

A Complete Guide to

PUNCTUATION RULES

Rule 1. Use a period at the end of a complete sentence that is a statement.

Example: *I know him well.*

Rule 2. If the last item in the sentence is an abbreviation that ends in a period, do not follow it with another period.

Incorrect: *This is Alice Smith, M.D..*

Correct: *This is Alice Smith, M.D.*

Correct: *Please shop, cook, etc. We will do the laundry.*

Rule 3. Question marks and exclamation points replace and eliminate periods at the end of a sentence.

Commas and **periods** are the most frequently used punctuation marks. Commas customarily indicate a brief pause; they're not as final as periods.

Rule 1. Use commas to separate words and word groups in a simple series of three or more items.

Example: *My estate goes to my husband, son, daughter-in-law, and nephew.*

Note: When the last comma in a series comes before *and* or *or* (after *daughter-in-law* in the above example), it is known as the **Oxford comma**. Most newspapers and magazines drop the Oxford comma in a simple series, apparently feeling it's unnecessary. However, omission of the Oxford comma can sometimes lead to misunderstandings.

Example: *We had coffee, cheese and crackers and grapes.*

Adding a comma after *crackers* makes it clear that *cheese and crackers* represents one dish. In cases like this, clarity demands the Oxford comma.

We had coffee, cheese and crackers, and grapes.

Fiction and nonfiction books generally prefer the Oxford comma. Writers must decide Oxford or no Oxford and not switch back and forth, except when omitting the Oxford comma could cause confusion as in the *cheese and crackers* example.



Rule 2. Use a comma to separate two adjectives when the adjectives are interchangeable.

Example: *He is a strong, healthy man.*

We could also say *healthy, strong man.*

Example: *We stayed at an expensive summer resort.*

We would not say *summer expensive resort*, so no comma.

It's no accident that a **semicolon** is a period atop a comma. Like commas, semicolons indicate an audible pause—slightly longer than a comma's, but short of a period's full stop.

Semicolons have other functions, too. But first, a caveat: avoid the common mistake of using a semicolon to replace a colon (see the "Colons" section).

Incorrect: *I have one goal; to find her.*

Correct: *I have one goal: to find her.*

Rule 1. A semicolon can replace a period if the writer wishes to narrow the gap between two closely linked sentences.

Examples:

Call me tomorrow; you can give me an answer then.

We have paid our dues; we expect all the privileges listed in the contract.

Rule 2. Use a semicolon before such words and terms as *namely, however, therefore, that is, i.e., for example, e.g., for instance, etc.*, when they introduce a complete sentence. It is also preferable to use a comma after these words and terms.

Example: *Bring any two items; however, sleeping bags and tents are in short supply.*



Rule 3. Use a semicolon to separate units of a series when one or more of the units contain commas.

Incorrect: *The conference has people who have come from Moscow, Idaho, Springfield, California, Alamo, Tennessee, and other places as well.*

Note that with only commas, that sentence is hopeless.

Correct: *The conference has people who have come from Moscow, Idaho; Springfield, California; Alamo, Tennessee; and other places as well.*

Rule 4. A semicolon may be used between independent clauses joined by a connector, such as *and*, *but*, *or*, *nor*, etc., when one or more commas appear in the first clause.

Example: *When I finish here, and I will soon, I'll be glad to help you; and that is a promise I will keep.*

A **colon** means "that is to say" or "here's what I mean." Colons and semicolons should never be used interchangeably.

Rule 1. Use a colon to introduce a series of items. Do not capitalize the first item after the colon (unless it's a proper noun).

Examples:

You may be required to bring many things: sleeping bags, pans, utensils, and warm clothing.

I want the following items: butter, sugar, and flour.

I need an assistant who can do the following: input data, write reports, and complete tax forms.

Rule 2. Avoid using a colon before a list when it directly follows a verb or preposition.

Incorrect: *I want: butter, sugar, and flour.*

Correct:

I want the following: butter, sugar, and flour.

OR

I want butter, sugar, and flour.

Incorrect: *I've seen the greats, including: Barrymore, Guinness, and Streep.*

Correct: *I've seen the greats, including Barrymore, Guinness, and Streep.*



Rule 3. When listing items one by one, one per line, following a colon, capitalization and ending punctuation are optional when using single words or phrases preceded by letters, numbers, or bullet points. If each point is a complete sentence, capitalize the first word and end the sentence with appropriate ending punctuation. Otherwise, there are no hard and fast rules, except be consistent.

Examples:

I want an assistant who can do the following:

input data

write reports

complete tax forms

The following are requested:

Wool sweaters for possible cold weather.

Wet suits for snorkeling.

Introductions to the local dignitaries.

These are the pool rules:

Do not run.

If you see unsafe behavior, report it to the lifeguard.

Did you remember your towel?

Have fun!



Rule 4. A colon instead of a semicolon may be used between independent clauses when the second sentence explains, illustrates, paraphrases, or expands on the first sentence.

Example: *He got what he worked for: he really earned that promotion.*

If a complete sentence follows a colon, as in the previous example, it is up to the writer to decide whether to capitalize the first word. Capitalizing a sentence after a colon is generally a judgment call; if what follows a colon is closely related to what precedes it, there is no need for a capital.

Note: A capital letter generally does not introduce a simple phrase following a colon.

Example: *He got what he worked for: a promotion.*

Rule 5. A colon may be used to introduce a long quotation. Some style manuals say to indent one-half inch on both the left and right margins; others say to indent only on the left margin. Quotation marks are not used.

Example: *The author of *Touched*, Jane Straus, wrote in the first chapter: Georgia went back to her bed and stared at the intricate patterns of burned moth wings in the translucent glass of the overhead light. Her father was in "hyper mode" again where nothing could calm him down.*



Rule 6. Use a colon rather than a comma to follow the salutation in a business letter, even when addressing someone by his or her first name. (Never use a semicolon after a salutation.) A comma is used after the salutation in more informal correspondence.

Formal: *Dear Ms. Rodriguez:*

Informal: *Dear Dave,*

Quotation Marks

The rules set forth in this section are customary in the United States. Great Britain and other countries in the Commonwealth of Nations are governed by quite different conventions. Nowhere is this more apparent than in Rule 3a in this section, a rule that has the advantage of being far simpler than Britain's and the disadvantage of being far less logical.

Rule 1. Use double quotation marks to set off a direct (word-for-word) quotation.

Correct: *"When will you be here?" he asked.*

Incorrect: *He asked "when I would be there."*

Rule 2. Either quotation marks or italics are customary for titles: magazines, books, plays, films, songs, poems, article titles, chapter titles, etc.

Rule 3a. Periods and commas always go inside quotation marks.

Examples:

The sign said, "Walk." Then it said, "Don't Walk," then, "Walk," all within thirty seconds.

He yelled, "Hurry up."



Rule 3b. Use single quotation marks for quotations within quotations.

Example: *He said, "Dan cried, 'Do not treat me that way.' "*

Note that the period goes inside both the single and double quotation marks.

Rule 4. As a courtesy, make sure there is visible space at the start or end of a quotation between adjacent single and double quotation marks. (Your word processing program may do this automatically.)

Not ample space: *He said, "Dan cried, 'Do not treat me that way.'"*

Ample space: *He said, "Dan cried, 'Do not treat me that way.' "*

Rule 5a. Quotation marks are often used with technical terms, terms used in an unusual way, or other expressions that vary from standard usage.

Examples:

It's an oil-extraction method known as "fracking."

He did some "experimenting" in his college days.

I had a visit from my "friend" the tax man.

Rule 5b. Never use single quotation marks in sentences like the previous three.

Incorrect: *I had a visit from my 'friend' the tax man.*

The single quotation marks in the above sentence are intended to send a message to the reader that *friend* is being used in a special way: in this case, sarcastically. Avoid this invalid usage. Single quotation marks are valid only within a quotation, as per Rule 3b, above.



Rule 6. When quoted material runs more than one paragraph, start each new paragraph with opening quotation marks, but do not use closing quotation marks until the end of the passage.

Example: *She wrote: "I don't paint anymore. For a while I thought it was just a phase that I'd get over.*

"Now, I don't even try."

Apostrophes

Rule 1a. Use the **apostrophe** to show possession. To show possession with a singular noun, add an apostrophe plus the letter s.

Examples:

a woman's hat

the boss's wife

Mrs. Chang's house

Rule 1b. Many common nouns end in the letter *s* (*lens, cactus, bus, etc.*). So do a lot of proper nouns (*Mr. Jones, Texas, Christmas*). There are conflicting policies and theories about how to show possession when writing such nouns. There is no right answer; the best advice is to choose a formula and stay consistent.



Rule 1c. Some writers and editors add only an apostrophe to all nouns ending in *s*. And some add an apostrophe + *s* to every proper noun, be it *Hastings's* or *Jones's*. One method, common in newspapers and magazines, is to add an apostrophe + *s* ('*s*) to common nouns ending in *s*, but only a stand-alone apostrophe to proper nouns ending in *s*.

Examples:

the class's hours

Mr. Jones' golf clubs

the canvas's size

Texas' weather

Care must be taken to place the apostrophe outside the word in question. For instance, if talking about a pen belonging to Mr. Hastings, many people would wrongly write *Mr. Hasting's pen* (his name is not Mr. Hasting).

Correct: *Mr. Hastings' pen*

Another widely used technique is to write the word as we would speak it. For example, since most people saying, "Mr. Hastings' pen" would not pronounce an added *s*, we would write *Mr. Hastings' pen* with no added *s*. But most people would pronounce an added *s* in "Jones's," so we'd write it as we say it: *Mr. Jones's golf clubs*. This method explains the punctuation of *for goodness' sake*.



Rule 2a. Regular nouns are nouns that form their plurals by adding either the letter *s* or *-es* (*guy, guys; letter, letters; actress, actresses; etc.*). To show plural possession, simply put an apostrophe after the *s*.

Correct: *guys' night out* (*guy + s + apostrophe*)

Incorrect: *guy's night out* (implies only one guy)

Correct: *two actresses' roles* (*actress + es + apostrophe*)

Incorrect: *two actress's roles*

Rule 2b. Do not use an apostrophe + *s* to make a regular noun plural.

Incorrect: *Apostrophe's are confusing.*

Correct: *Apostrophes are confusing.*

Incorrect: *We've had many happy Christmas's.*

Correct: *We've had many happy Christmases.*

In special cases, such as when forming a plural of a word that is not normally a noun, some writers add an apostrophe for clarity.

Example: *Here are some do's and don'ts.*

In that sentence, the verb *do* is used as a plural noun, and the apostrophe was added because the writer felt that *dos* was confusing. Not all writers agree; some see no problem with *dos* and *don'ts*.



Rule 2c. English also has many **irregular nouns** (*child, nucleus, tooth*, etc.). These nouns become plural by changing their spelling, sometimes becoming quite different words. You may find it helpful to write out the entire irregular plural noun before adding an apostrophe or an apostrophe + s.

Incorrect: *two childrens' hats*

The plural is *children*, not *childrens*.

Correct: *two children's hats* (*children* + apostrophe + s)

Incorrect: *the teeths' roots*

Correct: *the teeth's roots*



Rule 2d. Things can get really confusing with the possessive plurals of proper names ending in *s*, such as *Hastings* and *Jones*.

If you're the guest of the Ford family—the *Fords*—you're the *Fords'* guest (*Ford* + *s* + apostrophe). But what if it's the *Hastings* family?

Most would call them the "Hastings." But that would refer to a family named "Hasting." If someone's name ends in *s*, we must add *-es* for the plural. The plural of *Hastings* is *Hastingses*. The members of the Jones family are the *Joneses*.

To show possession, add an apostrophe.

Incorrect: *the Hastings' dog*

Correct: *the Hastingses' dog* (*Hastings* + *es* + apostrophe)

Incorrect: *the Jones' car*

Correct: *the Joneses' car*

In serious writing, this rule must be followed no matter how strange or awkward the results.



Rule 2e. Never use an apostrophe to make a name plural.

Incorrect: *The Wilson's are here.*

Correct: *The Wilsons are here.*

Incorrect: *We visited the Sanchez's.*

Correct: *We visited the Sanchezes.*

Rule 3. With a singular compound noun (for example, *mother-in-law*), show possession with an apostrophe + s at the end of the word.

Example: *my mother-in-law's hat*

If the compound noun (e.g., *brother-in-law*) is to be made plural, form the plural first (*brothers-in-law*), and then use the apostrophe + s.

Example: *my two brothers-in-law's hats*



Rule 4. If two people possess the same item, put the apostrophe + s after the second name only.

Example: *Cesar and Maribel's home is constructed of redwood.*

However, if one of the joint owners is written as a pronoun, use the possessive form for both.

Incorrect: *Maribel and my home*

Correct: *Maribel's and my home*

Incorrect: *he and Maribel's home*

Incorrect: *him and Maribel's home*

Correct: *his and Maribel's home*

In cases of separate rather than joint possession, use the possessive form for both.

Examples:

Cesar's and Maribel's homes are both lovely.

They don't own the homes jointly.

Cesar and Maribel's homes are both lovely.

The homes belong to both of them.



Rule 5. Use an apostrophe with **contractions**. The apostrophe is placed where a letter or letters have been removed.

Examples: *doesn't, wouldn't, it's, can't, you've*, etc.

Incorrect: *does'nt*



Rule 6. There are various approaches to plurals for initials, capital letters, and numbers used as nouns.

Examples:

She consulted with three M.D.s.

She consulted with three M.D.'s.

Some write *M.D.'s* to give the *s* separation from the second period.

Many writers and editors prefer an apostrophe after single capital letters only:

Examples:

I made straight A's.

He learned his ABCs.

There are different schools of thought about years and decades. The following examples are all in widespread use:

Examples:

the 1990s

the 1990's

the '90s

the 90's

Awkward: *the '90's*



Rule 7. Amounts of time or money are sometimes used as possessive adjectives that require apostrophes.

Incorrect: *three days leave*

Correct: *three days' leave*

Incorrect: *my two cents worth*

Correct: *my two cents' worth*

Rule 8. The personal pronouns *hers, ours, yours, theirs, its, whose,* and *oneself* never take an apostrophe.

Example: *Feed a horse grain. It's better for its health.*

Rule 9. When an apostrophe comes before a word or number, take care that it's truly an apostrophe (') rather than a single quotation mark (').

Incorrect: *'Twas the night before Christmas.*

Correct: *'Twas the night before Christmas.*

Incorrect: *I voted in '08.*

Correct: *I voted in '08.*



NOTE

Serious writers avoid the word *'til* as an alternative to *until*. The correct word is *till*, which is many centuries older than *until*.

Rule 10. Beware of **false possessives**, which often occur with nouns ending in *s*. Don't add apostrophes to noun-derived adjectives ending in *s*. Close analysis is the best guide.

Incorrect: *We enjoyed the New Orleans' cuisine.*

In the preceding sentence, the word *the* makes no sense unless *New Orleans* is being used as an adjective to describe *cuisine*. In English, nouns frequently become adjectives. Adjectives rarely if ever take apostrophes.

Incorrect: *I like that Beatles' song.*

Correct: *I like that Beatles song.*

Again, Beatles is an adjective, modifying song.

Incorrect: *He's a United States' citizen.*

Correct: *He's a United States citizen.*



Rule 11. Beware of nouns ending in *y*; do not show possession by changing the *y* to *-ies*.

Correct: *the company's policy*

Incorrect: *the companies policy*

Correct: *three companies' policies*

Hyphens

There are two commandments about this misunderstood punctuation mark. First, **hyphens** must never be used interchangeably with dashes (see the "Dashes" section), which are noticeably longer. Second, there should never be spaces around hyphens.

Incorrect: 300—325 people

Incorrect: 300 - 325 people

Correct: 300-325 people

Hyphens' main purpose is to glue words together. They notify the reader that two or more elements in a sentence are linked. Although there are rules and customs governing hyphens, there are also situations when writers must decide whether to add them for clarity.



Hyphens Between Words

Rule 1. Generally, hyphenate two or more words when they come before a noun they modify and act as a single idea. This is called a **compound adjective**.

Examples:

an off-campus apartment

state-of-the-art design

When a compound adjective follows a noun, a hyphen may or may not be necessary.

Example: *The apartment is off campus.*

However, some established compound adjectives are always hyphenated. Double-check with a dictionary or online.

Example: *The design is state-of-the-art.*

Rule 2a. A hyphen is frequently required when forming original compound verbs for vivid writing, humor, or special situations.

Examples:

The slacker video-gamed his way through life.

Queen Victoria throne-sat for six decades.



Rule 2b. When writing out new, original, or unusual compound nouns, writers should hyphenate whenever doing so avoids confusion.

Examples:

I changed my diet and became a no-meater.

No-meater is too confusing without the hyphen.

The slacker was a video gamer.

Video gamer is clear without a hyphen, although some writers might prefer to hyphenate it.

Writers using familiar compound verbs and nouns should consult a dictionary or look online to decide if these verbs and nouns should be hyphenated.

Rule 3. An often overlooked rule for hyphens: The adverb *very* and adverbs ending in *-ly* are not hyphenated.

Incorrect: *the very-elegant watch*

Incorrect: *the finely-tuned watch*

This rule applies only to adverbs. The following two sentences are correct because the *-ly* words are adjectives rather than adverbs:

Correct: *the friendly-looking dog*

Correct: *a family-owned cafe*



Rule 4. Hyphens are often used to tell the ages of people and things. A handy rule, whether writing about years, months, or any other period of time, is to use hyphens unless the period of time (years, months, weeks, days) is written in plural form:

With hyphens:

We have a two-year-old child.

We have a two-year-old.

No hyphens: *The child is two years old.* (Because *years* is plural.)

Exception: *The child is one year old.* (Or *day, week, month, etc.*)

Note that when hyphens are involved in expressing ages, two hyphens are required.

Many writers forget the second hyphen:

Incorrect: *We have a two-year old child.*

Without the second hyphen, the sentence is about an "old child."



Rule 5. Never hesitate to add a hyphen if it solves a possible problem. Following are two examples of well-advised hyphens:

Confusing: *I have a few more important things to do.*

With hyphen: *I have a few more-important things to do.*

Without the hyphen, it's impossible to tell whether the sentence is about a *few things* that are *more important* or a few more things that are all equally important.

Confusing: *He returned the stolen vehicle report.*

With hyphen: *He returned the stolen-vehicle report.*

With no hyphen, we could only guess: Was the *vehicle report* stolen, or was it a report on *stolen vehicles*?



Rule 6. When using numbers, hyphenate spans or estimates of time, distance, or other quantities. Remember not to use spaces around hyphens.

Examples:

3:15-3:45 p.m.

1999-2016

300-325 people

Rule 7. Hyphenate all compound numbers from *twenty-one* through *ninety-nine*.

Examples:

thirty-two children

one thousand two hundred twenty-one dollars

Rule 8. Hyphenate all spelled-out fractions.

Example: *more than two-thirds of registered voters*

Rule 9. Hyphenate most double last names.

Example: *Sir Winthrop Heinz-Eakins will attend.*



Rule 10. As important as hyphens are to clear writing, they can become an annoyance if overused. Avoid adding hyphens when the meaning is clear. Many phrases are so familiar (e.g., *high school*, *twentieth century*, *one hundred percent*) that they can go before a noun without risk of confusing the reader.

Examples:

a high school senior

a twentieth century throwback

one hundred percent correct

Rule 11. When in doubt, look it up. Some familiar phrases may require hyphens. For instance, is a book *up to date* or *up-to-date*? Don't guess; have a dictionary close by, or look it up online.



Hyphens with Prefixes and Suffixes

A **prefix** (*a-*, *un-*, *de-*, *ab-*, *sub-*, *post-*, *anti-*, etc.) is a letter or set of letters placed before a **root** word. The word *prefix* itself contains the prefix *pre-*. Prefixes expand or change a word's meaning, sometimes radically: the prefixes *a-*, *un-*, and *dis-*, for example, change words into their opposites (e.g., *political*, ***a*political**; *friendly*, ***un*friendly**; *honor*, ***dis*honor**).

Rule 1. Hyphenate prefixes when they come before proper nouns or proper adjectives.

Examples:

trans-American

mid-July

Rule 2. For clarity, many writers hyphenate prefixes ending in a vowel when the root word begins with the same letter.

Example:

ultra-ambitious

semi-invalid

re-elect



Rule 3. Hyphenate all words beginning with the prefixes *self-*, *ex-* (i.e., *former*), and *all-*.

Examples:

self-assured

ex-mayor

all-knowing

Rule 4. Use a hyphen with the prefix *re-* when omitting the hyphen would cause confusion with another word.

Examples:

Will she recover from her illness?

I have re-covered the sofa twice.

Omitting the hyphen would cause confusion with *recover*.

I must re-press the shirt.

Omitting the hyphen would cause confusion with *repress*.

The stamps have been reissued.

A hyphen after *re-* is not needed because there is no confusion with another word.



Rule 5. Writers often hyphenate prefixes when they feel a word might be distracting or confusing without the hyphen.

Examples:

de-ice

With no hyphen we get *deice*, which might stump readers.

co-worker

With no hyphen we get *coworker*, which could be distracting because it starts with *cow*.

A **suffix** (-y, -er, -ism, -able, etc.) is a letter or set of letters that follows a root word. Suffixes form new words or alter the original word to perform a different task. For example, the noun *scandal* can be made into the adjective *scandalous* by adding the suffix -ous. It becomes the verb *scandalize* by adding the suffix -ize.

Rule 1. Suffixes are not usually hyphenated. Some exceptions: -style, -elect, -free, -based.

Examples:

Modernist-style paintings

Mayor-elect Smith

sugar-free soda

oil-based sludge



Rule 2. For clarity, writers often hyphenate when the last letter in the root word is the same as the first letter in the suffix.

Examples:

graffiti-ism

wiretap-proof

Rule 3. Use discretion—and sometimes a dictionary—before deciding to place a hyphen before a suffix. But do not hesitate to hyphenate a rare usage if it avoids confusion.

Examples:

the annual dance-athon

an eel-esque sea creature

Although the preceding hyphens help clarify unusual terms, they are optional and might not be every writer's choice. Still, many readers would scratch their heads for a moment over *danceathon* and *eelesque*.

Dashes, like commas, semicolons, colons, ellipses, and parentheses, indicate added emphasis, an interruption, or an abrupt change of thought. Experienced writers know that these marks are not interchangeable. Note how dashes subtly change the tone of the following sentences:

Examples:

You are the friend, the only friend, who offered to help me.

You are the friend—the only friend—who offered to help me.

I pay the bills; she has all the fun.

I pay the bills—she has all the fun.

I wish you would...oh, never mind.

I wish you would—oh, never mind.

Rule 1. Words and phrases between dashes are not generally part of the subject.

Example: *Joe—and his trusty mutt—was always welcome.*



Rule 2. Dashes replace otherwise mandatory punctuation, such as the commas after *Iowa* and *2013* in the following examples:

Without dash: *The man from Ames, Iowa, arrived.*

With dash: *The man—he was from Ames, Iowa—arrived.*

Without dash: *The May 1, 2013, edition of the Ames Sentinel arrived in June.*

With dash: *The Ames Sentinel—dated May 1, 2013—arrived in June.*

Rule 3. Some writers and publishers prefer spaces around dashes.

Example: *Joe — and his trusty mutt — was always welcome.*

Definition

An **ellipsis** (plural: **ellipses**) is a punctuation mark consisting of three dots.

Use an ellipsis when omitting a word, phrase, line, paragraph, or more from a quoted passage. Ellipses save space or remove material that is less relevant. They are useful in getting right to the point without delay or distraction:

Full quotation: *"Today, after hours of careful thought, we vetoed the bill."*

With ellipsis: *"Today...we vetoed the bill."*

Although ellipses are used in many ways, the three-dot method is the simplest.

Newspapers, magazines, and books of fiction and nonfiction use various approaches that they find suitable.

Some writers and editors feel that no spaces are necessary.

Example: *I don't know...I'm not sure.*

Others enclose the ellipsis with a space on each side.

Example: *I don't know ... I'm not sure.*

Still others put a space either directly before or directly after the ellipsis.

Examples:

I don't know ...I'm not sure.

I don't know... I'm not sure.

A four-dot method and an even more rigorous method used in legal works require fuller explanations that can be found in other reference books.



Rule 1. Many writers use an ellipsis whether the omission occurs at the beginning of a sentence, in the middle of a sentence, or between sentences.

A common way to delete the beginning of a sentence is to follow the opening quotation mark with an ellipsis, plus a bracketed capital letter:

Example: "...[A]fter hours of careful thought, we vetoed the bill."

Other writers omit the ellipsis in such cases, feeling the bracketed capital letter gets the point across.

For more on brackets, see "Parentheses and Brackets."

Rule 2. Ellipses can express hesitation, changes of mood, suspense, or thoughts trailing off. Writers also use ellipses to indicate a pause or wavering in an otherwise straightforward sentence.

Examples:

I don't know...I'm not sure.

Pride is one thing, but what happens if she...?

He said, "I...really don't...understand this."



Rule 1. Use a question mark only after a direct question.

Correct: *Will you go with me?*

Incorrect: *I'm asking if you will go with me?*

Rule 2a. A question mark replaces a period at the end of a sentence.

Incorrect: *Will you go with me?.*

Rule 2b. Because of Rule 2a, capitalize the word that follows a question mark.

Some writers choose to overlook this rule in special cases.

Example: *Will you go with me? with Joe? with anyone?*

Rule 3a. Avoid the common trap of using question marks with **indirect questions**, which are statements that contain questions. Use a period after an indirect question.

Incorrect: *I wonder if he would go with me?*

Correct:

I wonder if he would go with me.

OR

I wonder: Would he go with me?



Rule 3b. Some sentences are statements—or demands—in the form of a question. They are called **rhetorical questions** because they don't require or expect an answer. Many should be written without question marks.

Examples:

Why don't you take a break.

Would you kids knock it off.

What wouldn't I do for you!

Rule 4. Use a question mark when a sentence is half statement and half question.

Example: *You do care, don't you?*

Rule 5. The placement of question marks with quotation marks follows logic. If a question is within the quoted material, a question mark should be placed inside the quotation marks.

Examples:

She asked, "Will you still be my friend?"

The question is part of the quotation.

Do you agree with the saying, "All's fair in love and war"?

The question is outside the quotation.



Exclamation Points

Rule 1. Use an exclamation point to show emotion, emphasis, or surprise.

Examples:

I'm truly shocked by your behavior!

Yay! We won!

Rule 2. An exclamation point replaces a period at the end of a sentence.

Incorrect: *I'm truly shocked by your behavior!.*

Rule 3. Do not use an exclamation point in formal business writing.

Rule 4. Overuse of exclamation points is a sign of undisciplined writing. Do not use even one of these marks unless you're convinced it is justified.