

# The Meaning of Punctuation

*Punctuation does not just exist as a convention;  
it also conveys meaning and so aids the reader in following the writer's ideas.*

## Semi-colons

- Signal the closeness of the connection between two independent clauses & shift the emphasis toward the second one.
  - Ex. My co-workers are extremely gregarious while at work, and they drive me crazy.
  - Compare: My co-workers are extremely gregarious while at work; they drive me crazy.
- Increase the formality of the sentence.
  - Ex. I haven't yet approached my son's teacher about her classroom management system, but I intend to very soon.
  - Compare: I haven't yet approached my son's teacher about her classroom management system; however, I intend to very soon.
- Clarify items in a series in the presence of extra commas.
  - Ex. I propose to study the anxious, depressive, and emotional reactive symptoms of the children; the stress and depression of the at-home parents; the resulting long-term social, emotional, and behavioral outcomes of dependent children; and the adultification of these children.

## Colons

- Signal a list that is usually promised in the independent clause.
  - Ex. Before I went to the store, I listed **the three things** I needed to buy: eggs, butter, and bananas. [The highlighted part is the promise; the items after the colon are the list.]
  - Ex. **Multiple parties** in the community play a role in supporting children whose parents have deployed: school teachers, pediatricians, day-care workers, and family members.
- Signal that the second sentence illustrates or explains the first one (**Requires an independent clause on either side of the punctuation.**)
  - Ex. My job keeps me super busy: at times, I act like a college student and have to stay up all night.
  - Ex. Parents of military dependents have frequently expressed concern over the lack of academic support for their children: given the statistically lower GPAs of these children, their parents' concerns appear to be warranted.

- Introduce a quote.
  - o Ex. Chartrand, Frank, White, and Shope (2008) clarified the extent of problems faced by families during a deployment: “Children presented increased levels of anxious depressive and emotional reactive symptoms, while non-deployed parents exhibited symptoms of stress and depression” (p. ??).

## Dashes

**Should be used sparingly or your writing might become choppy and hard to follow.**

- Add emphasis (contrast this with parentheses, which remove emphasis).
  - o Ex. I didn’t believe him—and said so.
  - o Ex. Symptoms exhibited by children experiencing parental deployment— anxiety depression, emotional reactivity—deserve further, in-depth study.
  - o Contrast: Researchers observed that children (regardless of age) presented increased levels of anxious-depressive and emotional-reactive symptoms— independent of the non-deployed parent’s symptoms of stress and depression.
- Clarify bonus information if setting it off with commas would be confusing.
  - o Ex. Even staple items—milk, flour, salt—were absent from the mostly-empty cupboards.
  - o Contrast: Even staple items, milk, flour, salt, were absent from the mostly-empty cupboards.

## Hyphens

- Clarify that the first modifier modifies the second modifier rather than the noun
  - o Ex. Fast-acting medication is a necessity when a migraine strikes. (Without the hyphen, we might wonder what “acting medication” is and what makes it fast . . . )
  - o Contrast: This **rock-hard** cake is hard to eat because it is **rock hard**. (Hyphens only used prior to the noun.)
- Note: some compound words take hyphens, some don’t. When in doubt, check a dictionary.
  - o mother-in-law
  - o bookstore
  - o living room

## Let's Practice!

1. Open an article that you have used in any writing project.
  - a. Use the search function to look up these various types of punctuation.
  - b. Note the most common use of each kind
  - c. Does this generalize to the field as a whole? Did you know this already, or is it new information?
2. Open a writing project you are currently working on.
  - a. Use the search function to look up these various types of punctuation.
  - b. For each instance, determine whether or not it is used correctly (see above) and whether or not it is used according to disciplinary conventions.
3. Choose a couple of sentences of your own that you particularly like.
  - a. Re-write them using each of the punctuation marks above.
  - b. What are the differences?
  - c. Which version is the best for your purposes in the paper you are writing?