

Punctuation Cheat Sheet: Excerpted from *Young Playwrights 101* by Jonathan Dorf

Punctuation is a big part of how we create rhythm in our plays. In fact, punctuating your play carefully is the best way to make your intentions clear to the director and the actors—so think carefully about what punctuation you use. What are your choices?

. (the period) means a complete break at the end of a sentence.
I want you to leave. I want you to leave now.

? (the question mark) is, as you might imagine, for questions.
Why are you leaving?

Note: Some playwrights (including yours truly) occasionally like to use periods at the end of sentences that naturally seem to require a question mark. It's a way to tell an actor that you're looking for a specific type of delivery.

, (the comma) is like a bridge or a slide from one part of a sentence to another. It's a much shorter rest than a period, a sort of half-breath.
I want you to leave now, and I want you to leave the new dress I bought you.

! (the exclamation point) is a period that got excited. Use it for extra emphasis, or when a character is shouting (you can add ALL CAPS or even use italics if you really want to emphasize the shouted text).
Stop! It's a trap!
Beware of overusing the exclamation point, though, or it loses its power.

— (the em dash) is a hitch in a sentence. It's almost like in music, where there's a moment of syncopation.
I want you to leave—and leave the new dress I bought you.
An em dash is also the way to show that one character is interrupting another one.
He left the—

; and : (semicolon and colon) are less common in dialogue. The semicolon connects two related sentences—usually where the second sentence follows from the first—and thus it falls close to a period in the length of the break it makes (think a period, with just a dash of comma in it). The colon sets off a list of items or emphasizes a comment or explanation that will follow it. It's similar in feel to a semicolon, perhaps just a notch closer to a period in the length of the break it creates.
I'm going with you; it's the fastest way for me to get home.
Here are the things I need: thyme, rosemary, parsley and sage.

... (ellipses) are for when a character either trails off at the end of a sentence, or pauses to think of his next word in the middle of a sentence.
I can't find the...
Something seems to be...missing.

How do you know what mark of punctuation to choose, or whether the one you picked is the right one? Try having someone else (or possibly several people) read your sentences out loud. That way, you know if the actors are interpreting the rhythm of your words how you want. If not, time to adjust your punctuation.