Punctuation helps sentence structure

When speaking, we can use pauses and gestures to clarify the meaning of our words. In written communication, punctuation such as commas, dashes, colons, and semicolons, provide most of these interpretation clues. They are signals to the reader that indicate a pause, place emphasis, alter the function or show the relationship between elements of the text.

Misplaced or insufficient punctuation can change the meaning unintentionally and create ambiguity. Well-used punctuation, on the other hand, can enhance clarity.

“Proper punctuation is both the sign and the cause of clear thinking.”

(Truss, 2003: p. 202)

A functional approach

The following sections give an overview of some important punctuation principles that can help to express ideas and arguments more clearly. This means that, instead of providing strict rules, the function of a punctuation mark determines whether it is necessary or not. This approach allows for some flexibility. However, for good academic writing it is important to be consistent in the use of punctuation marks.

Commas

“I have spent most of the day putting in a comma and the rest of the day taking it out.”

Oscar Wilde

Many writers place a comma where they would pause when they read the sentence aloud. Although the function of a comma is to mark a break in the continuity of a sentence, this break might not always coincide with a pause when speaking. The comma attempts to enhance clarity by separating and grouping words, phrases and clauses into meaningful units.

1. Use commas to separate items in a list:

- The solution consisted of water, ethanol and sodium chloride.

A comma before the ‘and’ is optional, but can be useful if the list of items is very long:

- Writing a research report involves giving a description of the methodology, summarising the results, and interpreting the results in the discussion section.

2. Use commas to separate independent clauses in a compound sentence, for example, clauses linked by and, but, for, or, so, yet:

- Australia is closest to Asia, yet it still has strong links to Europe.

However, don’t use a comma:

- if the clauses aren’t independent.
- between independent clauses without conjunctions. Instead, use a semicolon, insert a conjunction, or form two sentences.

- Experts have discussed the problem for a while, but have not found a solution.
- Experts have discussed the problem for a while but have not found a solution.
- Experts have discussed the problem for a while, they have not found a solution.
- Experts have discussed the problem for a while. They have not found a solution.

3. Use commas to: 1) separate the main clause and the subordinate clause. 2) set off conjunctive adverbs (which are formal ‘transitional words’ used to modify a whole clause. For example, certainly, finally, furthermore, however, in addition):

- The outcome would have been different, if the election had been held before the scandal.
- The outcome would have been different if the election had been held before the scandal.
- Experts have discussed the problem for a while, but have not found a solution.
- Experts have discussed the problem for a while. They have not found a solution.

- The French revolution, despite ending in brutal repression, heralded the change to democratic governments all over Europe.
- The test results, however, are not conclusive.
- Only students who passed the exams are allowed to enrol in this course.
- Only students, who passed the exams, are allowed to enrol in this course.
Curved brackets / parentheses () and dashes — can also be used to set off parenthetical elements but should be used very sparingly in academic writing. Placing or omitting commas can change the meaning substantially. Compare:

✓ All of the subjects who were over 40 years old returned the questionnaire.

**Meaning:** Some of the subjects were over 40 years old. Those who were over 40 years old returned the questionnaire.

✓ All of the subjects, who were over 40 years old, returned the questionnaire.

**Meaning:** All of the subjects returned the questionnaire. They were all over 40 years old.

**5. Use commas to avoid ambiguity or confusion:**

- After writing an essay needs to be proofread for punctuation and spelling.
- After writing, an essay needs to be proofread for punctuation and spelling.
- A short time after the experiment was terminated.
- A short time after, the experiment was terminated.

**Dashes**

There are two kinds of dashes; the **em dash** and the **en dash**.

- The em dash is the width of the letter ‘m’. There is no space between the words either side of the em dash. 
  E.g. Today’s exam—the morning one—is in the library.

- The en dash is the width of the letter ‘n’. En dashes can have a space before and after.
  E.g. … trees aged 20 – 30 years are …

Dashes are not to be confused with the hyphen, which joins words together to create ‘composite’ words. It is shorter than a dash.

1. **Use the em or en dash to separate a phrase from the rest of the sentence:**

- My report—the one you read yesterday—is being published.
- The essay consists of three sections—introduction, body and conclusion.

**Works Cited**


**Further Resources**


These websites provide information and exercises on the use of punctuation marks:

- Capital Community College: [http://grammar.ccc.commnet.edu/grammar/marks/marks.htm](http://grammar.ccc.commnet.edu/grammar/marks/marks.htm)
- Online Writing Lab at OWL at Purdue University: [http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/grammar/index.html#punctuation](http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/grammar/index.html#punctuation)