



THE PERIOD, EXCLAMATION POINT, AND QUESTION MARK

Choosing end punctuation is easy if you know the type and function of the sentence you are writing. Writers use declarative sentences to give information, imperative sentences to give instructions or commands, interrogative sentences to obtain information, and exclamatory sentences to express emotion.

Declarative sentence or statement → The Chinese zodiac has four elements.

Imperative sentence or command → Tell me which zodiac sign I am.

Interrogative sentence or question → How many Chinese zodiac signs are there?

Exclamatory sentence or exclamation → You're a Boar! Really!

18a

Use a period to end a sentence or separate initials or abbreviations

No iron can pierce the heart with such force as a period put just at the right place.

–Isaac Babel

1. End a sentence

A period ends a declarative sentence that gives information, makes a statement, or gives a mild command.

Gives information → In the Chinese zodiac, different animals not only rule each year, different ones rule each day.

Makes a statement → The Chinese zodiac is fascinating, especially when it is compared to our Western zodiac.

Gives a mild command → Learn the animals and elements of the Chinese zodiac for the quiz tomorrow.

2. Separate initials or abbreviations

Periods are placed after an initial or an abbreviation.

- Ms. Smith, Mr. Smith, Mrs. Smith, Dr. Allison D. Smith, Adam D. Smith, Jr., Sen. Thomas P. Smith, Prof. Adam Smith, Rev. Smith

Using periods for the above list is always correct. Some other initials or abbreviations can take a period or not. This is something you will need to check with your instructor or with the specific style guidelines you are using, such as Modern Language Association (MLA) or American Psychological Association (APA). For instance, both MLA and APA suggest not using periods or spaces in abbreviations composed only of capital letters, but some instructors prefer that students use periods.

The following abbreviations can appear with or without periods.

- BA, BS, MA, PhD
- GP, LPN, MBA, MD, RN
- BC, BCE, AD, CE, AM, PM

States can often be abbreviated in a variety of ways, including some forms that take periods. For instance, *PA* or *Penn.* can be used for the state of Pennsylvania. However, in formal writing, it is not commonly accepted that states be abbreviated in any way except in complete addresses.

18b

Emphasize with an exclamation point

An exclamation mark is used at the end of an exclamatory sentence to express a strong feeling or to give emphasis.

- This is the last time I will comment. Stop asking me!
- Imagine! The foundation of astrology goes back thousands of years.

Cut out all those exclamation marks. An exclamation mark is like laughing at your own jokes.

–F. Scott Fitzgerald

18c

End a direct question, show uncertainty, or embed a short question with a question mark**1. End a direct question**

A question mark is used at the end of a direct question or interrogative.

- Are there any similarities between the Chinese zodiac and Western astrology?

Helpful hint

A question mark is never used for an indirect question.

- Molly asked why I used Chinese zodiac examples.

2. Show uncertainty

A question mark can also be used to show uncertainty about a fact or piece of information. When used this way, the question mark should be placed within parentheses.

- Western astrology began in the 2nd century AD (?).



Western zodiac

3. Embed a short question within the middle of a sentence

A short question can be embedded within a longer sentence in three ways: within parentheses, enclosed by dashes, or just within the sentence itself.

- ➔ Western astrology began in the 2nd century AD (is this similar to Chinese astrology?) and has twelve signs.
- ➔ Western astrology began in the 2nd century AD—is this similar to Chinese astrology?—and has twelve signs.
- ➔ When she asked the question, why are Western and Chinese zodiacs so similar? at the lecture, the speaker gave her a point-by-point answer.

Helpful hint

Although embedding questions within longer sentences is grammatical, it is rarely done and often questioned. A writer might want to revise these types of sentences into something that is more common.

EXERCISE 1

Directions: Fill in the blanks with the correct punctuation mark: period (.), exclamation point (!), or question mark (?).

1. Have you ever gotten lost reading something that is poorly written__
2. Punctuation marks are like tiny road signs for the reader__
3. Also referred to as a full stop, the period tells the reader that a complete thought, or sentence, has come to an end__
4. Although periods are the most common way to end a sentence, did you know that there are two other ways to do this__
5. The exclamation point is sometimes overused by excited students__ Be careful__