

CHAPTER 22

Periods, Question Marks, and Exclamation Points

Periods, question marks, and exclamation points are collectively called *end punctuation* because they occur at the ends of sentences.

I love you. Do you love me? I love you!

PERIODS

22a When does a period end a sentence?

A **period** ends a statement, a mild command, or an **INDIRECT QUESTION**. Never use a period to end a **DIRECT QUESTION**, a strong command, or an emphatic declaration.

END OF A STATEMENT

A journey of a thousand miles must begin with a single step.

—Lao-tsu, *The Way of Lao-tsu*

MILD COMMAND

Put a gram of boldness into everything you do.

—Baltasar Gracian

INDIRECT QUESTION

I asked if they wanted to climb Mt. Everest. [As an indirect question, this sentence reports that a question was asked. If it were a direct question, it would end with a question mark: *I asked, “Do you want to climb Mt. Everest?”*]

22b How do I use periods with abbreviations?



Most abbreviations today don't use periods. For example, these abbreviations no longer call for periods: BA; MA; PhD; MD; RN; US; VP. Some abbreviations still do retain periods: Mr.; Mrs.; Ms.; Dr.; Fri.; Feb.; a.m.; p.m.; Mt. (For more about *a.m.* and *p.m.*, see section 29j; for more about abbreviations in general, see 29i through 29l.)



ALERT: Spell out the word *professor* in **ACADEMIC WRITING**; never abbreviate it. 

Abbreviations without periods include the names of states (for example, IL, CO) and some organizations and government agencies (for example, CBS and NASA).

Ms. Yuan, who works at **NASA**, lectured to **Dr.** Garcia's physics class at 9:30 **a.m.**

 **ALERT:** When the period of an abbreviation falls at the end of a sentence that calls for a period, the period of the abbreviation serves also to end the sentence. If, however, your sentence ends in a question mark or an exclamation point, put it after the period of the abbreviation. 

The phone rang at 4:00 **a.m.**

It's upsetting to answer a wrong-number call at 4:00 **a.m.!**

Who would call at 4:00 **a.m.?**

QUESTION MARKS

22c When do I use a question mark?

A **question mark** ends a **direct question**, one that quotes the exact words the speaker used. (In contrast, an **indirect question** reports a question and ends with a period.)

How many attempts have been made to climb Mt. Everest? [An indirect question would end with a period: *She wants to know how many attempts have been made to climb Mt. Everest.*]



 **ALERT:** Never use a question mark with any other punctuation.

NO She asked, "How are you[?]."

YES She asked, "How are you?" 

Questions in a series are each followed by a question mark, whether or not each question is a complete sentence.

After the fierce storm, the mountain climbers debated what to do next.
Turn back[?] Move on[?] Rest for a while[?]

 **ALERT:** When questions in a series are not complete sentences (as in the above example), you can choose whether to capitalize the first letter, but be consistent within each piece of writing. 

Sometimes a statement or mild command is phrased as a question to be polite. In such cases, a question mark is optional, but be consistent in each piece of writing.

Would you please send me a copy.

22d When can I use a question mark in parentheses?

The only time to use a question mark in parentheses ([?]) is if a date or other number is unknown or doubtful. Never use ([?]) to communicate that you're unsure of information.

Mary Astell, a British writer of pamphlets on women's rights, was born in 1666 (?) and died in 1731.

The word *about* is often a more graceful substitute for (?): *Mary Astell was born **about** 1666.*

Also, never use (?) to communicate IRONY or sarcasm. Choose words to deliver your message.

NO Having altitude sickness is a pleasant (?) experience.

YES Having altitude sickness is **as pleasant as having a bad case of the flu.**

EXCLAMATION POINTS


22e When do I use an exclamation point?

An **exclamation point** ends a strong command or an emphatic declaration. A strong command is a firm and direct order: *Look out behind you!* An emphatic declaration is a shocking or surprising statement: *There's been an accident!*

 **ALERT:** Never combine an exclamation point with other punctuation.

NO “There’s been an accident!,” she shouted.

YES “There’s been an accident!” she shouted.

YES “There’s been an accident,” she shouted. [Use this form if you prefer not to use an exclamation point.] 

22f What is considered overuse of exclamation points?

In **ACADEMIC WRITING**, words, not exclamation points, need to communicate the intensity of your message. Reserve exclamation points for an emphatic declaration within a longer passage.

When we were in Nepal, we tried each day to see Mt. Everest. But each day we failed. **Clouds defeated us!** The summit never emerged from a heavy overcast.

Also, using exclamation points too frequently suggests an exaggerated sense of urgency.

NO Mountain climbing can be dangerous. You must know correct procedures! You must have the proper equipment! Otherwise, you could die!

YES Mountain climbing can be dangerous. You must know correct procedures. You must have the proper equipment. Otherwise, you could die!

Never use (!) to communicate amazement or sarcasm. Choose words to deliver your message.

NO At 29,035 feet (!), Mt. Everest is the world's highest mountain. Yet, Chris (!) wants to climb it.

YES At a **majestic** 29,035 feet, Mt. Everest is the world's highest mountain. Yet, Chris, **amazingly**, wants to climb it.

EXERCISE 22-1 Insert any needed periods, question marks, and exclamation points and delete any unneeded ones. For help, consult all sections of this chapter.

EXAMPLE Dr Madan Kataria, who calls himself the Giggling Guru (!), established the world's first laughter club in 1995.

Dr. Madan Kataria, who calls himself the Giggling Guru, established the world's first laughter club in 1995.

1. More than 1,000 (?) laughter clubs exist throughout the world, each seeking to promote health by reducing stress and strengthening the immune system!
2. Dr Madan Kataria, a physician in Bombay, India, developed a yoga-like (!) strategy based on group (!) laughter and then set up laughter clubs.
3. Laughter clubs say, "Yes!" when asked, "Is laughter the best medicine."
4. The clubs' activities include breathing and stretching exercises and playful (?) behaviors, such as performing the opera laugh (!), the chicken laugh (!), and the "Ho-Ho, Ha-Ha" (?) exercise.
5. According to the German psychologist Dr Michael Titze, "In the 1950s people used to laugh eighteen minutes a day (!), but today we laugh not more than six (?) minutes per day, despite huge rises in the standard of living."

CHAPTER 23

Commas

23a What is the role of the comma?

Commas are the most frequently used marks of punctuation, occurring twice as often as all other punctuation marks combined. A comma must be used in certain places, it must not be used in other places, and it's optional in still other places. This chapter helps you sort through the various rules.