

## Punctuation Guide

### The Apostrophe

Used to indicate possession:

1) With nouns that do not end with *s*, add an apostrophe and *s*.

women's rights

'It is a man's place to rule, and a woman's to yield'. Sarah Ann Sewell, 1869.

2) With plural nouns ending in *s*, add only an apostrophe.

teachers' duties

3) With singular nouns that end with *s*, add both the apostrophe and the *s* for English names but not for 'foreign' or ancient proper names.

Charles's dog

the witness's testimony

Kurtz's fiancée

Moses' teaching

**N.B.** With the exception of 'one's', possessive pronouns (its, hers, his, theirs, yours, ours, whose) **NEVER** have an apostrophe because they already indicate possession.

The dog wagged **its** tail (not it's).

**It's = it is!**

The man **whose** tie has gravy on it (not who's).

### The Colon

Colons are used before lists, summaries, long quotations, or final clauses that explain or amplify preceding matter.

'My loathings are simple: stupidity, oppression, crime, cruelty, soft music.' Vladimir Nabokov.

When asked his opinion of a manuscript replete with spelling errors, George Kaufman replied: 'I'm not very good at it myself, but the first rule about spelling is that there is only one *z* in *is*.'

'Education: the inculcation of the incomprehensible into the indifferent by the incompetent.' John Maynard Keynes.

'Santa Claus has the right idea: visit people once a year.' Victor Borge.

**N.B.** Do not use a colon when the items of a list come immediately after a verb or preposition.

Wrong: The job requirements are: typing, shorthand and bookkeeping.

Right: The job requirements are typing, shorthand and bookkeeping.

### The Comma

Use a comma in a sentence that contains two independent clauses (complete statements) that are joined by the conjunctions *but*, *nor*, or *for*.

'It is always a silly thing to give advice, but to give good advice is absolutely fatal.' Oscar Wilde.

The comma is optional when two independent clauses are joined by the conjunctions *and* or *or*.

**N.B.** Do not use a comma before *and* or *or* unless there is a complete statement on each side of the conjunction.

Wrong: I resented his interference, and her superior smile.

(*her superior smile* is not a complete statement).

Right: 'The optimist proclaims that we live in the best of all possible worlds, and the pessimist fears this is true.'  
James Cabell.

Do not use a comma between an independent and a dependent clause (dependent clauses are incomplete statements that could not stand alone).

The dependent clauses in the following sentences are in italics.

'Facts do not cease to exist *because they are ignored*.' Aldous Huxley.

'Everything is funny *as long as it is happening to someone else*'. Will Rogers.

Use commas between the elements of a series of three or more words, phrases, or clauses.

'Eat, drink, and be leery'. O. Henry.

'The only way to keep your health is to eat what you don't want, drink what you don't like, and do what you'd rather not.' Mark Twain.

Use commas to set off certain phrases and clauses.

1) indicating contrast (antithetical phrases)

'Advice is judged by results, not by intentions.' Cicero.

'The fool wonders, the wise man asks.' Benjamin Disraeli.

2) parenthetical phrases (as if contained in parentheses).

'Pessimism, when you get used to it, is just as agreeable as optimism.' Arnold Bennett.

'Silence, it has been said by one writer, is a virtue which renders us agreeable to our fellow creatures.' Samuel Butler.

**N.B.** Use a **pair** of commas around the parenthetical phrase.

Use a comma with introductory words, phrases, or clauses.

Right: 'In general, the art of government consists in taking as much money as possible from one class of citizens to give to the other.' Voltaire.

Wrong: After eating the tigers dozed off.

Use commas with dependent clauses that precede the main clause.

'If at first you don't succeed, don't take any more chances.' Kin Hubbard.

Use a comma following the words *for example*, *that is*, *namely*. Punctuation preceding these words depends on the strength of the pause you desire.

'One era's artifacts become another's source of antiques; for example, moustache cups and chamber-pots.'

### **Where not to use the comma**

Commas are omitted if the statements are short and closely related.

'The wise make proverbs and fools repeat them.' Isaac D'Israeli.

'Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely.' Lord Acton.

Do not use a comma between two independent clauses unless they are joined by a conjunction (*and*, *but*, *or*, *nor*, *for*, etc.)

Independent clauses are complete within themselves and can stand as separate sentences. Unless they are joined by a conjunction, they must either be separated by a semicolon or written as two sentences.

Wrong: The Financial Times Index hit a new high, the pound continued to climb in foreign markets.

This sentence uses a comma where a stronger punctuation mark (full stop, semicolon) is needed.

Wrong: The student failed his exams, he simply didn't work.

Right: The student failed his exams; he simply didn't work.

The student failed his exams. He simply didn't work.

Do not separate subject and verb by a comma.

This error often occurs when a comma is placed following the last item in a series, or when the subject is a phrase.

Wrong: Placing a comma between subject and verb, is incorrect.

It is worth remembering that although commas can help the reader, too many commas can create a choppy, abrasive effect that slows down and can antagonise the reader.

### **The Dash**

**Use exceedingly sparingly!**

Use the dash for emphasis, to indicate an abrupt change, or with explanatory words or phrases (instead of commas or parentheses).

'It takes two to speak the truth - one to speak, and another to hear.' Thoreau.

'Always forgive your enemies - nothing annoys them so much.' Oscar Wilde.

**N.B.** Use dashes both before and after a phrase when it is in the middle of a sentence.

'The nature of men and women - their *essential nature* - is so vile and despicable that if you were to portray a person as he really is, no one would believe you.' W.Somerset Maugham.

### **The Ellipsis**

Use an ellipsis to indicate an omission within a quotation.

'Despite my thirty years of research into the feminine soul, I have not yet been able to answer ... the great question ... What does a woman want?' Sigmund Freud.

**Parentheses** (popularly referred to as 'brackets')

**Use sparingly!**

Parentheses are used primarily to de-emphasise explanatory matter (in contrast to dashes, which draw attention to

the elements they set off).

### Parentheses and punctuation

Enclose punctuation associated with complete statements within the parentheses.

(How I wish he would!)

When parentheses fall in the middle of a sentence, punctuation **follows** the closing parenthesis.

I telephoned him when I arrived (as I had promised), but he was not at home.

When a parenthesis falls at the end of a sentence, the closing punctuation **follows** the final parenthesis.

I telephoned him when I arrived (as I had promised).

### The Semicolon

Use a semicolon between independent clauses that are too closely related to be written as separate sentences.

'A neurotic is the man who builds a castle in the air; a psychotic is the man who lives in it; and a psychiatrist is the man who collects the rent.' Lord Webb-Johnson.

'There are two ways of disliking poetry; one way is to dislike it, the other is to read Pope.' Oscar Wilde.

Use a semicolon to separate a series of phrases that already contain commas.

The meeting was attended by Mr Harrison, chairman of the board; Mr White, chief delegate of the consumer groups; Mr Blake, representing the press; and Mr Havers, speaking for the shareholders.

'War is, at first, the hope that one will be better off; next, the expectation that the other fellow will be worse off; then, the satisfaction that he isn't any better off; and finally, the surprise at everyone's being worse off.' Karl Kraus.

N.B. Two independent clauses joined by *however* require either a semicolon or a full stop.

Wrong: Projections were gloomy, however, sales rocketed.

Right: Projections were gloomy; however, sales rocketed.

Use a comma after *however* whenever it is an interruption or suggests contrast with something preceding it (ie. most of the time!). When *however* is used in the sense of 'no matter how', do not use a comma.

'Let him step to the music which he hears however measured or far away.' Thoreau.

Best of luck!

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