

Word for Word

A Note (or Two) About Using Parentheses

In scientific writing, parentheses are mostly used to present clarifying information. In a typical research article, for example, you are likely to see parentheses being used to

- Define abbreviations, to clarify the meaning of terms

Examples:

- We reviewed computed tomography (CT), magnetic resonance imaging (MRI), and positron emission tomography (PET) data collected between March 2010 and March 2019.

Provide additional information about a supplier or manufacturer, to clarify the source or type of materials or equipment

Examples:

- Mice were purchased from The Jackson Laboratory (Bar Harbor, ME).

Cite figures, tables, and references, to clarify the location of specific information

Examples:

- The progression-free survival duration of group 1 was significantly longer than that of group 2 (Figure 2A).
- The groups' rates of distant metastasis did not differ (Table 1).
- Our findings are in agreement with those of previous studies (Rogers et al., 2014; Nelson et al., 2015)

Parentheses can also be used to present an aside, “a gentle interruption to tuck information into a sentence or between sentences.”¹

Within a sentence, an aside enhances the meaning of the sentence but is not essential to that sentence's meaning. In each of the following examples, the parenthetical information adds to readers' understanding but could still be removed without



muddying the message the author wishes to convey.

Examples:

- The mutation has been reported in many other cancers (breast, colon, and endometrial cancers), but this is the first known instance of an XYZ mutation occurring in melanoma.
- That Friday (a full week later), the mountaineers began their descent, weary and defeated.

Similarly, as a stand-alone sentence, a parenthetical aside can provide inessential information that may be of some interest to readers without breaking the rhythm of the writing.

Examples:

- We were able to analyze the expression of the XYZ gene in only three samples. (The other seven samples we acquired had been improperly stored, rendering them inadequate for analysis.) Nevertheless, even this small study provides important information about XYZ expression in melanoma.
- They were filthy, wet, and above all, hungry. (The beans had run out days ago.) But their return to base camp promised a cold bath and a hot meal.

Be mindful of punctuating the text in and around parentheses. According to Strunk and White,² a sentence that contains information in parentheses is punctuated “exactly as if the parenthetical expression were absent”; the parenthetical expression itself “is punctuated as if it stood by itself, except the final stop is omitted unless it is a question mark or exclamation point.” However, for full sentences in parentheses, the final punctuation mark is given immediately before the final parenthesis.

Examples:

- ♦ (This is the correct way to punctuate a full sentence within parentheses.)
- ♦ (This is not).

References

1. O'Conner PT. Woe is I: The Grammarphobe's Guide to Better English in Plain English. New York, NY: Riverhead Books;1996:143.
2. Strunk W Jr, White EB. The Elements of Style, 4th ed. Needham Heights, MA: Allyn & Bacon; 2000:36.

--Joe Munch

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