



# **PUNCTUATION**

## **A brief overview**

# WHAT'S PUNCTUATION AGAIN?

Punctuation, according to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, is:

**“The act or practice of inserting standardized marks or signs in written matter to clarify the meaning and separate structural units.”**

So, in case you forgot, those are:

! ( ) ; : ‘ “ ” , . / ? -



## **We all know the basic rules of punctuation, right?**

However, this can become a tricky business in academic writing, when you have to insert quotations, reference correctly, use direct speech etc. We will go through each of the punctuation marks and address common mistakes.

For punctuation concerns related to referencing, please ask a writing consultant for material specifically on how to reference.

If you have trouble using punctuation in combining clauses, ask for material related to run-on sentences.



# SOME COMMON MISTAKES AND DON'TS

1. Avoid using exclamation marks (!) in academic writing.
2. Never combine a question mark and an exclamation mark (?!) or use multiple signs (!!!/ ???)
3. Avoid using ellipses (...) at the end of your sentences. Only use this to indicate omission in quoting.
4. Don't use apostrophes to make plurals, for example the 1920's.
5. Watch out for misplaced commas. If you're uncertain, read your sentence out loud and see if there's a natural pause.

Some things are okay to do on Whatsapp and Facebook, but keep them out of your academic writing... :)



# THE SEMICOLON (;) AND COLON (:)

## The semicolon has two main uses:

- It separates two related, but independent clauses. If your clauses are very complex, rather use a full stop.

Once clean water was plentiful; now it is a scare resource.

- It separates a complex list of items, especially containing commas.

I visited Phoenix, Arizona; Los Angeles, California; Atlanta, Georgia and Charlotte, North Carolina on my trip.

## The colon has many uses:

- It introduces a list. Be careful to use it only after a word that typically introduces a list, for example *the following*. Also only use it after a noun.

I was given the following suggestions: to call the manager, to visit the office, or to write a letter.

Not: The envelope contained: a letter from my mother, a bookmark from my sister, and a R50 from my grandpa.



# THE SEMICOLON (;) AND COLON (:)

- A colon also introduces an idea:

We were left with only one option: to abandon the ship.

There is something you should know about the chops: they're burnt.

- It is used after a clause that introduces quoted material:

I was reminded of the words of the apostle Paul: 'For to me, to live is Christ.'

- It can also be used to emphasis an idea. Compare the following examples:

The one thing he can't go without is coffee.

Vs.

There is one thing he can't go without: coffee.



# THE COMMA (,)

The comma is often misused and over-used. Let's look at its many functions:

- It separates items in a list of three or more.

The recipe includes flour, milk, eggs, oil and baking powder.

It is an American writing convention to put a comma before the and introducing the last item in the list. You only need to do this to avoid confusion.

My favourite breakfasts are yoghurt and muesli, oats, flapjacks and syrup, and bacon and eggs.

- It is used before certain conjunctions such as *but*, *yet*, *nor*, *for*, *or* and *so* (note: not after). Do not use it before the word *because*.

That was his suspicion, but it seemed to be incorrect.

- It separates introductory elements in a sentence. If the introductory element is short, it can be omitted, but if it's longer than three words, a comma is recommended.

As the day drew to a close, the workers commuted home.

At night the workers commuted home.



# THE COMMA (,)

- Commas can be used to indicate parenthesis by being inserted before and after the parenthetical statement (also called an *aside*):

Jonathan Davino, called Jonnie-Boy by the others, was the last to arrive.

- They separate direct speech or quotations from the rest of the sentence.

“Oh no, “ he said, “I failed my driving test again!”

- Note that if the direct speech is already separated from the rest of the sentence by a punctuation mark, it’s not necessary to use a comma, for example:

“Come here quickly!” shouted mom.

- Commas are used to separate contrasting elements in a sentence:

It’s spicy, not hot.

- They are used to separate adjectives in a list:

He was tall, skinny, pale and German.



# THE HYPHEN (-)

The hyphen is used to divide or to compound words, word elements, or numbers.

- Use it with all words containing the word *self*, such as:  
*Self-expression, self-confidence, self-assured, self-denial, etc.*
- Use it in adjectives that have been formed by combining two or more words:  
*Old-fashioned shop, out-of-reach shelf, self-detonating bomb, etc.*
- The hyphen is used in nouns that consist of a verb and a preposition, such as:  
*Hold-up, washing-up, telling-off.*
- Be careful when splitting words across two lines. The rules that govern where a word should be split are very complex and there is a tendency to move away from this kind of hyphenation. If you're using a word processor, it should avoid it for you.



# THE APOSTROPHE (')

- The apostrophe is used to form contractions. It indicates that a letter or letters have been omitted:

It's , they've, we're, can't, won't etc.

Do not use contractions in academic writing, however, unless it's in a direct speech quotation. In academic writing it is expected that one write out the full words.

- The apostrophe is used to indicate possession. If the noun is singular, you just add an 's:

Baker's theory, grandpa's pipe, Sarah's dress, the policeman's gun.

If the noun is plural and ends with an s already, simply add the apostrophe after the s.

My brothers' toys, the managers' lounge.

If the noun is singular and ends in an s, there is some debate as to which form to use. Some prefer 's, whereas s' is also acceptable:

Jesus' disciples vs. Jesus's disciples.



# QUOTATION MARKS (“ ”)

You may have seen both single and double quotation marks being used in a quote. When should you use which?

- The single quotation marks are a British writing convention. With this kind, the punctuation will go outside the quotation marks. The examples have been enlarged so that you can see clearly:

According to Halliday (1994), ‘Register consists of field, tenor and mode’.

- According to American writing standards, double quotation marks are used

According to Halliday (1994), “Register consists of field, tenor and mode.”

In South Africa, and even in Britain, both kinds can be used and it is up to the writer to decide which style he prefers. What is important is consistency, so if you choose one, stick to it. Note, however, that if you do choose the British convention, and there is a quote within a quote, double quotation marks will be used outside and single inside.



## QUOTATION MARKS (“ ”)

- Quotation marks can also be used to indicate titles of books, songs, poems etc. Titles can alternatively be indicated by italicising them. Once again, if you choose single inverted commas, the punctuation will go outside:

*‘The Long Journey of Poppie Nongena’, one of Joubert’s best-sellers, was Mandela’s favourite.*

Alternatively:

*“The Long Journey of Poppie Nongena,” one of Joubert’s best-sellers, was Mandela’s favourite.*



# PARENTHESES () AND BRACKETS []

Parentheses are used to clarify, to add a personal comment or an afterthought.

- When used for clarification, commas can be used in stead of parentheses:

Franken (her husband) is also an acclaimed poet.

- Parentheses can be used to add an afterthought in the following way. Remember to put the full stop after the brackets.

Most scientists believe in species evolution (though sufficient proof is yet to be given to support this).

- Brackets can be used to add a comment or clarification to a quote. Try to limit adding comments in quotes unless really necessary, since this is considered bad practice.

Original quote: Smith (2012:5) considers it to be indispensable to a well-written text.

With clarification: Smith (2012:5) considers [cohesion] to be indispensable to a well-written text.

