# *A Punctuation Guide for Academic Writing*

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Chapter summary:

- Punctuation – using commas, colons, semi-colons, quotation marks and italics, hyphens, apostrophes, conjunctions, parenthesis and dashes
- Further reading

## *1. Introduction*

This chapter covers the technical details of Standard English punctuation. The material presented is the kind of detail not taught very much anymore in secondary and tertiary education in the UK, so, unsurprisingly, a lot of people are unsure of the rules and conventions governing punctuation. The subject of punctuation can produce a collective shudder among writing group participants, especially if words like 'compound sentence' or 'subordinate clause' are used. But there is nothing to be afraid of; punctuation is merely a kind of technical knowledge, whose basic conventions can be picked up with a little effort. The potential benefit of a sound basic knowledge is that it can go along way in helping a writer develop both clearer and more powerful prose. What you will find below are the Standard English conventions of how to use commas, colons, semi-colons, quotation marks, italics, hyphens, apostrophes, parenthesis, and dashes. I hope these terms have not evoked a shudder. At all times I will try to keep the language simple and the concepts clearly explained, so there is nothing to be afraid of.

### *1.1 Simple & complex sentences*

Perhaps first we should state what a sentence is. A sentence is a grammatically coherent and complete unit. In English a sentence typically consists of a subject, or predicate and an object. These terms may sound alien to you but they just refer to the role of different parts of the sentence. Subjects and objects are nouns and predicates are verbs, for example:

| Subjects | Predicate | Object |
|---|---|---|
| Engels | admired | Marx |

In this example Engels is doing the action ‘admiring’, and Marx is the object of that admiration. A sentence can still be grammatically complete if it contains at least a subject (noun) and a predicate (verb), as in ‘Mary retired’, but the subject, predicate, object order is considered most typical. Sentences of the type ‘Engels admired Marx’ or ‘Foucault advanced sociology’ or ‘I am walking home’ are all simple sentences: they all contain the minimum requirements to form a grammatically coherent unit in English. Yet these are not the only types of sentence we write. How many simple sentence have I written in the last two pages? The answer is very few. As such, in addition to simple sentences we also have complex sentences.

Complex sentences are just as they sound: they are more complicated in their structure containing more verbs, conjunctions, adverbial and adjectival clauses. For example:

> Engels admired Marx and subsidised his intellectual musings because of this admiration.

This is a much more intricate sentence than the previous example of a simple sentence. There are two verbs (‘admired’ and ‘subsidised’) and there are two conjunctions (‘and’ and ‘because’) connecting and relating subordinate clauses to the main clause. There are two main clauses in this example – that is two sentences of the same rank – which are ‘Engels admired Marx’ and ‘subsidised his intellectual musings’. We know they are of the same rank because the coordinating conjunction ‘and’ links them together. Other coordinating conjunctions are ‘but’ and ‘or’. Things are a little more complicated because the subject of

the second clause is elided, which means it is already given that the subject of the second clause is Engels. We could rewrite the two coordinated clauses as ‘Engels admired Marx and Engels subsidised Marx’s intellectual musings’.

Finally, there is also a subordinate clause, which is a clause that adds additional supporting information to a main clause. Subordinating clauses are often linked to other clauses with what we call subordinating conjunctions, like ‘although’, ‘if’ ‘however’, ‘since’, ‘after’, ‘because’, ‘as’, ‘unless’, ‘while’, ‘rather than’, ‘in case’, ‘so that’ and others. The way you can tell subordinate and main clauses apart is that a subordinate clause cannot stand alone as a sentence, whereas a main clause can. The reason for introducing the notion of subordinate and main clauses is because as you write longer sentences you will need a reasonable command of punctuation to enable you to communicate more effectively. Also, this basic terminology will enable you follow the rest of the guidance on punctuation in this chapter.

## *2. Commas*

If you are looking for an overarching rule then it is this: keep it simple. Learn to do the basics correctly and then develop sophistication when appropriate. The longer your sentences the more complex they will be, and correspondingly, the more sophisticated your use of commas, and other punctuation, will have to be to maintain clarity.

We have already touched on some of the issues relating to the use of commas in the previous section. Here, I’ve tried to breakdown the main uses of commas in academic English. The first three are the most important in terms of overall sentence structure, whilst the next six cover some other technical comma usage below the level of the clause.

### *2.1 Linking coordinating main clauses*

Commas are used to separate main clauses divided by one of the following coordinating conjunctions, such as *but, and, or, for, nor, yet, so*.

E*xample :*

We were unable to locate the cause of pain, so the patient's discomfort continued.

*Example :*

The data was collected easily, but conclusions proved difficult to reach.

*Example :*

Home owners continue to suffer instability in the housing market, and economists are unable to provide a satisfactory analysis of market volatility.

NOTE: some people will say that it is unnecessary to put a comma before a coordinating conjunction, particularly when both the main clauses are short. As such, both of the following are acceptable:

*Example :*

Prices rise and prices also fall.

*Example :*

Prices rise, and prices also fall.

However, a comma should not be used when a coordinating conjunction connects two or more verbs to the subject of the sentence. For example:

*Example :*

Jane Austen mastered her own art and developed possibilities for the future direction of the novel. (Correct)

*Example :*

Marx was financially indebted to Engels, and personally enriched by their friendship. (Incorrect)

## *2.2 Marking off introductory and contextualising words and phrases at the start of the sentence*

Introductory and contextualising phrases are often used at the start of sentences in academic English. There are three main types: clauses giving information on the position of the main clause in time and space; clauses adding circumstantial or judgemental information; and introductory words and phrases that move the writing on and can indicate argumentative shifts. We will consider each in turn.

*Example: Time*

Prior to Bourdieu and Foucault, twentieth-century French philosophy was permeated heavily by Marxist and phenomenological thought.

*Example: Space*

Outside of the logical positivist paradigm, Hawthorn (1967) contemplated the possibilities of meaning when not subject to empirical verification.

*Example: Circumstantial or judgemental*

Although well constructed, the empirical studies involved have proved inconclusive.

*Example: Argumentative shifts*

However, we have not been able to illustrate a significant relationship between childhood obesity and increased marketing expenditure.

In the first example, the phrase ‘Prior to Bourdieu and Foucault’ gives the main clause greater temporal specification. The second example uses an introductory clause with a spatial preposition ‘outside’, marking the metaphorical limits of the subject of the main clause. In the third example, the introductory clause passes judgement, as an additional comment, on the studies carried out. While in the final example, ‘However’ functions to introduce the sentence and mark a shift in the writer’s assertions. All the introductory elements in the sentences above could be removed and the sentences would still make sense and maintain their core meaning. Including these introductory elements adds a degree of sophistication and detail.

## *2.3 Inserting additional information at the end of a sentence*

This use of a comma marks off phrases in a similar way to the previous examples of introductory and contextual phrases at the start of the sentence. Without wanting to add to much technical detail, both these types of additional phrases add what grammarians and linguists would call adverbial and prepositional phrases. These phrases can often occur either at the beginning, end, or even the middle of a main clause. Their mobility and optional nature are the key ways in which you can identify them, which is useful if you are trying to unpack your writing when editing early drafts.

*Example:*

Early approaches to grammar were idealised and rule governed, rather than based on applied observations.

Note how in the previous example the additional element could just as easily be put at the front of the sentence and remain coherent. In this next example the additional information cannot be moved around the sentence (this is an example of 2.5), but both the example above and the one below are subordinate clauses unable to stand on their own.

*Example:*

Herrington (1999) argues in the context of his research into racism and the state, which contrasts state and community driven projects, that greater social inclusion is achieved by…

## *2.4 Signalling implications, examples and introducing argumentative points*

Certain words, used along with a comma, are very important in academic writing when signalling implications, examples and introducing argumentative points. If a sentence starts with a linking phrase or word then a comma should be used. Examples of linking words and phrases are, *however*, *moreover*, *nevertheless, for example*, *as such*, *consequently*, *furthermore*, *in fact*, *indeed* and *similarly*, amongst others.

*Example:*

In summation, a negative impact was recorded.

*Example:*

Thirdly, the implication of their argument is unfounded.

*Example:*

Similarly, experimentation is a necessary process to scientific investigation.

## *2.5 Parenthetical elements mid-sentence*

These are subordinate clauses marked which add addition information as an extra comment or aside.

*Example:*

Doctoral dissertations and other academic genres are undergoing a period of significant change, and this will certainly continue, due to a new research agenda and new technology.

## *2.6 Forms of address (appositives) and places names*

These conventions are probably familiar to people but for comprehensiveness and accuracy of use are included below.

*Example: Appositives*

James Smith, Professor of Genetics, pioneered research in human genetics.

*Example: Places*

Caledonian University, Glasgow, pioneered research in nursing.

## *2.7 One of a kind*

Commas help distinguish when something is one of a kind and not one of many. For example:

*Example:*

Lilith frequently spoke of her late husband, Jeremiah, on these occasions.

If Lilith were a polygamist or her religion afforded her the opportunity to have several husbands or she was windowed more than once then the commas could be removed. For scholarly writing, one must be more careful when referring to things like publications. The next example would be incorrect:

*Example:*

Professor Smith published his seminal work in the UK based journal, ***Rheumatology***, for maximum impact.

Rheumatology is not the only UK based journal. Therefore, the following would be better:

*Example:*

Professor Smith published his seminal work in the number one UK based journal, ***Rheumatology***, for maximum impact.

There can be only one 'number one' journal, therefore, *Rheumatology* must be enclosed in commas.

## *2.8 Lists and multiple adjectives modifying a noun*

Commas are used to separate components of a list.

*Example:*

This study selected males aged 20, 25, 30 and 35.

Commas are also used to separate coordinating adjectives which modify a noun but not non-coordinating adjectives. Coordinating adjectives are of equal status and the final adjective in the list is preceded by 'and'. One can recognise coordinating adjectives if: their order can change without effecting meaning; and 'and*'* can be placed in between them without effecting meaning. For example,

Smith's exciting, well researched and influential study was initially ignored.

The list in this sentence can be reordered without becoming grammatically incoherence,

Smith's well researched, influential and exciting study was initially ignored.

Non-coordinating adjectives cannot fulfil the above conditions, as in,

Smith's new rheumatology study is groundbreaking.

The order of these two adjectives cannot be reversed; 'Smith's rheumatology new study' would just not make sense. The initial adjective 'new' is subordinate to the second adjective 'rheumatology'. Therefore, in instances such as these commas are not used.

## *2.9 Setting off quotations*

This is probably very familiar to scholarly writers. The two main uses are marking reported speech and introducing quotations.

*Example: Quotations*

Smith (1956) noted, ‘subjects presented with extremely large facial cysts on the third day of the trial’.

*Example: Reported speech*

“The facial cysts were particularly painful and smelt a lot”, reported one patient in Smith’s (1956) study.

## *2.10 Numbers*

Commas are used with large numbers over a thousand. For example,

*Example:*

1,000

10,000

100,000

1,000,000

Full stops, not commas, are used in decimals.

## *3. Colons*

In addition to using this punctuation mark when indicating time, as in *4:30am*, the colon has four uses in English prose. In general, all four uses signal a grammatical break greater than a comma, introducing clauses that expand or clarify the previous main clause.

## *3.1 Making exemplifications*

Where a second clause supports the first, as in:

*Example:*

Some animals are exceptional fast: over fifty metres greyhounds can out run the average family car.

## *3.2 Signalling an illustrative list*

This use of the colon can be useful in academic writing when wishing to make complicated lists, separating constituent elements of the list with semi-colons (information on the use of semicolons in extended lists will follow in Section 4 below).

*Example:*

There are four main researchers involved in this study: Professor Susan Jones, John Hopkins University; Professor James Smith, University of Illinois; Dr Timothy Taylor, Belfast Queens University; and Dr Samuel Khan, Belfast Queens University.

And this example, adapted from the historian Anthony Smith's (2008: 12) book *The Cultural Foundations of Nations*:

*Example:*

For most modernists, the nation is characterized by: a well-defined territory; a unified legal system and common legal institutions; participation in the social life and politics of the nation; a mass public culture disseminated by means of a public, standardized, mass education system; collective autonomy institutionalized in a sovereign territorial state; membership of the nation in an "inter-national" system of the community of nations.

This method of displaying a complex list also lends itself to bullet points; in fact, Smith's original text has all the elements of the list after the colon as six distinct, numbered points.

### *3.3 Introducing an extended quotation/extract*

This is particularly common in academic writing. Use the colon when the quotation starts at the beginning of a sentence.

*Example:*

Garton, Montgomery and Tolson go on to suggest:

> Particular ideological assumptions and narrative scenarios occupy a place of dominance within this forum, to the extent that their pervasive solidity as forms of common sense is very difficult to challenge. (1991: 116)

Some extended extracts may start mid-sentence and grammatically follow on from your own text, in which case a comma or no punctuation mark might work, as long as this is consistent with the use of commas indicated above.

### *3.4 Introducing explanatory clauses*

This form is seen less nowadays, but that does not mean it should be avoided. Indeed, as contextualising and clarifying assertions is important to the type of evidencing required in academic discourse, these types of clauses are potentially very useful to an academic writer.

*Example:*

The Fothergill Theorem has been disastrous: built on flawed data, the theorem lead the field to waste ten years of research before realising the mistake.

## *4. Semicolons*

There is sometimes confusion even among quite advanced academic writers when using semicolons. Whereas, the colon introduces clauses expanding or clarifying the preceding main clause, a semicolon separates clauses of equal weight when they are not separated by a conjunction. There are three main uses of the semicolon detailed below.

### *4.1 Separating two clauses that could function independently but work better together*

This usage helps writers avoid the *comma splice* (joining two independent clauses without the use of a conjunction). Compare the next two examples:

*Example:*

It was raining, I closed the window.

*Example:*

It was raining. I closed the window.

The first is the comma splice; the second is two short sentences. Both examples probably work better with the use of a semicolon, as in:

*Example:*

It was raining; I closed the window.

The semicolon helps because the meaning of the two clauses is closely connected and the semi-colon maintains the separation of the clauses as independent grammatical units but also indicates the connection between the semantics of the clauses.

### *4.2 When a second compound sentence indicates a transition*

Indicating a transition in the argument, the second sentence begins with an adverb, such as *however, whereas, hence, therefore, as such, then,* and *thus*.

> *Example:*
>
> Positivists believe in objective and verifiable truth; whereas, pragmatists believe truth to be subjective and situated in a milieu of cultural and historical contingencies.

Another comma before *whereas* would not add clarity; whereas, a semicolon gives additional force to indicate the distinction between clauses.

### *4.3 Separating elements of a list*

This is the same as 3.2 above where a long and complicated list has been introduced by a colon.

> *Example:*
>
> There were four main researchers involved in this study: Professor Susan Jones, John Hopkins University; Professor James Smith, University of Illinois; Dr Timothy Taylor, Belfast Queens University; and Dr Samuel Khan, Belfast Queens University.

## *5. Quotation marks*

There are two main types of quotation marks, the first are single marks, as in ‘single quotation marks’, and there are double marks, as in “double quotation marks”. Both are used to indicate when an author is referencing *exact* text from a secondary source.

> *Example:*
>
> Jones and Smith (2009: 87) estimated that ‘as many as 100,000 hours of work are lost in the Scottish economy every week due to lower-back pain.’

Some disciplines make a distinction between ‘’ and “ ”, with the former being used for referencing secondary literature, while the latter is used to report direct speech, i.e. from recorded interviews or field notes. Once again there are no hard and fast rules and this is a question of disciplinary conventions. The best advice I can give you is to apply one approach consistently throughout one document, and find out if a style guide is available for the thesis, dissertation or paper you are writing and follow its guidelines.

Other uses for quotation marks are to set off words and concepts, which is common in linguistics; however, this is not the case in all disciplines so familiarise yourself with those conventions.

> *Example:*
>
> There is some difference in the meaning of ‘discourse’ between its usages in linguistics, philosophy and sociology.

There is sometimes confusion over where to put punctuation marks at the end of quotations. Full stops and commas go inside, as do exclamation marks and question marks when part of the quotation. If a question or exclamation is not part of the quotation but

made on the part of the writer then it goes outside of the quotation marks. Colons and semi-colons when part of your writing go outside of quotation marks.

> *Example:*
>
> Stanley Fish (2011) has made arguments for the aesthetic greatness of Nabokov's opening line of *Lolita* (1955), 'Lolita, light of my life, fire of my loins'; however, Debra Zimmerman's (2002) feminist critique points to the line's overriding misogyny.

## *6. Italics*

There are several instances in which italics can be used that involve indicating emphasis or difference which the reader should be aware of.

### *6.1 Indicating foreign words*

The first is in marking foreign words when in the running text, this can include Latin phrases, as in *ad infinitum, ad hoc* or *persona non grata*. For example, in the following the French words are italicised:

> *Example:*
>
> The former is an example of *la langue,* while the latter is *parole*.

However, if I were to quote an extract of a French text I would not italicise it.

### *6.2 Adding emphasis*

Italics can also be used to add emphasis to words or phrases of a quotation, but in a quotation you must indicate that you, the writer, have added the emphasis, as in:

*Example:*

'Although small, Belgium *is* an important player in European politics.' [emphasis added]

An exception to italicising foreign words is when a word has become anglicised, or naturalised into English, of which there are many such foreign 'loan words' in English, for example the old French word 'mutton' or a newer French import 'milieu'. In these instances italics are no longer necessary.

## *6.3 Indicating the names of large texts*

Thirdly, italics are used when referring to book titles, films and plays as in:

*Examples:*

Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* has long been celebrated for its ironic and satirical tone.

Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange* has been a much debated cinematic work.

*Waiting for Godot* has not escaped the usual analysis of, i.e. longing for symbolic unity.

Similarly, long poems like Milton's *Paradise Lost* or the name of scholarly journals should be italicised. However, short poems, the titles of chapters within books, unpublished theses, journal papers, and conferences papers are placed within quotation marks.

# *7. Hyphens*

Long and short dashes: these are the two types of dashes used in standard written English.

## *7.1 Long dashes for parenthetical comment*

Long dashes are used to indicate a break more significant than a comma but less than a colon, and can be used to set of parenthetical comments:

*Example:*

The second meeting of the committee – the first having been a resounding disaster – was convened to address lingering disagreements.

However, dashes are sometimes considered less formal than parenthesis. Be consistent in whatever you choose to do. Long dashes also have a space before and after the diacritic. Word processing packages like MS Word now automatically lengthen dashes when you insert spaces on either side.

## *7.2 Short dashes*

Short dashes are used to show a connection between words.

### *7.2.1 Compound nouns with equal roles*

The short dash connects compound nouns which represent different but equal roles, as in:

*Example:*

Philosopher-poet doctor-journalist

In the two examples above one might be writing about someone who is known for two different things.

### *7.2.2 Two words making a single concept*

In similar fashion, the short dash is used to indicate the connection of two words which represent a single concept, for example:

*Example:*

Post-modernism pre-Cartesian

### *7.2.3 Fractions*

Spelling out fractions should be hyphenated as follows:

*Example:*

One-fifth nine-tenths two-thirds

### *7.2.4 A compound including the descriptor 'all'*

If 'all' is part of a compound as in the following then a hyphen should be used:

*Example:*

All-powerful all-consuming all-seeing all-inclusive

## *8. Apostrophes: Its and It's*

Writers' misuse of 'its' and 'it's' is a common and much maligned error in English. Generally, I think the error comes about because writers, who have not had much formal training in punctuation and grammar, apply the genitive *'s* rule to mark possession, not realising that this conflicts with English's system of possessive pronouns. The genitive inflection *'s* marks possession in English as in 'Ebenezer*'s* boil' or 'Einstein*'s* theory of relativity'. Confusingly, however, in informal English we get the situation where

contractions of the verb ‘to be’ are written with an *’s* as in ‘he’s hopping righteously’, ‘she’s gone to the abattoir’. Therefore, one can see how this contraction gets confused with the genitive inflection because they look and sound the same, though they mean different things. To further complicate matters, because ‘it’ functions like a pronoun (technically a *dummy subject*) we would, if English was logical (which it isn’t), mark the possessive of ‘it’ as ‘it’s’, but orthographically this looks the same as the contraction of ‘it is’. The thing to remember is ‘it’ functions like a pronoun and pronouns do not take a genitive inflection. So one would not say ‘we’s cheese flan’ but ‘our cheese flan’, nor would one say ‘he’s halitosis’ but ‘his halitosis’. Another way to remember the rule of when one should write ‘its’ and when ‘it’s’ is that in formal standard written English ‘it’s’ is never (that is never) acceptable, as it is always read as a contraction of ‘it’ and ‘is’, which should be written in full in formal writing. The exception is when a writer is quoting natural speech or an extract containing ‘it’s’. I can think of notable exceptions: the eminent American sociologist Howard Becker, who has also written a lot about writing, has a very informal system and uses contraction ‘it’s’ for ‘it is’. But if you are looking for a clear advise to remember the rule then do not use apostrophe contractions in formal Standard English prose.

## *9. Further reading*

Fish, S. (2011) *How to Write a Sentence: and How to Read One*. New York: Harper Collins.

Struck, W. and White E.B. (2000) *The Elements of Style* (fourth edition). London: Longman.

Turabain, K. L. (1996) *A Manual for Writers of Terms Papers, Theses, and Dissertations* (sixth edition). London: University of Chicago Press.