

# Punctuation Basics

The following table is not intended as a comprehensive guide to punctuation. Rather, it offers a basic run-down on the appropriate use of the most frequently used punctuation marks. Further, it is tailored towards creative fiction and nonfiction (rather than academic) writing, and reflects the most commonly encountered Australian publishing conventions.

Punctuation Mark	Name	Purpose
.	Full-stop	Signals the end of a sentence, bringing to a close the complete thought or idea contained therein.
?	Question mark	Brings to a close a sentence or statement intended as a query. Any questions?
!	Exclamation mark	Used to add emphasis to a word, phrase or sentence. For instance, in the case of a command, a loud noise, or something shouted or spoken with intensity. E.g.: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ‘Company, halt!’ barked the drill sergeant.</li> <li>• Bang! The gun went off as it hit the floor.</li> <li>• Mary looked exasperated. ‘I can’t take it anymore!’</li> </ul> <p><i>NB: Exclamation marks should be used sparingly, if at all. Often, a reader can tell from the words themselves, or the context, if something is spoken with intensity or special emphasis.</i></p>
...	Ellipsis	In creative writing, an ellipsis is commonly used in dialogue to indicate hesitation or trailing off. E.g.: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gasping for breath, Jenny struggled to explain: ‘The enemy... at the gate... they’re here!’</li> <li>• ‘I just wanted to say...’ Brian started to apologise, but the words just wouldn’t come.</li> </ul> <p>Can also indicate words omitted or unheard, or the passage of time. E.g.:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ‘... and then she shot him!’</li> <li>• The countdown began: ten, nine, eight...</li> </ul>

Punctuation Mark	Name	Purpose
,	Comma	<p><b>Creates a short pause</b> within a sentence <b>to help relate clauses</b> and so clarify meaning—e.g.:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Let's eat, Grandpa! Man, bacon tastes so good!</li> </ul> <p>Used <b>between items in a list</b>—e.g.:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• We ate hot-dogs, doughnuts, and ice-cream.</li> </ul> <p>Used to <b>set apart parenthetical clauses</b>—e.g.:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Too much food, especially fried food, causes indigestion.</li> <li>• One hot summer's day, about three years ago, I decided to go for a walk.</li> </ul> <p>Used <b>after qualifying or introductory terms</b> in a sentence—e.g.:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• However, we all enjoyed the meal.</li> <li>• Once upon a time, there lived three bears.</li> <li>• Entering the room, Ruth began to sing.</li> </ul> <p>Commas are also <b>used to introduce or complete dialogue with a speech attribution*</b>—e.g.:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Dad said, 'This is a feast!'</li> <li>• 'I'm so hungry,' said Sam.</li> </ul> <p><i>* Note placement of comma (outside or within quotation marks), depending on whether it introduces or completes the dialogue.</i></p>

Punctuation Mark	Name	Purpose
;	Semi-colon	<p>Used <b>to join two independent but strongly related clauses</b>—e.g.:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I decided to pack the Travel Scrabble; it was one of my favourite games.</li> </ul> <p>Used <b>as a ‘super comma’</b> when listing complex items that already contain commas—e.g.:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I have family living in Tampa, Florida; San Antonio, Texas; and Juneau, Alaska.</li> </ul>
:	Colon	<p>Used <b>before a list of particulars</b>—e.g.:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mary packed a bag with everything she needed: lipstick, hairbrush, knuckledusters, and a flick-knife.</li> </ul> <p>May be used <b>before a phrase or quotation that amplifies or demonstrates</b> the preceding sentence—e.g.:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I only have one rule at my house: wipe your feet before you enter.</li> </ul>
( )	Brackets	<p>Brackets allow the writer <b>to include an aside comment, explanation or digression</b>, set apart from the main sentence—e.g.:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Brackets (also called parentheses) allow a writer to provide additional information.</li> <li>• The audience quickly grew tired of the clown’s antics (which were anything but funny).</li> </ul> <p><i>NB: Brackets may contain single words, fragments or complete sentences. However, the words in brackets should be able to be removed without compromising the meaning of the sentence in which they appear.</i></p>

Punctuation Mark	Name	Purpose
—	Em-dash	<p>An em-dash (so-named because it spans the same width as the letter ‘M’) can be used in much the same way as commas, brackets and colons—i.e. <b>to set apart parenthetical clauses and additional information</b>. E.g.:</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">Dad taught me all about mushing—that’s dogsledding.</p> <p>An em-dash can also be used <b>to indicate dialogue that is cut short</b> — e.g.:</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">Robert started to ask, ‘Has anyone seen my—’ ‘Brain?’ quipped Mary.</p>
-	En-dash	<p>Slightly smaller than the em-dash (the width of the letter ‘N’), the en-dash is most often used in formal or academic writing to span a range of numbers, dates or times—e.g.:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1997–2003 saw profit margins grow significantly.</li> <li>• I can be contacted Mon–Fri, 10am–2pm.</li> </ul> <p>En-dashes can also be used to join words to show conflict, connection or direction—e.g.:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The British–Australian rivalry in sport is well-known.</li> <li>• The Sydney–Melbourne flight was cancelled.</li> <li>• The east–west freeway is nearing completion.</li> </ul>
-	Hyphen	<p>Mostly used to form compound terms—e.g.:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Check-in is in five minutes.</li> <li>• Sally won the fifty-metre breaststroke.</li> <li>• I bought a new three-piece suit for the wedding.</li> <li>• Five-year-olds can be a real handful.</li> </ul> <p>Also used to hyphenate numbers 21-99 (e.g. twenty-one, forty-five etc.).</p>

Punctuation Mark	Name	Purpose
‘ ’	Single quotation marks	<p>In Australia, single quotation marks are the publishing standard for dialogue in creative fiction (unlike in the US, where double quotation marks are used extensively).</p> <p>Quote marks are used to indicate that the words they enclose have been spoken aloud—e.g.:</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">‘Hi, Pete. How are things?’ said Jim. ‘Yo, Jim!’ replied Pete. ‘Not bad at all.’</p> <p>While sometimes used to express thoughts (rather than spoken words), <i>italics</i> are more often used for this purpose—e.g.:</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">‘That’s great,’ said Jim, trying not to breathe too deeply. <i>Man, Pete’s breath stinks!</i></p>
“ ”	Double quotation marks	<p>In Australia, double quotation marks are used to indicate quotes within quotes—e.g.:</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">‘When I threw the paper plane, Mr Sanders screamed, “Right, Carter, you’ve done it now!” I’ve never seen him so mad.’</p> <p>They are also commonly used to introduce nicknames or as “scare quotes” (i.e. to cast doubt on a word or phrase, or to emphasise that it is being used as a euphemism). E.g.:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There’ll never be another golfer like Greg “The Shark” Norman.</li> <li>• My five-year-old nephew’s “redecorating” left much to be desired.</li> <li>• We don’t speak of haircuts in this house, not since the dreaded “incident” of Christmas, 2005.</li> </ul>

‘	Apostrophe	<p>Apostrophes have two main functions (there are more, but these are the 2 you should be aware of). Firstly, they are used <b>to form contractions</b>. E.g.:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cannot = can't</li> <li>• Is not = isn't</li> <li>• Will not = won't</li> <li>• Should not = shouldn't</li> </ul> <p>Secondly, apostrophes are used <b>to show ownership</b>. Generally, the possessive of a singular noun is formed by adding an apostrophe and s, whether the singular noun ends in s or not. E.g.:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tammy's cat had been missing for five days.</li> <li>• Tim was the delivery boy from Jones's Butcher.</li> <li>• It was anyone's guess what had become of the cake.</li> <li>• The bus's windscreen was completely smashed.</li> <li>• Blake decided to take a week's unpaid leave.</li> </ul> <p><b>The key exception</b> is when forming the possessive pronoun <i>its</i>, which has no apostrophe, in order to distinguish it from the contraction <i>it's</i> (it is). E.g.:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It's a long way to go.</li> <li>• The cat cleaned its whiskers.</li> </ul> <p><b>In the case of a plural noun</b> already ending in s, the apostrophe of ownership appears after the s (e.g. No one knew the whereabouts of the gangsters' hideout.)</p> <p><i>NB: Generally, apostrophes are NOT used to create plurals. There are occasional exceptions, but for the most part this is not their job.</i></p>
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