

# The Most Important Things About Punctuation

Punctuation is important because it tells the reader how ideas are related and how to read the information in a sentence.

## Clauses

All clauses contain a subject and a verb; in other words, they have the basic components to create a complete sentence. There are two types of clauses: **independent clauses and dependent clauses**.

- **Independent clauses** contain a subject, a verb, and form a complete thought.
- **Dependent clauses** also have a subject and a verb, but they cannot stand on their own because they don't form a complete thought. They must be connected to an independent clause to make sense.

There's a trick for figuring out whether a passage is an independent clause: the "I know that" test. Put the words "I know that" before any part of a sentence, and it makes sense, it's an *independent clause*. If it doesn't make sense, then it's not an independent clause. Let's look at this in action:

- *I know that **the dog walked across the street.*** → This sentence makes sense, so you know that the bolded part – the dog walked across the street – is an independent clause.
- *I know that **because he wanted water*** → In this sentence, you don't know who or what wanted water or what they were doing to get that water. The sentence doesn't make sense, so the bolded part is not an independent clause.

An independent clause can be a sentence on its own. In fact, all sentences must contain at least one independent clause. Keep in mind the "I know that" test doesn't work with commands or questions.

## Misunderstood Punctuation: Colons and Semi-Colons

**Colons** and **semi-colons** are two punctuation marks that are often misused. These two marks are used to separate an *independent clause* from additional information.

- **Colons** are used when additional information demonstrates an initial independent clause. Most often, they are used to separate an independent clause from a list that demonstrates it. One example might be, *When I went to the store, I needed three things: milk, eggs, and bread.*
- **Semi-colons** are used to connect two *closely related independent clauses*. A good hint is this: if you can't use a period, you can't use a semi-colon either. One example might be this: *I went to the store; I needed to buy milk, eggs, and bread.*

## Other Punctuation: Apostrophes, Hyphens, Quotation Marks, Dashes, and Parentheses

There are three other punctuation marks that are worth knowing.

- **Apostrophes** combine two words into a contraction. One example of a contraction would be the word *can't*, which eliminates letters from *cannot*. An example of possession would be a phrase like, *the girl's cat*, which indicates that the cat belongs to the girl.
- **Hyphens** combine two unrelated words together to create a compound word with a new meaning. One example is the word *semi-colon*, where we combine "semi" and "colon" to create a new word that describes a different punctuation mark.
- **Quotation Marks** are used to set off speech or writing *that another person said or wrote*. One example might be this: *Jane said, "I need to buy a new car."*

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- **Dashes** replace commas or colons in certain situations to provide emphasis and instruct the reader to pay extra attention to it.  
For instance, in the sentence, *I wanted more information about bridges – and how they are built – to inform my research paper.* “And how they are built,” would normally be separated by commas, but I used dashes to create extra emphasis.
- **Parentheses** set off information that is not essential or important to instruct the reader to pay less attention to it. In the same sentence as above, we can replace the dashes with parentheses to decrease emphasis: *I wanted more information about bridges (and how they are built) to inform my research paper.*

## Terminal Punctuation: Periods, Question Marks, Exclamation Points

**Terminal Punctuation** is punctuation that ends a sentence. These types of punctuation always go after an independent clause and consist of periods, question marks, and exclamation points. Exclamation points are **generally discouraged in academic writing**.

## Commas

Commas are probably the most complicated of our punctuation marks. They're most often used in the following situations:

- **To connect two independent clauses** that are linked by the following words: *for, and, nor, but, or, yet, or so.*  
For example: *I wanted a book, so I went to the store.*
- **To separate a dependent clause from an independent clause** when the dependent clause comes first.  
For example: *Because I wanted a book, I went to the store.*
- **To separate additional or non-essential information from the main, independent clause.**  
For example: *Jane, the teacher, wanted to read a book.*

For more details, see the Comma Rules resource.