

SOME GRAMMATICAL RULES THAT ARE FREQUENTLY BROKEN BY COLLEGE STUDENTS

Spaces After a Sentence. Microsoft has *settled the great space debate*, and sided with everyone who believes one space after a period is correct, not two. The software giant has started (in early 2020) to update Microsoft Word to highlight two spaces after a period as an error, and to offer a correction to one space. Much of the debate around one space or two has been fueled by the halcyon days of the typewriter. Typewriters used monospaced fonts to allocate the same amount of horizontal spacing to every character. Narrow characters like “i” got the same amount of space as “m,” so the extra space after the “.” was needed to make it more apparent that sentences had ended. Word and many other similar apps make fonts proportional, so two spaces is no longer necessary.

Spell out numbers under 10. There are several rules of thought on how to handle writing numbers, but the most common is pretty simple. Spell out numbers under 10 (zero through nine), and use the numeric symbols for numbers 10 and up. Example: *I bought eight candy bars from the vending machine. I average eating 29 candy bars per month.* There are some exceptions to the rule. For example, spell out all numbers that begin a sentence. Example: *Forty-seven-thousand contestants were turned down for “American Idol.” Eleven were selected.* Of course, there’s an exception to the exception: Don’t spell out calendar years, even at the front end of a sentence. *1997 was the year I met my wife.*

Titles of books should be underlined or put in italics. (Titles of stories, essays and poems are in “quotation marks.”) Refer to the text specifically as a novel, story, essay, memoir, or poem, depending on what it is. In subsequent references to the author, use his or her last name. **Titles of chapters** should be put in quotation marks.

End a sentence with a preposition? It’s allowed, BUT ... When you could leave off the preposition and it wouldn't change the meaning, it’s best to leave it off. People do use unnecessary prepositions at the end of sentences when they talk, as in the question “Where are you at?”

An ellipsis is a set of three spaced periods used to show that material has been omitted from a quotation. Here is a quotation with ellipsis points used **correctly**: “[D]riving is not as automatic as one might think; in fact, it imposes a heavy procedural workload on cognition that . . . leaves little processing capacity available for other tasks” (Salvucci and Taatgen 107). **Use four dots if you are omitting the last part of a quoted sentence that ends in a period but what remains is still a complete thought.** The first dot comes immediately after the sentence and has no space before it. It functions as a period. The following three dots are spaced and indicate that material has been omitted. If the original sentence ended in a question mark or exclamation point, substitute that mark for the first dot. Example; *The author advises, “In analyzing nonverbal signals, look at the total pattern of behavior rather than just one symbol....”*

Commas and periods always go inside the quotation marks in American English. For example, Bear stated, “Become an excellent writer.” Dashes, colons, and semicolons almost always go outside the quotation marks; question marks and exclamation marks sometimes go inside, sometimes stay outside. Examples:

- A) “There was a storm last night,” Paul said.
- B) Peter, however, didn’t believe him. “I’m not sure that’s exactly what happened.”
- C) Peter was aware of what he called “Paul’s weakness triangle”: he was half deaf, slept like a log, and was prone to lying.
- D) Paul saw an argument coming, so he muttered only “But I saw it”; this was going to be a long night and he didn’t want to start it with a fight.

Question marks and exclamation points have their own rules. If they apply to the quoted material, they go within the quotation marks. If they apply to the whole sentence, they go outside it:

- E) Sandy asked them, “Why do you guys always fight?”
- F) Did the dog bark every time he heard Sandy say “I’m bringing dinner”?

Use single quotation marks inside double quotation marks. For example: "'The Dementor's Kiss' is my favorite chapter in the whole series," Tom said.

More on quotation marks. Direct quotations involve incorporating another person's exact words into your own writing.

- (1) Quotation marks always come in pairs. Do not open a quotation and fail to close it at the end of the quoted material.
- (2) Capitalize the first letter of a direct quote when the quoted material is a complete sentence. Example: Mr. Johnson, who was working in his field that morning, said, "The alien spaceship appeared right before my own two eyes."
- (3) Do not use a capital letter when the quoted material is a fragment or only a piece of the original material's complete sentence. Example: Although Mr. Johnson has seen odd happenings on the farm, he stated that the spaceship "certainly takes the cake" when it comes to unexplainable activity.
- (4) If a direct quotation is interrupted mid-sentence, do not capitalize the second part of the quotation. Example: "I didn't see an actual alien being," Mr. Johnson said, "but I sure wish I had."

You can use semicolons (instead of a comma) to divide the items of a list if the items are long or contain internal punctuation. In these cases, the semicolon helps readers keep track of the divisions between the items.

- I need the weather statistics for the following cities: London, England; London, Ontario; Paris, France; Paris, Ontario; Perth, Scotland; Perth, Ontario.
- My plan included taking him to a nice—though not necessarily expensive—dinner; going to the park to look at the stars, which, by the way, are amazing this time of year; and serenading him with my accordion.

Avoid using contractions in formal writing. A contraction is a combination of two words as one, such as "don't," "can't," and "isn't." The use of contractions is inappropriate in formal legal writing. Replace them with the two-word version of the contraction.