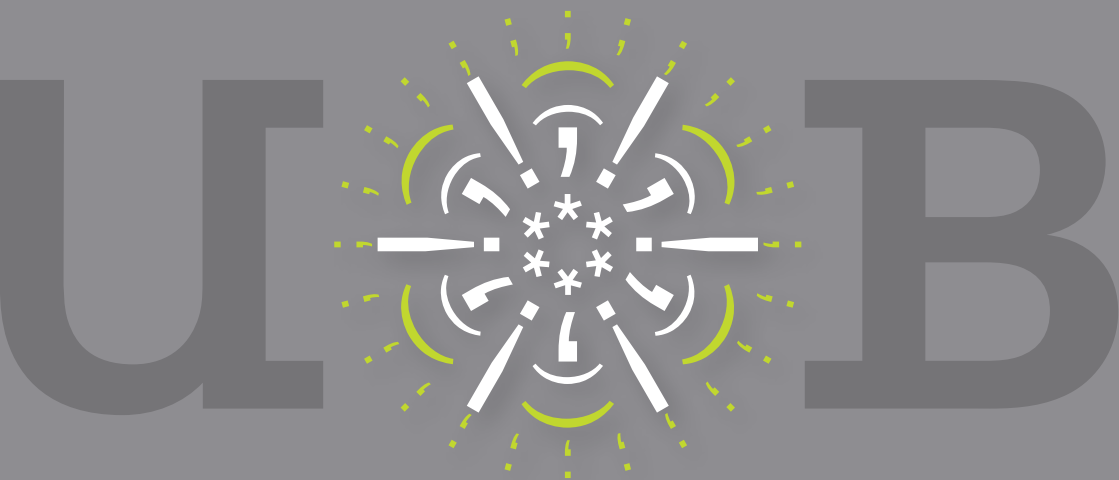


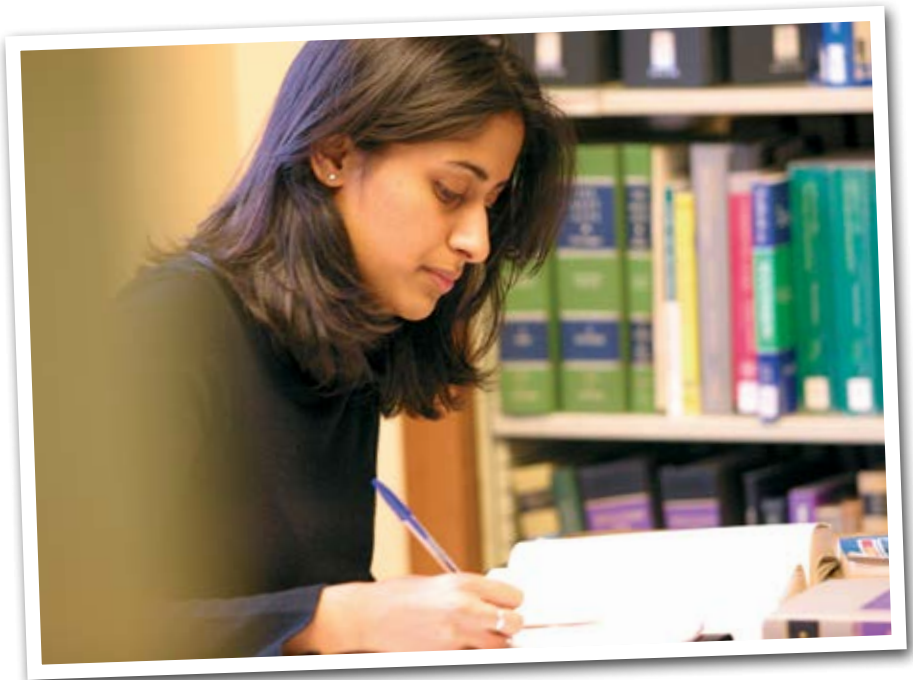
A short guide to punctuation



Why is punctuation so important?

Punctuation helps your reader. It ensures that your sentences flow and your ideas are clear. Without effective punctuation, your reader may stumble and be distracted from your arguments.

Punctuation is a huge area and this short guide can only touch the surface. For more information, see the references at the end. One of the best ways to improve your skills is by reading widely and paying attention to the way punctuation is used in published writing such as books, journal articles and broadsheet newspapers.





Full Stops

Mastering full stops is vital for clear writing. Common mistakes include using a comma instead of a full stop between two complete sentences, and the opposite error: using a full stop where a comma should go, creating a fragmented sentence.

Examples of incorrect division of sentences:

PUNCTUATION ERROR

Evidence suggests that petty crime is decreasing, it has also been suggested that this is merely due to the way in which criminal activity is evolving.

Here the clauses either side of the comma can **both** stand alone as complete sentences. They should therefore have a full stop or a conjunction between them. A comma is not enough.

NOT A SENTENCE

Criminal activity is evolving all the time. Although the evidence suggests that petty crime is decreasing. It is possible that it is merely changing form.

It is not appropriate to put a full stop at the end of the section in bold. It is not a complete sentence by itself, as it needs a main clause to make sense.



Commas

Commas can be tricky. They have several uses. Below are some of the most common:

You should use commas to separate clauses (sections) of complex sentences. For example:

After talks broke down, relations between the two countries became even more strained.

BREATHER BETWEEN THE TWO BITS OF THE SENTENCE

Before the words 'and,' 'but' and 'because,' you can either use a comma or leave it out, but if the sentence is long and complex, a comma can make it easier to read (as in this sentence). To take another example:

The talks were conducted against a background of increasing distrust between representatives from both sides, and relations between the two countries consequently deteriorated.

COMMA PROVIDES CLARITY

Words like 'however,' 'consequently,' 'instead' and 'therefore' should have a comma after them if they are the first word in a sentence. For example:

However, there is evidence to contradict this approach.

ALWAYS A COMMA HERE

Commas separate items in a list. For example:

Relations between the two countries were characterised by distrust, hostility and caution.

COMMA FOR LISTING

:

Colons

Colons can be used:

■ Before a list

This essay will discuss three possible contributing factors to the London Riots: social media, issues of social identity, and dissatisfaction resulting from perceived inequality.

■ Before a quotation

James (2012) is dismissive of Kingsley Amis's approach: 'How could one be guiltless of them all?'

■ Before an explanation or example of something just mentioned.

The paper raises one important question: how could these problems best be addressed?

Using colons and semi-colons with a complex list:

In the survey, people living in the area reported that their major concerns were as follows: lack of good quality public transport links; distance to the nearest hospital or medical centre; lack of career opportunities to encourage young people to stay in the area; and the uncertain future of the agricultural industry.

COLON INTRODUCES THE LIST

;

Semi colons

Semi colons can be used to separate two **complete** sentences that are very closely connected.

The clauses either side of a semi colon should be able to stand alone and still make sense. For example:

Talks were conducted against a background of increasing distrust; relations between the two countries subsequently deteriorated.

COULD BE A FULL STOP, BUT SEMI-COLON SHOWS RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SENTENCES

Try not to use too many semi colons in your academic writing. Often a full stop is clearer. However, semi colons can be useful to show a strong link between two sentences or ideas.

SEMI COLONS SEPARATE THE ITEMS

LOWER CASE LETTER FOLLOWS THE COLON

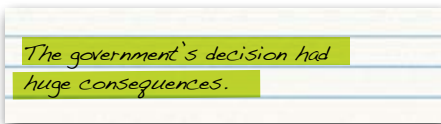


Apostrophes

Getting apostrophes wrong, or omitting them altogether, can make your academic writing appear sloppy. It is important to learn and practise the two uses for an apostrophe:

Possession: Adding an apostrophe and then 's' to a word shows that the person or thing owns something.

For example:

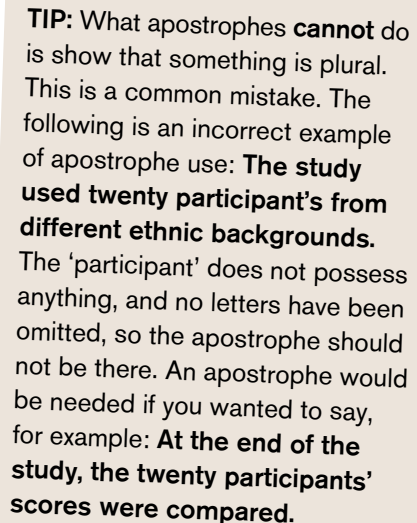


Here the *decision* belongs to the *government*. If the original word already ends in 's,' the apostrophe is placed at the end, but with no extra 's.'

For example:



Omission: Apostrophes also show where letters have been removed. For example, in the word 'don't,' which is a shorter version of 'do not,' the apostrophe shows the omission of the second 'o.'



TIP: What apostrophes **cannot** do is show that something is plural. This is a common mistake. The following is an incorrect example of apostrophe use: **The study used twenty participant's from different ethnic backgrounds.** The 'participant' does not possess anything, and no letters have been omitted, so the apostrophe should not be there. An apostrophe would be needed if you wanted to say, for example: **At the end of the study, the twenty participants' scores were compared.**



One more punctuation mark – to avoid!!!!

You hardly ever need to use an exclamation mark in an essay. It is intended to express feelings and emotions and is very rarely used in academic writing. You might use it if you were reporting the direct speech of an interviewee: **The participant stated: ‘Frankly the benefits situation is driving me bonkers!’** However, generally, it is best to forget the exclamation mark in your academic writing.

Conclusion

There are many other forms of punctuation, but this short guide has aimed to summarise some of the most commonly misused types. See below for further reading.

It is important to think about punctuation whilst writing, and to check it at the proofreading stage. Your punctuation should make your writing clearer and easier to read.

Further reading and references

The resources below are grammar guides, but they do also cover lots of different types of punctuation.

Books:

Harrison, M., Jakeman, V. and Paterson, K. (2012) **Improve your Grammar**. Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan.

Online resources:

Lynch, J. **A Guide to Grammar and Style**. [online]. Available at: <http://andromeda.rutgers.edu/~jlynch/Writing/> [Accessed 9 July 2013]

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