

# DSAT Reading and Writing Grammar Mini Guide

Test Ninjas Publication

Made in California

2024 Edition

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# SAT Grammar Mini Guide: Using Commas, Colons, Semicolons, and Other Punctuations in English

English punctuation can seem complicated, but it follows a set of rules that, once understood, can be easily applied. This tutorial will guide you through the correct use of commas, colons, semicolons, and other essential punctuation marks.

## Commas (,)

The comma is a versatile punctuation mark. Here are some common uses:

- In a series/list: Use commas to separate items in a list or series.

**Example:** I enjoy hiking, swimming, and cycling.

- Between independent clauses: If two independent clauses (complete thoughts) are connected by a coordinating conjunction (for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so), a comma should precede the conjunction.

**Example:** It was raining, so I took an umbrella.

- After introductory elements: Use a comma after an introductory word, phrase, or clause to set it apart from the main sentence.

**Example:** Despite the bad weather, they decided to go for a run.

- With non-essential elements: If a clause, phrase, or word is not essential to the sentence's meaning, it should be set off with commas.

**Example:** My dog, who loves to play fetch, is eight years old.

- Direct address: Use a comma to separate the person being addressed from the rest of the sentence.

**Example:** Could you, John, pass the salt?

## Colons (:)

Colons are used to introduce information, often in a list or a clarification.

- Before a list: Use a colon to introduce a list of items, particularly after phrases like "the following" or "as follows".

**Example:** I need to buy the following items: eggs, milk, and bread.

- Introducing explanation or amplification: Colons can be used to extend or clarify information in the first part of the sentence.

**Example:** I decided to stay home: I was feeling a little under the weather.

## Semicolons (;)

Semicolons are somewhere between a comma and a period.

- Between closely related independent clauses: Use a semicolon to link two independent clauses that are closely related in thought. This is especially useful when you don't have a coordinating conjunction.

**Example:** Some people prefer Android; others love iOS.

- In complex lists: If the items in a list are long and contain internal punctuation, semicolons can be used to separate them for clarity.

**Example:** We have offices in Springfield, Illinois; Austin, Texas; and Seattle, Washington.

## Full Stops/Periods (.)

Full stops, or periods, primarily signal the end of a sentence.

- End of a sentence: Use a period at the end of a declarative sentence, that is, a sentence that makes a statement.

**Example:** I have a cat.

- In abbreviations: Use periods in certain abbreviations.  
**Example:** Dr. Smith lives on St. James St.

## Hyphens (-) and Dashes (–, —)

Both hyphens and dashes are used to connect words and ideas, but they serve distinct functions.

- Hyphen: A hyphen is the shortest of these marks and is used most commonly to join two related words together. This can avoid ambiguity or form a single idea from two or more words.

**Example:** She has a two-year-old son.

- En Dash (–): An en dash is slightly longer than a hyphen. It is commonly used to indicate a range or span of numbers, dates, or time.

**Example:** The meeting will take place from 3–5 p.m.

- Em Dash (—): An em dash is the longest of these marks. It's used to indicate a break in thought, an aside, an interruption, or to give extra emphasis to a point.

**Example:** I need three items at the store—eggs, milk, and bread.

## Apostrophes (’)

Apostrophes indicate possession and are used to form contractions.

- **Possession:** To show that something belongs to someone or something, use an apostrophe. If the noun is plural and ends in “s,” just add an apostrophe at the end. If it’s singular or doesn’t end in “s,” add ’s.

**Example:** This is Mary’s book. (singular)

**Example:** These are the dogs’ toys. (plural)

- **Contractions:** Contractions are combinations of words in which letters have been omitted and replaced by an apostrophe.

**Example:** I can’t believe it’s already Monday.

## Quotation Marks (“ ”)

Quotation marks are used to indicate direct speech, quotes, and to highlight specific words or phrases.

- **Direct Speech:** Use quotation marks at the start and end of direct speech or dialogue.

**Example:** “I love this song,” she said.

- **Quotes:** Quotation marks are used to show where you’ve used someone else’s exact words.

**Example:** As Martin Luther King Jr. said, “I have a dream.”

- **Highlighting words or phrases:** Quotation marks can be used to highlight words or phrases, such as to indicate irony, unfamiliar terms, or words used in a non-standard way.

**Example:** The “fresh” fish had been sitting out all day.

By understanding and correctly using punctuation, you can effectively communicate your ideas and ensure your writing is clear and professional. Practice these rules regularly, and soon using them will become second nature.

## Parentheses (())

Parentheses are used to add additional information or clarification to a sentence. The sentence should still be complete and make sense if the information within the parentheses were removed.

- **Additional Information:** Parentheses are used to include extra details that are not essential to the sentence’s main point. This can include asides, comments, or clarifications.

**Example:** I have two pets (a cat and a dog).

- **Acronyms or Abbreviations:** When first using an acronym or abbreviation in your writing, it’s conventional to write out the full term followed by the shortened version in parentheses.

**Example:** The World Health Organization (WHO) is a global organization.

## Brackets ([])

Brackets, often called square brackets, are typically used within quoted material or within parentheses.

- **Within Quotations:** Brackets can be used to clarify or add context within a direct quote without changing the original wording.

**Example:** She said, “I absolutely love [the band] Radiohead.”

- **Within Parentheses:** Occasionally, brackets are used inside parentheses to create a separate grouping or clarification.

**Example:** She adopted a puppy (a golden retriever [like the one her family used to have]).

## Question Marks (?)

Question marks are straightforward—they end a sentence that is asking a question.

- **Example:** How are you doing today?

## Exclamation Points (!)

Exclamation points are used to express strong emotion or emphasis.

- **Example:** Watch out for the car!

It's important to use exclamation points sparingly in formal writing, as overuse can diminish their impact and may make your writing seem overly emotional or informal.

## Ellipsis (...)

An ellipsis is a set of three periods indicating an omission or pause.

- **Omission:** An ellipsis can indicate that a portion of the text has been left out, especially when quoting a source. This helps to shorten the quote or to focus on the essential part.

**Example:** "To be, or not to be... that is the question."

- **Pause:** In informal writing or dialogues, an ellipsis can indicate a pause in speech, an unfinished thought, or a trailing off into silence.

**Example:** "I thought I knew him, but..."

## Slashes (/)

A slash or forward slash is used to indicate a choice or conflict.

- **Options:** A slash can indicate options or alternatives.

**Example:** Please check yes/no.

- **Conflict:** A slash can also indicate a conflict or a divide.

**Example:** The employer/employee relationship can sometimes be contentious.

## Quotation Marks for Titles

While it's common to use italics or underlining for titles of large works (like books or movies), quotation marks are used for shorter works or components of larger works.

**Shorter works:** This includes short stories, poems, newspaper articles, and song titles.

**Example:** "The Road Not Taken" is a famous poem by Robert Frost.

**Parts of larger works:** This includes book chapters, individual episodes of TV shows, or articles within a magazine or newspaper.

**Example:** "The One Where Ross and Rachel Take a Break" is an infamous episode of the TV show "Friends."

Mastering English punctuation may seem daunting at first, but with practice, these rules will become second nature. Punctuation is a powerful tool that can



help you express your ideas clearly and effectively. Remember, the primary goal of punctuation is to aid in understanding, not to confuse the reader. Therefore, when in doubt, it's often best to keep it simple. Punctuation might seem like a minor aspect of writing, but it significantly influences how we interpret and understand written language. Each punctuation mark has a distinct role to play in conveying meaning, structuring sentences, and adding rhythm to our writing. By mastering these rules, you'll be able to write more clearly, effectively, and professionally.

## Italics and Underlining

These aren't punctuation marks, but they are essential typographic conventions that you might find useful.

Titles of major works: Books, movies, albums, newspapers, and magazines should be italicized if you're typing or underlined if you're writing by hand.

**Example:** My favorite book is *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

Emphasis: Italics can be used to emphasize a word or phrase in a sentence.

**Example:** She couldn't believe he had never eaten *sushi* before.

Foreign words or phrases: If a foreign word or phrase is likely to be unfamiliar to your readers, italics can be used. This rule does not apply to foreign words and phrases that have become part of regular English usage, such as "rendezvous" or "bon voyage."

**Example:** She has a certain *je ne sais quoi*.

## Capital Letters

Capital letters are used in English to denote the start of a sentence or a proper noun.

Start of a sentence: Each sentence should start with a capital letter. This helps to visually separate sentences and make the text easier to read.

**Example:** He went to the park. It was a beautiful day.

Proper Nouns: These are the names of specific, unique things. They always start with a capital letter, even in the middle of a sentence.

**Example:** I went to London last summer.

In conclusion, punctuation and typographic conventions play a crucial role in the English language, enhancing clarity and understanding. As you continue practicing these rules, you'll find your writing skills improving and your confidence growing. Remember, practice is the key to mastering these conventions. Keep writing, keep learning, and most importantly, keep enjoying the process.