

## PUNCTUATION

Punctuation is simply about a series of conventions that make it easier for readers to follow your train of thought. A complete sentence (one thought or idea) is indicated by a full stop (.). A pause in the flow of thought, for example, to allow additional information, is indicated by a comma (,). A semicolon (;) is used to indicate a fuller pause than a comma, but not the final end of the sentence. A colon (:) is used to indicate the beginning of a list.

### Full Stops

Full stops are used to divide text and create boundaries by marking the end of a sentence.

Make sure that your full stops look like full stops and that they are distinct from commas.

Make sure that the letter following a full stop is always a **CAPITAL LETTER** and looks like one.

Remember, feedback from your lecturers that points out that there are too many commas in your writing may well mean that your commas are doing the wrong job.

After you have completed one sequence of thought, indicate this with a full stop. Then move on to the next one.

### Commas

Commas are used to divide up groups of words within a sentence. They are extremely important and help to keep units of writing together. This helps to clarify understanding and avoids frustrating the reader.

1) The main function of the comma is to:

Break up parts of longer sentences - for example:

After the main points had been presented, the students were asked for their comments.

*The comma in this example neatly divides the meaning into two parts. If there were no comma, the reader would read, "presented the students." As a word group, and this would not make sense without re-reading for clarification.*

However, there would be no comma in the following sentence:

They decided to go to the library and find further information about the topic of the essay.

*In this case, a pair of ideas is linked by the word 'and', no pausing occurs in speech, and no punctuation (i.e. comma) is needed to clarify the meaning.*

2) Present items in a list:

I would like to watch the video, take notes, and then be ready to ask questions.

3) Divide words which refer to the subject of a sentence:

The classroom President, Aaron Alberts, received amazing feedback after his presentation.

4) Punctuate certain relative clauses (i.e. parts of a sentence beginning with 'who', 'which', or 'whose'):

The College, which is located near downtown Miami, has an excellent academic reputation within students from overseas.

*In this example, the part of the sentence between the commas is designed to add extra information to the statement about the college.*

5) A comma is not always used with words like 'who' or 'which'. Consider the following example:

I like professors who give high grades for my work.

*In this example the meaning is derived from linking up the 'professors' and 'who give high grades...', not from separating out these two parts of the sentence.*

Try reading the sentence with a comma (pause) before the word 'who'.

I like professors, who give high grades for my work.

Does the sentence make sense with this comma? It actually changes the meaning completely.

Some words or phrases (in traditional grammar, at least!) expect a comma after they have been used: e.g. However, nevertheless, for example, etc..

### **Colons and Semi-Colons**

Colons should be used only:

1) To introduce a list:

An essay usually includes the following components: an introduction, a main body of text and a conclusion.

2) To show a link between the units of meaning, like a hinge:

The results of the referendum were very clear: there was a need for a change in policy.

Semi-colons are extremely useful in long sentences but be careful not to over-use them. They are typically used as follows:

In the library there were several students reading journal articles; a couple of lecturers checking the stock, and a librarian returning books to the shelves.

1) To provide a break in a sentence, while showing the relationship between the two parts:

Night was falling; he knew all was lost.

2) To express an idea which is too short to merit a new sentence:

Wherever possible, students should try to organize their academic work by using a planning tool; this can help to clarify ideas.

In some cases, semi-colons are followed by linking words, as in:

They were unsure about the outcome of the assignment they were about to undertake; nevertheless, they would try their best.

The semi-colon can be a powerful tool in helping you to organize your writing and present your ideas clearly and meaningfully. However, it will lose its effectiveness if over-used. Think carefully about how you will use it and remember to use it sparingly.

## Apostrophes

Incorrect use of the apostrophe in students writing is a very common mistake, and very irritating! Apostrophes should be used:

1) When letters have been left out of a word:

The library's still open. (meaning "The library is still open.")

It won't be necessary. (meaning "It will not be necessary.")

2) To show possession (belonging to):

Einstein's theory (meaning "The theory of Einstein")

When you are using an apostrophe to show possession, then the position of the apostrophe depends on whether you have a singular or plural noun to denote the possessor.

In these examples, the apostrophe is attached to a singular noun:

That pen is Raul's.

Sandra's immigration papers.

In these cases, apostrophe 's' is added after the noun to show possession. This is the correct position for a singular noun.

*(Note: there is no apostrophe in the word "papers" above - this is because this is a simple plural - there are no letters missing and no possession is shown!)*

If the relevant noun is in the plural, the apostrophe is placed after the 's':

The students' belongings ...

Psychologists' theories have suggested ...

Exceptions:

1) Some words have unusual plural forms, such as children (plural of child), women (plural of woman). In these cases, because the plural is different from the singular, the apostrophe goes in the singular position, before the 's':

The children's party ... (not childrens'....)  
The women's meeting ... (not womens'...)

2) The really confusing exception is ***it***:

It only takes an apostrophe to show a missing letter:

It's a shame (meaning "It is a shame.").

The possessive form of '*it*' is '*its*' ***NOT*** '*it's*'. The possessive of '*it*' ***DOES NOT*** need an apostrophe....

The company was falsely accused of maladministration. Its response was to threaten to sue.

Even though this looks as if the '*it*' should have an apostrophe (because 'it' refers to the response that 'belongs' to the company), don't do it! The simple rule is to only use an apostrophe with it when it means it is.

This is true for all possessive pronouns: yours, hers, ours, theirs.