishes (wait for it; wait for it)—stuffing and green-bean casserole. Wow!*

Given that there isn't anything exciting about Squiggly's favorite dishes, a dash may not be the best choice here, but it wouldn't be wrong. It would be a better choice if that sentence were part of a mystery novel where green-bean casserole was missing, and Squiggly was implicated as the thief. Then it could be a dramatic announcement that he loves green-bean casserole, and a dash would make more sense.

### Making a Dash for It

Here's a very important rule about dashes: never, never, never use a hyphen in place of a dash. A hyphen is not a junior dash; it has its own completely separate use. Using a hyphen in place of a dash can cause your copy editor to have a mild fit.

There is no computer key for a dash; you need to insert a dash as a symbol. If for some reason you can't insert the dash symbol, for example if you are using a typewriter, use two hyphens right next to each other: --.

Dashes can also be used like commas or parentheses to set off part of a sentence. When you use dashes to set off a parenthetical element, you're

using the strongest method possible to draw attention to it, so be sure it merits the drama.

## **A Dash of This, a Dash of That: Different Types of Dashes**

You may have heard of two different kinds of dashes: em dashes (—) and en dashes (–). An em dash is longer than an en dash. Those may seem like strange names, but consider that historically the em dash was as long as the width of a capital typeset letter M, and the en dash was as long as the width of a capital typeset letter N. Now with computer typesetting, the widths of each may vary from font to font, with the width of an en dash always falling midway between a hyphen and an em dash.

The em dash is the kind of dash I was referring to in the main dash section; it is the kind of dash you use in a sentence. When people say, “Use a dash,” they almost always mean the em dash.

The en dash is used much less frequently and usually only to indicate a range of inclusive numbers. You would use an en dash to write something like this:

- **Squiggly will be on vacation December 2 to December 9.**
- **Squiggly will be on vacation December 2–December 9.**

The *to* and the en dash between the dates indicate that Squiggly will not be in the office starting the second of December and will return on the tenth of December (because an en dash indicates that the numbers are inclusive of those two dates).

Whether you are using the longer em dash in a sentence or the shorter en dash to indicate an inclusive range, you can use your own judgment about whether to put spaces between the dash and the words around it—it’s a style issue, so just be consistent.

## THE HYPHEN: A NEVER-WERE-THERE-SO-FEW-SOLID-RULES PUNCTUATION MARK

You can use a hyphen to split a word at the end of a line, but you can also use a hyphen to join compound words.

The rules about when to hyphenate a compound word are a bit squidgy. Well, actually, they're a lot squidgy. The problem is that compound words go through an evolution from open compound (two separate words), to hyphenated compound, to closed compound (one word with the two parts shoved together)—and sometimes back again—and the changes can seem arbitrary. For example, when the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* was released in 2007, it eliminated sixteen thousand hyphenated words. Some words (*leap-frog*) advanced to closed compound form (*leapfrog*), and other words (*pot-belly*) reverted back to open compound form (*pot belly*). The best advice I can give you is to pick a dictionary and consult it when you aren't sure whether to hyphenate a compound.

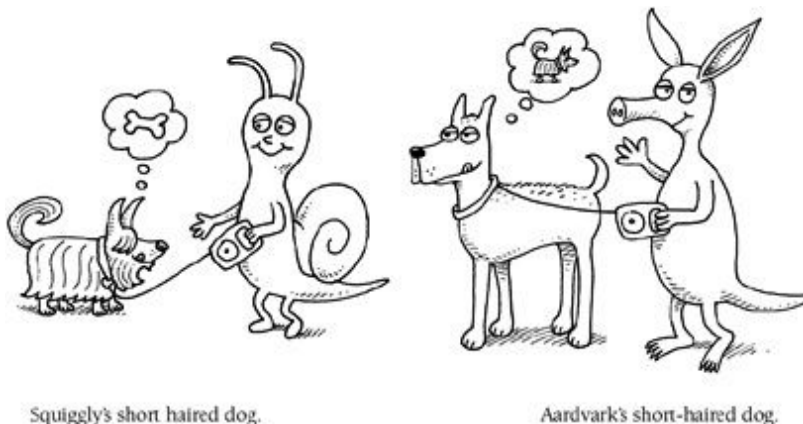
In very general terms, you use a hyphen to avoid confusion. For example, when two adjectives modify a noun, sometimes the sentence could be read two ways or be initially confusing to a reader, so you can use a hyphen to clarify which words go together:

**Squiggly wanted a short haired dog.**

*(Could be read to mean that Squiggly wanted a short dog with hair.)*

**Squiggly wanted a short-haired dog.**

*(More clearly means that Squiggly wants a dog with short hair.)*



A hyphen also eliminates confusion when it is used to clarify pronunciation:

**I need to re-press my jeans.**

**I need to repress those memories.**

You often use a hyphen between two adjectives that come directly *before* the noun they modify, but not when they come *after* the noun they modify:

**They are in a long-term relationship.**

**They are in it for the long term.**

Despite the vast wiggle room in hyphen land, there are a few solid rules. You can confidently use a hyphen when you are joining a prefix to a word that must be capitalized, joining a letter to a word, and writing out numbers from twenty-one to ninety-nine:

- Anti-American
- Un-American
- Pre-Mesozoic

- X-ray
- A-list
- T-shirt

- Thirty-five
- Sixty-four
- Ninety-three

It's fine to occasionally make up an adjective using a long string of hyphenated words for effect, but don't overdo it to the point that you become an irritating hyphenate-for-no-reason writer.

# COMMA COMMA COMMA COMMA COMMA CHAMELEON

Ah, the comma—the most versatile (and therefore confusing) punctuation mark in the English language. Many people were taught to use a comma when they would naturally pause in a sentence, but that “rule” is wrong. It’s a decent way to guess if you have absolutely no idea whether you need a comma, but it’s not a rule and won’t reliably lead you to the right answer. It’s “rules” like this that lead people to use commas like confetti, throwing them around whenever the mood strikes them. Let me get you started on your path to redemption.

## Serial Comma

The comma people ask me about most often is the serial comma: the comma that comes before the final conjunction in a list. Here’s a sentence that uses a serial comma:

**Aardvark and Squiggly love chocolate, hiking, and fishing.**

Whether to use the serial comma is a style issue, which is why so many people are confused.

Although the British are less likely to use serial commas than Americans, primarily it’s newspapers that allow writers to omit that final comma. Newspapers are always looking to save space, and one argument for leaving out the comma is that it’s unnecessary in simple sentences. Consider the same example without the serial comma:

**Aardvark and Squiggly love chocolate, hiking and fishing.**

I didn’t use a serial comma in that sentence, and there wasn’t any confusion. That’s the main argument against using the serial comma: in most cases leaving it out doesn’t change anything.

Although the serial comma isn’t always necessary, I favor it because often it does add clarity, and I believe in having a simple, consistent style instead of trying to decide whether you need something on a case-by-case basis. I also believe using the serial comma makes even simple lists easier to read.

Really, unless space is incredibly expensive, I can't imagine why anyone would decide the best method is sometimes leave it out and sometimes add it in.

The one thing everyone does seem to agree on is that you have to use a serial comma when leaving it out would create confusion, as is often the case when the items in the list have internal conjunctions or are complex in some other way. Here's a sentence that could mean different things with and without the final comma because one of the list items has an internal conjunction: *Squiggly was proud of his new muffin recipes: blueberry, peanut butter and chocolate chip and coconut.*

Without a serial comma, you may not know whether the last recipe is coconut alone or a combination of chocolate chip and coconut. You can make the meaning clear in two ways: place the final comma after peanut butter or after chocolate chip, or rewrite the sentence so there is no ambiguity.

If you want to say that the final recipe is coconut alone, you can write *blueberry, peanut butter and chocolate chip, and coconut*, or if you insist on leaving out the serial comma, you can rewrite the list as *peanut butter and chocolate chip, blueberry and coconut*. But I still think the rewrite is more risky than the sentence with the serial comma because a reader who's just skimming the sentence could be tempted to think that coconut and blueberry is a combination.

Another case where leaving the comma out can be confusing is where the later items in the list can describe an earlier item. An oft-cited example is the made-up book dedication *To my parents, Ayn Rand and God*. A reasonable reader would assume there are four entities being thanked: Mom, Dad, Ayn Rand, and God; but without the serial comma you could also conclude that the two parents are Ayn Rand and God. A serial comma clears up any confusion: *To my parents, Ayn Rand, and God*.

Another oft-cited story involves a court case over an inheritance. If a will states that the fortune goes to Aardvark, Squiggly and Grammar Girl, Aardvark can sue for—and win—50 percent (instead of 33.3 percent) of the inheritance because he can claim that Squiggly and Grammar Girl are a single unit. That would be a costly comma omission for Squiggly and Grammar Girl!

Finally, there are similar sentences where even a serial comma doesn't make the meaning clear. Consider this sentence: *I went to see Zack, an*

*officer and a gentleman.*

Without the serial comma, *I went to see Zack, an officer and a gentleman* could mean that Zack is both an officer and a gentleman, or that I went to see three people: Zack, an unnamed officer, and an unnamed gentleman.

With the serial comma, *I went to see Zack, an officer, and a gentleman* could still mean two different things. It could mean I went to see three people (Zack, an unnamed officer, and an unnamed gentleman), or it could mean I went to see two people (Zack, who is an officer, and an unnamed gentleman).

So, the bottom line is that whether to use the serial comma is a style issue. Most publications except newspapers favor using it all the time, as do I, and all publications call for a serial comma when leaving it out could cause confusion. And sometimes sorting out your meaning is just too much for one little comma and the best option is to rewrite your sentence.

## Adjective Commas

Commas and adjectives are another tricky area; fortunately, the rules are straightforward. If you can put the word *and* between the words, or if you can reverse the order of the adjectives and the sentence would still make sense, you can also use a comma.

**Aardvark is a blue and small mammal.**

**Aardvark is a small and blue mammal.**

**Aardvark is a small, blue mammal.**

*(You can use and between the adjectives and reverse the order, so you use a comma.)*

Sometimes it's a challenge to figure out whether a word that ends in *ly* is an adjective since adverbs also often end in *ly*. Remember that adjectives modify nouns and adverbs modify verbs (and things like other adverbs).

**Aardvark took a long, daily run.**

*(Daily is an adjective modifying the noun run; therefore, it is OK to use a comma.)*



**Aardvark trains hard daily.**

*(Daily is an adverb modifying the verb trains; therefore, don't use a comma. Note that you couldn't reverse the order of hard and daily in this sentence.)*

**Aardvark is a friendly, blue beast.**

*(Friendly is an adjective modifying the noun beast; therefore, it is OK to use a comma.)*

**Aardvark is a fiercely loyal friend.**

*(Fiercely is an adverb modifying the adjective loyal; therefore, don't use a comma. Note that you couldn't reverse the order of fiercely and loyal in this sentence.)*

## **Sentence-Joining Commas and Conjunctions**

One of the most common ways to use commas is to separate two main clauses that are connected by a coordinating conjunction. That just means that when you join two things that could be sentences on their own with a word such as *and*, *but*, or *or*, you usually need a comma before the conjunction.

**Squiggly ran to the forest, and Aardvark chased the peeves.**

*Squiggly ran to the forest* could be a complete sentence, and *Aardvark chased the peeves* could be a complete sentence. To join them with a comma, you need the word *and* or some other coordinating conjunction.

In most cases, you need the noun in the second half of the sentence to use the comma. For example, the comma in the following sentence is wrong because there is no noun after it:

**Squiggly ran to the forest, and chased the peeves. (wrong)**

The only time you would use a comma in a sentence like the one above is if the second part of the sentence is in stark contrast to the first part of the sentence:

**Squiggly cowered under a rock, but felt brave. (comma allowed because of contrast)**

## **The Comma Splice**

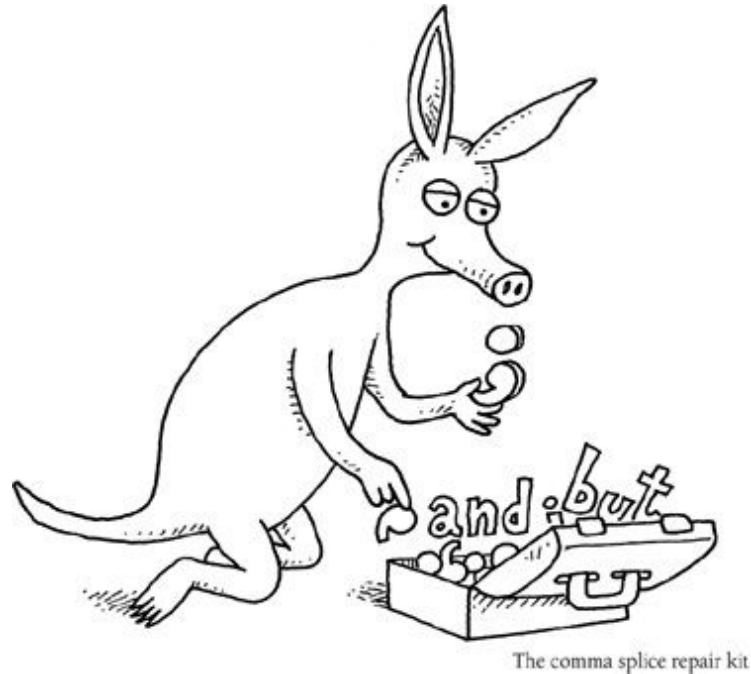
If you put a comma between two independent clauses without a conjunction (*Squiggly ran to the forest, Aardvark chased the peeves*) it's an error called a comma splice or a comma fault.

It's easy to see why the error is called a comma splice: the comma is used to splice together two complete sentences when that isn't the function of a comma.

The good news is that it's easy to fix a comma splice once you are aware of the problem. Because the two clauses are complete sentences, you can treat them that way and use a period where you had a comma. It's a period's job to separate complete sentences.

**Squiggly ran to the forest. Aardvark chased the peeves.**

If the two sentences are closely related to each other, for example, if Aardvark is chasing the peeves for the same reason Squiggly ran to the forest, you can use a semicolon to connect the two sentences without a coordinating conjunction.



**Squiggly ran to the forest; Aardvark chased the peeves.**

If you imagine that there is a grammar toolbox, you can think of a semicolon as a “sentence splicer” because its job is to splice complete sentences together.

Commas aren’t meant to join main clauses all by themselves; to force them into that role is to perpetrate a comma splice. That’s bad, but it’s easy to fix.

### **Run-on Sentences: Running on Empty**

Run-on sentences are, in some ways, the opposite of comma splices: instead of using the wrong punctuation, they occur when you don’t use any punctuation between two sentences. Many people mistakenly believe that run-on sentences are just long sentences, but run-on sentences are actually sentences that are smashed together without any punctuation. For that reason, they are also sometimes called fused sentences. Here’s an example of a run-on sentence: *You’re about halfway through this book you should be smarter by now.* Without internal punctuation, that is a run-on sentence. You can use the same

tools we had in the comma splice repair kit to fix the fused sentence: periods, semicolons, dashes, colons, and coordinating conjunctions:

- **You're about halfway through this book. You should be smarter by now.**

- **You're about halfway through this book; you should be smarter by now.**

- **You're about halfway through this book, and you should be smarter by now.**

- **You're about halfway through this book—you should be smarter by now.\***

- **You're about halfway through this book: you should be smarter by now.\***

\* A colon and dash aren't the best choices for this sentence (see the sections on [colons](#) and [dashes](#)) but they can be used to repair some comma splices.

## Commas Around Nonessential Elements

The August 2006 issue of *Wired* reported that there aren't any commas in Bart Kosko's book *Noise*. Apparently Kosko believes commas make you wait too long to get to the verb. He declared, "The comma is on the way out."

I disagree; but I think the people at Rogers Communications, Inc., in Canada, probably wish it were true. They recently lost \$2.13 million in a court ruling that hinged on the placement of a comma in a contract. Yup, Grammar Girl was in heaven. Headline comma news!

The offending sentence reads like this: *The agreement shall continue in force for a period of five years from the date it is made, and thereafter for successive five year terms, unless and until terminated by one year prior notice in writing by either party.*

Rogers Communications thought that meant they had the deal locked up for the first five years and the other party could terminate any time after that with one year's notice, but the court ruled that grammar rules allowed the other party to terminate the contract at any time by giving one year notice, not just after the first five years. The reasoning was that "the comma placed

before the phrase *unless and until terminated by one year prior notice in writing by either party* meant that the phrase qualified both the phrase *[the deal] shall be effective from the date it is made and shall continue in force for a period of five years from the date it is made* and the phrase *and thereafter for successive five year terms.*” In essence, they said the underlined part in the sentence was a parenthetical element. Somewhere in Canada, there were some very unhappy executives screaming at their lawyers about commas. (The ruling was eventually overturned on appeal based in part on disparities between the French and English versions of the contract, evidence of the history of negotiations, and “rules of punctuation and their application to contractual provisions.”)

As the people at Rogers Communications surely learned, commas are used to separate parenthetical elements, asides, nonessential elements, and additional information from the rest of the sentence. In other words, commas offset something that could be left out but that wouldn’t change the meaning of the rest of the sentence. Here are some additional examples:

**The snail, which happened to be yellow, was named Squiggly.  
His best friend, Squiggly, went to the store.**

## **Commas and Conditional Sentences**

Conditional sentences have an *if* clause such as *If you have any questions, let me know.* The action depends on something else. You will only let me know if you have questions. If you don’t have questions, you won’t let me know.

The rule is when the “if clause” is at the beginning of the sentence, you need a comma. But when the “if clause” is at the end of the sentence, you don’t need a comma.

**If you have any questions, let me know.  
Let me know if you have any questions.**

## **Commas with Interjections**

Interjections at the beginnings of sentences are followed by commas (or exclamation points if you want to be more dramatic).

**Indeed, he's quite irritating.**

**Yes! I do want to go to the beach.**

**Oh, he's coming along too?**

Additional information about commas is also found in the "[Tag Questions](#)" section.

## **ELLIPSES: MY THOUGHTS ARE TRAILING OFF . . .**

### **The Omission Ellipsis**

The most common and formal use of ellipses is to indicate an omission. If you're quoting someone and you want to shorten the quote, you use ellipses to show where you've dropped words or sentences.

Here's a quote from the book *Our Mutual Friend* by Charles Dickens: "I cannot help it; reason has nothing to do with it; I love her against reason."

Now far be it from me to edit Dickens, but if I were a journalist under a tight word limit looking at that quote, I'd be tempted to shorten it to this: "I cannot help it . . . I love her against reason." That middle part—*reason has nothing to do with it*—seems redundant, and taking it out doesn't change the meaning. Dot-dot-dot and it's gone, which saves me seven words. Clearly, literature and journalism are not the same thing.

Integrity is essential when using ellipses in this way. It's fine to use an ellipsis to tighten up a long quote by omitting unnecessary words, but it's important that you don't change the meaning. It's wrong to omit words to misrepresent what someone has said. For example, imagine what an unethical writer could do with the following quote:

**"*Gigli* was the best movie of 2003—if you were a vapid tabloid groupie who couldn't get enough of Ben Affleck and Jennifer Lopez."**

It would be easy to use ellipses and omissions to make the quote sound as if the writer loved *Gigli*. Here's the revised quote:

**“*Gigli* was the best movie of 2003. . . .”**

See? Chop off the qualifier at the end, and you've got a completely different quote. Of course, that is an obvious and egregious example; you would never do that, but be careful not to introduce more subtle changes in meaning when you use ellipses (and when you are editing quotes in general).

## **The E-mail Ellipsis**

Now, on to the other use of ellipses—the use you frequently see in e-mail messages, where the ellipsis is used to indicate a pause or a break in the writer's train of thought. I read a lot of complaints in e-mail groups and a lot of speculation about what these ellipses mean. However, speculation isn't necessary because ellipses can be used for the following reasons to indicate a pause or falter in dialogue: to show that

- **Time has passed**
- **A list is unfinished**
  - **A speaker has trailed off in the middle of a sentence or left something unsaid**

So it is allowable to use ellipses to indicate pauses or breaks in the writer's train of thought, as you see so frequently done in e-mail, especially where a break is meant to feel uncertain. Nevertheless (and this is a BIG nevertheless), most people who use ellipses in e-mail overdo it—a lot.

## **Three-Dot Journalism**

A couple of famous newspaper writers have used ellipses instead of periods to separate their rambling thoughts. Larry King heartily used ellipses in his *USA Today* column, as did Herb Caen in his *San Francisco Chronicle* column. In fact, Herb Caen is reported to have

coined the phrase *three-dot journalism* to describe such writing, and he was so beloved in San Francisco that when he died the city named a street after him—and included an ellipsis in the name: Herb Caen Way.

...

You should not replace all normal punctuation with ellipses. You should not allow the sweet lure of ellipses to muddle your ability to write a complete sentence. Use ellipses in these ways if you must, but use them sparingly, and know that although it's grammatically correct, it's considered by some to be annoying and cheap.

## Formatting Ellipses

So, now that you know how to use ellipses, you need to know how to make them. An ellipsis consists of exactly three dots called ellipsis points—never two dots, never four dots—just three dots.

Most style guides call for a space between the dots. Typesetters and page designers use something called a thin space or a nonbreaking space that prevents the ellipsis points from getting spread over two lines in a document. Also, many fonts have an ellipsis symbol that you can insert, but for everyday purposes, it's fine to use regular spaces between the ellipsis points. Type period-space-period-space-period. Just make sure your ellipsis doesn't get broken up and spread out over two lines.

Also, there should always be a space on each side of an ellipsis. The ellipsis is usually standing in for a word or sentence, so just imagine that it's a word itself, and then it's easy to remember to put a space on each side.

If you're omitting something that comes after a complete sentence, meaning that your ellipsis has to follow a period, put the period at the end of the sentence just as you normally would, type a space, and then type or insert your ellipsis. Again, you're treating the ellipsis as if it were a word. This will result in four dots in a row with spaces between each dot, but this is not a four-dot ellipsis—there's no such thing. It is a period followed by a regular three-dot ellipsis.

Oddly, you don't treat an ellipsis as a word if it comes at the end of a sentence that requires terminal punctuation like a period, question mark, or exclamation point. In that case you still put a space on each side of the



ellipsis. For example, if your original sentence is *Aardvark is coming home on Thursday!* and you wanted to make it shorter, you would write it like this: *Aardvark is coming home . . . !*

Fortunately, most style guides don't call for an ellipsis when you omit something at the end of a quote, so you don't have to deal with it too often. (Putting an ellipsis at the beginning of a quote is also usually not necessary, but again it is a matter of style.)

## THE ASTERISK: A RISKY PROPOSITION

Who would have thought a simple punctuation mark could cause a stir? But sports is a nutty business—people actually get paid to play games—so why be surprised that sports fans get all atwitter about asterisks?

The asterisk of the moment waits for Barry Bonds. When he broke the record for career home runs, people started talking about putting an asterisk next to his name in the record book because of the steroid controversy surrounding his career. I couldn't care less about the baseball record, but I was thrilled about the emergence of another punctuation-related news story!

The asterisk is that little star above the number 8 key on your keyboard, and the word *asterisk* actually comes from the Latin and Greek words for “little star.” *Asterisk* can also be used as a verb to mean that you've marked something with the little star; for example, *Some sportswriters want the baseball commissioner to asterisk Barry Bonds' record.*

It's pronounced “aste-risk.” It's common to hear people call it an “aste-rick” or “aste-rix,” but the correct pronunciation is “aste-risk.”

## Asterexasperation

My first rule for using an asterisk is to always make sure it refers to something at the bottom of the page. It makes me crazy when ads have an asterisk next to some offer, and then you can't find what it means. More than once I've seen something such as *Jackhammers, 20% off,\** and then nothing else on the page to indicate what the asterisk means. Does it mean I get 20 percent off only if it is a Sunday and my name is Squiggly? I hate that! Two Grammar Girl podcast listeners suggested new words to go with these

aggravating asterisks: Scott T. calls it an “exasperisk,” and Chuck Tomasi refers to the feeling upon seeing one as “asterexasperation.”

## **Star Power: How to Use an Asterisk**

Today, you place an asterisk after something you want to comment on or qualify. Historically, asterisks were also used to show that something was omitted or that there was a passage of time, but that use has been largely taken over by the ellipsis. Today, the asterisk is for commenting, especially when you need to avoid letters or numbers, such as when adding comments to mathematical or chemical equations. Using symbols will prevent people from confusing your comment marks as part of the equations. You wouldn’t want readers thinking your second comment note means to square the equation!

### **Symbols: When an Asterisk Is the First of Many**

If you have to include both citations and long comments in a document, you should use symbols for the footnoted comments—and the order matters! Start with the asterisk and then continue with the dagger, double dagger, section mark, parallels, and number sign. If you need more symbols, you start over in the sequence and double each symbol: double asterisk, double dagger, double double dagger, etcetera. The specific symbols that are used for citations, and their order, vary from publication to publication, so you should always check the style guide or instructions to authors.

\* † ‡ § || #

Asterisks are also used to replace letters in obscene words to avoid offense—h\*ll, sh\*t, and d\*mn, for example.

When you combine an asterisk with other punctuation marks, the asterisk goes after every punctuation mark except the dash.

**There is a controversy about Barry Bonds' home run record<sup>\*</sup>—whether to include an asterisk.**

**The Barry Bonds home run record,<sup>\*</sup> broken in San Francisco, may be marked with an asterisk in the record books.**

**San Franciscans celebrated Barry Bonds' home run record.<sup>\*</sup>**

<sup>\*</sup>The record Bonds broke in 2007 was for the most home runs hit in a career.

## **Negative Connotations**

I have a theory that when used alone, an asterisk has a more negative connotation than a number or a letter. Think about advertisements: the asterisk always indicates a limitation on what seems like a great offer. Also, when linguists want to show examples of incorrect words or sentences, they often mark them with an asterisk. And finally, thinking back to Barry Bonds, I'm sure the proposed asterisk next to his name in the record book isn't something he's looking forward to seeing.

### **The Nathan Hale**

Among computer programmers, the asterisk is sometimes called a “Nathan Hale.” The name comes from a reimagining of the famous quote Hale made before being hanged—*I only regret that I have but one life to lose for my country*—to *I only regret that I have but one asterisk (ass to risk) for my country*.

Had Hale actually uttered “ass to risk” instead of “life to lose,” this kind of mishearing (*ass to risk* → *asterisk*) would be classified as a slip of the ears called a Mondegreen.

# FORMATTING VERTICAL LISTS

Experts have raised valid concerns that people overuse lists in PowerPoint presentations and for presenting complex information, but the scant attention to lists in most style guides has always baffled me because you can hardly open a Web page, marketing brochure, or user manual without walking smack into a list. Marketing experts and Web designers know that most people visually scan such simple or instructional documents instead of reading every word and that lists improve a scanner's ability to remember key points.

## Bullets, Numbers, and Letters

If you're going to use a list, the first question to ask yourself is what kind of list you should use.

Bullets are just big dots, and you use them to make a bulleted list when the order of the items doesn't matter. For example, you could use bullets to list the items you want everyone to bring to a beach party:

**I wish I were in Santa Cruz right now. I'd have a party and make s'mores. Everyone would need**

- Chocolate bars
- Graham crackers
- Marshmallows
- Pointy sticks

When the order isn't important, I usually list the items alphabetically or in some other way that seems to make sense. The list in the s'mores example is alphabetical, but if I called the pointy sticks something that didn't fall at the end alphabetically, I still would have grouped all the food items together and put sticks at the end. In marketing materials, you probably want to put your most important product feature or selling point first.

Numbers are reserved for instances where the items in the list need to follow a specific sequence. You could use numbers to list the stepwise tasks that are required in order to start up a piece of machinery, for example.

### **When I turn on my laptop, I**

1. Open the cover
2. Push the start button
3. Make tea while the applications load

Letters are useful when you're implying that readers need to choose individual items or when items don't need to follow a specific sequence, but you want to refer back to an item later.

**Visit                    the                    Grammar                    Girl                    website**

**(<http://grammar.quickanddirtytips.com>) for free extras:**

- a. Goofy grammar photos
- b. Quizzes
- c. An e-mail newsletter

Letters make sense with that list because the order doesn't matter, and I can refer to item (b) if I want to promote the free quizzes again later. You can use capital or lowercase letters for your list. It seems to be more common to use lowercase letters, but just make sure you are consistent.

Remember from the section about colons that if your lead-in statement is a complete sentence, then you use a colon at the end to introduce your list. On the other hand, if your lead-in statement is a sentence fragment, don't use a colon.

## **Capitalization**

After you've completed the introductory sentence, your next question will be whether to capitalize the first letter in the statements that come after your bullets, numbers, or letters.

If your list item is a complete sentence, capitalize the first letter. If your list item isn't a complete sentence, you can choose whether to capitalize the first letter—it's a style issue. The only thing that is important is to be consistent. I capitalize the first letter of everything in lists because it's easier to remember to capitalize everything than it is to remember to capitalize complete sentences and use lowercase for sentence fragments.

# Punctuation

With capitalization covered, you're on to your items, and at the end of the first one you have to decide what kind of punctuation to use.

If your list items are complete sentences, or if at least one list item is a fragment that is immediately followed by a complete sentence, use normal terminal punctuation: a period, question mark, or exclamation point.

**For the following reasons, I feel bad for people who don't visit the website:**

- They miss the goofy grammar photos.
- They can't take the free quizzes.
- They can't sign up for the e-mail newsletter that includes free grammar tips.

If your list items are single words or sentence fragments, you can choose whether to use terminal punctuation. Again, the important thing is to be consistent. I don't use terminal punctuation after single words or sentence fragments. I think periods look strange after things that aren't sentences.

**The following additional content is available on the website:**

- Goofy grammar photos
- Free quizzes
- A free e-mail newsletter

Finally, your text will be easier to read if you don't put commas or semicolons after the items, and don't put a conjunction such as *and* before the last item. They are unnecessary clutter.

# Parallelism

OK, now that you've got the mechanics down for lists, don't forget to be a good writer and make sure all of your list items are parallel. That means

each list item should be structured the same way. They should all be fragments or they should all be complete sentences. If you start one bullet point with a verb, start every bullet point with a verb. Here's an example of a list that uses parallel construction:

**For Aardvark, a vacation involves**

- Attending lectures
- Reading books
- Seeing sights

Each bullet point is formed the same way—each one starts with a verb.

On the other hand, even though the following list is grammatically correct, it's considered poor writing because the list items aren't parallel.

**For Aardvark, a vacation involves**

- Attending lectures
- Books
- Many trips to famous destinations

## **Style**

Many of the points I've covered in this section are style issues, meaning that I've run across multiple books and online style guides that make different recommendations. My recommendations are based on my assessment after checking about twenty different grammar handbooks and style guides and on what seems logical to me. For example, I didn't find any source that discussed how to order items in a bulleted list, so I made up the recommendation to write them alphabetically because it seems to be the best solution. However, if your organization has a designated style guide, be sure to check it to see if your house style differs from any of my recommendations.

# QUOTATION MARKS: YOU CAN QUOTE ME

## Yeah, He Actually Said That

The most common use of double quotation marks is to surround direct quotations or spoken words. Something inside quotation marks is assumed to be *exactly* what the person being quoted said or wrote; so if you make changes, you must indicate them with ellipses (also see [the section on ellipses](#)), brackets, or the abbreviation *sic* in square brackets (which is Latin for “thus; so” and indicates the error was made by the speaker or original writer and not by the current writer).

**In his bulletin, Smith wrote, “Pork bellys rose eighty, and I mean percent not dollars, last year.” (original quotation)**

**In his bulletin, Smith wrote, “Pork bellys [*sic*] rose eighty [percent] . . . last year.” (edited quotation)**

**According to Smith’s bulletin, pork bellies rose 80 percent last year. (paraphrased quotation)**

Typically, if you have to make too many changes to a quotation, it is better to paraphrase the statement.

## Quotation Confusion

It’s common to hear people use the verb *quote* as a shortened form of quotation, as in “I filled my notebook with *quotes* from *The Daily Show*,” but such use is technically wrong. It should be, “I filled my notebook with *quotations* from *The Daily Show*.” Now, I agree the correct way sounds kind of pretentious, and given that a lot of reference sources have extra entries discussing how the misuse is widespread, you aren’t going to sound illiterate if you use *quote* incorrectly, but it is



still good to know the difference and stick to *quotation* in formal writing.

## Let's Get Snarky

Double quotation marks can also be used to indicate that a word is special in some way. I bet you've all seen quotation marks used as something called "scare quotes," which are quotation marks put around a word to show that the writer doesn't buy into the meaning. For example, I could write the sentence *Women achieved "equality" when they were granted the right to vote in 1920*. The quotation marks would indicate that although women getting the right to vote was heralded as *equality* at the time, I don't think it was enough of a gain to merit the word equality. More often, though, scare quotes (which are also sometimes called sneer quotes) are used to impart a sense of irony or disdain. They're especially common in nasty political commentary, as in *Politicians "care" about their constituents*.

## Mixed Company

### *Commas and Periods*

One reason you are probably confused about mixing quotation marks with other punctuation marks is that American English and British English have different rules about quotation marks. So if you read the BBC and *The New York Times* websites on the same day, you'll see punctuation done two different ways.

In the United States, periods and commas go inside the quotation mark. In Britain, they go outside the quotation mark.

**Squiggly said, "No." (United States)**

**Squiggly said, "No". (Britain)**

**"No," said Squiggly. (United States)**

**“No”, said Squiggly. (Britain)**

### ***Question Marks and Exclamation Points***

Where do you put the question mark or exclamation point when you’re using quotation marks? It depends on the sentence—is the whole thing a big question or exclamation, or is only the part in quotation marks a question or exclamation?

Using question marks as an example, if the whole sentence is a question, then you put the question mark outside the quotation mark.

**What do you think Squiggly meant when he said, “The fish swam darkly up the river”?**

The whole sentence is a question, so the question mark goes at the very end (outside the quotation mark).

On the other hand, if only the quotation is a question, then the question mark goes inside the quotation mark.

**Squiggly ran up to Aardvark and asked, “Where are the fish?”**

The question mark goes inside the quotation mark because the only part of the sentence that is a question is *Where are the fish?* (You don’t need a period after the quotation mark. Despite being inside the quotation mark, the question mark serves as the terminal punctuation.) It works the same way with exclamation points.

It helps to remember that the question mark (or exclamation point) stays attached to the question (or exclamation)—whether it makes up the whole sentence or just the quotation.

## **The Single Life**

Single quotation marks are like backup double quotation marks—you pull them out of your bag of tricks when you’ve already used double quotation marks. The most common use is when you are quoting someone who is quoting someone else. You enclose the primary speaker’s comments in double quotation marks, and then you enclose the thing they are quoting in

single quotation marks. For example, imagine you've interviewed Aardvark for a magazine article about his harrowing ordeal with the arrow.

**Aardvark said, "Squiggly yelled, 'Watch out,' as the arrow was coming toward me."**

If you're ever in the extremely rare position of having to nest another quote inside a sentence like that, you would use double quotation marks again for the quote inside of the single quotation marks.

**Aardvark said, "Squiggly yelled, '*Sir Fragalot says, "Watch out,"*' as the arrow was coming toward me."**

Note that there are three levels of quotations in that last example sentence: the part in bold, the part in bold italics, and the part in underlined bold italics.

Single quotation marks are also sometimes used when there's a quote in a headline, and they are used to highlight words with special meaning in certain disciplines such as philosophy, theology, and linguistics.

## **Suspensive Hyphens: Leave Me Hanging**

You may not have known they were called suspensive hyphens, but you know you've seen those hyphens that seem to be hanging in the air. They most often occur with numbers:

**Do you want a one- or two-bedroom apartment?**  
**Please pick up a ten- to twelve-foot pipe at the hardware store.**

Suspensive hyphens are economical—there's no need to name the second part of the compound when you're going to get to it in a second. Be patient; it will show up soon.

## **EXCLAMATION POINT**

The exclamation point adds emphasis and indicates a strong emotion—surprise, panic, urgency, etc. Don't overuse it! (See [Mixed Company and the Question Marks and Exclamation Points](#) section for a discussion about mixing an exclamation point with quotation marks.)

## PARENTHESES

### Asides

Parentheses are beautiful; I think of them as bookends for fun little statements. The words inside of parentheses are called parenthetical elements, and they often act as asides. They are things you don't need to say, but want to say anyway. They can clarify, direct, or give a sense of the writer's frame of mind.

**Everyone loved Sigler's new book (*Ancestor*).**

**Also see the section on [commas](#) and [dashes](#).**

**I'm fantasizing (just fantasizing, mind you) about skipping town and taking a job as a juggler.**

### Parentheses with Other Punctuation Marks

If the parenthetical element is a complete sentence, the terminal punctuation goes inside the parenthesis. If the parenthetical element is not a complete sentence, but comes at the end of a sentence, the terminal punctuation goes outside the parenthesis.

**Squiggly had many allergy symptoms. (He was itching, sneezing, and coughing.)**

**Squiggly had many allergy symptoms (itching, sneezing, and coughing).**

If you have a complete sentence inside parentheses, and it falls inside another complete sentence, you don't capitalize the first letter of the parenthetical sentence and you don't use terminal punctuation unless the sentence requires a question mark or exclamation point.

**Squiggly loves (we mean he truly adores) fish.**

**Squiggly loves (should we say adores?) fish.**

## APOSTROPHES

I saved apostrophes for the end of the chapter because they are, hands down, the most troublesome punctuation mark. My listeners often send me photos of objects (T-shirts, signs, packaging, etc.) that contain grammar mistakes, and about 90 percent of those photos are of signs that misuse apostrophes. Apostrophe errors are so common on produce signs that an apostrophe that is misused in a sign like “Banana’s \$1.50” actually has a name: the greengrocer’s apostrophe.



Apostrophes have two main uses in the English language: they stand in for something that's missing, and they can be used to make a word possessive.

Apostrophes first showed up in the 1500s as a way to indicate omissions. Today, the most common place to find this kind of apostrophe is in contractions such as *can't* (for *cannot*), *that's* (for *that is*), and *it's* (for *it is* or *it has*). But apostrophes can also be used in fun ways. If you're writing fiction, you can replace letters with apostrophes to reflect a character's dialect; for example, you could write, "I saw 'em talkin' yonder," to indicate that the speaker said *'em* instead of *them* and *talkin'* instead of *talking*.

It's no wonder that people are confused about apostrophes because new uses were introduced in the 1600s and again in the 1700s, and it wasn't until the mid-1800s that people even tried to set down firm rules. One major new

use for the apostrophe was to indicate possession. For example, *Aardvark's pencil*, where there is an apostrophe *s* at the end of *Aardvark*, means that the pencil belongs to Aardvark. It does not mean the plural of *Aardvark*, and it does not mean “The aardvark is pencil.”

An interesting side note is that it doesn't seem so strange that an apostrophe *s* is used to make words possessive once you realize that in Middle English it was common to make words possessive by adding *es* to the end. For example, the possessive of *ston* (the Middle English equivalent of *stone*) would have been *stones*, which was the same as the plural. So today, the apostrophe can be thought of as taking the place of the *e* in the possessive case of long ago.

The bottom line is that whenever you are using apostrophes, especially if you are making signs or flyers, take a second and a third look at them to make sure you're doing it right. Do you want to make your noun possessive, are you making a contraction, or do you instead have the plural form of a noun that shouldn't include an apostrophe?

## Singular Words That End with *S*

Many people are surprised to learn that there are two ways to make words that end with *s* possessive. It's true, and there are even justices in the U.S. Supreme Court who have squabbled about how to do it: is it *Kansas's statute*, with an apostrophe *s*, or *Kansas' statute*, with just an apostrophe at the end? Justice Clarence Thomas wrote the majority opinion for *Kansas v. Marsh* and prefers to leave off the extra *s*, referring to *Kansas' statute* (with just an apostrophe at the end), whereas Justice David Souter wrote the dissenting opinion and prefers the double *s* of *Kansas's statute* (with an apostrophe before the final *s*).

So who's right? Neither. Both. Justice Thomas' name ends with an *s*, so you might guess that he is more invested in the topic, but style books make different recommendations, some suggesting you should leave off the extra *s*, and others recommending that you add the apostrophe *s* to almost all singular words that end with *s*. (The exceptions are words such as *Moses* and *Bridges* that end with an *s* that makes an “iz” sound, and classical names such as *Zeus* and *Venus*, and *Jesus*. Some style guides suggest that all these words should end with just an apostrophe (e.g., *Moses' tablets*). So our first

tough issue—how to make words that end with *s* possessive—doesn't actually have an answer; it's a style issue and you can do it either way. Many people have written in telling me the rule they use is that if they pronounce the second *s*, they write it out; and if not, they leave it off. Nevertheless, I prefer to pick one style and stick with it—I leave off the final *s* because doing so looks cleaner and saves space.

## Plural Words That End with *S*

I always feel bad when the answer is that there isn't an answer, as in the previous section, so here's an easier situation that has a firm rule: if the word ending with *s* is plural, such as *peeves*, then you just add an apostrophe at the end to make it possessive. For example, you could write, "The peeves' escape route was blocked" to indicate that a group of peeves needed to find another way out of danger.

Plural words that don't end with *s*, such as *children*, do take an apostrophe *s* at the end for possession. For example, you could write, "Fortunately, the children's room had a hidden doorway" and "We sell children's books."

## The Plural of a Single Letter

Here's a tricky issue with a definite answer: how do you make a single letter plural, as in *Mind your p's and q's*? It's shocking, but you actually use an apostrophe before the *s*! It looks possessive, but it isn't. The apostrophe is there just to make it clear that you're writing about multiple *p's* and *q's*. The apostrophe is especially important when you are writing about *a's*, *i's*, and *u's* because without the apostrophe readers could easily think you are writing the words *as*, *is*, and *us*.

## Making Abbreviations Plural

Making abbreviations plural used to be more of a gray area, but I'm thrilled to report that the last prominent holdout I'm aware of (*The New York Times*) recently stopped using apostrophes to make abbreviations plural. The

*NYT* used to write about *CD's* when they meant multiple CDs. But they don't do it anymore, and I finally feel as if I can firmly recommend against using apostrophes to make abbreviations plural!

## Compound Possession

If you're trying to write about possession and have two subjects, you have to decide if the two people possess something together or separately. Here's an example: *Squiggly and Aardvark's religious beliefs*. The rule is if the two people share something, you use one apostrophe *s*. So if Squiggly and Aardvark have the same religious beliefs, it is correct to say *Squiggly and Aardvark's beliefs* (with only one apostrophe *s* after the last noun). On the other hand, if Squiggly and Aardvark have different beliefs, then you would say *Squiggly's and Aardvark's beliefs*.

The rule is if they each possess something different, then you use two apostrophe *s*'s. The quick and dirty tip for remembering the rule is to think about luggage and hair dryers. Imagine that two women are going on the same trip; if they are sharing an adventure, they can share a hair dryer on the trip, so then they can share the apostrophe *s* too (*Gail and Mignon's adventure*); but if they are each going on their own separate adventure, then they each need their own hair dryer, and they each need their own apostrophe *s* (*Gail's and Mignon's adventures*). So an apostrophe *s* is like a hair dryer: you don't need to bring two if you are going to stay in the same hotel room. When one of the words is a pronoun, you use the possessive pronoun: *Squiggly's and my tree is thriving*. (As a rule of politeness, put yourself last in a list of people.)

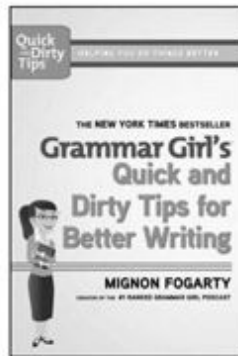
## Greeting Card Grammar

As you learned in the section "Singular Words That End with *S*," you could go to Bob Jones' house or Bob Jones's house—both are correct. But what if you have a family? Bob, Amy, and their children are the Joneses. The possessive form of *Joneses* is *Joneses'*. If the Joneses invite people over for dinner, their invitation could read two different ways:



- **Please come to the Joneses' house for dinner. (possessive)**
- **The Joneses invite you to dinner. (plural)**

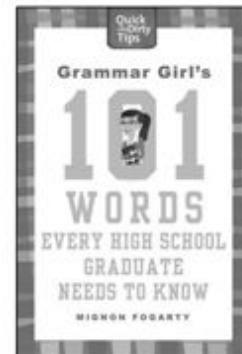
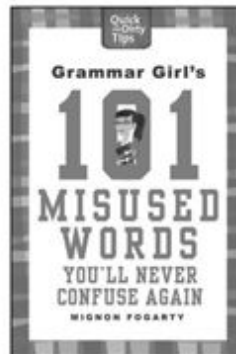
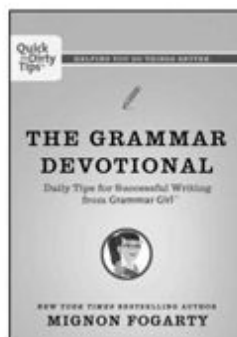
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