Punctuation Power Pack

*Knowing how to use these pieces of punctuation properly will make you a language ninja!*

**DASHES**

Use a dash to draw attention to parenthetical information, to prepare for changes in tone, or to introduce or emphasize information.

**CORRECT:**Everything about the test - especially the surprise essay section - was incredibly difficult.

**CORRECT:** He took a deep breath, began to sprint toward the finish line - and collapsed just a few feet before he crossed it.

**CORRECT:** I need three things from you - patience, kindness, and understanding.

**CORRECT:** I hate - absolutely abhor - that band.

Dashes are fairly versatile, so there aren't many obvious errors related to their usage. Just be careful not to overuse the dash, as it's less formal than other punctuation. Also remember that a dash is composed of two lines (--), not just one (-), which is a hyphen.

**PARENTHESES**

Use parentheses to set off extra material, digressions, or afterthoughts.

**CORRECT:**After her eggs, bacon, and coffee (her usual breakfast), she leaves for work.

**CORRECT:**My mother tolerates (i.e. hates) my nose piercing.

**BRACKETS**

Brackets are used to enclose words that you add to a direct quotation.

**CORRECT:** In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, " he [Billy] is in a constant state of stage fright, he says, because he never knows what part of his life he is going to have to act in next."

If there is an error in the original quotation, the word *sic* appears in brackets after the word containing the error.

**CORRECT:** "This sentence contains an eror [*sic*]."

Paraphrasing quotations can eliminate the need for this use of brackets. Try paraphrasing to avoid calling attention to others' mistakes whenever possible.

**ELLIPSIS**

The ellipsis is used to show the deletion of words from a direct quotation.

If the original quotation says:

**ORIGINAL:** "The best way to be healthy, according to the most prestigious doctors at the University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine, is to eat right, exercise, and get plenty of sleep."

You can use the ellipsis as follows:

**REPHRASED:**"The best way to be healthy...is to eat right, exercise, and get plenty of good sleep."

Keep in mind that you don't need to use the ellipsis to show words omitted at the beginning of a quote. If you paraphrased the beginning of the quote above, you wouldn't need to use ellipsis:

**REPHRASED:** If a person wants to be the healthiest he can, he should "eat right, exercise, and get plenty of good sleep."

You also don't need to use the ellipsis at the end of a quote unless you are omitting words from the end of a multi-sentence quote. Use brackets around the ellipsis in this case, to show that the mark itself is not a part of the original sentence.

If the original quote reads:

**ORIGINAL:**"The best way to be healthy, according to the most prestigious doctors at the University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine, is to eat right, exercise, and get plenty of sleep. This is the first of many important suggestions, the rest of which deal with managing everyday pressures such as family, career, and other commitments."

You could abbreviate it as follows:

**REPHRASED:**"The best way to be healthy, according to the most prestigious doctors at the University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine, is to eat right, exercise, and get plenty of sleep. This is the first of many important suggestions[...]."

The ellipsis can also be used to indicate a pause in the flow of a sentence and is especially useful in quoted speech:

Juan thought and thought … and then thought some more.  
"I'm wondering …" Juan said, bemused.

Note carefully the spacing of the ellipsis marks and the surrounding characters in the examples above. In mid-sentence, a space should appear between the first and last ellipsis marks and the surrounding letters. If a quotation is meant to trail off (as in Juan's bemused thought), leave a space between the last letter and the first ellipsis mark but do not include a period with the ellipsis marks.

**When to Use a Colon**

The **colon** focuses the reader's attention on what is to follow, and as a result, you should use it to introduce a list, a summation, or an idea that somehow completes the introductory idea. You may use the colon in this way, however, **only after an independent clause**:

He visited three cities during his stay in the Maritimes: Halifax, Saint John and Moncton.

Their lobbying efforts were ultimately useless: the bill was soundly defeated.

My mother gave me one good piece of advice: to avoid wasting time and energy worrying about things I cannot change.

**When Not to Use a Colon**

You should not place a colon between a verb and its object or subject complement, or between a preposition and its object:

**ORIGINAL:**His neighbour lent him: a pup-tent, a wooden canoe, and a slightly battered Coleman stove. (colon between verb and objects)

**REPHRASED:**His neighbour lent him a pup-tent, a wooden canoe, and a slightly battered Coleman stove.

**ORIGINAL:**Her three goals are: to improve her public speaking skills, to increase her self-confidence and to sharpen her sales techniques. (colon between verb and subject complement)

**REPHRASED:**Her three goals are to improve her public speaking skills, to increase her self-confidence and to sharpen her sales techniques.

**ORIGINAL:**We travelled to: London, Wales and Scotland. (colon between preposition and objects)

**REPHRASED:**We travelled to London, Wales and Scotland.

**Semicolon**

You will usually use the **semicolon** to link independent clauses not joined by a co-ordinating conjunction. Semicolons should join only those independent clauses that are closely related in meaning.

Abdominal exercises help prevent back pain; proper posture is also important.

The auditors made six recommendations; however, only one has been adopted so far.

Do not use a semicolon to link a dependent clause or a phrase to an independent clause.

**ORIGINAL:**Although gaining and maintaining a high level of physical fitness takes a good deal of time; the effort pays off in the long run.

**REPHRASED:**Although gaining and maintaining a high level of physical fitness takes a good deal of time, the effort pays off in the long run.

Generally, you should not place a semicolon before a co-ordinating conjunction that links two independent clauses. The only exception to this guideline is if the two independent clauses are very long and already contain a number of commas.

**ORIGINAL:**The economy has been sluggish for four years now; but some signs of improvement are finally beginning to show.

**REPHRASED:**The economy has been sluggish for four years now, but some signs of improvement are finally beginning to show.

It may be useful to remember that, for the most part, you should use a semicolon only where you could also use a period.

There is one exception to this guideline. When punctuating a list or series of elements in which one or more of the elements contains an internal comma, you should use semicolons instead of commas to separate the elements from one another:

Henry's mother believes three things: that every situation, no matter how grim, will be happily resolved; that no one knows more about human nature than she; and that Henry, who is thirty-five years old, will never be able to do his own laundry.