

Punctuation



Not often addressed in grammar courses but critical to written language, 'punctuation' refers to the "marks" we use when we write in order to help people to read and understand sentences in the way that we, as the writers, intend them to.

Not everyone gets punctuation right and Lynne Truss' excellent book 'Eats Shoots and Leaves' is an amusing portrait of many of the common errors made even by native speakers.*

Spoken language, of course, doesn't have any punctuation or even any spelling, just grammar, but in written language, the use of punctuation is essential to proper understanding of words on the page. Without punctuation, a book would just be a long series of words which are all strung together.

As a musician as well as a grammar writer, I also think of punctuation as being akin to musical notation and dynamics. Music does not simply consist of a string of notes but the composer also tells the player **how** the music should be played, where to pause, volume, speed, etc.

In a similar way, punctuation within written language helps to break the word strings up into manageable and meaningful chunks, shows us where there would be a natural pause in the spoken equivalent and gives the writing some shape.

Surprisingly enough, punctuation marks are very similar to those used in English in many languages which don't even share the same writing system as we do, such as Chinese and

Japanese. Speakers of some other languages though e.g. Farsi and some Ethiopian languages will find that English marks are very different and unfamiliar to them.

** In case you have not heard of the book, the title is playing with punctuation. Consider the difference in meaning between 'eats shoots and leaves' or 'eats, shoots and leaves?' The latter denotes eating, using a firearm and then exiting - in that order.*

In this section we are going to cover the following areas of punctuation:

Mark	Name	Example
▪	full stop (period in US English)	This is a grammar course.
,	comma	I like grammar, spelling and punctuation.
'	apostrophe	Grammar's great.
	capital letters	This is an English grammar course.

Let's have a look at these marks then, what they're for, when we use them and whether there is anything you should warn your students to be extremely careful about when using them. Let's start with the simplest and indeed the strongest punctuation mark, the full stop.