

Writing Skills

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.

I went shopping yesterday, **but** I did not buy anything.

2. When adding extra information to the basic sentence:

For example:

At the beginning

Yesterday morning, I went for a bike ride.

Unfortunately, I fell off and hurt my knee.

In the middle

The woman, who was feeling tired, went home.

The Gentle Annie, an inland route from Napier to Taihape, offers amazing scenery.

At the end

Margaret passed all her exams, to her surprise.

I enjoy eating, especially chocolate.

3. When listing a series of items:

Marcus made a chocolate cake, a fruit tart, and a ginger slice.

While on holiday, Kiri did a yodelling course, practised the ukulele, and walked the Milford Track.

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

The purpose of the colon is to introduce something:

1. A list:

For example:

To make an excellent chocolate cake, you will require the following ingredients: butter, flour, milk, eggs, cocoa, and vanilla essence.

2. An explanation or illustration

For example:

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

3. A quotation

For example:

During the Oxford Union debate in 1985, Lange made the following well-known statement: “And I’m going to give it to you if you hold your breath just for a moment. I can smell the uranium on it as you lean forward!”

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

Semi Colon

The semicolon, which can be considered as halfway between a full stop and a comma, has two main uses:

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

For example:

Tania drank her coffee black; Robert preferred his with milk and sugar.
Cats are independent creatures; dogs require more looking after.

2. Listing complex items that contain commas:

Heather enjoys cooking, at which she excels; cycling, though she goes very slowly; and reading, especially detective stories.

Before going on a long road trip, 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 Manawatu Gorge; and your emergency supplies, which should include a torch that works, first aid kit, and warm clothing and blankets

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

- For singular nouns, add 's

Christine's computer = the computer belonging to Christine
the boy's bike = the bike belonging to the boy
next week's timetable = the timetable belonging to next week

- For plural nouns with final s, just add '

all the dogs' leads = the leads belonging to all the dogs
the two buildings' windows = the windows belonging to the two buildings
the students' results = the results belonging to the students

- For plural nouns constructed in other ways, add 's

the women's coats = the coats belonging to the women
the children's bikes = the bikes belonging to the children

- For nouns that do not change their spelling whether they are in the singular or plural add 's

the sheep's wool = the wool belonging to one or many sheep

NB. Do not use the apostrophe with personal pronouns:

his, hers, its, theirs, yours, ours

For example:

The car is yours.

The cat washed its face.

That house is theirs.

Capitals

Use capitals for the following:

1. The first letter of the first word of a sentence.
The woman entered the room.
2. The pronoun I.
John and I are going to the movies.
3. Abbreviations and acronyms, which are words formed from the first letters of certain words.
BNZ USA FBI EIT AIDS YMCA WHO IBM
4. All proper nouns, which include the names of people and their titles, specific places and organizations, and the names of months and days.
Dr **Mary Jones**, **Napier**, **France**, the **White House**, **Tuesday**, **Students' Association**.
5. **Headings** (APA, 2012, p. 62)

APA specifies heading styles for up to five levels of headings.

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.

References

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- Murphy, E. M. (1989). *Effective writing: Plain English at work*. Melbourne, Australia: Pitman.
- Silyn-Roberts, H. (1996). *Writing for science: A practical handbook for science, engineering and technology students*. Auckland, New Zealand: Longman.
- University of Reading. (n.d.). Punctuation. Retrieved from <http://www.reading.ac.uk/internal/studyadvice/Studyresources/Writing/sta-punctuation.aspx>