Using the Virgule

The virgule has four specific uses in punctuation.

1) To separate parts of an extended date.

Example: The 1994/95 basketball season.

The 1914/18 War.

2) To represent the word per in measurements:

Example: 186,000 mi./sec. (miles per second)

3) To stand for the word or in the expression and/or. (Though not considered standard, it can sometimes stand for the word or in other expressions.)

Example: Using the pass/fail option backfired on her; she could have scored an A.

The slash here can be translated as or, and should not be used where the word or could not be used in its place. To avoid gender problems with pronouns, some writers use he/she, his/her, and him/her, but this always looks clumsy to me. Others prefer either to pluralize when possible and appropriate (to they, their, them) or to use he or she, etc. instead. Notice there is no space between the slash and the letters on either side of it.

4) To separate lines of poetry that are quoted in a run-on fashion in the text. This way of quoting poetry is limited to four or five lines of verse, within the normal flow of text. Note that there should be a following space when the slash is used to indicate a line-break in quoted poetry:

Example: "And up and down the people go,/ Gazing where the lilies blow/ Round an island there below,/ The island of Shalott."

"The woods are lovely, dark, and deep/ but I have promises to keep."

When using slashes in a Uniform Resource Locator (URL) for a World Wide Web address (http://www.ccc.commnet.edu/grammar/), be sure not to include spaces and in particular do not confuse the slash with its backward cousin, \, which is used as a path separator in Windows (for example, c:\program files\Adobe).