

# Campbell's English: Punctuation Rules

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## INTRODUCTION:

Punctuation rules, like language itself, are subject to change. They also vary from one style guide to another, such as MLA versus APA, etc. Always check with your instructor about which style guide you must follow. The following rules are ones which most people follow in the business and academic world.

## A. COMMAS

### 1. COMMA RULE:

Use a comma before the conjunction between independent clauses that are joined together to make compound sentences.

*Example:*

*Yuki kicked the ball to Catherine, and she scored the last goal of the game.*

### 2. COMMA RULE:

Use commas to separate series of things or actions.

*Examples:*

*Please pick up some pineapple, corn, mayonnaise, soft rolls, and tofu.*

*We were skating, sliding, and building snow castles on Saturday.*

**NOTE:** The use of the comma before the conjunction for your last list item is optional. This is called an **OXFORD COMMA**. It is my personal preference to use Oxford commas. If you decide not to use an Oxford comma, be consistent. Maintain that choice throughout an entire piece of writing.

**3. COMMA RULE:**

Use commas before and after the names of people to whom you are directly speaking.

**Example:**

*I know it's hard to believe, Frank, but we really did win the lottery last night.*

**COMMA RULE 3 EXCEPTION:**

If all that precedes the name is the word *and* or *but*, you can skip the comma before the name (but keep the comma after the name.)

**Example:**

*But Mom, I have my homework finished.*

*And Khatija, let's never fight over strawberry jam again.*

**4. COMMA RULE:**

Use commas before or after a quotation.

**Examples:**

*Andrea whispered, "I think we're going to miss our flight."*

*"Please come to the station with us," said the officer.*

**COMMA RULE 4 EXCEPTION:**

Do not use a comma when the quotation is a question or an exclamation.

**Examples:**

*"Why did we ever come here?" cried Tomas*

*"We are out of Cheddar Bunnies again!" shouted Dad.*

5. **COMMA RULE:**  
Use a comma after an introductory phrase

**Example:**

*Of course, the students just love learning about punctuation.*

6. **COMMA RULE:**  
Use a comma around an aside, which is information that could go in parenthesis.

**Example:**

*My oldest dog, the gentle beagle we got from the SPCA, sleeps under the baby's crib.*

7. **COMMA RULE:**  
Use commas around *which* clauses.

**Example:**

*The grade 12 prom, which will take place in June, will be a community-building event for the whole school.*

**NOTE:** Do not use commas around *that* clauses.

**Example:**

*The shoes that I usually wear are lost.*

**NOTE:** What's the difference between *that* and *which*?

If you can drop the clause and the main idea still works, use *which*, and set it off by commas.

If you need the clause to make sense, use *that* and don't use commas.

In the examples used above, the point about the date of the prom is not as important as the fact that it is a community-building event. However, it is very important that I can't wear the shoes I usually wear: it explains why I need to go shoe shopping!

## B. SEMI-COLONS

### 1. SEMI-COLON RULE:

Use a semi-colon between independent clauses that are joined to create a compound sentence if you do not use a comma with a conjunction.

*Example:*

*Yuki kicked the ball to Catherine; she scored the last goal of the game.*

### 2. SEMI-COLON RULE:

Use a semi-colon to separate items in a list when there's already a comma in one or more of the list items, or when those list items are very long.

*Examples:*

*My favourite classes at Hogwarts include Transfiguration, taught by Professor McGonagall; Flying, taught by Professor Hootch; and Care of Magical Creatures, taught by Hagrid.*

*Pick up your groomsmen's suits at the dry cleaner; pay for my bridesmaids' fresh corsages at the florist; collect our honeymoon cruise tickets at the travel agency in the mall; and don't forget to get our excited, proud parents from the airport tonight at midnight!*

## C. COLONS

### 1. COLON RULE:

Use a colon instead of a comma, if you wish, to introduce a quotation.

*Examples:*

*Andrea whispered: "I think we're going to miss our flight."*

**NOTE:** Many people prefer to introduce long quotations with a colon.

### 2. COLON RULE:

Use a colon to introduce a list, if what comes before the list is an independent clause.

*Examples:*

*I have three pets: a dog, a kitten, and a goldfish.*

**NOTE:** Do not use a colon after a verb if that will separate it from the rest of the sentence. For example, this is wrong: In the dead man's hands were: a cell phone, an opened envelope without a letter, and a key.

## D. APOSTROPHES

### 1. APOSTROPHE RULE:

Use an apostrophe with the letter S to show ownership. If the owner's name already ends in S, just add an apostrophe to the end of the name (although some older folks may add an extra S).

*Examples:*

*Mayumi's cat was found wandering in the park.*

*Serena Williams' game last night was fantastic.*

*Serena Williams's game last night was fantastic.*

**APOSTROPHE RULE 1 EXCEPTION:**

When you need to show that it owns something, do not use an apostrophe. *It's* means *it is*. *Its* mean *belonging to it*.

**Examples:**

*The dog ate its dinner in silence.*

**2. APOSTROPHE RULE:**

Use an apostrophe to show that there are letters missing when you make a contraction.

**Example:**

*Don't drink the water from the tap; use what's in the kettle.*

*(don't = do not; what's = What is)*

## **E. QUOTATION MARKS**

**NOTE:**

- a. Opening quotation marks always go right before the first word in a quotation.
- b. The rules vary when closing quotations.

**1. QUOTATION MARKS RULE:**

When quotations end with periods and commas, place them inside the closing quotation marks.

**Examples:**

*As Oscar Wilde said, "I can resist everything except temptation."*

*"I never travel without my diary. One should always have something sensational to read in the train," said Oscar Wilde.*

## 2. QUOTATION MARKS RULE:

Use quotation marks around the titles of chapter, stories, poems, songs, or smaller pieces within entire units of work. On the other hand, either underline (if you are handwriting) or italicize (if you are printing) titles of books, albums, films and other entire units of work. Doing this means you are using the correct title case.

**Examples:**

“Antigone” is the third play from Sophocles’ The Theban Plays.

“Antigone” is the third play from Sophocles’ *The Theban Plays*.

“Heart-shaped Box” is a great song from In Utero by Nirvana.

“Heart-shaped Box” is a great song from *In Utero* by Nirvana.

## 3. QUOTATION MARKS RULE:

When quotations end with colons or semi-colons, place them inside the closing quotation marks. If they are not part of the original quotation, however, they go outside the quotation marks.

**Examples:**

*According to the menu, there are two sizes available from “Chez Louis’ Soup du Jour:” appetizer or main. [EXPLANATION: The colon is part of the original title of the story, and goes inside the quotation marks.]*

*One of Ray Bradbury’s most famous stories is “The Veldt”; it was published in a number of textbooks, it was turned into a television film, and it even inspired a pop song. [EXPLANATION: The semi-colon is not part of the original title of the story, and goes outside the quotation marks.]*

## 4. QUOTATION MARKS RULE:

- a. As with colons and semi-colons in quotations, when quotations end with question mark or exclamation points, place them inside the quotation marks if they are part of the original quotation.

**Examples:**

*"What is your password?" asked my sister.*

*"I can't believe you did that!" I shouted at my sister.*

- b. When quotations end with question mark or exclamation points, place them outside the quotation marks if they are not part of the original quotation.

**Examples:**

*Who sang in the 1985 charity song "We are the World"?*

*We are out of my favourite cereal, "Captain Crunch"!*

## 5. QUOTATION MARKS RULE:

When one quotation appears within another quotation, put the inside quotation in single quotation marks.

**Example:**

*"Was it Douglas MacArthur or George S. Patton who said, 'Old soldiers never die; they just fade away'?" asked Francis.*

## F. ELLIPSIS

### 1. ELLIPSIS RULE:

Use an ellipsis to indicate that material is missing from a quotation.

**NOTE:**

When you use an ellipsis in this way, do not leave out any part of the quotation that is important to the point you are discussing, and do not change the meaning of the person you are quoting.

**Example:**



*According to the contractor, "The first step to successful home kitchen design is to determine your ... budget."*

*[EXPLANATION: The original quotation had the words "credit rating and overall household budget" which are left out by using the ellipsis.]*

**2. ELLIPSIS RULE:**

If the ellipsis ends the sentence, a fourth dot should be added as it functions as the period for the sentence.

*Example:*

*As an example, consider the infamous line from 2004's Saw: "I want to play a game ...."*

**3. ELLIPSIS RULE:**

Sometimes, poets and other writers use an ellipsis to indicate a pause for emphasis. However, formal academic writers do not use the ellipsis in this way.

*Example:*

*In the 1931 film, Dracula, the filmmakers emphasize our sense of horror arising from dramatic irony when Dracula says, "I never drink ... wine."*

## **G. HYPHENS**

**NOTE:**

A hyphen is shorter than a dash, and is used in a different way.

**1. HYPHEN RULE:**

Use a hyphen with the family prefixes *ex* (meaning former), *in-law*, and *great*.

*Examples:*

*Although they married and divorced twice, Elizabeth Taylor's ex-husband Richard Burton is considered by many to be the love of her life.*

*Jim's brothers-in-law are all carpenters.*

*Have you met Miriam's great-grandmother?*

Do not use a hyphen with the family prefixes step, half, or grand.

**Examples:**

*My stepfather, Ron, is the kindest man I know.*

*Is it possible that Jon Snow Daenerys Targaryen's half brother?*

*Your grandmother makes the best jam.*

## 2. HYPHEN RULE:

Use a hyphen when you are adding a suffix or a prefix to proper nouns, or words that are capitalized.

**Example:**

*The anti-British sentiment is still felt in parts of the EU.*

*The Austen-like work was popular with academics and mainstream readers alike.*

**NOTE:** The current exceptions to this rule are the Biblical words, *Christlike* and *Antichrist*.

## 3. HYPHEN RULE:

Use a hyphen when you are adding the suffix *like* to words that already end with the letter *l*.

**Example:**

*The shell-like sculpture fascinated guests during the charity art auction.*

**4. HYPHEN RULE:**

Use a hyphen when you are adding a prefix or suffix to words that would result in a double vowel.

**Example:**

*The pro-arts group explained how funding cuts would negatively affect the economy in the whole community.*

## **H. DASHES**

**5. DASH RULE:**

**NOTE:**

A dash is longer than a hyphen. In fact, when typing, a dash is created by typing two hyphens next to each other, and then hitting the enter key, as here –

Sometimes, poets and other writers use dash to indicate a pause for emphasis, or they may use two dashes when they want to include an interrupting idea that could be couched in parenthesis.

However, formal academic writers do not use the dash in this way. In other words, you can use the dash in your poems and short stories, but do not use them in your essays for school.

**Example, from Robert Frost's poem "The Road Not Taken":**

*I shall be telling this with a sigh  
Somewhere ages and ages hence:  
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I —  
I took the one less traveled by,  
And that has made all the difference.*

## I. BRACKETS

**NOTE:** Brackets are square [ ]; parentheses are round ( ). They have different uses.

### 1. BRACKET RULE:

Use brackets to insert your own words into a quotation to lend clarity or grammatical shifts that fit your sentence.

**NOTE:** Do not use brackets in this way to change the original meaning of a quotation.

*In "The Road Not Taken", Robert Frost says: "I took the one [road] less travelled by, and that has made all the difference."*

## J. PARENTHESIS

**NOTE:** Brackets are square [ ]; parentheses are round ( ). They have different uses.

### 1. PARENTHESIS RULE:

Parentheses (singular version is parenthesis) are used in formal academic research writing when placing an in-text source citation after a quotation, or a paraphrase of ideas from another source. That citation leads the reader to the full citation details given in the bibliography at the end of the research paper. Usually, the in-text citation is the author's last name and a page number.

*"Nobody is capable of free speech unless he knows how to use language, and such knowledge is not a gift: it has to be learned and worked at" (Frye, 93).*

The example above is what appears in a research paper. The citation in parentheses tells us to look for the bibliography at the end of the paper for something written by Frye. When we get there, we find:

Frye, Northrop, and Germaine Warkentin. *Educated Imagination and Other Writings on Critical Theory, 1933-1963*. Toronto: U of Toronto, 2006.

**2. PARENTHESIS RULE:**

Sometimes writers of short stories or poetry use parentheses to include an interrupting idea within a sentence. However, such use of parentheses might be considered the result of poor organization for formal academic work. This use of parenthesis also disrupts the flow of sentences, and prevents sentence variety. Try to avoid using this kind of parenthetical asides in your formal academic writing.

## **K. EXCLAMATION POINTS**

**1. EXCLAMATION POINT RULE:**

Exclamation points indicate emotion; therefore, exclamation points are not appropriate for formal academic writing. They may be used successfully in creative types of writing.

Stop using exclamation points!

And stop using two exclamation points!

And stop using two exclamation points and then drawing a curved line underneath to make a smiley face!

Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaak!

## **L. QUESTION MARKS**

**1. QUESTION MARKS RULE:**

Few people make errors with question marks. They are used at the end of interrogative sentences, which is to say, they are used at the end of questions.

Isn't that easy?