

Basic Punctuation: A Summary

Apostrophe

We use the apostrophe in two ways:

1. To show missing letters when words are shortened: He's got a really fast car.
2. To show possession; for example: This is Miguel's car.

Please note:

- a. Apostrophes are not used to show missing letters in academic writing. Instead, words are written in full.
- b. In possessives, the position of the apostrophe is determined by singular or plural:

Example: Can you carry the girl's bags? (before the "s" in singular nouns)
 Can you carry the girls' bags? (after the "s" in plural nouns)

Capitals

We capitalize:

- Proper nouns
- The first word in a sentence
- A person's title, when it comes before their name
- Every word in a title, except for a, an, the, and, etc.
- The first word in a quoted sentence: Johan said: "Make sure you see the show."

Colon

Correct use of the colon can enrich your writing. Its function is to introduce something that follows:

- A list; for example: We need some groceries: sugar, milk and bread.
- A quotation; for example: The professor stated: "This course is the best."
- A question; for example: The question is: Do you think it will rain?
- A conclusion; for example: The conclusion was: "It's all over."
- An example; for example: There is one word you cannot overuse: please.

We also use a colon:

- For formal salutations: Prime Minister: Dear Mrs Smith: Honourable Members:
- To separate the hour and minute(s) in a time notation; for example: 10:30 p.m.
- To separate the chapter and verse in a Biblical reference; for example: Matthew 1:6.

Comma

Mastering the comma will improve your writing. Use it to:

- Itemize; for example: Make sure you order some pens, binders, rulers and paper.
- Separate persons and names: Nazia, what did you say?
- Add an additional thought; for example: His advice was, generally speaking, encouraging.
- Emphasize; for example: I was scared, really scared.
- Balance comparisons; for example: The more I looked, the more I saw.

Dash and hyphen

A dash is used in the construction of sentences. A hyphen is used in the construction of words. The dash can be used to:

- Link; for example: The colours of the flag are very vibrant – orange, black and green.
- Pause; for example: She apologized with a smile – as usual.
- Interrupt; for example “I have to tell you – and I apologize in advance – that she will not see you.”
- Extend a sentence; for example: He walked in the room, looked around – and quietly left.
- Separate a list; for example: She threw the lot at me – plates, cups, sausages – and stormed out.

Exclamation mark

Wise use of the exclamation mark can improve your writing. Overuse can kill it!!! We use it:

- To command; for example: “Get out!”
- To convey irony or emphasize insults; for example: “That’ll be right!” or “You idiot!”
- To convey great surprise, anger or disgust; for example: “I won!” or “It’s itchy!”

Quotation mark

Double or single? The choice is yours, but having made your choice, stick with it: be consistent.

- Quotation marks indicate direct speech: they show the exact words someone has spoken.
- Example: The professor said, “If your paper is late, it will be ungraded.”
- Don’t use quotation marks if you are paraphrasing what someone has said.
- Example: The professor said that if our papers are late, we won’t get a grade.
- Capitalize the first letter of the word that begins a quotation.

Semicolon

Some of the main uses of the semicolon include:

- To join independent clauses that are closely related; for example: “I’m not going to help him; he never offers to help me.”
- To separate word groups that already contain commas; for example: The Student Council was composed of Abbas Mohammed, President; Sri Hartini, Vice President; James Taylor, Treasurer and Carolyn Johnson, Secretary
- To emphasize opposite statements and contrast; for example: “I loved the car; pity about the colour.”
- Semicolons are often found in phrases that use transitional words, such as: after all, as a result of, for example, however, in addition, in fact, therefore, and thus. The sentence above could be improved to read: “I’m not going to help him; after all, he never offers to help me.”

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