

# Using Punctuation Marks



“I can’t believe I went out with an apostrophe  
– he was so possessive.”

## The comma

The comma is a much misused and often over used piece of punctuation. The complexity of its usage stems primarily from the fact that there are several different situations in which the comma is the correct piece of punctuation to use. The trick is to identify those situations so as not to use the comma in places where it really should not be.

The following are some of the situations in which a comma should be used:

### 1. To separate the elements in a list of three or more items.

*The potion included gobstoppers, chewing gum, bran flakes and coleslaw.*

*His favourite puddings were ice apple pie, rhubarb crumble and jelly and ice cream.*

*I dedicate this work to my parents, Marie Smith and God.*

## **2. Before certain connectors**

A comma should be used before these connectors: **and, but, for, nor, yet, or, so** to separate two independent clauses.

*She was a fantastic cook, but would never be as good as her mother in law.*

*He hated his neighbours, so he never invited them round.*

A common mistake is to put the comma after the conjunction.

It is not usually necessary or indeed correct to use a comma with the conjunction 'because'.

*We all had to move to higher ground because the floodwaters were rising quickly.*

*She really didn't feel hungry because she had already eaten a hearty lunch.*

However, there are occasions when a 'because clause' needs to be set off with a comma in order to avoid any confusion of meaning.

*I knew she would not be hungry, because my sister works in a restaurant and had seen her eating a huge meal earlier in the day.*

In this example the reason for the person in question not being hungry is nothing to do with the sister's working in a restaurant as might be indicated if the comma were omitted.

## **3. To separate introductory elements in a sentence.**

Use a comma to separate introductory elements in a sentence from the main part of that sentence.

*Given the appalling weather conditions, Michael was lucky to survive the storm.*  
( *Dangling Subject* )

*As the night drew to a close, the clubbers wandered home.*

Having mastered the use of the colon, it is important to make it work for you in your writing.

If the introductory element of the sentence is very short, it is permissible to omit the comma. If the introductory phrase is more than about three words, the comma is recommended.

*Shortly we will be leaving for the port.*

*After his nap Sam felt a lot better.*

*After a deliciously long nap in his hammock, Sam felt a lot better.*

If a brief introductory phrase, however short, is likely to merge with the rest of the sentence and confuse the reader, the comma is required.

*Inside the house was a total mess.*

*Inside, the house was a total mess.*

*Until the summer lectures will take place in the main building*

*Until the summer, lectures will take place in the main building.*

The comma is also required if the introductory phrase, however short, appears to modify the meaning of the sentence.

*Sadly, the whole building was beginning to crumble.*

*On the other hand, the new extension looked fantastic.*

#### **4. To separate parenthetical elements in a sentence.**

A comma is used to set off parenthetical elements in a sentence. The parenthetical element (**also known as appositives**) is part of the sentence that can be removed without changing the essential meaning of the sentence.

*Sarah, the most intelligent pupil in the class, was always late for school.*

*The pyramids, one of the wonders of the ancient world, lie just outside Cairo.*

If you are using a comma to do this, it is important that the appositive is opened and closed with a comma. A common mistake is to omit the second comma.

#### **5. To separate direct speech or quoted elements from the rest of the sentence.**

Commas are used to separate direct speech or quoted elements from the rest of a sentence. Use a comma to separate the quoted material from the rest of the sentence.

*"That house there," he whispered, "is where I grew up."*

*"Give me the money," he snarled, "unless you want to meet your maker."*

Note that a comma is not always needed in direct speech if another punctuation mark serves to separate the quoted element from the rest of the sentence. Look at the following example:

*"Give me the money!" he snarled.*

*"That cake looks delicious," she said. "Where can I get the recipe?"*

*"That cake looks delicious," she said, "Where can I get the recipe?"*

The two quoted elements are separate sentences and as such need to be separated by a full stop. A comma alone is not enough.

#### **6. Commas are used to separate elements in a sentence that express contrast.**

He was first attracted by her money, not her stunning looks.

She is intelligent, not pretty.

He thought the building was enormous, but ugly.

#### **7. Commas are used for typographical reasons to separate dates and years, towns and counties etc.**

His home was in Streatham, East London.

My father was born on March 13, 1949.

#### **8. Commas are used to separate several adjectives.**

The old, ramshackle, dilapidated house had a charm of its own.

That rather dull-looking, badly-dressed, clumsy man is actually a university professor.

## **The colon.**

The colon is a widely misused but very useful piece of punctuation. Use it correctly and it can add precision to your written work as well as impressing your tutors and future employers. There are not many people around who are able to use colons correctly. The colon has a number of functions:

#### **To introduce a list.**

The second main use of the colon is to introduce a list. You need to take care; many people assume that a colon *always* precedes a list. This is not the case. Again it is important to remember that the clause that precedes the colon must make complete sense on its own.

Have a look at these examples:

*The potion contained some exotic ingredients: snails' eyes, bats' tongues and garlic.*

*The magic potion contained sesame seeds, bran flakes and coleslaw.*

In the first sentence, the clause preceding the colon has a subject and a predicate and makes complete sense on its own 'The potion contained some exotic ingredients.' In the second sentence a colon should not be used, as the clause that would precede it would not make sense alone 'The magic potion contained'.

### **To introduce quoted material.**

The colon has other uses: it can also be used after a clause introducing quoted material. Have a look at this example.

*The director often used her favourite quotation from Monty Python: 'I wasn't expecting the Spanish Inquisition.'*

## **The semicolon.**

The semicolon is a hugely powerful punctuation mark. Getting it right will not only impress your tutors and future employers, it will allow you to express your ideas and opinions with more subtlety and precision than ever before. The good news is that it is simple and easy to use and should take you no more than a few minutes to master.

### **In complicated lists.**

The semicolon can be used to sort out a complicated list containing many items, many of which themselves contain commas.

Have a look at this example:

*In the meeting today we have Professor Wilson, University of Barnsley, Dr Watson, University of Barrow in Furness, Colonel Custard, Metropolitan Police and Dr Mable Syrup, Genius General, University of Otago, New Zealand.*

In a situation such as this, only the mighty semicolon can unravel the mess.

*In the meeting today we have Professor Wilson, University of Barnsley; Dr Watson, University of Barrow in Furness; Colonel Custard, Metropolitan Police and Dr Mable Syrup, Genius General, University of Otago, New Zealand.*

In most lists a comma is enough to separate the items. In a complicated list like the one above, it is perfectly acceptable to use the semicolon to make the list more understandable.

Test your understanding of punctuating lists with this [exercise](#).

### **Separating closely-related independent clauses.**

The semicolon is also used to connect two closely-related independent clauses. Have a look at this example:

*Terry always slept with the light on; he was afraid of the dark.*

The two clauses here are closely connected but the link has not been made explicit. They could have been separated by a full stop.

*Terry always slept with the light on. He was afraid of the dark.*

*They could have been connected by a **transition**.*

*Terry always slept with the light on because he was afraid of the dark.*

*Terry always slept with the light on, as he was afraid of the dark.*

In this instance we have changed the second clause into a dependent clause; it is directly dependent on the first clause.



## The hyphen (-)

This little piece of punctuation is becoming less and less used. There are, however, occasions where the hyphen is definitely required.

If you use justified text, your computer will automatically adjust the spacing between words to ensure that you do not need to hyphenate words that have come at the end of a line. This is an extremely good thing, as the rules governing where a hyphen should fall in a given word are complicated and dull to say the very least.

There are some instances in which you will need to use a hyphen.

**All words consisting of *self* combined with a noun:**

*self-expression*

*self-confidence*

*self-consciousness*

**In adjectives that have been formed by combining two words:**

*nineteenth-century history*

*self-paced learning exercises*

*off-the-peg suits*

*old-furniture salesman*

Take care to use the hyphen only in situations where the hyphenated word is used as an adjective as in the above examples. Contrast these two examples:

*He was an old-furniture salesman. (The furniture is old)*

*He was an old furniture salesman. (The salesman is old)*

Tumultuous events took place in the latter half of the nineteenth century.

We have several verbs in English that consist of a verb and a preposition. Have a look at these verbs and the nouns that can be formed as a result:

*to hold up ... This is a hold-up.*

*to wash up ... Go and do the washing-up.*

*to tell off ... The tutor gave him a good telling-off.*

## The dash (—)

The dash is longer than a hyphen. There are in fact two different dashes: the en-dash is the same width as a letter N, while the em-dash is the same width as the letter M. Both of these can be found by on MS Word by going to: Insert, Symbol and then selecting the dash you require.

The dash can be used to set off parenthetical elements, when those elements themselves contain internal forms of punctuation. Use the em-dash in these situations.

Consider the following sentences:

*My friends, Paul, Barry, Steve and Homer, all love rhubarb crumble.*

*My friends-Paul, Barry, Steve and Homer-all love rhubarb crumble.*

The dash should **not** be used to set off **appositives** elements when a comma would do just as well. There needs to be a good reason to use the dash. The em-dash can also be used in direct speech to signal a break in thought or a shift in tone.

*'What on earth can I do-, ' Alan jumped up and ran to the door.*

*I've just asked you to-oh what was I telling you?'*

# The apostrophe

## Contractions

One use of the apostrophe is in contracted words. The apostrophe is used to indicate that a letter or letters has/have been removed. If you follow this rule then it will avoid confusion about where the apostrophe should be.

He is = he's

I am = I'm

Do not = Don't

They have = They've

It is = It's

I would = I'd

Let us = Let's

She has = She's

Who is = who's

This is not an exhaustive list of contractions. There are many more but all follow the same rule. In examples such as "she'd" (the contracted form of she would) the apostrophe replaces several letters. Obviously, only one apostrophe is needed to indicate that several letters have been omitted.

You need to be a bit careful with apostrophes; many people make the mistake of putting them in all over the place. Contracted forms are very common in spoken language but should **not** be used in a formal academic essay. In formal/academic writing you must use the full, unabbreviated form.

*Clayton does not find any evidence that densely amnesiac patients show reduced performance on other measures of working memory.*

*There is no doubt that successive presidents of the United States have found difficulty in balancing pressures from home and abroad.*

The only place they could legitimately appear is in quotations.

*"I'm drowning!!" he shouted.*

Test your understanding of contracted words with this [exercise](#).

### **The apostrophe showing possession.**

A second and trickier use of the apostrophe is to show possession. If the possessor is a singular noun, an -'s is added to the end of the noun. This is true for both proper nouns (people and places beginning with a capital letter) and common nouns (other nouns). Here are some examples of the apostrophe at work showing possession:

*He found himself lost in Madrid's winding streets.*

*I cannot understand Tim's point of view.*

*The building's foundations were very unstable.*

*The poet's work was highly regarded around the world.*

A very common mistake is to put apostrophes where they should not be. Many people, unsure about using the apostrophe, put it in every time they see a word ending in s. Grammar checkers do not always highlight this mistake, as they do not know the meaning of the sentence.

*Bristol contain's a lot of lovely old building's and street's.*

*I have never seen the mountain's and the sea's look so beautiful.*

If the possessor is a plural noun ending in s, simply adding an apostrophe after the final s indicates possession.

*The teacher was always losing her pupils' books.*

*The monks' meals were served in a cold and damp dining room.*

*I can never understand the politicians' obsession with spin.*

As you can see, the positioning of the apostrophe makes a big difference to the meaning of the sentence. Make sure when adding the apostrophe that it indicates your intended meaning very precisely.

*The monk's meals were served in a cold, damp room. (one monk)*

*The monks' meals were served in a cold, damp room. (lots of monks)*

If the plural noun does not end in an s, the addition of -'s shows possession.

*The children's books lay on the table.*

*The men's boots were lined up outside the door.*

*The women's race will take place before the children's race.*

If the possessor is a singular noun that happens to end in an -s, there is some debate about whether the apostrophe is simply added after the -s or whether an -'s is needed.

It appears that both are acceptable. Whichever you decide to use, make sure you are consistent. The university English department's style guide recommends that proper nouns that end in -s form their possessive form by adding -'s.

*Have you seen James' book?*

*Have you seen James's book?*

The exceptions to this rule are proper nouns that are Latin or Greek in origin.

*Odysseus' adventures spanned many miles and many many years.*

*Pythagoras' theorem has baffled generations of school children.*

## Exclamation Mark

- Use an exclamation mark at the end of a sentence to show strong emotion.

*"I am very upset with him!"*

- Use an exclamation mark at the end of a sentence for emphasis.

*"I have to go home right now!"*

- Use an exclamation mark after an interjection at the start of a sentence (an interjection is a word used to express strong feeling or sudden emotion).

*"Wow! That test was harder than I expected."*

## Punctuation marks exercise.

This exercise will test your understanding of all kinds of different punctuation marks, particularly commas, colons, semi-colons and apostrophes.

Select the correctly punctuated sentence.

- 1  a) Spain is a beautiful country; the beache's are warm, sandy and spotlessly clean.
- b) Spain is a beautiful country: the beaches are warm, sandy and spotlessly clean.
- c) Spain is a beautiful country, the beaches are warm, sandy and spotlessly clean.
- d) Spain is a beautiful country; the beaches are warm, sandy and spotlessly clean.

Please select an answer. No. The apostrophe is not needed in this sentence. No. The colon is incorrect here. No. This sentence uses a comma to connect two independent clauses. This is called the comma splice. Correct.

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- 2  a) The children's books were all left in the following places: Mrs Smith's room, Mr Powell's office and the caretaker's cupboard.
- b) The children's books were all left in the following places; Mrs Smith's room, Mr Powell's office and the caretaker's cupboard.
- c) The childrens books were all left in the following places: Mrs Smiths room, Mr Powells office and the caretakers cupboard.
- d) The children's books were all left in the following places, Mrs Smith's room, Mr Powell's office and the caretaker's cupboard.

Please select an answer

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- 3  a) She always enjoyed sweets, chocolate, marshmallows and toffee apples.
- b) She always enjoyed: sweets, chocolate, marshmallows and toffee apples.
- c) She always enjoyed sweets chocolate marshmallows and toffee apples.
- d) She always enjoyed sweet's, chocolate, marshmallow's and toffee apple's.

Please select an answer. Correct. No. The colon is incorrect here. The clause before the colon cannot stand alone. No. You need commas to separate the items in the list. No. No need for apostrophes here.

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- 4  a) Sarah's uncle's car was found without its wheels in that old derelict warehouse.
- b) Sarah's uncle's car was found without its wheels in that old, derelict warehouse.
- c) Sarahs uncles car was found without its wheels in that old, derelict warehouse.
- d) Sarah's uncle's car was found without it's wheels in that old, derelict warehouse.

Please select an answer. No. You need a comma to separate the adjectives describing the warehouse. Correct. No. You need some apostrophes in this sentence. No. Although it is indicating possession, it does not have an apostrophe.

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- 5  a) I can't see Tim's car, there must have been an accident.  
 b) I cant see Tim's car; there must have been an accident.  
 c) I can't see Tim's car there must have been an accident.  
 d) I can't see Tim's car; there must have been an accident.

Please select an answer. No. You cannot use a comma to separate two independent clauses. This is the comma splice. No. Can't stands for can not, so it needs an apostrophe. No. There are two independent clauses, so there needs to be a punctuation mark between the two. Correct.

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- 6  a) Paul's neighbours were terrible; so his brother's friends went round to have a word.  
 b) Paul's neighbours were terrible: so his brother's friends went round to have a word.  
 c) Paul's neighbours were terrible, so his brother's friends went round to have a word.  
 d) Paul's neighbours were terrible so his brother's friends went round to have a word.

Please select an answer. No. You need a comma before the co-ordinating conjunction 'so'. No. You need a comma before the co-ordinating conjunction 'so'. Correct. No. You need a comma before the co-ordinating conjunction 'so'.

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- 7  a) Tims gran, a formidable woman, always bought him chocolate, cakes, sweets and a nice fresh apple.  
 b) Tim's gran a formidable woman always bought him chocolate, cakes, sweets and a nice fresh apple.  
 c) Tim's gran, a formidable woman, always bought him chocolate cakes sweets and a nice fresh apple.  
 d) Tim's gran, a formidable woman, always bought him chocolate, cakes, sweets and a nice fresh apple.

Please select an answer. No. You need an apostrophe to in Tim's to indicate possession. No. You need commas to separate the parenthetical elements in the sentence. No. You need commas to separate the items in the list. Correct.

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- 8  a) After stealing Tims car, the thief lost his way and ended up the chief constable's garage.

- b) After stealing Tim's car the thief lost his way and ended up the chief constable's garage.
- c) After stealing Tim's car, the thief lost his way and ended up the chief constable's garage.
- d) After stealing Tim's car, the thief lost his' way and ended up the chief constable's garage.

Please select an answer. No. You need an apostrophe on Tim's to indicate possession. No. You need a comma to set off the introductory phrase. Correct. No. His can never have an apostrophe.

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- 9
- a) We decided to visit: Spain, Greece, Portugal and Italy's mountains.
  - b) We decided to visit Spain, Greece, Portugal and Italys mountains.
  - c) We decided to visit Spain, Greece, Portugal and Italy's mountains.
  - d) We decided to visit Spain Greece Portugal and Italy's mountains.

Please select an answer. No. You cannot use a colon to introduce this list. No. You need an apostrophe on Italy's to indicate possession. Correct. No. You need commas to separate the items in the list.

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- 10
- a) That tall man, Paul's grandad, is this month's winner.
  - b) That tall man Paul's grandad is this month's winner.
  - c) That tall man, Paul's grandad, is this months winner.
  - d) That tall man, Pauls grandad, is this month's winner.
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