



Writing Clearly: Punctuation

Study Development Factsheet

Punctuation marks indicate pauses and logical links. The place or absence of punctuation can therefore completely change the meaning of a sentence. Compare:

‘A woman, without her man, is nothing.’

‘A woman: without her, man is nothing.’

Punctuation marks play different roles, indicating the relationship between the central part of the sentence and additional information.

Full Stop .	To mark the end of a sentence
Colon :	To introduce a list
	To introduce a quotation
	To introduce an explanation or illustration
Semi-Colon ;	To join full sentences which are closely connected (optional, can be replaced by a full stop)
	To separate items in a list when the items contain commas
Comma ,	To insert extra information, when used in pairs
	To separate items in a list
	Before a new part of the sentence starting with ‘but’, ‘or’, ‘so’ etc.
	To mark off a word or a phrase at the start or end of the sentence

We often place a comma where we would pause when reading, but this is not always correct.

When proofreading your work, count the commas in each sentence and ask yourself:

- Are they necessary?
- Should one of them be a full stop?
- Do they follow the rules given above?

If you're not sure, think about what you really want to say and re-write the sentence.



Apostrophes

Apostrophes are used for two purposes:

1. To mark possession: Laura's book; children's toys; St James's Hospital; one student's essay; several students' essays.

 2. To indicate contradiction: don't = do not; it's = it is or it has. You should not use contractions in formal or academic writing.
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Possession

1. When the owner does not already end in –s, add 's:

- The author's key finding (discussing one author)
- The study's conclusion (just one study)
- Dr Smith's latest publication
- Children's services

2. When the owner ends in –s and is in the plural, just add an apostrophe after the final 's':

- The researchers' hypothesis (discussing several researchers)
- The studies' conclusion (several studies)

3. When the owner's name ends in –s in the singular, make sure you do not change the spelling of their name. You can add 's or just an apostrophe: both spellings are OK:

- Professor Jones' lecture
- St James's Hospital

4. Indicating periods of time follows the same rules as possession, where the apostrophe could be replaced by 'of':

- One month's notice
- Twelve days' delay



The apostrophe is not necessary when indicating possession with 'it'. For example:

The study was ground-breaking because its findings highlighted factors that had never previously been considered.

It's (with an apostrophe) is a contracted form of it is / it has and therefore is not common in academic writing.

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