

An Easy Guide to Symbols

Ah, the keyboard. A ubiquitous tool that, despite its importance, has faded into the background when it comes to the hardware associated with writing digitally. A standard keyboard consists of 104 alphanumeric keys, plenty of which are ignored in everyday use. But what are the other keys used for in digital writing?

&: Ampersands

GrammarBook's guide to grammar and punctuation describes ampersands as commonly being used as a substitute for the word 'and.' They can most commonly be found in company names and titles. Try to avoid using this symbol in everyday language, and limit it to official names, as a part of a descriptive clause, and in informal communication as shorthand for the word 'and' (GrammarBook, 2021). Keep in mind that the use of this symbol is generally considered to be informal.

- **Ex.1:** Johnson & Johnson is a company that develops medicine and pharmaceuticals.
- **Ex.2:** Some of my favorite animals are dogs, cats, fish, and rats & mice.
- **Ex.3:** I went out & did some errands this past weekend.

*: Asterisk

According to Chime and Davina, asterisks are most commonly used to indicate a footnote. In a situation like this, a word would be marked with an asterisk (or another symbol, such as a number, if there are more than one denotations close together) that will correspond with a footnote at the bottom of the page. When using an asterisk, keep in mind that they come *after* punctuation, with the exception of dashes (Chime & Davina, 2019). Asterisks can also be used to omit words or parts of words from writing, as seen in example 2.

- **Ex.1:** Penguins* at the San Francisco Zoo are a popular attraction.
 - **Footnote*:** Penguins are flightless, aquatic birds that can often be found in colder climates.
- **Ex.2:** Asterisks are so f*****g cool!

[] { } < >: Brackets (Square, Curly, Angle)

Square brackets [] can be used to indicate a subordinate in a subordinate clause. In layman's terms, square brackets can be used as a sort of 'parenthesis within a parenthesis,' which you can see in example 1 below.

Curly brackets { }, also known as 'braces,' are simply used when a writer wishes to indicate a list. See example 2 below.

Angle brackets < > are rarely used in everyday situations, especially today. In the early days of the internet, they were commonly used to enclose an email address.

- **Ex.1:** Mark (who was traveling abroad to see his favorite animal [the kangaroo] and was very lost) had never navigated an airport before.

- **Ex.2:** Your options for pizza toppings are {olives, pepperoni, sausage, tomato, pineapple, and anchovies.}
- **Ex.3:** You can contact me at <jimthec clown@clownmail.com>

\/: Backward/Forward Slashes

Slashes come in two different varieties: backslashes \ and forward slashes /. Don't worry about using backslashes; they are only used in computer coding. Forward slashes, on the other hand, have multiple important uses in writing. The first is to show a line break in a poem, play, or song. Second, it can also be used as a stand-in for the word 'or'. Third, in informal writing, it can be used to designate an abbreviation. Finally, it can also be used to demonstrate a relationship or connection between two or more ideas. (Grammarly, 2021)

Don't put a space after a slash if it indicates alternatives between only two words. If you are using a slash to indicate alternatives between phrases or multi-worded terms, put a space before and after the slash.

- **Ex.1:** Old MacDonald had a farm/ E-I-E-I-O/ And on that farm he had a sheep/ E-I-E-I-O.
- **Ex.2:** Always bring an umbrella and/or raincoat when you go out on a rainy day.
- **Ex.3:** Can I get a Hawaiian pizza w/o the pineapple?
- **Ex.4:** This house features a combined kitchen/dining room space.

: Colon

Colons and semicolons, while similar, serve different purposes when it comes to writing. Colons are used to highlight the information that comes after it, while semicolons are used to join two independent clauses. Grammarly's guide to colons describes them as "flashing arrows that point out the information following it." They also state that "colons should not separate a noun from the connecting verb, a verb from its object/subject complement, a preposition from its subject, or a subject from its predicate" (Grammarly, 2021). Do not capitalize a word after a colon unless it is a proper noun.

- **Ex.1:** It was once believed that our world could be broken down into four elements: earth, air, fire, and water.
- **Ex.2:** You have two options: do your homework, or fail the class.
- **Ex.3:** Rick Roll once said: "Never gonna give you up, never gonna let you down."
- **Ex.4:** It is obvious: ice cream is the best dessert.

; Semicolon

Semicolons act as a sort of “soft” punctuation that links two independent clauses more closely than a conventional period would. An independent clause is a clause that can stand by itself, without help from a supporting clause; basically, a group of words that contain a verb, subject, and a complete thought. See what I did there? Semicolons can also be used to make a sort of list, as you can see in example 2.

- **Ex.1:** We couldn’t score a basket; the game didn’t go well for us.
- **Ex.2:** Cows are important food sources; they provide milk; they also provide meat.

~ Tilde

Tildes are not commonly used in academic writing, but when they do pop up, they are usually used to refer to an approximation. Keep in mind that the Spanish tilde is a different symbol that looks like this: señorita.

- **Ex.1:** The gas station is ~20 miles away.

Double/Single Quotation Marks: “ ” / ‘ ’

Quotation marks are used to denote when someone is, well, quoting something someone else said. They are also used to demonstrate dialogue. American English uses double quotation marks for quotes, and single quotation marks for quotes that are inside of a double quotation mark. Punctuation comes *before* the closing quotation mark. Pay attention to where the punctuation is in the examples below. (Grammarly, 2021)

- **Ex.1:** John paused. “I guess that’s okay. I’m just not too happy about it.”
- **Ex.2:** “He’s over there,” Jeffery said. “Behind the trash can.”
- **Ex.3:** Jenny snorted. “I’ve read ‘The Tempest’ thirteen times, get on my level.”

You may also see quotation marks being used outside of dialogue. The same punctuation rules apply here .

- **Ex.3:** My friend told me that “I was a pretty cool guy” and that he was happy to know me.

Finally, writers will oftentimes use quotation marks to designate a word that they are using in a different way, or that they are implementing a sarcastic tone into that specific word. Grammarly states that these are often called scare or shudder quotes. (Grammarly, 2021)

- **Ex.4:** The governor’s “kindness” came at the cost of those less fortunate than himself.

Em Dash: —

An Em dash is a slightly longer version of the En dash –, and a much longer version of the hyphen -. It generally is not found on a keyboard. This means that it must be inserted using either the special characters tool, or using a shortcut. It fulfills a similar role as parentheses, commas, and even colons, separating information that is less important or that is an aside to enhance readability. It can also be used to censor parts of a word. Spaces are generally not used before

and after a dash. Omit any punctuation surrounding the dashes if you are using them to replace parentheses.

- **Ex.1:** The people were not happy with the President’s decision—or, rather, lack of a decision.
- **Ex.2:** The man’s dogs—all 12 of them—ran after the mailman.

Parentheses: ()

Also known as round brackets, parentheses are used to indicate an afterthought or additional information that occurs during or after a sentence. They are also used when inserting an in-text citation, according to MLA formatting. Note that when using parentheses this way, punctuation occurs *after* the parenthetical (see example 2 below) (Grammarly, 2021).

- **Ex.1:** I was going to go to the grocery store for a sandwich (I was really hungry), but decided to order takeout instead.
- **Ex.2:** In his song “You’re Gonna Go Far, Kid,” Thompson sings “You’re gonna go far, kid” (The Offspring, 0:35).

Conclusion

There are dozens of funky symbols that can be found in digital writing, and this is by no means a comprehensive list.. If you’re curious about other symbols, check out Grammerly’s “Grammar Rules” page; they are an awesome resource not only for symbol reference, but for grammar rules as well!

Sources:

“Category: Definitions.” *GrammarBook.com | Your #1 Source for Grammar and Punctuation*, 2021, <https://www.grammarbook.com/blog/definitions/>.

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