

Abbreviations Made Easy

By Tim North

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Which is better usage: USA or U.S.A.?

The punctuation of abbreviations is an area that is subject to considerable differences of opinion. For example, as demonstrated by the question above, not everyone agrees on when (or if) to use full stops.

It's an indication of just how confused this area is that even the basic terminology isn't agreed upon. You'd think that a simple term like abbreviation was easy to define, wouldn't you? Sure you would, yet some camps distinguish between abbreviations and contractions (giving each different punctuation rules), while others lump everything in together as abbreviations.

A common definition of abbreviation goes something like this:

An abbreviation is a shortened version of a word or phrase and is often followed by a period. For example, c.o.d., ft-lb, St. or publ.

Unfortunately, there is rarely any cogent explanation of what is meant by "often followed by a period", so just *when* does an abbreviation take a period, and when doesn't it?

In an effort to provide clear answers to these questions, I present the following more precise definitions:

An ABBREVIATION is a shortened form of a word that does not include the full word's final letter.

A CONTRACTION is a shortened form of a word that does include the full word's final letter.

Here are some examples of abbreviations:

Tues.	Tuesday	approx.	approximately
doz.	dozen	Aug.	August
Prof.	Professor	Aust.	Australia
a.m.	anti meridiem	p.m.	post meridiem
i.e.	id est	e.g.	exempli gratia

Abbreviations are followed by a full stop. You can think of the full stop as being a replacement for the missing final letter.

Note that abbreviations like "p.m." are actually two separate abbreviations: "p." for "post" and "m." for "meridiem."

Here are some examples of contractions. Contractions should not be followed by a full stop as they retain the final letter of the original word.

Rd	Road	govt	government
St	Street	ft	feet
Mr	Mister	mfg	manufacturing
Dr	Doctor	Mme	Madame
Pty	Proprietary	Ltd	Limited
dept	department	yds	yards

* * *

Not everyone will agree with this approach. Still, in my view, distinguishing between abbreviations and contractions is a better way to proceed than the ambiguous definition quoted earlier that relies on you guessing what "often followed by a period" means.

I hope you find this useful.

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