Main uses of punctuation marks

The following passage shows the main punctuation marks in use.

“Why Study English?” is the title of a book; it is also a question.

An English-speaking pupil, or a student, might answer, “Because I’ve got to!” — especially if they are at school (where it is part of the syllabus: compulsory until the age of sixteen).
1. **FULL STOP / . /**

   a) A full stop is used to end a sentence. The next sentence begins with a capital letter.

   b) An abbreviation ends in a full stop when the final letter of the abbreviation is not the last letter of the word.

   You can find this reference on p. 20 of ch. 3 in vol. 1.
   One editor is abbreviated to ed., but two editors are abbreviated to eds (without a full stop), since –s is the final letter of the word.

   c) A full stop is sometimes, but not always, used in acronyms (abbreviations of names).

   The S.L.C. is an important part of Flinders University. You can make an appointment to see an S.L.C. advisor if you need help with essay writing or grammar.

   There is an ATM on the campus. You can find the ATM outside the bank.

2. **COMMA / , /**

   Together with the full stop, the comma is the most commonly used punctuation mark. Basically it separates parts of the sentence. It is used:

   a) to separate a non-defining relative clause (a clause which adds extra information, introduced by a word such as *that, which* or *who*) from the rest of the sentence.

   It is years since I read *Anna Karenina, which* is my favourite novel.  
   *Anna Karenina, which* is my favourite novel, was written by Tolstoy.

   b) when a subordinate (less important) clause comes before the principal clause.

   If you do not understand, please tell me.

   c) to separate phrases in apposition (describing the same person or thing mentioned earlier) from the rest of the sentence.

   Mr Gorbachev, the President, said that he approved of the policy.

   d) to separate some non-defining adjectival phrases from the rest of the sentence.

   The speaker, *getting to his feet*, began to introduce his talk.
e) to separate items in many kinds of lists.

I shall need a book, some paper, a pencil and a ruler.

f) to separate a number of connectives from the rest of the sentence: too, however, nevertheless, though, of course, then, etc.

You can, however, do it if you wish. Nevertheless, these results must be interpreted within their context. This is, of course, the best action to take.

g) before a coordinating conjunction (and, but, or, nor, for, so, yet) linking two main clauses, when this clarifies the meaning.

The first vendor was selling ice cream with chocolate chips, and worms were available from the second vendor.

h) between coordinate adjectives not joined by and.

Informative, imaginative, appealing writing can sell your ideas.

i) when some adverbs or adverbial expressions are placed within a sentence (instead of at the beginning or end of the sentence).

They tried, in spite of my advice, to climb the mountain.

3. COLON / : /

A colon is not often used. It indicates a fairly close interdependence between the units that it separates. The sentence before the colon should be complete in itself, not a sentence fragment.

a) It indicates that what follows it is an explanation or amplification of what precedes it.

I have some news for you: John’s father has arrived.

b) It can be used to introduce a list of items.

Please send him the following items: a passport, a visa application and the correct fee.

4. SEMI-COLON / ; /

a). A semi-colon joins two independent but related clauses or sentences.

The lecture was badly delivered; it went on far too long.
It is possible to avoid using the semi-colon here, by replacing it with a word such as and or because, or by creating two separate sentences.

The lecture was badly delivered and it went on far too long.
The lecture was badly delivered. It went on far too long.

b). It is used in lists to separate items made up of several words.

To make a cake you will need a hundred grams of butter; a hundred grams of sugar; a hundred grams of flour; a spoon of cocoa; and two eggs.

c). It can separate main clauses joined by conjunctive adverbs such as however, therefore, moreover, nevertheless, then, thus. This applies even when the conjunctive adverb is moved.

Ernest Hemingway was a master of style; however, opinions about his work vary widely.

Ernest Hemingway was a master of style; opinions about his work, however, vary widely.

5. **Hyphen** / - /  **Dash (or EM rule)** / — /  **En rule** / – /

a) A **hyphen** separates, in some cases, the prefix from the second part of the word.

co-opt

b) It also joins some compound words.

self-control, twenty-one

**Note:** You should always check in a dictionary to see if a hyphen is needed.

c) A **dash** is used to indicate a break, often informally, or to add parenthetical information.

He received a prize — and a certificate as well.

His research output included two books — both on astronomy — as well as numerous articles.

**Note:** Generally, it is better to avoid using a dash in academic writing.
The two sentences above could be rewritten:

He received a prize, and a certificate as well.

His research output included two books (both on astronomy) as well as numerous articles.

d) An **en-rule** indicates a range:

1939 – 1945
6. **APOSTROPHE / ' /**

   a) An apostrophe is most frequently used to indicate possessive singular or plural.

      When there is one owner, the apostrophe comes before the -s.
      When there is more than one owner the apostrophe comes after the -s

      The student's car.  (The car belonging to one student.)
      The students' car.  (The car belonging to more than one student.)
      The student's books.  (The books belonging to one student.)
      The students' books.  (The books belonging to more than one student.)

   b) An apostrophe is also used to indicate that a letter is missing.

      It's a well-known fact.

      This use should be avoided in academic writing. It is better to say

      It is a well-known fact.

   c) The apostrophe should always be included when telling the time.

      It is nine o’clock.  (This is short for ‘nine of the clock’.)

   d) An apostrophe is **not** needed to indicate a plural.

      That shop sells bananas.
      **NOT** That shop sells banana's.

7. **QUESTION MARK / ? /**

   a) A question mark is used after a direct question.

      What time is it?
      Can you tell me the answer?

   b) It is **not** used after an indirect question.

      Please tell me what time it is.
      I need to find out where the books are.

8. **QUOTATION MARKS (QUOTES) OR INVERTED COMMAS. THEY MAY BE SINGLE / ‘ ’ / OR DOUBLE / “ ” / (SINGLE MARKS ARE MORE COMMON).**

   a) They show when someone is being quoted directly.

      ‘We must put a stop to the illegal exportation of mahogony,’ said the Minister for the Environment.
      Ferdinand de Saussure separated language into ‘langue’ and ‘parole’.
b) They show the titles of journal articles.


9. **EXCLAMATION MARK / ! /**

The exclamation mark is not often used in academic writing. It is usually appropriate after real exclamations or short commands.

Oh dear!

Get out!

10. **BRACKETS (PARENTHESES) / ( ) /**

a) Brackets are used to clarify, or to avoid confusion. In your academic writing such confusion should not arise, and so this use of brackets will not be necessary.

He (Mr Brown) told him (Mr Jones) that he (Mr Green) had been accepted for the job.

b) They provide additional, non-essential information in a sentence.

French, Italian and Spanish (but not Portuguese) may be studied at this university.

c) They enclose author-date references in the text.

A number of experiments (Smith 1987; Tan 1990; Wong 1991) indicate that this is correct.

d) They enclose the number for an equation, and bracket parts of an equation together.

\[ x = 2(a+b) \]

11. **SQUARE BRACKETS /[ ]/**

Square brackets are used within a quotation to explain, clarify or correct the original words.

PUNCTUATION EXERCISES

Exercise 1

In the following sentences, put the correct punctuation marks in the underlined spaces. Also add capital letters where necessary.

a man has six items in his bathroom: a toothbrush, shaving cream, a razor, a bar of soap and a towel from the Holiday Inn; the average number of items in the typical woman's bathroom is 337; a man would not be able to identify most of these items.

women love cats; men say they love cats; but when women aren't looking men kick cats.

Exercise 2

Now add the correct punctuation marks in the following sentences. Remember to use capital letters where appropriate.

a woman will dress up to go shopping, water the plants, empty the garbage, answer the phone, read a book, and get the mail; a man will dress up for weddings and funerals.

a successful man is one who makes more money than his wife can spend; a successful woman is one who can find such a man.

a woman knows all about her children, dentist appointments and romances, best friends and worst enemies, favourite foods, secret dreams and fears, and future hopes; a man is vaguely aware of some short people living in the house.

when the bill for dinner arrives the men will each throw in $20 even though its only for $32.50; none of them will have anything smaller and none will actually admit they want change back when the girls get their bill out come the pocket calculators.
ANSWERS

Exercise 1

A man has six items in his bathroom: a toothbrush, shaving cream, a razor, a bar of soap and a towel from the Holiday Inn. The average number of items in the typical woman’s bathroom is 337. A man would not be able to identify most of these items.

Women love cats. Men say they love cats, but when women aren’t looking men kick cats. or
Women love cats; men say they love cats, but when women aren’t looking men kick cats. or
Women love cats; men say they love cats, but, when women aren’t looking, men kick cats.

Exercise 2

A woman will dress up to go shopping, water the plants, empty the garbage, answer the phone, read a book and get the mail; a man will dress up for weddings and funerals. or
A woman will dress up to go shopping, water the plants, empty the garbage, answer the phone, read a book and get the mail. A man will dress up for weddings and funerals.

A successful man is one who makes more money than his wife can spend; a successful woman is one who can find such a man. or
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A woman knows all about her children: dentist appointments and romances; best friends and worst enemies; favourite foods; secret dreams and fears; and future hopes. A man is vaguely aware of some short people living in the house.

When the bill for dinner arrives, the men will each throw in $20, even though it’s only for $32.50. None of them will have anything smaller and none will actually admit they want change back. When the girls get their bill, out come the pocket calculators.