

Writing Skills: Mechanics of Writing

Punctuation helps the reader to make sense of what has been written. When speaking, we use not only words but also body language, voice tone and emphasis, and pauses to convey our message. When we write, however, we use punctuation marks to help the reader understand our meaning.

What is in
this guide?



- Comma
- Comma fault
- Colon
- Semi colon
- Apostrophe
- Capitals

Comma

**Use a comma to separate ideas in a sentence
in order to make the meaning clearer.**

1. When joining two sentences with a conjunction:

For example:

- The sun was shining, so we went to the river.
- The new intake of students was large, so the group was divided into two classes.

2. When adding extra information to the basic sentence:

For example:

a) At the beginning

- Yesterday morning, I went for a bike ride.
- In conclusion, the survey demonstrated students make good use of the library.

b) In the middle

- The woman, who was feeling tired, went home.
- The student, who came from Europe, adjusted quickly to the New Zealand academic culture.

c) At the end

The student searched for hours without success, becoming increasingly desperate.

3. When listing a series of items:

For example:

- A pen, lined paper, and a calculator were required for the exam.
- For their exams the students needed a fine tipped red pen, extra paper for diagrams, and a scientific calculator.

4. To introduce a quotation:

For example:

- According to Winston Churchill, “To improve is to change, so to be perfect is to have changed often.”

Comma Fault

Comma fault (also known as comma splice and run-on sentence) refers to joining two sentences with a comma instead of separating them with a full stop.

Each group of words is a complete sentence and therefore needs to be separated by a full stop.

For example:

- ✘ Please let me know if you can help in this matter, I would appreciate your reply as soon as possible.
- ✓ Please let me know if you can help in this matter. I would appreciate your reply as soon as possible.

Sentences can be **joined** together using a **comma** and a **conjunction** (linking word), such as for, and, but, or, nor, so, yet, because, although.

For example:

- It was a beautiful day, so we went to the beach.
- I went to town yesterday, but I didn't buy anything.

When two sentences are closely related or reflect each other, they can be separated with a semi colon instead of a full stop.

For example:

- ✘ Drivers think cyclists are a menace on the roads, cyclists think drivers don't give them enough room.
- ✓ Drivers think cyclists are a menace on the roads; cyclists think drivers don't give them enough room.

NB. The group of words on either side of the semi colon must be able to stand alone as a sentence.

Colon

Colons are used to point to further information.

A colon can point to a single word, a list, to another sentence, or to a series of sentences or paragraphs.

1. Introduce a list:

For example:

- For the practicum course, you are required to bring the following: chef's jacket, recipe instructions, and all ingredients.

2. Introduce a quotation:

For example:

- Copus (2009) comments: "Clear writing is inextricably linked to clear thinking" (p. vii). (Note: A comma can also introduce a direct quotation).

3. Expand an idea:

For example:

- Both parties agreed on the final result: There would be increased participation in meetings by all those involved.

4. Add emphasis. The colon acts like a pointer:

For example:

Compare the following sentences:

- She worked hard at her her studies because she wanted good grades.
- She worked hard at her studies for one reason: good grades.

NB. When a sentence follows a colon, start the sentence with a capital.

Semi Colon

Semi- colons are used to separate related information of equal value and reduce confusion when presenting a complex list.

1. **Join two complete sentences** that are closely connected in meaning:

For example:

- Cats are independent creatures; dogs require more looking after.
- The class was divided into two groups; the intake of first year students was larger than expected.

2. **Listing complex items** that contain commas:

For example:

- Research material can include the following: journals from the library, and from databases; hard copy, and online books; and relevant information from a practicum experience.
- Before going on a road trip north, you should check your car's oil and water, which may need topping up; the tyre pressure, including that of the spare tyre; road conditions and availability, for example, the Napier–Tāupo Road; and your emergency supplies, which should include a torch that works, a first aid kit, and warm clothing and blankets.

Note: A semi colon separates grammatical units of equal weight (e.g., an independent clause from another independent clause, or a phrase from a phrase).

Do not use a semicolon to separate unequal grammatical units, for instance an independent clause from a dependent clause.

Apostrophe

Apostrophes are used to show missing letters in contracted words and to show possession.

1. **Contraction**, to show that letters have been left out of a word

Didn't = did not	doesn't = does not
it's = it is	wasn't = was not
who's = who is	can't = cannot
I'll = I will	isn't = is not

NB. Contractions are not used in academic writing.

2. **Possession**, to show that something belongs to someone or something.
The apostrophe always comes directly after the name of the owner of the object, followed by what they own.

Steps:

1. Ask yourself, "who does the object belong to?"
2. Add an 's after the owner's name.
3. If the owner's name ends in s just add an '.

For example:

1. Who does the computer belong to?
2. The computer belongs to Christine.
3. Add an 's after the owner's name: Christine's computer.

For example:

- a student's essay = the essay belongs to a student
- next week's timetable = the timetable belonging to next week
- the students' pens = the pens belong to the students
- the people's leader = leader of the people

NB. Do not use the apostrophe with personal pronouns: his, hers, its, theirs, yours, ours

For example:

- The work is yours.
- That house is theirs.
- The book is missing its cover.

Do not use an apostrophe with adjectives:

For example:

- assignment instructions
- lecture notes

Acronym plurals and dates do not take an apostrophe:

For example:

- DHBs, FAQs, 1930s, 30s.

Resist the temptation to use an apostrophe whenever you see an s.

Capitals

**Capitals letters are used at the start of a sentence,
and for acronyms, proper nouns, and headings.**

1. The first letter of the first word of a sentence:

For example:

- The woman entered the room.

2. The pronoun I:

For example:

- John and I are going to class.

3. Acronyms that are formed from the first letters of words:

For example:

- EIT is an acronym for Eastern Institute of Technology.
- The World Health Organisation = WHO

4. All proper nouns, which include the names of people and their titles, specific places and organisations, and the names of months and days.

For example:

- Dr Mary Jones, Napier, France, the White House, Tuesday, Students' Association.

5. Headings

Follow the APA guidelines for where (and when) to put capitals in headings.
APA specifies heading styles for up to five levels of headings (APA, 2020, p. 48).

Heading format, according to the APA, is as follows:

<p style="text-align: center;">Level 1 Heading (centred, bold, title case; text begins as a new paragraph)</p> <p>Level 2 Heading (left aligned, bold, title case; text begins as a new paragraph)</p> <p><i>Level 3 Heading</i> (left aligned, bold italic, title case; text begins as a new paragraph)</p> <p>Level 4 Heading. (indented, bold, title case, full stop; text begins on the same line and continues as a regular paragraph)</p> <p><i>Level 5 Heading.</i> (indented, bold italic, title case, ending with full stop; text begins on the same line and continues as a regular paragraph)</p>

NB: In title case, most words are capitalised (see APA, 2020, p. 167)

6. When a sentence follows a colon:

For example:

- Both parties agreed on the final result: There would be increased participation in meetings by all those involved.

References

American Psychological Association. (2020). *Publication manual of the American Psychological Association* (7th ed.). <https://doi.org/10.1037/0000165-000>

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