Parentheses and brackets are used to include supplemental information without interrupting the flow of a text. This handout explains how to use parentheses and brackets appropriately in academic writing.

# Using Parentheses

## Adding Information
Parentheses are used to add supplemental information like explanations, instructions, examples, and references into a text.

**Example:** I need to pick up some party supplies (streamers, giftwrap, Styrofoam cups) at the store.

## Signifying Lists
Parentheses can also enclose numbers or letters signifying items on a list.

**Example:** Please submit three of the following documents: (a) student I.D., (b) state I.D., (c) passport, or (d) green card.

When you create a list, be sure to (1) enclose the number or letter in parentheses, (2) separate each item with a comma, and (3) precede the last item with a conjunction, (e.g., “and,” “but,” “or,” etc.).

# Using Brackets

## Inserting Parentheses Inside Parentheses
When you need to insert parentheses inside other parentheses, use brackets for the inner parenthetical.

**Example:** While in medical school, Nasim and her husband Anwar (who attended a different medical school [JHU]) had a small beach wedding.

## Indicating Editorial Comments
Brackets are also used to indicate text added by someone other than the original author or speaker.

Used in this way, brackets can clarify quotes that are separated from their original context.

**Example:** “I couldn’t believe the [utopian social] experiment turned out the way it did.”

**Note:** The insertion of “utopian social” helps clarify what sort of experiment the author is writing about.

They can also provide a translation.
Parentheses, Brackets, and Other Punctuation

Remember that parentheses and brackets are used to include supplemental information—in other words, information that doesn’t necessarily need to be there.

Therefore, in most instances, you’ll use punctuation just as you would if the parentheses or brackets were removed.

Example: She is juicing all kinds of fruit (bananas, berries, and mangoes).

Note: Since the parentheses contain a list of items incorporated into a surrounding sentence, the surrounding sentence simply ends with a period or as it would if the parentheses weren’t there.

Example: I packed the car with the camping equipment we have (sleeping bags, lantern, bug spray), but we still need to purchase a tent.

Note: Since the above example joins two complete sentences with the coordinating conjunction “but,” a comma comes before the conjunction just as it would if the parentheses weren’t there.

The rules are slightly different when using complete sentences within parentheses or brackets. In these cases, if the parenthetical statement exists on its own, simply capitalize and punctuate it within the parentheses as you would any other sentence.

Example: A wedding doesn’t need to be a grand, expensive affair. (Wedding planners and vendors may beg to differ.)

However, if the parenthetical statement exists within another sentence, don’t capitalize it or end it with a period. You may use a question mark or exclamation point though.

Example: It’s not that Joanie isn’t ready to marry Todd (they’ve been dating for nearly 9 years) but that she isn’t sure she believes in the institution of marriage at all (given her family history, how could she?).

References


