



Punctuation

Punctuation marks are symbols used in writing to separate sentences, their elements, and clarify meaning. Punctuation helps you organise your ideas and well-organised ideas are better understood.

Punctuation you will need to know

Full Stop



Use full stops:

- when marking the end of a sentence.
- when marking abbreviations, e.g. Dr. Smith.

Comma



Use commas:

- to separate items in a series, e.g. I have a ball, a bat, and a glove.
- to separate main ideas within a sentence, e.g. Even though commas are one of the most common punctuation types, many people do not know how to use them correctly.

Tip: Too many commas could indicate an unnecessarily long complex sentence. If there are many in a single sentence, is there a way you could break it up into shorter and easier to read sentences?

Semicolon



Use semicolons:

- if the list items already have commas, so it's clear where each item ends, e.g. The conference was attended by delegates from Paris, France; Paris, Texas; London, UK; Stockholm, Sweden; Colombo, Sri Lanka; and Mumbai, India.
- to join two closely related sentences rather than splitting them with a full stop, e.g. Bears are very dangerous when protecting their young; you are much more likely to be attacked when their cubs are around.

Tip: If you aren't sure if two sentences are related enough to join with a semicolon, just use a full stop, e.g. Bears are very dangerous when protecting their young. You are much more likely to be attacked when their cubs are around.

Colon



Use colons:

- before an introduced list. Grammatically, you could imagine the colon replacing 'including' or 'for example' e.g. When camping be sure to pack thoroughly: tent, bedding, torch, insect repellent, etc.
- A colon instead of a semicolon may be used between two sentences when the second sentence explains, illustrates, paraphrases, or expands on the first sentence, e.g. She got what he worked for: she really earned that promotion.

Tip: It's probably easier just to use colons to introduce lists. As for the semicolon, a full stop works just as well most of the time.

Apostrophe



Use apostrophes:

- when forming possessive nouns, e.g. Wednesday's meeting, Steven's ball, etc. They are not used for possessive pronouns, e.g. his, hers, theirs, ours, yours.
- in contractions, e.g. didn't, could've, I'm, won't, etc.

Tip: Get this right! Make sure you aren't using apostrophes for plural forms of words. They are for possessive nouns only. Avoid using contractions in academic writing; they are too informal.

Parentheses



Use parentheses:

- to enclose extra information for the sentence, e.g. They had prepared a picnic (food, drinks, blanket, cutlery and plates) in a basket.
- to include referencing information for author/date referencing systems, e.g. (Smith, 2019).

Tip: Make sure you close parentheses off, e.g. (Both sides). Use parentheses mainly for referencing or to introduce acronyms in academic writing. Unnecessary information that would usually end up in parentheses will use up your word count.

What is your document trying to tell you?

The underlines that appear under words on your computer as you type might be trying to tell you something about your punctuation.

Spelling error

Using spell check will help find errors in your writing: speling mistakes, grammar errors, alternate or confused word choices, and punctuation problems. Poor proof reading and editing can impact the quality of your writing. However if you slow down to consider what you have written you will be able to improve.

Comma missing

Microsoft Word uses different coloured underlines to show its suggestions to change/improve your writing: **red** for spelling, **blue** for when a different word could be better, and **blue** or **green** for grammar and punctuation suggestions.

Tip: Don't just accept any changes suggested without checking them. It is a program and doesn't understand the nuances of the English language. Read it for yourself and decide if the suggestion is a valid one.

More information

For more on these and other punctuation types, try the [Lexico Punctuation Guide](#) powered by Oxford Dictionaries. Alternatively, if you're not sure if you have used one of these punctuation types correctly, ask the Study Smart Officer in your [Library's Study Smart Zone](#).



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