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Punctuation marks are the mechanical means for making the meaning of a sentence easily understood. They indicate the proper relationships between words, phrases, and clauses when word order alone is not sufficient to make these relationships clear.

One important caution about punctuation: If you find it particularly hard to determine the appropriate punctuation for a sentence you have written, the chances are that the sentence is improperly constructed. To be on the safe side, recast your thought in a form you can handle with confidence. In any event, do not try to save a badly constructed sentence by means of punctuation.

Section 1 deals with the three marks of terminal punctuation (the period, the question mark, and the exclamation point) plus the three major marks of internal punctuation (the comma, the semicolon, and the colon). All other marks of punctuation are covered in Section 2.

The Period

At the End of a Statement or Command

- 101** a. Use a period to mark the end of a sentence that makes a statement or expresses a command.

A nanosecond is one-billionth of a second.

An ohnosecond is an equally brief moment in which you realize that you goofed in a big way.

John W. Hirsch, president of Seglin Controls Inc., has announced the company's plan to acquire Parker Associates before the end of this year.

I question the need to cut advertising and promotion expenses at this time.

All monthly expense reports must be in by the 10th of the following month.

Make sure that Kate gets to the airport by 10 a.m. (The period that marks the end of the abbreviation also serves to mark the end of the sentence.)

- b. Use a period to mark the end of an *elliptical* (condensed) expression that represents a complete statement or command. Elliptical expressions often occur as answers to questions or as transitional phrases.

Yes. No. Of course. Indeed. Been there. Done that.

Enough on that subject. Now, to proceed to your next point.

- c. Do not confuse elliptical expressions with sentence fragments. An elliptical expression represents a complete sentence. A sentence fragment is a word, phrase, or clause that is incorrectly treated as a separate sentence when it ought to be incorporated with adjacent words to make up a complete sentence.

Great news! The laser printer arrived yesterday. After we had waited for six weeks. (*Great news* is an elliptical expression; it represents a complete sentence, *I have great news*. The clause *After we had waited for six weeks* is a sentence fragment, incorrectly treated as a sentence in its own right; this dependent clause should be linked with the main clause that precedes it.)

REVISED: Great news! The laser printer arrived yesterday, after we had waited for six weeks.

- 102** The following guidelines will help you decide whether to use one or two spaces following a period at the end of a sentence.

NOTE: These spacing guidelines also apply to any other element that comes at the end of a sentence—for example, a question mark, an exclamation point, a dash, a closing parenthesis, a closing quotation mark, or a superscript (a raised figure or symbol) keyed to a footnote.

- a. As a general rule, use one space after the period at the end of a sentence, but switch to two spaces whenever you feel a stronger visual break between sentences is needed. In all cases, the deciding factor should be the appearance of the breaks between sentences in a given document.
- b. When monospace fonts (in which all the characters have exactly the same width) were in wide use, it was traditional to leave two spaces between the period and the start of the next sentence.

This example is set in 10-point Courier, a monospace font. Note the use of two spaces after the period at the end of the previous sentence.

Now that the standards of desktop publishing predominate, the use of only one space after the period is quite acceptable with monospace fonts.

This example is also set in 10-point Courier, a monospace font. Note the use of only one space after the period at the end of the previous sentence.

- c. Proportional fonts (in which the width of the characters varies) are now much more commonly used. The standard here has always been the same: use only one space between the period and the start of the next sentence.
- d. With some proportional fonts—such as 10-point Times New Roman (the default font for Microsoft Word)—the use of only one space after the period may not always provide a clear visual break between sentences. Consider these examples:

This example is set in 10-point Times New Roman with proportional spacing. Note that the use of *one* space does not create much of a visual break between sentences.

This example is also set in 10-point Times New Roman, but it uses *two* spaces after the period. Note the improvement in the visual break.

- e. When an abbreviation ends one sentence and begins the next, the use of one space after the period that ends the sentence may also be inadequate. (The following examples are set in 10-point Garamond.)

Let's plan to meet at 10 a.m. Mr. F. J. Calabrese will serve as the moderator. (Only *one* space follows *a.m.* at the end of the first sentence.)

Let's plan to meet at 10 a.m. Mr. F. J. Calabrese will serve as the moderator. (Note the improvement in the visual break when *two* spaces follow the period at the end of the first sentence.)

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- f. If you prepare a document with a justified right margin (so that every line ends at the same point), the width of a single space between sentences can vary from line to line. (The following examples are set in 10-point Arial.)

We need to start lining up speakers right away. Please consider Patricia Cunningham for the keynote address. Frederick Haley could be approached if she is not available. (The single space after the first sentence is less than the single space after the second sentence.)

We need to start lining up speakers right away. Please consider Patricia Cunningham for the keynote address. Frederick Haley could be approached if she is not available. (Although two spaces have been inserted at the end of each sentence, the break after the second sentence looks excessive.)

➤ For a summary of guidelines for spacing with punctuation marks, see ¶299.

At the End of a Polite Request or Command

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- a. Requests, suggestions, and commands are often phrased as questions out of politeness. Use a period to end this kind of sentence if you expect your reader to respond by *acting* rather than by giving you a yes-or-no answer.

Will you please call us at once if we can be of further help.

Would you please send all bills to my bank for payment while I'm out of the country.

May I suggest that you refer to computer criminals who break into other people's computers as crackers, not hackers. (Hackers are actually dedicated computer programmers.)

If you can't attend the meeting, could you please send someone else in your place.

NOTE: Use a period only when you are sure that your reader is not likely to consider your request presumptuous.

- b. If you are asking a favor or making a request that your reader may be unable or unwilling to grant, use a question mark at the end of the sentence. The question mark offers your reader a chance to say no to your request and helps to preserve the politeness of the situation.

May I ask a favor of you? Could you spare fifteen minutes to tell my son about career opportunities in your company?

Will you be able to have someone in your department help me on the Woonsocket project?

Will you please handle the production reports for me while I'm away?

- c. If you are not sure whether to use a question mark or a period, reword the sentence so that it is clearly a question or a statement; then punctuate accordingly. For example, the sentence directly above could be revised as follows:

Would you be willing to handle the production reports for me while I'm away?

I would appreciate your handling the production reports for me while I'm away.

- d. When you are addressing a request to someone who reports to you, you expect that person to comply. Therefore, a period can properly be used to punctuate such requests. However, since most people prefer to be *asked* to do something rather than be *told* to do it, a question mark establishes a nicer tone and often gets