Punctuation Primer

Punctuation is vital to written communication. It creates the pauses, inflections, hand gestures and body language of the written word. If punctuation is not used well, typographic communication can be confusing, misleading, and difficult to read.

Rules of Engagement
There are about 30 punctuation marks. Most are not used often—but all should be handled correctly. The following provides a brief overview of how to use the most important punctuation marks.

Periods indicate the end of a declarative or imperative sentence. Period.

Commas indicate the simplest form of interruption of thought or continuity. A comma is used to join a clause to a conjunction, to join clauses in a compound sentence, to separate an adverbial or adjectival clause from the body of a sentence, and to separate a series of three or more elements, etc., etc., etc.

Exclamation points make an outcry or emphatic statement. Use sparingly!

Question marks indicate a query or express a doubt. You knew that already, didn't you?

Colons are used for the following: after the words "follows," "the following," to introduce a list or series, and to introduce a formal statement or a speech in dialogue.

Semicolons are used to separate two independent clauses that are closely related. When commas are already being used to separate words in a series; a semicolon can be used to separate the longer components of the series.

"Double quotes enclose words, phrases and sentences that run into text," he said.

"Single quotes enclose quotes within quotes," she added. "You mean when you quote a statement like 'Single quotes enclose quotes within quotes' you don't use a double quote again within the quote?" "That's correct," she replied.

Parentheses indicate sets of (1) amplifying, explanatory or digressive elements, and (2) they enclose numerals or letters marking divisions or enumerations that run into the text. (They also enclose parenthetical remarks.)

Braces show the relationship between groups of
numbers such as {1, 2, 3, 4 ...}
words like {one, two, three, four ...}
and phrases such as {one cent, two cents ...}

Brackets enclose editorial interpolations, explanations, corrections or comments. They can be used to take the place of parentheses within parentheses, to enclose information that is not the original writer's and to enclose italicized phrases such as [to be continued].

Dashes and hyphens are often confused but are not interchangeable.

Hyphens are used to divide words that break at the end of a line and to connect parts of compound words such as go-between, ill-fated and run-of-the-mill.

En Dashes are used to indicate a range of almost anything with numbers, including dates, times and pages in a document. Please refer to the Chicago Manual of Style, pp. 187–188, or The Associated Press Stylebook, pp. 98–99.

Em Dashes are used for emphasis. Since they break up the flow of the sentence—only use the em dash to stress a point. An em dash can also indicate missing words or a sudden break in thought—confusing, isn't it?

Dashes on a Diet
Em dashes make a strong statement. Sometimes – if space is added on either side – an en dash can be used in place of an em dash. Some style manuals support this idea—others don't. Be sure that you are in sync with the style required by your client.

Apostrophes indicate possession or the deletion of a letter or number in a contraction, don't they? No apostrophe is needed, however, in plural or possessive abbreviations like MAs and 1920s.

Ellipses indicate the omission of a word, phrase, line or paragraph; they also indicate the end of a thought that goes on, and on...

Asterisks are used as reference points for footnotes.*

*They're pretty little things.

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