

A Few Punctuation Rules

Apostrophes

- Do not use for plurals of all-capital abbreviations or numerals; just use an s with no apostrophe
 - ECGs
 - IQs
 - Woman in her 40s
 - During the 1990s

Hyphens

- Hyphenate 2 words that come before a noun and work together to modify that noun
 - Risk-reward ratio
 - We performed a double-blind study.
 - Our main outcome measure was 30-day mortality.
- Do not hyphenate 2-word modifiers that come after the noun
 - Ratio of risk to reward
 - The study was double blind.
 - We estimated mortality at 30 days, 6 months, and 1 year.
- Hyphenate compound numbers from 21 to 99 and fractions used as adjectives
 - All thirty-six patients were examined.
 - A two-thirds majority was needed.
- Do not hyphenate fractions used as nouns
 - Three fourths of the questionnaires were returned.
- The following common prefixes are not typically joined by hyphens:
 - ante, anti, bi, co, contra, counter, de, extra, infra, inter, intra, micro, mid, non, over, pre, post, pro, pseudo, re, semi, sub, super, supra, trans, tri, ultra, un, under
 - Can make an exception when the same vowel appears twice in a row (eg, co-opt, possibly intra-aortic)
 - Check journal style

- When two or more hyphenated compounds have a common base, omit the base in all but the last compound. In **unhyphenated** compounds written as one word, repeat the base
 - 10- and 15-year-old boys
 - Preoperative and postoperative treatment (not pre- and postoperative treatment)
- Omit hyphens in words commonly read together as units
 - Open heart surgery
 - Social services agency
 - Public health officials
- Do not use a hyphen after an adverb ending in **-ly** even when used in a compound modifier
 - The electrically actuated pump

Commas

- Use with nonrestrictive clauses that begin with “which”
 - The arrhythmia, which lasted for days, disappeared after drug therapy.
- Do not use to set off clauses that are essential to the sentence’s meaning (restrictive) or that begin with “that”
 - The arrhythmia that caused the patient’s death was attributed to drug therapy.
- Place after Latin terms such as viz, ie, and eg in parentheses, and use to set off the expanded equivalents like namely, that is, and for example
 - The use of standardized scores (eg, Z scores) has no effect on statistical comparisons.
 - Three of the DPP4 inhibitors, namely saxagliptin, alogliptin, and sitagliptin, have already been tested.
- Use to separate main clauses joined by coordinating conjunctions (and, but, for, or, nor, yet, so) in compound sentences
 - No subgroup of responders could be identified, and differences between centers were so great that no real comparison was possible.
- Place around interrupting words and phrases that are not essential to the sentence’s meaning (nonrestrictive)
 - An in vitro cell-based bioassay, to my knowledge, has not been developed.
 - At 16 and 32 ng/mL, however, 4 of the 5 curves had at least 1 predicted concentration that deviated...

- Use to separate each element in a date but not when the month and year are used without the day
 - Edward's rhinoplasty was scheduled for August 19, 2015, at the Mayo Clinic.
 - December 1941 was a time of fear.
- Place inside quotation marks and before superscript reference citations and footnote symbols (check journal style)
 - "I'll lend you my stethoscope," she offered.
 - Sampson and colleagues,¹ Jones and colleagues,² and our group³ reported similar findings.
 - Title page of manuscript: James T. Willerson, MD,¹ Maximilian Buja, MD,² and Emerson C. Perin, MD, PhD³
- Use to set off introductory clauses or phrases
 - If the infection recurs, another course of azithromycin should be given.
- Place after items in a series
 - The doctor, the nurse, and the therapist saw the patient daily.
- Use between a series of modifiers
 - The randomized, double-blind, placebo-controlled trial...

Semicolons

- Use to separate independent clauses
 - The conditions of 52% of the patients improved greatly; 4% of the patients were lost to follow-up.
- Use to separate main clauses joined by a conjunctive adverb (eg, furthermore, however, thus, hence, indeed, yet)
 - The patient's fever had subsided; however, his condition was still critical.
- When it will make the sentence clearer, use to separate list items when one or more of the items has internal punctuation
 - The study had 3 goals: first, to examine medication compliance in our patients, most of whom lived in rural communities; second, to determine the relative influence of clinical effectiveness and adverse effects on medication compliance; and third, to test a psychosocial intervention designed to improve medication compliance.

Quotation Marks

- Place outside commas and periods, inside colons and semicolons
 - Do not do the autopsy if the result is invariably “edema and congestion of the viscera.”
 - If the result is “edema and congestion of the viscera,” do not do the autopsy.
 - The result of the autopsy is invariably “edema and congestion of the viscera”; why do the autopsy?
- Place other punctuation inside quotation marks only when part of the quoted material
 - Why bother to do autopsies at all if the result is invariably “edema and congestion of the viscera”?
- Place around coined words, slang, and words or phrases used ironically or facetiously
- Avoid overuse

Capitalization

- Do not capitalize the second part of a hyphenated compound when both parts together constitute a single word, even in a title
 - Long-term Goals
 - Follow-up Studies
- Do not capitalize words from which acronyms are derived (unless those words would be capitalized anyway)
 - LVAD, left ventricular assist device
 - ELISA, enzyme-linked immunosorbent assay
 - STS, Society of Thoracic Surgeons