# The little marks really matter – punctuation

| Punctuation mark | Use | Don't use |
|---|---|---|
| **Full stop** | To end a sentence | After headings |
| | As the decimal point in numbers and currency, and in expressions of time (where a colon could instead be used): | After table or figure names |
| | 127.45   $31.50   9.15 am | After contractions (shortened forms that include both the first and last letters of the word):<br><br>Dr   Qld |
| | To separate elements of web and email addresses:<br><br>www.contentmanual.com.au | After abbreviations (shortened forms that do not include the last letter of the word):<br><br>Vic   Fig 1 |
| | After the last point in a bulleted list of sentence fragments | However, this is a matter of style preference – check the stylesheet and be consistent |
| | In table entries to separate sentences, but not at the end of an entry. However, this is a matter of style preference – check the stylesheet and be consistent | In acronyms and initialisms:<br><br>ASIO   NSW |
| | | After initials in people's names |
| | | After page header and footer text |
| | | After points in a bulleted list (except for the last point), unless they are complete sentences |
| | | At the end of table entries. However, this is a matter of style preference – check the stylesheet and be consistent |
| | | After index entries |
| | | In or after symbols for units of measurement:<br><br>mg   kWh |
| **Colon** | To introduce items in a bulleted list | To introduce items in a sentence when the items are preceded by a word such as 'including' |
| | To introduce items in a sentence that provide further information about something already mentioned:<br><br>We invited 3 people: John, Amy and Carol. | To introduce second-level bullets in a bulleted list |
| | To introduce a block quotation | |
| | Between the title of a publication and its subtitle | |
| | In ratios:<br><br>3:1 | |
| | In expressions of time (where a full stop could instead be used):<br><br>9:15 am | |

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

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

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| En dash | To show spans of numbers<br><br>On either side of a parenthetic 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)<br><br>To show an association between words that have equal weight:<br><br>Australia–India agreement<br><br>In some types of compound words | In expressions using *between* and *from*:<br><br>The murder was committed between 8:00 and 9:30 pm.<br><br>not<br><br>The murder was committed between 8:00–9:30 pm.<br><br>She worked from Monday to Friday.<br><br>not<br><br>She worked from Monday–Friday.<br><br>More than 1 pair of parenthetic en dashes in a sentence (this can cause confusion) |
| Em dash | On either side of a parenthetic 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) | More than 1 pair of parenthetic em dashes in a sentence (this can cause confusion) |
| Slash | In web addresses<br><br>To indicate *per* (e.g. in some units of measure) | To show alternatives (use *or* instead)<br><br>In spans of numbers |

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