
The Period

What Americans call a “period” is named “full point” or “full stop” in Britain. The second British term gives a good idea of the period’s main function. Like the red sign at the end of a road, a period orders the reader not just to slow down briefly but to come to a true halt. Probably the only sign in a piece of writing that makes a sharper separation between one idea and another is the blankness at the end of a line preceding a new paragraph or the unfilled page at the end of a chapter.

The period’s primary function is to signal the end of any sentence that makes a statement or gives a command. Periods also appear in most abbreviations. In recent years this punctuation mark has picked up a new and important function as part of Web addresses.

Though the rules governing the period are fairly straightforward, problems do arise when a period at the end of a sentence tangles with the period of an abbreviation or with quotation marks. This chapter addresses those intricacies and other special cases, including the use of a period in titles, lists, and slide presentations.

AS AN ENDMARK

A complete sentence that states an idea always ends with a period. A sentence that gives a command normally concludes with a period as well. To put this rule another way: Any sentence that does not ask a question, exclaim, or command with extra emphasis needs a period. Every sentence in this chapter

thus far, and nearly every sentence in this book, finishes up with a period. Some examples follow:

The toy duck is resting atop the child's dresser. (statement)

Turn left at the corner. (command)

Stop what you are doing and help me. (command)

No house is truly a home until it is lived in. (statement)

A penny saved is a penny earned. (statement)

The period's emotional tone is neutral. To see the contrast, imagine the above sentences punctuated differently:

The toy duck is resting atop the child's dresser?

Turn left at the corner!

Stop what you are doing and help me!

No house is truly a home until it is lived in!

A penny saved is a penny earned?

The first sentence leads one to think that the writer is puzzled or perhaps even upset about the presence of the toy duck on the dresser. Why is the duck there, you imagine the writer pondering. The next two sentences are much more urgent than the versions ending with a period. Perhaps the writer is angry or intent on securing complete obedience. The fourth sentence sounds like a protest. Any one of a number of situations comes to mind: a new house, a family not yet settled, a conversation about the meaning of "home." In the last example, you may imagine a spendthrift child answering a parent's scolding with a bit of sarcasm. Whatever scenario you come up with for these sentences, the issue is the same. The period has a more neutral effect on meaning than other endmarks.

In placing a period at the end of a sentence, be sure that you've actually written a complete sentence. A true "complete sentence" in grammatical terms includes a subject and a verb

and expresses a coherent thought. The subject is the person or thing being talked about in the sentence and the verb is the action or state of being of the subject. A coherent thought means that the sentence may stand alone and make sense. The reader may not have every piece of information possible, but neither is the reader left hanging halfway through an idea. Below are some samples of complete and incomplete thoughts. Several of the examples include subjects and verbs, but only the complete thoughts are true sentences:

Complete: The stadium is filled to capacity. (subject = *stadium*, verb = *is filled*)

Incomplete: The fans are. (subject = *fans*, verb = *are*)

Why it is incomplete: The fans are what? The statement isn't finished.

Revised, complete: The fans are thrilled by the team's success.

Complete: Despite altering the dress three times, the tailor was still dissatisfied with the fit. (subject = *tailor*, verb = *was*)

Incomplete: Sewing for hours and hours to make ends meet. (no subject or proper verb)

Why it is incomplete: There is a verb form, *sewing*, but no subject. No one *is sewing*. If sewing is taken as a thing, a hobby, perhaps, it may be a subject. In that case the sentence still needs a verb.

Revised, complete: Sewing for hours and hours to make ends meet, Eloise dreamed of a better life.

IN PARENTHESES

A number of rules govern the interaction between periods and parentheses (what the British call "round brackets").

Entire Sentence Inside Parentheses

If an entire sentence making a statement or giving a command is in parentheses, place a period inside the closing mark:

(The appendix contains more information on closing costs and mortgage rates.)

(See page 12 for more information.)

Complete Sentence Inserted into Another Sentence

If the parenthetical statement appears inside another sentence, there is no period in the parentheses. The logic behind this rule is that there is only one sentence, of which the parenthetical information is a part, and thus only one endmark.

This situation is not acceptable (I have told you so several times) and must be remedied immediately.

When the cleaners have finished their work (they generally leave before midnight), only the security staff remain on campus.

Citations in Parentheses

Citations of source material are sometimes placed in parentheses at the end of the ideas or quotations being cited. The major style manuals allow this citation format and even at times recommend it over footnotes or endnotes. The general principle is simple: Parenthetical citations are part of the sentence but not part of the quotation, if there is one. Therefore the parentheses come before the endmark of the sentence (usually a period) but after any quotation marks. Note the punctuation in these examples:

As Smith reached the Pole, he “staked the claim of a sovereign nation” (Smith 203).

A sailor on the supply boat later said that Smith admitted his trek had not been a success because of the high fatality rate (Morganstern 44).

For more information on the punctuation of cited sources, see Part III.

IN QUOTATIONS

The rules governing where a period should be placed in quoted material have very little to do with meaning. The arbitrary nature of these rules is made clear by the fact that they are different on each side of the Atlantic Ocean. In fact, British and American period and quotation mark placement is exactly opposite. In most cases British and American quotation marks vary in another respect as well. In Britain single quotation marks generally enclose quoted material; double quotation marks are reserved for quotations within other quotations. In American usage the order is reversed, with double quotation marks enclosing the primary quotation and single marks surrounding an interior quotation.

Quotation at the End of a Sentence

When quoted material appears at the end of a sentence and a question mark or exclamation point is not called for, the period resides inside the closing quotation mark (American English) or outside the quotation mark (British English).

Some examples in American English follow:

Laura replied, "I visited the museum yesterday and toured the Asian galleries."

Olivia mentioned that Tang Dynasty art presents an "age of splendor."

One piece of art was called "Autumn Moon."

Some examples in British style:

'Laura, as an art buff you are more likely to be in a museum than anywhere else'.

Oliver commented that he plans to see the new Rubens exhibit this weekend 'or die trying'.

I'm looking forward to the curator's essay for this exhibit, 'Rubens: A Reassessment'.

When the quotation ending the sentence is a question, a question mark appears inside the quotation marks, but no period ends the sentence. The logic here is that the sentence should not have two endmarks, so the question mark does double duty. Some examples follow:

Arthur asked, "Are you feeling ill today?"

Amy replied, "Why are you asking?"

In British style these sentences would employ single quotation marks (inverted commas), but otherwise appear the same:

Arthur asked, 'Are you feeling ill today?'

Amy replied, 'Why are you asking?'

The question mark, following both American and British usage, goes inside the closing quotation mark if the quoted material is a question and outside the closing quotation mark if the sentence, but not the quoted material, is a question. The period, on the other hand, always goes outside the quotation mark (British style) or inside (American style).

Quotation Within a Sentence

If a quoted statement normally calls for a period but the sentence continues on after the quotation, replace the period with a comma:

"The tapestry is slightly frayed," observed the curator.

The tapestry is slightly frayed is a complete sentence. Because it is a statement, it would normally end with a period. Yet *observed the curator* is part of the same sentence. A period should follow *curator* to signal the end of the entire sentence. Had you placed a period after *frayed*, the sentence would have two endings, a clearly impossible situation:

Wrong: "The tapestry is slightly frayed." observed the curator.

Here is another example:

The ski instructor remarked that his class “must be willing to fall” in order to master the correct posture.

Here the quotation is not a complete sentence, but some writers may still be tempted to insert a period after the instructor’s statement. Once again, the rule is that no sentence should have two endmarks. A period should not be inserted after *fall* because the sentence continues:

Wrong: The ski instructor remarked that his class “must be willing to fall.” in order to master the correct posture.

Quotation Within Another Quotation

If the sentence ends with a quotation within another quotation, place the period inside both the single and the double quotation marks (American usage). In British usage, the period normally goes outside both marks:

American usage: Canwell explained, “My favorite saying is ‘just do it.’”

British usage: Canwell explained, ‘My favorite saying is “just do it”’.

For more information on quotation marks, see Chapter 7.

IN ABBREVIATIONS

A period often takes the place of letters that have been omitted in an abbreviation. However, not all abbreviations include periods. If you are unsure about a particular abbreviation, the dictionary is a good guide. The major style manuals also include lists of abbreviations, showing which should include periods and which should not. If you are writing an academic paper, check the style manual if you are in doubt about the conventions of abbreviations in your field. This section explains only the most common forms.

Most Common Abbreviations

Two of the most common abbreviations are a.m. and p.m., indicating morning and afternoon times. These abbreviations are sometimes capitalized and written without periods: AM and PM. Both forms are correct and quite common, so you may choose either. Take care to be consistent in one piece of writing. Regardless of how they are written, these forms are always placed after the time, separated by a space.

Names and Titles

When a name or title is abbreviated, insert a period:

W. B. Yeats (William Butler Yeats)

F.D.R. (Franklin Delano Roosevelt)

John F. Kennedy (John Fitzgerald Kennedy)

Msgr. Robert Agnow (Monsignor Robert Agnow)

Sen. Henry Dosworth (Senator Henry Dosworth)

Some Common Abbreviations for Titles

The abbreviations in the following chart are generally written with periods:

Atty. Gen.	Attorney General
Dr.	Doctor
Esq.	Esquire
Gov.	Governor
Jr.	Junior
Pres.	President
Rep.	Representative

Note: Academia and the military now prefer to omit periods from abbreviated ranks or degrees (*LT* for “Lieutenant,” *PhD* for “Doctor of Philosophy,” and so forth). Many titles, such as “Medical Doctor” may be abbreviated with or without periods (*M.D.* or *MD*).

The most common titles—Mr., Mrs., and Ms.—have traditionally been followed by periods. However, this style is changing, perhaps in recognition of the fact that the words abbreviated are never spelled out and, in the case of the female titles, never even pronounced as a whole word. In Britain, the period is always omitted in these titles.

Latin Terms

Abbreviations derived from Latin words commonly include periods:

e.g. (for example)

i.e. (that is)

cf. (compare)

et al. (and others)

etc. (and so forth)

When any abbreviation ends a sentence, only one period is inserted. The period following the abbreviation (if there is one) does double duty, as in the following examples:

The best article was written by Peterson et al.

The temperamental artist was always complaining about the lack of time, space, energy, etc.

Sic Is Not an Abbreviation

A small word, *sic*, alerts the reader to an error in a quotation—a misspelled word, a faulty grammatical construction, and the like. *Sic* is not an abbreviation and thus is not followed by a period. *Sic* should be placed in brackets next to the error.

Original: She had gave it to me yesterday before I went to the movies.

Quoted: The witness reported that “she had gave it [sic] to me” but the jury did not believe him.

Lowercase Words

Most abbreviations that end with a lowercase letter include periods:

- fig. (figure)
- illus. (illustration)
- Sp. (Spanish)
- Inc. (Incorporated)
- Ltd. (Limited)
- irreg. (irregular)

When these abbreviations occur at the end of a sentence, only one period is inserted. The period at the end of the abbreviation also serves as an endmark, as in these examples:

Helen invested in Burbank, Ltd.

The towels on sale were marked “irreg.”

Abbreviations Without Periods

As noted earlier in this chapter, the trend today is to streamline writing by omitting the periods in many abbreviations, as in AM (morning) and PM (afternoon). The same trend applies to the abbreviation for the United States of America, which may be written with periods but which increasingly appears without punctuation (*USA*). Acronyms—“words” created from the first letters of each word of a name—don’t include periods:

NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization)

OPEC (Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries)

The United States Postal Service abbreviations for American states and territories should not include periods. A sampling:

NY

AK

AL

MS

You may see the older state abbreviations (*Ind.* for “Indiana,” *Penn.* for “Pennsylvania,” for example) from time to time. The two-letter abbreviations are preferred.

Note: Abbreviations and acronyms multiply almost as fast as a supercomputer. Because the placement or omission of a period is often governed by custom, not logic, you may want to check the standard usage in your company or school before writing a particular abbreviation. If you’re unsure and the dictionary is no help, simply spell out the term you need. If more than one option is open to you, be sure to use the same abbreviated form throughout the document.

Abbreviations in a Sentence

When an abbreviation containing a period occurs within a sentence, the period remains. When the same abbreviation occurs at the end of the sentence, one period serves two purposes—to mark the abbreviation and to signal the end of the sentence. Some examples follow:

I bought this stationery from Johnson’s Inc. and compared it to a store brand. (abbreviation within the sentence)

In my opinion the best quality stationery is from Johnson’s Inc. (one period for the abbreviation and endmark)

If the abbreviation is tucked into the sentence at a spot where a comma or semicolon is called for, the period of the abbreviation is followed—never preceded—by those marks:

I bought this stationery from Johnson’s Inc., which is going out of business.

I thought you invested wisely in Johnson’s Inc.; I was wrong.

One Endmark Only

Never place two periods at the end of a sentence.

Wrong: Return unused merchandise to the Macalister Co..

Right: Return unused merchandise to the Macalister Co.

WITH AN ELLIPSIS

An *ellipsis* is a series of three dots, each separated from the next by a space, indicating that material has been left out of a quotation. An ellipsis may also signal a trailing thought. (For more information on ellipses, see Chapter 10.) When an ellipsis occurs at the end of a sentence expressing a statement or command, the three dots are joined by a fourth, which is the period, as in this example:

The author goes on to say that we should “take advantage of each day. . . .”

In the above example the period is placed immediately after the concluding word, *day*, and the three dots for the ellipsis follow, each separated by one space.

If the quotation is cited parenthetically in the text, the period follows the parentheses. In the quotation below, the three dots after *anger* indicate missing words, and the period after the parentheses functions as an endmark.

The author writes, “None of the rulers understood the nature of the peasants’ anger . . .” (Sneeman 23).

IN LISTS AND SLIDE PRESENTATIONS

When items in a list on paper or in a slide presentation are complete sentences, each item ends with a period:

Follow these steps in assembling your new Robotype G-3:

- (1) Unpack and count all pieces. You should have twelve.
- (2) Assemble all side slats according to figure 1.
- (3) Place the roof over slats 1–5.
- (4) Connect the power supply cord to slat 3.

If the items are not complete sentences, no period is called for. Note the difference between this list and the preceding list:

Each camper should bring these supplies:

- sleeping bag
- canteen
- water purification tablets
- snacks
- sunscreen

Numbers, Letters, and Periods

If the items in a list are numbered or preceded by letters, the numbers and letters are usually followed by periods or enclosed in parentheses. The choice is a matter of style. Don't mix parentheses and periods in the same list, and don't place periods inside parentheses. Some examples follow:

Incorrect:

- (1.)
- (2.)
- (3.)

Correct:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Correct:

- A.
- B.
- C.

Correct:

- (1)
 - (2)
 - (3)
-

IN TITLES AND HEADINGS

If a title or subtitle is centered on a title page or in a heading, no periods are needed even if the title sounds like a complete sentence.

Wrong: The Sun Also Rises. (centered title)

Right: The Sun Also Rises (centered title)

IN MEMOS AND E-MAILS

In writing a memorandum or an e-mail, the text is punctuated normally. Periods signal the end of complete sentences in the usual way. The heading of the memo or e-mail contains no periods unless one is called for in an abbreviation or an e-mail address. The subject line contains no periods. Note these excerpts from a memo and an e-mail:

To: Alexander McSorley

From: Eileen Enders

Re: The Company Picnic

Next month the company picnic will be held in McCarron Park. All departments are responsible for collecting fees from members.

To: absmith@havad.edu

Subject: Term Paper

Please submit the rough draft no later than February 27, 2006.

IN WEB ADDRESSES

Periods, more commonly called “dots” in this context, separate various parts of Web addresses or Internet addresses. Because these addresses are sometimes extremely long, you may need to divide one between two lines. Take care to separate the Web address at a natural break—after a slash or before a period. If a Web address is mentioned in your text and ends a sentence, place a period at the end of the sentence in the normal way.

Wrong: The data we need for next month’s product launch can be found at www.havad.edu

Right: The data we need for next month’s product launch can be found at www.havad.edu.

IN NUMBERS

The period acts as a decimal point, as in these examples:

15.44 (15 and 44 hundredths)

2.033 (2 and 33 thousandths)

In Britain, the separation between hours and minutes is also indicated by a period, or full stop. (In American usage, a colon replaces the period for this function.) Examples in British style:

5.15 (15 minutes past 5)

2.30 (half past 2)

The same times would be written differently in American style:

5:15 (15 minutes past 5)

2:30 (half past 2)

In drama, a period also separates the number of an act, scene, and line:

1.2.33–34 (Act 1, scene 2, lines 33–34)

When a Period Is Not Appropriate

Periods are not called for after centered titles, following dates and addresses, or in short captions that do not form complete sentences. A signature should not be followed by a period.
