Punctuation

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***):**

✓ *If the election had been held before the scandal, the outcome would have been different.*

✓ *However, the poem also provides insight into the daily life of workers at the time.*

However, don't use a comma if a subordinate clause comes after the main clause

✗ *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.*

4. Use commas to enclose parenthetical (non-defining) elements. Note that these elements can be removed from the sentence without affecting its meaning or structure:

✓ *The French revolution, despite ending in brutal repression, heralded the change to democratic governments all over Europe.*

✓ *The test results, however, are not conclusive.*

However, don't use a comma for elements that are defining and therefore essential:

✗ *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.*

Colons & Semicolons

1. Use a semicolon (;) to closely link two independent clauses:

✓ *Some of the studies seem to confirm the theory; others appear to refute it.*

2. Use semicolons to separate items in a list if the items contain commas:

✓ *The contributors are Marie Noël, Professor of History; Stephen White, Research Fellow in Media Studies; and Wu Ming, lecturer at the IT Research Institute.*

3. Use a colon (:) after an independent clause to introduce amplifications, examples, explanations, lists or long quotations:

✓ The results confirmed the theory: black cars are more often involved in accidents.

However, when the items listed in the sentence are the objects, don't use a colon to introduce them:

✗ *The solution consisted of: water, ethanol and sodium chloride.*
✓ *The solution consisted of water, ethanol and sodium chloride.*

✗ *They went to the shop and bought: bread, milk and soap.*
✓ *They went to the shop and bought bread, milk and soap.*

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 main reason for using dashes is to add emphasis to the information that is enclosed by them. Dashes can do this more effectively than the comma. However, commas interrupt the flow of the sentence the least and are best for enclosing non-essential information. Dashes should be used sparingly because they can slow down the reading process by interrupting the sentence flow. Check whether your style guide gives a preference to either em or en dashes, and use them consistently.

However, don't use a dash instead of a colon in formal academic writing:

✗ *The essay consists of three sections—introduction, body and conclusion.*
✓ *The essay consists of three sections: introduction, body and conclusion.*

2. Use the en dash to link words or numbers in pairs:

✓ *Refer to pages 80–85.*
✓ *The study will examine parent–child relationships.*

3. Avoid confusing dashes with hyphens:

✗ *The editor—in—chief is proofreading the document.*
✓ *The editor-in-chief is proofreading the document.*

Works Cited

Truss, L. (2003). *Eats, shoots and leaves: the zero tolerance approach to punctuation*. London: Profile Books.

Further Resources

McKenzie, M. (2001). *Handbook for writers and editors*. Melbourne: Dundas Press
These websites provide information and exercises on the use of punctuation marks:
Capital Community College:
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