

# PUNCTUATION

English's most common punctuation marks are capital letters, full stops, question marks, commas, colons and semi-colons, exclamation marks, and quotation marks. Punctuation consists of both rules and conventions. There are rules of punctuation that have to be followed, but there are also punctuation conventions that give writers a greater choice.

## Capital letters and Full stops

1. We use capital letters to mark the beginning of a sentence, and we use full stops to mark the end of a sentence:
  - *We went to France last summer. We were surprised that it was so easy to travel on the motorways.*
  - *The Football World Cup takes place every four years. The next World Cup will be held in South Africa. In 2006 it was held in Germany.*
2. We also use capital letters at the beginning of proper nouns. Proper nouns include personal names (including titles before names), nationalities and languages, days of the week and months of the year, public holidays as well as geographical places:
  - *Dr David James is a consultant at Leeds City Hospital.*
  - *They are planning a long holiday in New Zealand.*
  - *Can she speak Japanese?*
  - *The next meeting of the group will take place on Thursday.*
  - *What plans do you have for the Chinese New Year?*
3. We use capital letters for the titles of books, magazines and newspapers, plays and music:
  - *'Oliver' is a musical based on the novel 'Oliver Twist' by Charles Dickens.*
  - *The Straits Times is a daily English-language newspaper in Singapore.*
  - *They are performing Beethoven's Sixth Symphony.*
4. In addition to closing sentences, we also use full stops in initials for personal names:
  - *G. W. Dwyer*
  - *David A. Johnston, Accountant*
5. Full stops are also used after abbreviations, although this practice is becoming less common:
  - *Arr. (arrival)*
  - *etc. (etcetera)*
  - *Dr. (doctor)*
  - *Prof. (professor)*

## **Question marks (?) and exclamation marks (!)**

1. We use question marks to make clear that what is said is a question. When we use a question mark, we do not use a full stop:
  - *Why do they make so many mistakes?*
  - *A: So you're Harry's cousin?*  
*B: Yes. That's right.*
2. In informal writing, we use exclamation marks to indicate an exclamative clause or expression. When we want to emphasise something in informal writing, we sometimes use more than one exclamation mark:
  - *Listen!*
  - *Oh no!!! Please don't ask me to phone her. She'll talk for hours!!!*

## Commas (,)

1. We use commas to separate a list of similar words or phrases:
  - *It's important to write in clear, simple, accurate words.*
  - *They were friendlier, more talkative, and more open than the last time we met them.*
2. We do not normally use a comma before *and* at the end of a list of single words:
  - *They travelled through Bulgaria, Slovakia, the Czech Republic and Poland.*
3. American English does use a comma in lists before *and*:
  - *We took bread, cheese, and fruit with us.*
4. We use commas to separate words or phrases that mark where the voice would pause slightly:
  - *I can't tell you now. However, all will be revealed tomorrow at midday.*
  - *We had, in fact, lost all of our money.*
  - *James, our guide, will accompany you on the boat across to the island.*

### **Separating clauses with commas**

5. When main clauses are separated by *and*, *or*, *but*, we don't normally use a comma if the clauses have the same subject. However, we sometimes use commas if the clauses have different subjects:
  - *They were very friendly and invited us to their villa in Portugal. (same subject)*
  - *Footballers these days earn more money but they are fitter and play many more matches. (same subject)*
  - *It was an expensive hotel in the centre of Stockholm, but we decided it was worth the money. (different subjects)*
6. When a subordinate clause comes before the main clause, we commonly use a comma to separate the clauses.
  - *If you get lost in the city centre, please don't hesitate to text or phone us.*
  - *If you get lost, just phone us.*
7. When we use subordinate clauses to give further details or more information, we commonly use commas to separate the clauses:
  - *You do need to wear a darker jacket, if I may say so.*
  - *To be honest, I thought they were very rude.*

### Commas and relative clauses

8. We use commas to mark non-defining clauses. Such clauses normally add extra, non-essential information about the noun or noun phrase:
  - *The ambulance, which arrived after just five minutes, took three people to the hospital immediately.*

- *Hong Kong, where the first ASEAN meeting was held, is a very different city now.*

### **Commas and speech forms**

9. We commonly separate tags and yes-no responses with commas:
  - *They are going to the party, aren't they?*
  - *No, thank you. I've already eaten too much.*
10. We also usually separate vocatives, discourse markers and interjections with commas:
  - *Open the door for them, Kayleigh, can you. Thanks. (vocative)*
  - *Well, what do you think we should do about it? (discourse marker)*
  - *Wow, that sounds really exciting. (interjection)*
11. We use commas to show that direct speech is following or has just occurred:
  - *He said in his opening speech, 'Now is the time to plan for the future.' (or He said in his opening speech: 'Now is the time to plan for the future.')*
12. When the direct speech is first, we use a comma before the closing of the quotation marks:
  - *'We don't want to go on holiday to the same place every year,' he said impatiently.*

## **Colons (:) and semi-colons (;)**

1. We use colons to introduce lists:
  - *There are three main reasons for the success of the government: economic, social and political.*
2. We also use colons to indicate a subtitle or to indicate a subdivision of a topic:
  - *Life in Provence: A Personal View*
3. We often use colons to introduce direct speech:
  - *Then he said: 'I really cannot help you in any way.'*
4. We commonly use a colon between sentences when the second sentence explains or justifies the first sentence:
  - *Try to keep your flat clean and tidy: it will sell more easily.*
5. We use semi-colons instead of full stops to separate two main clauses. In such cases, the clauses are related in meaning but are separated grammatically:
  - *Spanish is spoken throughout South America; in Brazil, the main language is Portuguese.*

***Semi-colons are not commonly used in contemporary English. Full stops and commas are more common.***

## Quotation marks ('...' or "...')

1. Quotation marks in English are '...' or "...". In direct speech, we enclose what is said within a pair of single or double quotation marks, although single quotation marks are becoming more common. The direct speech begins with a capital letter and can be preceded by a comma or a colon:
  - *She said, "Where can we find a nice Indian restaurant?" (or She said: 'Where can we find a nice Indian restaurant?')*
2. We can put the reporting clause in three different positions. Note the position of commas and full stops here:
  - *The fitness trainer said, 'Don't try to do too much when you begin.' (quotation mark after comma introducing speech and after full stop)*
  - *'Don't try to do too much when you begin,' the fitness trainer said. (comma before closing quotation mark)*
  - *'Don't try to do too much,' the fitness trainer said, 'when you begin.' (commas separating the reporting clause)*
3. When we use direct speech inside direct speech, we use either single quotation marks inside double quotation marks, or double quotation marks inside single quotation marks:
  - *"It was getting really cold," he said, "and they were saying 'When can we go back home?'"*
  - *Jaya said, 'They were getting really excited and were shouting "Come on!"'*
4. We commonly use question marks inside the quotation marks unless the question is part of the reporting clause:
  - *'Why don't they know who is responsible?' they asked.*
  - *So did they really say 'We will win every match for the next three weeks'?*
5. We also use single quotation marks to draw attention to a word. We can use quotation marks in this way when we want to question the exact meaning of the word:
  - *I am very disappointed by his 'apology'. I don't think he meant it at all.*
  - *NEW 'WAR' OVER NORTH SEA FISHING PLANS*
6. We sometimes use quotation marks to refer to the titles of books, newspapers, magazines, films, songs, poems, videos, CDs, etc:
  - *There's a special report all about it in 'The Daily Mail'.*
7. We can use italics instead of quotation marks for these citations:
  - *There's a special report all about it in The Daily Mail.*
8. Articles or chapters within books, or titles of short stories, are normally punctuated by single quotation marks:
  - *The longest chapter in the book is the last one called 'The Future of Africa'.*

## **Dashes ( – ) and other punctuation marks**

Dashes are more common in informal writing. They can be used in similar ways to commas or semi-colons. Both single and multiple dashes may be used:

- *Our teacher – who often gets cross when we're late – wasn't cross at all. No one could believe it!*
- *Just wanted to thank you for a lovely evening – we really enjoyed it.*

Brackets have a similar function to dashes. They often add extra, non-essential information:

- *Thriplow (pronounced 'Triplow') is a small village in the eastern part of England.*

We use brackets around dates and page numbers in academic writing:

- *Heaton (1978) gives a convincing explanation of how hurricanes are formed (pages 27–32).*

We often use forward slashes in internet addresses and to indicate *and/or* in academic references:

- *You can find the figures you need on [www.bbc.co.uk/finance](http://www.bbc.co.uk/finance)*
- *Binks (1995/1997) has already researched this aspect of Roman history.*

## Punctuation guidelines

### I. Full stop

### II. Comma

### III. Semicolon

### IV. Colon

### V. Dash

### VI. Quotation marks/Inverted commas

### VII. Hyphen

### VIII. Capital letters

#### Remember:

- **Good punctuation** makes a sentence **clear and easy to read and understand**, because it shows the grammatical structure of the text, its meaning, and often the relationship between words or clauses.
- With the exception of the cases described below, **the rules concerning punctuation**, especially commas, are **not as hard and fast** in English as in some other languages. Some writers use fewer marks of punctuation, but others prefer to use many. Whichever style you choose, be consistent.

### I. Full stop

The full stop is used:

- to mark **the end of a sentence** (unless the sentence ends with a question mark or an exclamation mark):

*The method proved to be very useful.*

- in some **abbreviations**: e.g. (for example), etc. (and so on), p. (page), pp. (pages), fig. (figure), vol. (volume), dept. (department), usu. (usually), Brit. (British), Apr. (April).
- in **decimal numbers**: 0.25

#### Notes:

- In **BE** the full stop is not used in **the names of degrees**: BSc, MSc, MEng, PhD,  
in **forms of address**: Mr/Ms/Mrs/Dr,  
in some **other cases**: m, km, m, mph, hr, hrs  
rpm (revolutions per minute)
- In **AE** the full stop is **more common**: Mr./Ms./Mrs./Dr./Ph.D./B.Sc.

### II. Comma

In English, commas depend much more on recommendations and **usage** than on many rules and mechanical conventions. They prevent misunderstanding, so they should be used **at logical places**.

Compare the following sentences:

Eats, shoots, and leaves. (i.e. a robber, a murderer)

Eats shoots and leaves. (i.e. a panda ) (a book title by L.Truss)



Commas can be organized into **four main groups** :

1. **Introducers**
2. **Coordinators**
3. **Inserters**
4. **Tags**

### 1. **Introducer comma**

The introducer comma is used **after any element placed before the first independent clause** in a sentence.

a) <b>Linkers</b> , e.g. However, ... Nevertheless, ... Therefore, ...	<b>INDEPENDENT CLAUSE</b>
b) <b>Phrases</b> , e.g. In this picture, ... In this paper, ...	<b>INDEPENDENT CLAUSE</b>
c) <b>Dependent clauses</b> introduced e.g. by When .., As .., If ...,	<b>INDEPENDENT CLAUSE</b>
d) <b>-ing, -ed clauses</b> , e.g. Based on ....., Substituting .... in ....., When completed, ..., On entering, ...	<b>INDEPENDENT CLAUSE</b>
e) <b>If/When + adjective</b> , e.g. If necessary, ...	<b>INDEPENDENT CLAUSE</b>
f) <b>If/When + prepositional phrase</b> , e.g. When in doubt, ...	<b>INDEPENDENT CLAUSE</b>

Examples:

a) *The advances in power electronics enabled motor users to control motors. **However**, they introduced a new problem.*

*We decided not to join the project. **Obviously**, that was a mistake.*

***Basically**, there is hardly any difference between these two approaches.*

***Unfortunately**, I missed the beginning of your lecture.*

b) ***In some cases**, the digital communication channel is used to get feedback from the customer.*

***In Fig. 3**, three coils instead of five are drawn for simplicity.*

c) ***If the experiment fails**, we will have to repeat it.*

***When he returns from the conference**, he will be able to tell us more.*

d) ***After leaving university**, she worked for a foreign company.*

***When completed**, the new building will house both the computer centre and the library.*

***Having identified the error**, he repeated the experiment.*

***On registering for the maths course**, he acquainted himself with the syllabus.*

e) ***If necessary**, I will write a more detailed report.*

f) ***When in doubt**, consult a dictionary.*

### **Notes:**

- The comma is sometimes **left out** after **adverbs** and **short phrases** if the sentence is short.

*Occasionally he worked in the laboratory.*

*In this case no change is necessary.*

- If the **independent clause (IC)** comes **before the dependent clause (DC)**, there is **no comma**.

**IC + DC:** *We will have to repeat the experiment if it fails.*

**DC + IC:** *If the experiment fails, we will have to repeat it*

## 2. Coordinator comma

**2.1.** The coordinator comma used before a coordinating linker (and/or/but/nor/so/yet) **links independent clauses**.

INDEPENDENT CLAUSE	,	and/or/but/nor/so/yet	INDEPENDENT CLAUSE
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Examples:

*Teamwork is the norm, **and** team leaders need to understand how their technical expertise fits into their company's strategy.*

*You must start preparing the grant application as soon as possible, **or** you will miss the deadline.*

*At that college, students are not only exposed to lectures and seminars, **but** also have in-depth discussions with industry leaders.*

*We worked on today's supercomputers, **so** we had a relatively good idea of what it was going to be to build something with 1,000 times as much computing power.*

*The experiment was very well prepared, **yet** it failed.*

### Note:

The comma is **not used** if the **independent clauses are short**.

*Many students apply but few are admitted.*

*He lectures and runs seminars on electrical machines.*

**2.2.** The coordinator comma links a series of **three or more equal elements** (nouns, adjectives, verbs, phrases). The series may also contain linkers. Usually, there is a comma before the linker (see 2.1.)

<b>3 or more NOUNS</b>	undergraduates, graduates, (and/or/but not) PhD students
<b>3 or more ADJECTIVES</b>	young, talented, hardworking, yet lacking ambition
<b>3 or more VERBS</b>	(he) reads, understands, speaks, and writes (English very well)
<b>3 or more PHRASES</b>	at home, in the hall of residence, (and/or/but not) on the campus

Examples:

**Nouns:** *What kept these products from success was high cost, technical difficulties, and poor marketing.*

**Adjectives:** *Stator windings of rotating machines are exposed to thermal, electrical, mechanical, and environmental stresses.*

**Verbs:** *When preparing a paper, students learn to search, read, plan, write, and revise.*

**Phrases:** *The lab is open on weekdays, at weekends, and sometimes also at night.*

### Note:

With adjectives, the **comma is used** when they **can be joined by "and"**.

*He has become a confident, independent, successful, and famous researcher. (= a confident and independent ....)*

The comma is **not used** if the **adjectives modify each other**.

*numerous English historical novels*

(historical modifies novels, English modifies historical novels,

numerous modifies English historical novels)

### 3. Inserter comma

The inserter comma is placed **before and after any element** inserted into the middle of an independent clause.

INDEPENDENT CLAUSE (1st part)	,	inserted element	,	INDEPENDENT CLAUSE (2nd part)
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Examples:

**Linkers and adverbs:** *One can, **therefore**, conclude that the proposed method has a number of advantages.*

*Their approach is, **basically**, similar to ours in many respects.*

**Prepositional phrases:** *This solution, **in my opinion**, does not bring the desired effect.*

#### **Non-defining clauses and phrases,**

i.e. clauses and phrases that provide additional information about the preceding word/group of words (as the word is sufficiently defined in itself, the additional information can be left out and the sentence still makes sense).

**Relative clauses:** *Professor White [4], who also researched this problem, proposed a completely different approach.*

*We cannot hold the meeting on **Friday**, when most of the staff who are busy writing the final report, will not be able to come.*

**-ing, -ed clauses:** *Dr Brown, chairing today's session, will also be chairing the session tomorrow.*

*Their method, based on the theory of ...., proved very efficient.*

*Professor Sichel, on returning from the conference, passed the new facts to his team.*

**Phrases in apposition:** *Albert Einstein, the author of the theory of relativity, died in 1955.*

#### **Note:**

- There are **no commas in defining clauses**, i.e. clauses that define the preceding word(s).

Compare:

**Defining** *The gentleman who chaired/chairing today's session will also be chairing the session tomorrow.*

**Non-defining** *Professor Brown [4], who ....., will also be chairing .....*

**Defining** *The method based on the theory of .... proved to be very efficient.*

**Non/defining** *Their method, based on ....., proved .....*

For more information on relative clauses see A Remedial Course in English Grammar: Clauses (Relative clauses) and for more information on linkers see Guidelines for Academic Writing: Text structure.

### 4. Tag comma

The tag comma is placed **before elements added to the end of a sentence**.

a) INDEPENDENT CLAUSE	,	adverb
b) INDEPENDENT CLAUSE	,	-ing, -ed clause

Examples

a) *This system is more efficient and cheaper (,) too.*

*This is the same problem, **basically**.*

b) *We have done quite well, **taking into account** the circumstances.*

*We have done quite well, **given** the circumstances.*

### The comma is not used

- if the **independent clause comes before the dependent clause** (see Introducer comma)
- with **a series of adjectives that modify each other** (see Coordinator comma)
- in **defining clauses** (see Inserter comma)
- **before “that”**, both in the meaning of “že” and “který” (even when “that” is left out):

*There are many geometries **that** (které) are different from the Euclidean geometry.*

*It is obvious **that** (že) in this case the equation does not hold.*

*The reviewer stated (**that**) the facts need clarification.*

*The explanation (**that**) he gave us was not convincing.*

- with **dependent clauses functioning as the verb’s object**, beginning with **wh-question words** (who, what, which, when, where, why)

*We do not know **who** is to blame for the errors in measurement.*

*I do not understand **what** you mean by that.*

*I do not know **where** to find the information.*

**“whether” and “if” meaning “zda”**

*I am not sure **whether/if** we will be able to keep the deadline.*

- in **decimal numbers**: 0.521

### Useful advice

As has already been said, rules concerning the use of commas in English are not as strict as in Czech. Usage may vary, especially with adverbs and short phrases. When in doubt whether or not to use a comma, reading aloud the sentence you have written might help. With great probability, a comma would be useful in places where you pause when speaking.

### III. Semicolon

The semicolon is used to **connect two independent clauses** into a sentence. The sentence may/may not include a linker or an adverb.

a) INDEPENDENT CLAUSE	;	INDEPENDENT CLAUSE		
b) INDEPENDENT CLAUSE	;	linker, adverb	,	INDEPENDENT CLAUSE

Examples:

a) *My colleague did all the measurements and calculations; I analysed the results.*

b) *The cost of food has gone up in recent years; similarly, fuel prices have risen considerably.*

*I wanted to solve the problem quickly; however, it was much more complicated than I had thought.*

*Many researchers dislike using this traditional method; personally, I find it still very useful.*

**Note:**

**The full stop** or “**and**”, “**or**”, “**but**”, “**yet**” can be used **instead of the semicolon**.

*My colleague did all the measurements and calculation(,) and I analysed the results.*

*The cost of food has gone up in recent years. Similarly, fuel prices have risen considerably.*

**IV. Colon**

The colon introduces an explanation or a list.

**1. Explanation**

*If the high price does not keep sales down, the quantity will: only 100 of these products have been made.*

*The size of this mobile serves its purpose: to be easy to handle by senior users.*

**2. List**

*The vast majority of telephone calls occur between spouses or close relations: parents and children, siblings, and so on.*

**V. Dash**

Like the colon, the dash introduces an explanation or a list. Dashes can also be used to separate an inserted element from the rest of the sentence.

**1. Explanation**

*All languages have the same purpose – they communicate thoughts.*

*One key outcome of this situation was unmanageable, inflexible systems unsuited to local needs – an undesirable outcome from the perspective of the local managers.*

**2. List**

*The nominally random number Netscape was based on just three values – time of day, process identification number, and parent-process identification number.*

**3. Separation of inserted element**

*This highly efficient method – developed in the USA at the beginning of this century – is being successfully applied in many other countries.*

As with the inserter comma, the inserted element can be left out and the sentence still makes sense.

**VI. Quotation marks/Inverted commas**

Inverted commas are used **to enclose direct speech** and **quotations**. They may be single ‘...’ or double “....” (mainly in AE).

1.	"direct speech"
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Example:

*'I have spoken to him', I said, 'on only one occasion'. (BE)*

2.	"quotations"
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Examples:

*According to XY "a word is characterized by the company it keeps".*

*In the 1970s, a number of studies were conducted on the "mum effect", i.e. the notion that people are reluctant to transmit unpleasant messages.*

### Notes:

- Both marks are written at the **upper level of the text**.
- The full stop, exclamation mark, question mark, and comma come **outside the quotation marks** in BE (see the example above)  
**inside the quotation marks** – in AE  
*"I have spoken to him," I said, "on only one occasion." (AE)*

## VII. Hyphen

The hyphen **joins together**

1.

WORDS	with	WORDS
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Examples:

**adjective + adjective:** *red-hot, dark-blue, socio-economic, Anglo-American*

**adjective + -ing/-ed forms:** *high-conducting, slow-acting, long-lasting  
old-fashioned, long-lived, hard-earned*

**noun + adjective or -ing/-ed forms:** *life-long, life-saving, career-minded*

**adjective + noun:** *high-frequency (transformer), high-carbon (steel), high-temperature  
(reactor), long-term (plans)*

**adverb + adjective:** *well-established (fact), well-known (scientist)*

**noun + noun:** *optimum-power design, inductor-capacitor (oscillator)*

**numeral + numeral:** *twenty-five, thirty-two*

**numeral + noun:** *64-bit (microprocessors)*

**verb + adverb** (used as a noun): *take-off, pick-up, set-up*

**others:** *state-of-the art (report), up-to-date (methods), do-it-yourself (job)*

2.

WORDS	with	PREFIXES
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Examples:

*co-author, co-opt, non-smoker, non-essential, non-corrosive, non-existent*

## Notes:

- In some cases, the use of **the hyphen prevents ambiguity of meaning**. Compare:  
*re-formed* (newly formed) but *reformed* (improved, made better)  
*re-mark* (mark again) but *remark* (say a few words about something)  
*re-cover* (cover again) but *recover* (return to the original condition)

- The combination **“verb + adverb” is hyphenated** when used **as a noun**  
*take-off, pick-up, set-up*  
**is not hyphenated but is spelt as two words**  
when used **as a phrasal verb**  
*(to) take off, (to) pick up, (to) set up*

Very often, however, the noun is spelled as **one word**:

*slowdown, breakdown, breakthrough, fallout*

- Compare also the **difference between**:

<i>a well-established fact</i>	<i>that fact is (very) well established</i>
<i>a well-known scientist</i>	<i>that scientist is (very) well known</i>
<i>a state-of-the-art method</i>	<i>a method based on the state of the art</i>
<i>a do-it-yourself job</i>	<i>a job you (can) do yourself</i>
<i>64-bit microprocessors</i>	<i>microprocessors having 64 bits</i>

When used **as attributes** (qualifying the following noun), the groups of words **are hyphenated**.

- Most **words formed with prefixes** are now spelled **as one word**.

*anticorrosive, decentralized, hyperactive*

**The hyphen** is often used with **“non-” and “co-”**, but even here usage varies.

*non-existent or nonexistent, co-operate or cooperate, but co-author*

- When using **two hyphenated words** with **the same second part**, it is quite common to write just the first part of the first word (with a hyphen, of course).

*short- and long-term plans*

The full version (*short-term and long-term plans*), is, however, clearer.

Apart from some of the recommendations given above, **usage of the hyphen varies**. It is advised to check it with a good dictionary and follow the policy of the relevant journal on this point.

## VIII. Capitals

A capital letter is used for

- the **beginning of a sentence**:

*These robots are saving time, lives, and money.*

- **proper nouns and adjectives** formed from proper nouns, e.g.

*September, Monday, John, Prague, England, the English* (people);  
*the English language, English* (the language)

- the **main words** (i.e. nouns, adjectives, and verbs) in **titles** and **positions of people**, in **titles of books, plays, names of institutions**, e.g.

*Dean of the Faculty; Admissions Officer, Doctor/Professor Brown;  
Three Men in a Boat; Faculty of Electrical Engineering,  
Faculty of Nuclear Sciences and Physical Engineering*

- **salutations and forms of address**, titles, greetings, and the complimentary close in letters, e.g.

*Dear Dr/ Professor/Mr/ Mrs/ Ms/Miss Brown/Sir/Madam;  
Yours sincerely/Sincerely (yours); Faithfully yours; Yours faithfully*

- words **the writer considers to be important** for the text, e.g.

*(our) Faculty, Department, Dean.*

### **Notes:**

- The pronoun **“I”** is **always capitalized**, but not **“me”** or **“my”**.
- Pronouns **“you”** and **“yours”** are **never capitalized** unless they are in a title or at the beginning of a sentence.