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.
  o Ex. My co-workers are extremely gregarious while at work, and they drive me crazy.
  o Compare: My co-workers are extremely gregarious while at work; they drive me crazy.

• Increase the formality of the sentence.
  o Ex. I haven't yet approached my son's teacher about her classroom management system, but I intend to very soon.
  o 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.
  o 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.
  o 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.]
  o 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.)
  o Ex. My job keeps me super busy: at times, I act like a college student and have to stay up all night.
  o 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—indeed 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?