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A ROUGH GUIDE TO PUNCTUATION

Good punctuation is crucial for successful academic writing. Many students' essays use little punctuation beyond commas and full stops. But to be restricted to just two forms of punctuation mark, when writing your essay, is like building a house using only a hammer and a saw: you can do it; but not very well. By learning to use more, or all, of the available forms of punctuation you will be able to communicate and express your ideas, and arguments, more clearly.

Full Stop (.)

Full stops have three distinct uses:

- To mark the end of a sentence
- To indicate abbreviated words (unless first and last letters of the word are shown).
- To punctuate numbers and dates

Examples:

The cat is completely black.

The teacher will be John Smith (B. Sci.).

All assignments should be submitted by 6. 6. 03.

Colon (:)

- A colon can be used to indicate that a list, quotation or summary is about to follow.
- A colon can also be used to separate an initial sentence/clause from a second clause, list, phrase or quotation that supports the first in a particular way.

Examples:

Buy these things: a packet of peanuts, two loaves of bread and a kilogram of steak.

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Apostrophe (')

There are two uses for the apostrophe:

1. Contractions

A contraction is a shortened version of a word. An apostrophe is used to show that something has been left out, and where it has been left out.

2. Possessives

An apostrophe is used to indicate ownership/ possession with nouns. To show ownership by a single individual, insert the apostrophe between the noun and the 's'. To show ownership by more than one individual, use the apostrophe at the end of the word.

Be careful: *It's* is the contraction of 'it is'. *It's* is not a possessive (a possessive denotes ownership).

Examples:

don't (do not) It'll (It will) she'll (she will) It's too cold to go swimming today.

I don't think she'll come to the party.

the dog's tail (belonging to a single dog)

the women's magazines

boys' football boots (belonging to more than one boy)

Einstein's theory of relativity

The dog is chasing its own tail!

Semicolon (;)

- ⦿ Separates two complete sentences that are closely linked. The semicolon can be replaced by a full stop, but the direct link between the two parts is lost.
- ⦿ A semicolon also serves as a second level of punctuation in a series of words or phrases which already have commas, making some internal divisions.

Examples:

To err is human; to forgive, divine.

Don't go near the lions; they could bite you.

She came out of the house, which had a long drive, and saw the police officer at the end of the path; but instead of continuing towards him, she hid until he left.

Question Mark (?)

- ⦿ A question mark is used at the end of a sentence which is a question.

Examples:

Have the students completed the exam?

Comma (,)

- ⦿ Commas are used in longer sentences to separate information into readable units. A single comma ensures correct reading of a sentence which starts with a long introductory element.
- ⦿ Pairs of commas help in the middle of a sentence to set off any string of words which is either a parenthesis, or in contrast, to whatever went before.
- ⦿ A set of commas is a means of separating items in a list within a sentence.
- ⦿ Sometimes a comma is needed between the last two items to ensure clarity.

Examples:

When Australia celebrated its sesquicentenary in 1938, there was a little of the confidence or enthusiasm of the centennial celebrations of 1888.

Yet in representing ourselves to ourselves, as film and television do, these media are constantly introducing and reinforcing the assumptions.

The details required are name, date of birth, address and telephone number. The main divisions of the economy are agriculture, manufacturing, and service industries.

Hyphen (-)

When used correctly, a hyphen links two or more words, that normally would not be placed together, in order that they work as one idea and these are called compound nouns.

Examples:

Stonier's post-industrial economy is a service economy.

There are four types of information-related machines.

Dashes (—)

- ⊗ Hyphens are not the same as dashes. Dashes are like brackets; they enclose extra information. A colon and semi-colon would work just as well in the example opposite. Dashes are rarely used in academic writing.
- ⊗ Although often used in pairs, dashes can also be used singularly.

Examples:

To the three divisions of the economy—agriculture, manufacturing, and service industries—Jones has added a fourth.

Have an orange—or would you prefer a banana?

While the importance of sport to Pay TV is clear, the opposite perspective is less certain—the importance of Pay TV to sport.

Parentheses ()

- ⊗ Parentheses are brackets used to include extra or nonessential material in sentences. Parentheses should be used sparingly and always appear in pairs.
- ⊗ In citation systems like Harvard, parentheses are used to include in-text references.

Examples:

It was unusual to see Paul awake so early (as he often studied late into the night) and Jane greeted him with amazement.

Larsen and Greene (1989) studied the effects of pollution in three major cities.

“Australia is a settler society” (Hudson & Bolton 1997, p. 9).

Exclamation Mark (!)

- ⌚ An exclamation mark is used at the end of a sentence and indicates surprise, anger, or alarm.
- ⌚ Exclamation marks should be used very sparingly and are not often used in academic writing.

Examples:

The police stormed in and arrested her!

How disgraceful!

Ellipsis (...)

- ⌚ An ellipsis consists of three full stops. It indicates that material has been left out of a quotation.
- ⌚ When quoting, it is sometimes necessary to leave out words or lines for reasons of relevance or length. Using an ellipsis makes any omissions known to your reader.

Examples:

“But to be restricted to just two forms of punctuation mark ... is like building a house using only a hammer and a saw: you can do it; but not very well.”