Punctuation: hints and tips

Aim of this factsheet

To highlight the importance of correct punctuation, and to provide hints and tips to help you with this.

Introduction

Punctuation and grammar errors can lead to lower grades, so make sure you avoid the common pitfalls by understanding the basic rules. The Academic Skills team do not teach English language skills, but have provided some useful hints and tips in this factsheet to help you to get started.

‘The main function of punctuation is to support meaning’ (Sinclair, 2007, p. 90).

Correct punctuation aids clarity and readability. McMillan and Weyers (2007) explain that punctuation helps to send signals to the reader that replace the gestures, intonation and pauses which are available to a presenter. However, it is important to use the correct punctuation mark for each function.

Punctuation marks to avoid in academic writing

- Question mark: is it true that you should not be posing questions in your academic work? (Yes, in most cases).
- Exclamation mark: it is true that you should not usually use exclamation marks in academic work!

Top tip

Read your work aloud as if you were delivering a presentation and be sure to pause at the punctuation appropriately; do not race through it. Ensure you can make sense of what you have written. If it sounds wrong it almost certainly is wrong. If you cannot make sense of it, others will struggle. Think about what you are trying to explain, and consult the table below (and the other resources listed if needed) to help you to identify the appropriate punctuation to use.

Punctuation marks and how you might use them

Please note that this table covers only a few of the most common ways in which you may use these punctuation marks; for fuller information and guidance see the resources listed at the end of this factsheet or on our Punctuation libguide page. There is also more information in our friendly guide to punctuation, which is available at http://libguides.staffs.ac.uk/punctuation_student.
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| Apostrophe ‘      | In academic writing, the apostrophe can only be used to show that there is an element of possession (and should not be used for contractions, such as can’t or won’t, as contractions are not formal). | (Singular) It was necessary to discuss the student’s results with her in person.  
(Plural) All of the students’ results were posted on Blackboard. |
| Colon :          | You may use a colon to introduce a list. | Essential study skills include: academic writing; academic reading; critical thinking and time management.  
Academic skills are considered essential for the successful student: they develop skills which are transferable in the workplace. |
| Comma ,         | Commas can be used to separate items in a list.  
They can also separate parts of a sentence, or introduce additional information.  
They can be used after some introductory words at the start of sentences. | Staffordshire University has campuses at Stoke, Stafford, Shrewsbury and Lichfield.  
Driving above the speed limit, regardless of the reason, is an offence.  
Finally, from the results it would appear that... |
| Ellipsis …      | In academic writing, three dots – ellipsis – can be used to indicate missing words within a direct quotation. This can occur at the beginning, end or in the middle of a sentence.  
However, if using this technique you must ensure that you still accurately represent the meaning of the original source. | Sinclair (2007, p. 93) states that ‘… punctuation is used by skilful authors to create an effect.’  
‘Punctuation is used by skilful authors...’  
‘Punctuation is used... to create an effect.’ |
<p>| Full stop .     | A full stop is used to denote the end of a sentence, when a statement or point is complete. | The student often used full stops partway through a sentence, where a comma would be more... |</p>
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<td>The next sentence must then begin with a capital letter. You may need to break up a particular point into several sentences, depending on its complexity, in order to avoid long sentences that wander.</td>
<td>appropriate as the point was not yet complete. He also sometimes forgot to use a capital letter at the beginning of a new sentence. He found that reading his work aloud helped him to identify when he had reached the end of a sentence, and he found that he was then able to correct the punctuation in his work.</td>
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| Hyphen -         | A hyphen can be used to join two words together to make a compound word. They are also used with some prefixes (such as pre-, non- and co-). If you are unsure of whether or not a word requires a hyphen (such as post-modern or postmodern, re-book or rebook) you should look the word up in a dictionary. | Part-time
Semi-circle
Non-statutory
Co-operation                                                                                                                                                                                             |
| Semi-colon ;     | A semi-colon is used to separate a list of items, particularly where each item has several words and use of commas may become complicated or confusing. It can also act as a conjunction (join) when two related points or phrases are of equal importance. | Essential study skills include: academic writing; academic reading; critical thinking; effective research skills; and time management. He did not appreciate the importance of effective time management; he also made the error of trying to remember referencing rules rather than looking them up. |
References / Further Reading


For an appointment or further advice:

Click:  http://libguides.staffs.ac.uk/AcademicSkills
Call:  01785 353500
Email:  academicskills@staffs.ac.uk
Visit:  Skills Space, Thompson Library, Stoke / Blackheath Lane, Stafford / Shrewsbury Hospital

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