

A review of punctuation

This review deals with:

1. Commas, and full stops.
2. Colons:
3. Semi-colons;
4. Question marks?
5. Use of Capital Letters
6. Dashes - and Hyphens
7. Exclamation marks!
8. 'Quotation marks'
9. (Brackets)
10. Apostrophes

1. Commas and full stops.

Commas are used to separate parts of a sentence, whereas full stops are used to end a sentence. A common error in writing is caused by using commas where a full stop should go. This leads to ungrammatical 'run-on' sentences. We can clearly see in the following examples that the comma is not enough (**X** means incorrect):

X The policy on the single European currency is not well defined, it confuses many people.

X Terrorism legislation will be discussed alongside the Human Rights Act, this is because they contradict each other, this is a crucial matter.

To avoid this problem, we need either to use full stops and start a new sentence, or use link words, such as 'and', or 'which'. In some cases we might use a semi-colon (see 2. below).

Commas have five main functions.

- To separate an adverbial clause or phrase that is not essential to the meaning of the sentence, e.g.,

Recently, the number of service enterprises in wealthier free-market economies has grown rapidly.

Some businesses only seek to earn enough to cover their operating costs, however.

- Before various connectives to join two independent clauses, e.g., *and, but, or, so nor, for, yet.*

- Between main clauses in long, compound sentences, e.g.,

The 2001 census put the population of London at just over seven million, 5.6 million of whom are over 16 and living with, or married to, a partner.

- To separate words, phrases and clauses in a series, e.g.,

Mitsubishi Heavy Industries manufactures a large variety of industrial products and machinery, including ships, steel products, power plants, transportation systems, printing presses, aircraft, guided missiles, torpedoes, and air-conditioning and refrigeration systems.

- To separate adjectives that separately modify the same noun, e.g.,

There was a long, dark, winding road leading up to the house.

Another common mistake is to separate the subject (who or what) from the verb. The following sentences are not grammatical and the commas should be taken out:

- X A man of his great abilities, would always be successful.
- X The number of service enterprises in wealthier free-market economies, has grown rapidly.

Note that commas cannot be used after *that*.

- X Experience indicates that, these problems do not result wholly from our life-style.

Missing commas

Example

- X The second exercise which was more difficult took half an hour.

Corrected sentence:

The second exercise, which was more difficult, took half an hour.

Two commas are needed to set off the extra information. This extra information is parenthetical *{(which was more difficult)}*, i.e., it could be put in brackets.

Work with a partner to restore the missing commas to the text below:

In addition the USSR disliked the plan because it involved the abrogation in this field of the veto the principal symbol and guarantee of national sovereignty as opposed to international government which the USSR was even less disposed to countenance than any other state. A.A.Gromyko proposed instead a treaty banning the use of nuclear weapons the destruction of existing stocks and an international control commission subordinate to the Security Council (and therefore subject to the veto); he opposed the creation of a new international authority and was only prepared to allow international inspection of those plants which had been declared to have ceased nuclear production and were offered for inspection by the government of the country in which they were situated. These positions were irreconcilable and although the debate continued for a while the UN Atomic Energy Commission eventually decided in 1948 to adjourn indefinitely. The Russian rejection of the Baruch Plan was an additional factor in persuading the administration of Harry S. Truman who had become president on the death of Roosevelt in April 1945 that the USSR was no longer an ally but an adversary.

(Peter Calvocoressi - *World Politics since 1945* Longman, 1987)

2. Colons /:

The punctuation in the following sentences is correct. We can deduce certain rules from these examples.

- a) *The problem was this: how to add taped dialogue to film sequences and synchronise them in projection.*
- b) *A first-aid kit should contain the following items: cotton wool, sticking plasters, antiseptic cream, bandages, and a pair of scissors.*
- c) *The government can do one of three things: raise taxes; increase borrowing; or just do nothing and let events take their course.*
- d) *The chief commodities are: butter, cheese, milk, eggs; lamb, beef, veal, pork; oats, barley, rye and wheat.*

Colons have two main functions.

Firstly, to introduce a formal statement or question, e.g.,

- a) *The problem was this: how to add taped dialogue to film sequences and synchronise them in projection.*

Secondly, to introduce a series or list of examples, where the colon substitutes for ‘namely’ or ‘for example’ (b),(c) and (d) above.

Note that in examples c) and d) a semi-colon is used in the lists to mark off categories or groups of items.

Colons are also used to separate hours from minutes in indicating time: 14:10 pm; and also to separate the title and subtitle in a book: *Study Skills: A Handbook for students*.

Do not use colons in headings, for example,

X Introduction:

A colon is not followed by an upper-case letter, but by a lower-case letter.

3. Semi-colons /;/

The semi-colon is halfway between a comma and a full stop. It forms a clear break between two parts of a sentence. The two parts are usually grammatically complete but have a close relationship in meaning. Often, the second part in some way completes the first. Study the following examples.

“The philosophers so far have only interpreted the world; the point is to change it”. (Karl Marx, 1818-1883).

The past is a foreign country; they do things differently there.

Some people work better in the morning; others work better in the evening.

People say that travel broadens the mind; it can also be a frustrating and dangerous experience.

The sciences search for change; the humanities reflect on what it is.

Work with a partner and place either semi-colons or colons at appropriate places in the following sentences:

- a) Most countries in Latin America have reached the ‘take-off’ point towards economic development and competitive consumption, and thereby towards modernized poverty their citizens have learned to think rich and live poor.
- b) In 1830, 70 English boroughs had 100 or less voters Old Sarum and Dunwich were uninhabited constituencies and in 1793 it was estimated that 400 Members of Parliament out of a total of around 530 were nominated or dependent on noblemen.
- c) These are the days when men of all social disciplines and all political faiths seek the comfortable and the accepted when the man of controversy is looked upon as a disturbing influence when originality is taken to be a mark of instability and when, in minor modification of the scriptural parable, the bland lead the bland.

4. Question marks /?/ are used to mark questions in direct speech.

It is better to avoid direct questions in academic writing, however. Try to turn questions into statements, instead of, e.g.,

So why is population ageing a big problem?

✓ There are a number of reasons for concern about the ageing population

Beware of using question marks with indirect questions, where they are redundant, e.g.,

X She asked me if I wanted any help? X

5. Use of Capital Letters.

NB: this heading uses ‘Title Case’, that is, capitals for each important word.

Capital letters should be used with the following:

- days of the week (Tuesday, Sunday)
- months of the year (January, September)
- proper names and titles (Baroness Thatcher, Boy George)
- nationalities and languages (German, English)
- proper names of places (Freetown, Ruislip)
- names of rivers (The Thames, The Amazon)
- names of mountain ranges (The Himalayas, The Alps)
- names of historical periods (The Renaissance, The Cold War)
- names of festivals (Easter, Diwali, Ramadan)
- titles of plays, books, etc (The Merry Wives of Windsor)
- legislation (The Children Act, 1989).
- names of organisations (The Trades Union Congress)
- formal salutations in letters (Dear Sir or Madam, Yours sincerely)

Beware of over-using capital letters, e.g.,
X The British Film Industry is in decline. X

Correction: The British film industry is in decline.

5. Hyphens /-/ and Dashes.

Hyphens are used for joining some compound words, e.g., *short-sighted*, *a half-baked idea*. They can also avoid ‘letter collision’, e.g., *shell-like*, *de-icer*, *co-operation*. Often they have passed from use, e.g., we no longer hyphenate ‘wordprocessing’. If you leave them out, there may be ambiguity however, e.g.,

Man eating tiger escapes from safari park.

It is still necessary to use hyphens when spelling out numbers, such as *thirty-two*, *forty-nine*; and adjective phrases such as *a nine-year-old*. Also, certain prefixes require hyphens: *anti-American*, *pro-hunting*, *ex-boyfriend*.

Dashes are sometimes used instead of ‘proper punctuation’ such as commas and semi-colons.

e.g., *Punctuation can be a great help to clarity - or no help at all!*

Like exclamation marks !/, dashes are usually quite informal; their function is to mark speech and so it is generally better to avoid using them in academic writing.

7. Exclamation marks.

These are used to make writing sound funny, or to be emphatic, and like using capital letters in an email, look as if you are

S H O U T I N G ! This is bad etiquette and there is no place for such emoticons in academic writing.

8. Quotation marks (“inverted commas”)

A female MP once rebuked Churchill for being intoxicated at a dinner party.
‘Sir,’ she said, ‘You are drunk!’ ‘And you, madam, are ugly.’ Churchill retorted, ‘But I shall be sober tomorrow.’

Quotation marks are used to mark direct speech, and when we borrow phrases from another text. Increasingly, only single quotation marks are used, (‘...’) not double (“...”).

9. Brackets () also called parentheses, are used to add extra comments, e.g., *Leonardo da Vinci (1452 – 1519) was an advocate of vegetarianism.*

This is one step removed from the dash. Too many brackets mean it may be better to shorten sentences.

Brackets must be used in referencing in a text for the author and date after a quotation, and when citing someone else’s work. e.g. (Jones, 2001:6-12).

10. Apostrophes ('')

Apostrophes have two functions:

- a) to show that a letter is missing. For example, *it's only rock'n'roll*
- b) with 's after somebody's name, to show possession , i.e. that something belongs to, or is closely related to somebody.

Sample sentences

Freud's theories have been largely discredited.

My tutor's lectures have been cancelled this week.

AIDS is the world's biggest threat; the body's immune system is destroyed.

It is hoped that research will eventually lead to a cure for Parkinson's disease.

Today's rise in share prices has astonished everyone.

*The door of the car was dented.

When indicating possession, the apostrophe is used for:

a. *people*

President Bush's election

Bill Gates' charities

b. *animals*

The lion's share

a dog's dinner

c. *locations*

The country's development

Europe's population

d. *names of organisations*

The EU's policies

The government's decision

d. *time expressions*

yesterday's newspaper

two years' experience

If a person's name ends with **s** (e.g., Bill Gates) we simply add ' after it.

Optionally we can add another '**s**', (e.g., St. James's Infirmary; both forms are possible: St Thomas' Hospital or St Thomas's Hospital).

*The form with **of** is used for things (inanimate objects)

e.g., the lid of the machine, (*not*: the machine's lid); the development of science (*not*: science's development), etc.

Some forms are optional, so can equally say: *the work of Oxfam* or *Oxfam's work*.

Incorrect use

X An individuals right to security is guaranteed.

Corrected: An individual's right to security is guaranteed.

(We could equally talk about the rights of the individual).

X Security is very important, especially for large corporation's.

Corrected: Security is very important, especially for large corporations.
(There is no apostrophe on this simple plural: one corporation, many corporations).

X In a few year's time we may find...

Corrected: In a few years' time we may find...

(‘year’ is plural here, so the apostrophe goes after the s).

X Each application has it’s own advantages and disadvantages.

Corrected: Each application has its own advantages and disadvantages
(Remember, *it’s* can only mean, *it is* or *it has*. If you find you get confused with these, try saying the phrase aloud to yourself, to be clear about what you mean).

...

Correct punctuation is important in writing clearly and simply. Compare the following:

Blair said Brown was a fool.
Blair, said Brown, was a fool.

REVIEW

In these two texts, most punctuation has been removed. Work with a partner to punctuate them so that they are as clear to the reader as possible:

Two centuries ago the United States led the world in a movement to disestablish the monopoly of a single church. Now we need the constitutional disestablishment of the monopoly of the school and thereby of a system which legally combines prejudice with discrimination. The first article of a bill of rights for a modern humanist society would correspond to the First Amendment to the US Constitution The State shall make no law with respect to the establishment of education.

(Ivan Illich - Deschooling Society)

the post-war history of japan is an object lesson in what international politics are really about in 1945 japan was prostrate with its military power annihilated and its national symbol the emperor nullified within a generation japan regained the status of a great power and it did so not by replacing its armouries but by rebuilding its industries regaining its foreign trade and reconstituting its reserves of cash and currencies only after these achievements did it begin to contemplate and then to refashion its lost military might it was the one power in the world that could be referred to as a great power but it had no nuclear capacity and it was evidently more powerful than some powers britain france india which had made nuclear explosions

(Peter Calvocoressi - *World Politics since 1945* Longman, 1987)

Follow-up

For more advice and exercises on punctuation see the University of Hertfordshire’s Web site, ‘Using English for Academic Purposes’ at:

<http://www.uefap.net/writing/writing-punctuation/writing-punctuation-exercises>

Also, see the University of Sussex's guide to punctuation at:
<http://www.sussex.ac.uk/informatics/punctuation/>

Bibliography:

- Soars, J. & I. (1991). *Headway. Advanced*. Oxford: OUP.
- McCarter, S. (1997). *A Book on Writing*. Ford: IntelliGene .
- Truss, L. (2009). *Eats Shoots and Leaves*. London: Fourth Estate.
- Gillett, A. (2019). *Using English for Academic Purposes*. Available from <http://www.uefap.net> [accessed 20 August 2019].