

Punctuation: A Beginning

In all written languages, humans use symbols to convey meaning. For example, the symbols C A T are really just lines—an open circle, two angled lines with a crossing line, and a line topped by another line—but in English, we agree these squiggles have a specific meaning: “A small domesticated carnivore, *Felis domestica* or *F. catus*, bred in a number of varieties” (“Cat”). The squiggles might also make a picture in my head and yours: my pet cat curled up on my window sill. Therefore, we use words to convey information, and it is the same with punctuation. Each mark of punctuation has a meaning or idea and conveys information or a specific instruction for the reader. The following is a chart of some common marks of punctuation. Practice reading sentences with these punctuation marks, and try to pay attention to the information they are giving you as a reader.

Mark	Name	Idea	Instruction for Reader
·	period	End of an idea	Make a full stop
?	question mark	Signals a question is being asked	Raise voice / pitch
!	exclamation point	Emphasis (written jazz hands)	Excitement
,	comma	Separating related ideas	pause
;	semi-colon	Joining two sentences (two complete ideas or clauses that are related)	Longer pause
:	colon	Signal that a direct quote or list follows	Longer pause
— or – –	dash or em-dash	Emphasis	Longer pause
“ ”	quotation marks	Someone's exact words	(no change)
-	hyphen	Combining compound words or line break	(no change)
()	parentheses	Extra information that is not essential to meaning	Could skip or could read
x’	apostrophe	Something is missing or showing ownership	(no change)
‘x’	single quotation mark	The writer is quoting someone's exact words – use for quotes inside of quotes	(no change)