Useful Punctuation: Exclamation Points, Semicolons, Colons, and Quotation Marks
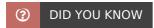
by Sophia Tutorial

☰ WHAT'S COVERED

This tutorial examines the correct and effective use of exclamation points, semicolons, colons and quotation marks, in five parts:

1. Punctuation Marks
2. Exclamation Points
3. Semicolons
4. Colons
5. Quotation Marks

1. Punctuation Marks

Punctuation refers to the symbols writers use to convey and control meaning in their writing. To optimize communication, punctuation must be used effectively.

? DID YOU KNOW

Not all punctuation marks signal the end of a sentence, though these do: periods, exclamation points, and question marks.

There are more punctuation marks than those which are addressed in this tutorial. The punctuation that is most commonly used an academic writing, however, is considered in the following sections.

2. Exclamation Points

Exclamation points are usually placed at the end of sentences that are meant to convey strong emotion. They should be used sparingly, especially in academic writing, because they become meaningless with overuse, and can be distracting to readers. The emotional impact of writing is best conveyed by words, not

punctuation.

Read the following passage, then consider whether the exclamation points help to communicate the writer's message.

> The first time Kevin saw Dragon, he immediately understood the difference between a well-trained guard dog and a "mean-because-he's-been-neglected" guard dog! Dragon wasn't just a junkyard mutt; he was a German Shepherd, and looked like the dogs that accompany the police when they search for drugs. But Dragon wasn't trained to look for drugs; he was trained to look for drug addicts, and to keep them out of Floyd's yard! The fence around the yard was nine feet tall and topped with razor wire. And now the gate, the only thing that separated Dragon from the rest of the world, hung open, swinging in the morning breeze!

The exclamation points used in this passage don't help to convey meaning. The words used (and the subject) would communicate the same message, including the emotional content and tone, without them. Perhaps the exclamation point that ends the paragraph could be left in place, but a period would work just as well. The tone of that sentence — established by the image of the swinging gate and Dragon's absence — would be more ominous *without* the exclamation point.

Here's the same passage without exclamation points. Is it an improvement of the original?

> The first time Kevin saw Dragon, he immediately understood the difference between a well-trained guard dog and a "mean-because-he's-been-neglected" guard dog. Dragon wasn't just a junkyard mutt; he was a German Shepherd, and looked like the dogs that accompany the police when they search for drugs. But Dragon wasn't trained to look for drugs; he was trained to look for drug addicts, and to keep them out of Floyd's yard. The fence around the yard was nine feet tall and topped with razor wire. And now the gate, the only thing that separated Dragon from the rest of the world, hung open, swinging in the morning breeze.

3. Semicolons

Semicolons confuse some writers, especially those who are new to academic writing. However, they're easy to understand — and use. It can helpful to think of a semicolon as combining some of the characteristics of a period and a comma.

Writers most often use semicolons in two ways. The first of these is to connect two independent clauses to form one sentence. This indicates that there is a stronger relationship between the clauses involved than between two consecutive sentences separated by a period. For example, consider this sentence:

I wanted to go to the party; you know I'm always looking for a good time.

The writer used this semicolon to indicate to readers that there is a close relationship between the two clauses. Here is another example:

Walt had never felt comfortable in the car; he always had the feeling that it didn't belong to him.

In both of these examples, the sense of strong relatedness between clauses would be lost if periods had been used to separate the clauses, making each of them two sentences instead of one.

🚩 **HINT**

It is not a good idea to use semicolons too often. Like most punctuation marks, overuse makes them less meaningful and more distracting to readers.

The second reason that writers use semicolons is to separate complex items in a list in which each item consists of several words, or contains commas. Here's an example:

There are two ways to write: with a pen or pencil, which is cheaper but slower; or with a computer and printer, which is more expensive, but faster.

If the writer had used additional commas instead of semicolons in this sentence, it would be harder for readers to understand where one list item ends and the next begins. In most situations, however, it's better to use commas. Items in a list should be separated by commas whenever doing so will not confuse readers. Here's an example:

My favorite sports are soccer, football, and rugby.

Semicolons are useful tools, but they must be used carefully.

4. Colons

Colons are similar to semicolons, but as the name suggests, their action is more complete and forceful (i.e., it's not *semi*-). Like the punctuation marks discussed in the preceding sections, colons are sometimes overused, which can result in decreased effectiveness (and increased distraction) from readers' perspectives. They are impactful, however, in a number of situations, including the following:

- Before quotations, preceded by an independent clause
- Before lists, preceded by an independent clause

Consider the following sentence:

I gave you three jobs today: washing the car, cleaning your room, and folding your clothes.

In this example the colon signals that a list has begun; as a result, readers will approach the rest of the sentence differently. Here's another example:

The following students have achieved perfect attendance: Janice, Mark, and Roland.

- To separate two parts of a title

🚩 **HINT**

This is commonly used in academic books and articles, which often have a title and a subtitle, separated by a

colon (e.g., *Ancient Greece: From Prehistoric to Hellenistic Times*).

- Before an extended idea, after an independent clause

Consider the following sentences:

He knew there was only one option left to him: to fight.

It was a dream come true: a bar with an endless happy hour.

In each of these sentences, the colon links two ideas closely. In the second sentence, the colon ensures that readers understand that the bar with the endless happy hour is the narrator's dream come true, not something else in the narrative.

- Between two independent clauses, combining them into one sentence

Read the following sentence:

I have a serious problem: I can't decide between chocolate and vanilla.

In this example the colon indicates a strong relationship between the ideas in the two clauses — stronger than the relationship indicated by a semicolon. Here's another example:

The senators remained entrenched: neither was willing to compromise.

The connection in this example is meant to be a strong one; use of a colon is good way to make that clear.

5. Quotation Marks

Quotation marks are used to indicate a verbatim account from a source, and to identify speech in narrative writing. They can also be used to draw attention to specific words and ideas. In this last respect they can indicate sarcasm or disbelief — similar to the way in which people use "air quotes" when speaking. Here's an example:

I'm sure her new boyfriend is a "winner," just like the last one.

The quotation marks indicate that the word "winner" is being used ironically in this example. It's important to be careful when using quotation marks in this way. It's easy for readers to confuse them with quotation marks that signal a real quotation or dialogue, depending on the genre. This is usually not the best way to convey irony or sarcasm, especially in an academic context.

Writers can also use quotation marks to draw attention to terms that they are defining or discussing directly, as in this example:

Though people still use it to sound intelligent, "irregardless" is not a word.

In this sentence, the quotation marks highlight and emphasize "irregardless" for readers, clearly identifying it as the topic of the sentence. Here's another example:

The text's use of terms like "ideological" and "rhetoricality" tends to intimidate new readers.

Quotation marks are an effective tool for directing readers' attention, but overusing them can have the opposite effect.

SUMMARY

This tutorial provided guidelines for, and examples of, the effective use of four punctuation marks: exclamation points, semicolons, colons, and quotation marks.

Source: Adapted from Sophia Instructor Gavin McCall