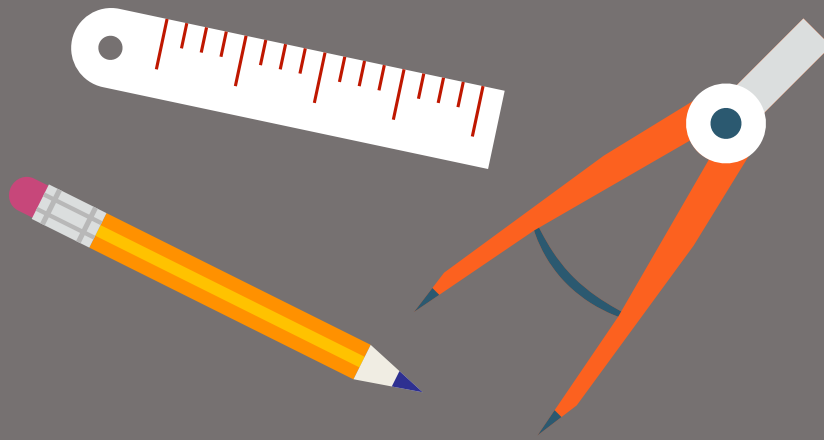


# A Business Writer's Guide to Proper Punctuation



PRACTICAL TOOLS

# A Business Writer's Guide to Proper Punctuation



We're so used to writing short emails, texts and messages that proper punctuation can take a back seat. But in business writing, bad punctuation will stand out – and not in a good way.

Keep these punctuation violations in mind when you're checking your writing.

## Splicing commas

This happens when two independent phrases are strung together with a comma, without a conjunction. It makes writing sound clunky and incomplete. Fix it with either a period to make two sentences or add a conjunction to the comma. For example:

- Instead of: *The company has two employee bonus structure options to consider, we're going to present them at the meeting next month.*
- Write: *The company has two employee bonus structure options to consider, so we're going to present them at the meeting next month.*
- Or: *The company has two employee bonus structure options to consider. We're going to present them at the meeting next month.*

## Using inconsistent commas

The comma before the final item in a list (known as the Oxford comma) was the formal standard, but it's become common to skip the last comma, especially in business or journalism. There's no right or wrong; it's more a matter of preference. Just be consistent in your writing.

For example:

**With an Oxford comma:** *The secretary's duties included filing, making appointments, and scheduling meetings.*

**Without an Oxford comma:** *The secretary's duties included filing, making appointments and scheduling meetings.*

## Leaving out necessary commas

Forgetting a comma when it's needed is a top way to confuse what you're trying to say. Consider a simple example: Let's eat Larry. OR Let's eat, Larry. Omitting the comma changes the whole meaning of the sentence.

## Commas are needed after introductory words

- **Wrong:** *Moreover employees are required to travel at least twice a year.*
- **Right:** *Moreover, employees are required to travel at least twice a year.*

After introductory phrases:

- **Wrong:** *To become confident leaders employees need to learn proper presentation.*
- **Right:** *To become confident leaders, employees need to learn proper presentation.*

### After introductory clauses:

- **Wrong:** *If you want to write well you must be prepared to practice the craft.*
- **Right:** *If you want to write well, you must be prepared to practice the craft.*

### And when setting off nonessential information:

- **Wrong:** *The new chief technology officer who was hired last month began to study the computer system.*
- **Right:** *The new chief technology officer, who was hired last month, began to study the computer system.*

## Confusing colons and semi-colons

Use a colon when you want to write a list of items.

For example:

- *Bring these items to the meeting: your laptop, notes and ideas.*
- *The issues we need to address are: tardiness, incomplete work and insubordination.*

Use a semi-colon if you want to separate two related but distinct thoughts instead of a period.

For example:

- **Wrong:** *The administrator made sure to **announce her vacation:** someone would be taking over her duties at that time.*
- **Right:** *The administrator made sure to **announce her vacation;** someone would be taking over her duties at that time.*
- **Or write:** *The administrator made sure to **announce her vacation** since someone would be taking over her duties at that time.*

## Confusing hyphens and dashes

A hyphen (a small line) is used to combine two words to create a single idea, such as forming two words into an adjective.

A dash (a longer line with spaces before and after) is used to indicate that you're moving onto a separate idea or train of thought. For example:

- Hyphen use: *full-throttle rocket, last-ditch approach, short-term plan*
- Dash use: *Our estimates weren't what we expected – they were better.*

## Using quote marks for emphasis

When you want to emphasize a word or phrase, use boldface or italics to make the word stand out. Quotations are usually used to quote specific words or titles, so it can confuse the reader when they're used otherwise. For example:

- Instead of: *Participation in the company wellness program isn't "mandatory."*
- Write: *Participation in the company wellness program isn't mandatory.*

## Misplacing punctuation

All punctuation should go inside quotation marks even if the comma or period isn't part of the quote itself. This applies even to titles of books or articles when referenced. For example:

- Instead of: *The CEO stressed that teamwork "was the most important part of our yearly success".*
- Write: *The CEO stressed that teamwork "was the most important part of our yearly success."*

- Instead of: *The secretary suggested titling the memo "Fourth-Quarter Expenditure Goals".*
- Write: *The secretary suggested titling the memo "Fourth-Quarter Expenditure Goals."*

Sentence-ending punctuation marks should go inside of sentence-ending quotes, not outside. The punctuation is part of the text you're quoting, so the punctuation goes inside the quotation marks. For example:

- Instead of: *The manager said, "Our meeting lasted longer than expected".*
- Write: *The manager said, "Our meeting lasted longer than **expected**."*

## Using excessive punctuation.

It's tempting to over-emphasize points we want to stress with multiple punctuation marks. But this should be avoided.

Stick to the rule of one; if you're using an exclamation point at the end of a sentence, that sentence should be the *baseline for high emphasis*.

- Instead of: *Management wants to let you know how proud we are of our sales team for doubling its goals for the month! This resulted in an increase of 80% of our valuation!!*

**Make the last sentence the most emphatic for maximum impact:**

- Write: *Management wants to let you know how proud we are of our sales team for doubling its goals for the month. This resulted in an increase of 80% of our valuation!*

Same goes for question marks. Using two or three rather than just one at the end of a question sentence doesn't make it more emphatic than the others. For example:

- Instead of: *Why did last year's calendar not include scheduling flexibility? And how will this affect production in the next quarter??*

**Use one question sentence to make a more emphatic impact:**

- Write: *Why did last year's calendar not include scheduling flexibility, and how will this affect production in the next quarter?*