








The little marks really matter – punctuation




Using the correct punctuation is important! This quick guide helps you decipher your colons from your semicolons, and when to use them.

| Punctuation mark | Use | Don't use |
|---|---|--|
| Full stop  | <p>To end a sentence</p> <p>As the decimal point in numbers and currency, and in expressions of time (where a colon could instead be used): 127.45 \$31.50 9.15 am</p> <p>To separate elements of web and email addresses: www.biotext.com.au</p> <p>After the last point in a bulleted list of sentence fragments</p> <p>In table entries to separate sentences, but not at the end of an entry.</p> <p>However, this is a matter of style preference – check the stylesheet and be consistent</p> | <p>After headings</p> <p>After table or figure names</p> <p>After contractions (shortened forms that include both the first and last letters of the word): Dr Qld</p> <p>After abbreviations (shortened forms that do not include the last letter of the word): Vic Fig 1</p> <p>However, this is a matter of style preference – check the stylesheet and be consistent</p> <p>In acronyms and initialisms: ASIO NSW</p> <p>After initials in people's names</p> <p>After page header and footer text</p> <p>After points in a bulleted list (except for the last point), unless they are complete sentences</p> <p>At the end of table entries. However, this is a matter of style preference – check the stylesheet and be consistent</p> <p>After index entries</p> <p>In or after symbols for units of measurement: mg kWh</p> |

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| Colon  | <p>To introduce items in a bulleted list</p> <p>To introduce items in a sentence that provide further information about something already mentioned:</p> <p style="padding-left: 20px;">We invited 3 people: John, Amy and Carol.</p> <p>To introduce a block quotation</p> <p>Between the title of a publication and its subtitle In ratios:</p> <p style="padding-left: 20px;">3:1</p> <p>In expressions of time (where a full stop could instead be used):</p> <p style="padding-left: 20px;">9:15 am</p> | <p>To introduce items in a sentence when the items are preceded by a word such as 'including'</p> <p>To introduce second-level bullets in a bulleted list</p> |
| Semicolon  | <p>To link 2 closely related clauses that could otherwise be separate sentences:</p> <p style="padding-left: 20px;">We submitted the paper to Virology; this was more appropriate for the topic than Cell.</p> <p>To separate items in a run-on list when the items contain internal commas:</p> <p style="padding-left: 20px;">The meeting was attended by representatives of the Department of the Environment; the Department of Industry, Innovation and Science; and the Australian National University.</p> | <p>To introduce items in a list (a colon is the correct punctuation)</p> |

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| Comma  | <p>Between items in a run-on list:</p> <p>We brought drinks, presents and a cake to the party.</p> <p>In strings of adjectives (of the same type):</p> <p>He was a sensible, studious young man.</p> <p>Between coordinate clauses (clauses that are separate statements and have different subjects):</p> <p>Jane walked the dog, and Bill stayed at home.</p> <p>Before clauses that represent a break in the continuity of thought:</p> <p>It rained in the afternoon, but we held the function anyway.</p> <p>After introductory adjectival or adverbial words, phrases or clauses:</p> <p>After the fire, we rebuilt our house.</p> <p>However, we were able to claim insurance.</p> <p>In contrast, our neighbours were not insured.</p> <p>In pairs around nondefining and parenthetical expressions:</p> <p>The children, who were upset by the experience, were taken home.</p> <p>The houses in Park Road, which overlooked the river, were more expensive.</p> <p>In pairs around expressions that share an element of a statement:</p> <p>You will need to complete, and submit to the department, the relevant form.</p> | <p>Between the subject of a sentence and its verb</p> <p>Between the last 2 items in a run-on list, unless the comma is needed to avoid confusion or ambiguity:</p> <p>We will provide bread, hot and cold food, and drinks.</p> <p>To join 2 sentences that should be separated by a full stop or a semicolon</p> <p>Around defining phrases:</p> <p>The children who were upset by the experience were taken home.</p> <p>The houses in Park Road that overlooked the river were more expensive.</p> <p>As a single comma when there should be a pair of commas:</p> <p>The Prime Minister, Harold Holt, visited Indonesia.</p> <p>not</p> <p>The Prime Minister, Harold Holt visited Indonesia.</p> |

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| Apostrophe  | <p>To indicate missing letters in contracted words: don't we'll it's</p> <p>To indicate possession: John's car</p> | <p>In plurals of words, numbers, shortened forms and other nouns: dingos CDs 1980s</p> <p>not dingo's CD's 1980's</p> <p>In <i>its</i> to indicate possession (<i>it's</i> means <i>it is</i>): The book had lost its cover.</p> <p>not The book had lost it's cover.</p> |
| Quotation marks  | <p>Around direct speech</p> <p>Around quotations</p> <p>Around titles of works that do not take italics (e.g. titles of articles or lectures)</p> <p>On first mention of a technical term that is then defined</p> <p>To indicate that a word or term is being used in a nonstandard sense</p> | <p>Around quotations set in the text as block quotations</p> <p>In addition to italics or another form of emphasis</p> |
| Hyphen  | <p>Between a prefix and the root word if there is potential for confusion, if the root words starts with a capital letter, or (sometimes) if the prefix ends with the same letter as the start of the root word: re-cover versus recover un-Australian semi-industrial</p> <p>Between a root word and some suffixes: Australia-wide</p> <p>In many compound words</p> <p>In ordinal fractions when they are spelled out: one-third</p> <p>In names of many chemical compounds</p> | <p>Between most prefixes and their root words: coordinate nongovernment antimalarial</p> <p>not co-ordinate non-government anti-malarial</p> <p>Between most root words and suffixes: fourfold worldwide</p> <p>not four-fold world-wide</p> <p>To show spans of numbers</p> |

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| En dash  | <p>To show spans of numbers</p> <p>On either side of a parenthetical expression (use of a spaced en dash or an em dash is a style decision, but a spaced en dash is recommended, because it causes fewer problems when text is viewed on screen)</p> <p>To show an association between words that have equal weight: Australia–India agreement</p> <p>In some types of compound words</p> | <p>In expressions using <i>between</i> and <i>from</i>: The murder was committed between 8:00 and 9:30 pm.</p> <p>not The murder was committed between 8:00–9:30 pm.</p> <p>She worked from Monday to Friday.</p> <p>not She worked from Monday–Friday.</p> <p>More than 1 pair of parenthetical en dashes in a sentence (this can cause confusion)</p> |
| Em dash  | <p>On either side of a parenthetical expression (use of an em dash or a spaced en dash is a style decision, but a spaced en dash is recommended, because it causes fewer problems when text is viewed on screen)</p> | <p>More than 1 pair of parenthetical em dashes in a sentence (this can cause confusion)</p> |
| Slash  | <p>In web addresses</p> <p>To indicate per (e.g. in some units of measure)</p> | <p>To show alternatives (use or instead)</p> <p>In spans of numbers</p> |