

## Writing Skills: Mechanics of Writing

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

This resource will consider the following writing skills:

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

### Comma

**Use the 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 the joining of two sentences by a comma instead of 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.

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

**Sentences** can be **joined** together using a **comma** and a **conjunction** (linking word), such as 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 by 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 can be used to:

### 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:

- "He started the business because he wanted money.
- He started the business for one reason only: money."(Bailey Jr, 1990, p. 59).

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

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

## Semi Colon

The semi colon has two main uses:

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 years 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 Taupo Road; and your emergency supplies, which should include a torch that works, a first aid kit, and warm clothing and blankets.
- **Note:** Bailey Jr (1990) notes that a semi colon separates "equal grammatical units" (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.

In Bailey's words: "Think of the semicolon as a kind of 'pivot': one idea is on this side of the semicolon; another idea is on that side of it. And on each side of the pivot point is an equal grammatical unit" (1990, p. 62).

## Apostrophe

The apostrophe has two main uses:

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 (belonging to) 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

Use capitals for the following:

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, which are formed from the first letters of words.

BNZ USA FBI EIT AIDS YMCA WHO

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.

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, 2012, pp. 62-63).

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

**Level 1 Heading**

(centred, bold, title case)

**Level 2 Heading**

(left aligned, bold, title case)

**Level 3 heading.**

(indented, bold, sentence case, full stop)

***Level 4 heading.***

(indented, bold, italicised, sentence case, full stop)

***Level 5 heading.***

(indented, italicised, sentence style case, full stop)

6. When a sentence follows a colon:

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