Exclamation marks are a type of punctuation mark used at the end of a command, interjection, or declaration. This handout will help you learn the rules of using exclamation marks in formal and informal writing.

**Types of Exclamations**

An exclamation is a statement of strong emotion. There are several ways to make an exclamation.

**Interjections**

Interjections are words or short phrases used to convey wonder, delight, anger, etc. They typically occur at the beginning of a sentence and are followed by exclamation marks.

*Example:* Wow! I've been using exclamations in formal writing all along.
*Example:* Holy crap! That was fast.

**Exclamatory Sentences**

An exclamatory sentence contains either “what” or “how.” Usually “what” and “how” are used to ask questions, but in exclamatory sentences, they express emotion.

*Example:* What a jerk! How rude!
*Example:* What big feet you have! How tall you've grown!

**Exclamation Marks with Other Sentence Types**

You can also give other sentence types an exclamatory meaning by using an exclamation point.

This works for **imperative sentences** (i.e., commands), which are used to tell others what to do.

*Example:* Please help yourself!
*Example:* Don’t do that!

It also works for **declarative sentences** (i.e., most sentences), which make statements or provide information.

*Example:* The aliens are attacking the city!
*Example:* He broke it!

However, in formal writing, exclamation marks are rarely used with **interrogative sentences** (i.e., questions). In these cases, only use a question mark.
Informal: Where did they go?!
Informal: What did you do?!

Note: For more information on sentence function, please see our “Sentences” handout.

Exclamation Marks in Formal Writing

While exclamation marks should generally be avoided in formal writing, there are exceptions.

Proper Nouns containing Exclamations Marks

In some cases, exclamation marks are a part of a proper noun.

Example: In Quebec, there are several places that include exclamation marks in their name: Saint-Louis-du-Ha! Ha!, a town located in Temiscouata County; Rivière Ha! Ha!, a river in Saguenay–Lac-Saint-Jean; and Baie des Ha! Ha!, a bay on the St. Laurence River.

Titles containing Exclamation Marks

It is most common to see exclamation marks in entertainment titles. Be sure to italicize the exclamation mark if it’s part of a title.

Example: Marlon Brando starred in two films with exclamation marks in their titles: Viva Zapata! (1952) and Burn! (1969).

Exclamation Marks and Quotations

If a quote containing an exclamation mark ends a sentence, do not include a period.

Incorrect: Homer Simpson coined the expression, “Doh!”
Correct: Homer Simpson coined the expression, “Doh!”

Similarly, if a quote containing an exclamation mark begins a sentence, do not use additional punctuation.

Incorrect: “Happy new year!,” the announcer exclaimed.
Correct: “Happy new year!” the announcer exclaimed.

However, if the exclamation mark is part of a title, include a comma inside the quotation marks.

Example: “Oi to the World!,” a song written by the Vandals, was covered by No Doubt.

If the quotation is not an exclamation but the surrounding sentence is, place the exclamation mark outside of the quotation marks.

Example: I can’t believe he said, “You’re too old”!

Note: For more information on how to use quotation marks, please see our handout on this topic.

References