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Punctuation Marks

The Apostrophe

The apostrophe joined the other punctuation marks in the 16th century; originating from Greek and meaning *omission*. Its sole purpose in life was to indicate a missing letter or letters. Hence:

He’d	for	He had
It’s	for	it is
Could’ve	for	could have (note: not could of)
Should’ve	for	should have (note: not should of)
Who’s	for	who is
What’s	for	what is
They’ll	for	they will
I’m	for	I am
Can’t	for	cannot
Won’t	for	will not

By the 17th century its role had been expanded to cover ‘belonging to it’, known as the singular possessive.

Mike’s bike	meaning	the bike belonging to Mike
The family’s pet	meaning	the pet belonging to the family
The mower’s blade	meaning	the blade belonging to the mower
The car’s engine	meaning	the engine belonging to the car
The dog’s	meaning	belonging to the dog

From the 18th century, this versatile punctuation mark’s role included indicating the plural possessive. Note that the apostrophe goes after the S.

The families’ home	meaning	the home belonging to the families
The boys’ mother	meaning	the mother belonging to the boys
The dogs’ bones	meaning	the bones belonging to the dogs
The cars’ tyres	meaning	the tyres belonging to the cars

The possession rule is also used to cover phrases like:

A month’s holiday	meaning	a holiday of one month
Five minutes’ delay	meaning	a delay of five minutes

A good rule of thumb is that an apostrophe is never used to make a plural. The phrase 1960’s is always wrong; it should be 1960s or ‘60s if you feel pretentious. Every rule seems to have an exception, and the exception here is common sense really. If you don’t use an apostrophe how can you write do’s and don’t’s ?? (i.e. the plural of words and letters).

In summary, the main uses for the apostrophe are:

1. Indicate an omission
2. Indicate a singular possessive
3. Indicate a plural possessive

The Full Stop .

Main uses

The full stop is used to mark the end of a sentence when it is a statement (and not a question or exclamation).

In abbreviations where the first and last letters are different e.g. Weds, Gen, p.m. etc. But not in abbreviations where the first and last letters are the same e.g. Dr, Mr, and Mrs (Mrs being an abbreviation of mistress – well how about that then?).

Three full stops in sequence, known as an ellipsis, are used to mark an omission, especially when forming an incomplete quotation.

He left the room, banged the door, **...** and went out.

The full stop is also used to represent a decimal point (10.5 per cent; £1.78), and to divide hours and minutes in giving time (7.15 p.m.). Please note that using a colon (7:15 p.m.) is American.

The Question Mark ?

This is used in place of the full stop to show that the preceding sentence is a question:

e.g. Do you mind if I explode**?**

It is not used when the question is implied by indirect speech or the question is rhetorical:

e.g. I asked you if you minded a small detonation.

The Exclamation Mark !

This is used after an exclamatory word, phrase or sentence expressing any of the following:

Meaning	Example
Absurdity	What an idea**!**
Command or warning	Look out**!**
Contempt or disgust	That's disgusting**!**
Emotion or pain	Ouch**!** I hate you**!**
Enthusiasm	I'd love to play**!**
Wish or regret	If only I could spell**!**
Wonder, admiration or surprise	Aren't they beautiful**!**

The Semicolon ;

The main role for the semicolon is to link sentences that are closely associated or that complement each other. It tells the reader that there is more to come**;** the writer hasn't finished yet**;** it gently urges you on to the next part of the sentence.

Without:

Fares were offered to Corfu, the Greek island, Morocco, Elba, in the Mediterranean, and Paris. Margaret thought about it. She had been to Elba once and found it dull, to Morocco, and found it too colourful.

With:

Fares were offered to Corfu, the Greek island**;** Morocco**;** Elba, in the Mediterranean**;** and Paris. Margaret thought about it. She had been to Elba once and found it dull**;** to Morocco, and found it too colourful.

With thanks to Lynne Truss, who describes the example above as 'special policeman semicolon sorting out a comma fight'.

The semicolon is also used before linking words such as however – nevertheless – also - consequently and hence, to give stronger emphasis.

Without:

He woke up in his own bed, and he felt fine.

With:

He woke up in his own bed**;** nevertheless, he felt fine.

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The Colon :

The main use for the colon is to link two statements in a sentence where the second statement reaffirms, explains, undermines, balances or illustrates the first**:** it announces what is to come.

H. W. Fowler said: ' the colon delivers the goods that have been invoiced in the preceding words '.

Examples:

We don't just like working here**:** we love it.

I can find only three things wrong with this report, Fred**:** the beginning, the middle and the end.

The colon is also used to introduce a list.

e.g. The following materials will be required: a pencil, paper, rubber chicken and table mat.
e.g. News reaches us from two sources: the news agency and reporters.

It is used to show antithesis.

e.g. sometimes I eat chocolate: sometimes I do not.

It is used to announce; a sort of written ‘Tadah!’

e.g. Ben only had one rule: never eat anything bigger than your head.
e.g. I want to tell you something: there is a rabbit under the shed.

The Comma ,

There are some clear rules for the use of the comma, but, after they have been covered, it can all get a bit messy; open to heated debate and generally unpleasant. This is because the comma, the literary equivalent of a sheepdog tidying up sentences, is asked to perform two distinct functions.

To:

- Illuminate the grammar of a sentence.

- Point up – rather in the manner of musical notation – qualities like rhythm, direction, pitch, tone and flow.

But first: the simple rules. Commas are used:

- In lists.
- Before reported speech.
- To mark out additional information.

Commas are used to separate a series of **nouns** or **phrases** in a list.

e.g. You will require a book**,** pen**,** pencil**,** rubber and ruler.

e.g. The company included ambassadors**,** bishops**,** cabinet ministers and traffic wardens.

Commas are always put after each item in the series up to the last but one. Practice varies about putting a comma after the and (known as the Oxford comma) and before the last item. Personally, I would do so if I wished to add a pause for emphasis.

e.g. The company included ambassadors**,** bishops**,** cabinet ministers and**,** (wait for it wait for it) traffic wardens.

Commas before **reported speech**.

Andy said**,** "who invited the traffic wardens?" Andy went on to say, "… anyway, they ate all the chocolates."

Commas are also used to mark out a clause containing **additional information** within a sentence.

e.g. Keith**,** who was always happy**,** has gone up North with Juanita.
e.g. The rings of Saturn**,** which can be seen clearly with a pair of binoculars**,** are mostly made of dust.

Care does need to be taken to make sure that the bit between the commas is not defining.

e.g. The lorries, on their way to Scotland, refuelled at Watford Gap.

Meaning all lorries refuelled at Watford Gap.

e.g. The lorries on their way to Scotland refuelled at Watford Gap.

Meaning only the lorries on their way to Scotland refuelled.

Some of the remaining uses are:

Commas are usually inserted between **adjectives** coming before a **noun**.

e.g. A large, bright pink, beach umbrella.
e.g. A short, sharp, shock.

But, (there's always a but isn't there), the comma is omitted when the last adjective has a closer relationship to the noun than the others. Or to put it another way, the sentence works well on its own without any further interference.

e.g. A little old lady. An endangered white rhino. An Australian red wine.

Commas are used to **join** two sentences.

e.g. Ian wanted to go to Wales, but he did not know where it was.
e.g. Chris eats a lot of biscuits, Sarah does as well.

Commas are used with **adverbs** or **adverbial phrases** at the beginning of sentences.

e.g. In practice, it has been found necessary to.....
e.g. In their absence, we found it better to.....

And finally, for the purposes of this guide anyway, commas are used to prevent **ambiguity**.
Consider the following examples:

Two miles on, the road is worse.
Two miles on the road, is worse.

Go get him, surgeons.
Go, get him surgeons.

He shot himself as a child.
He shot, himself, as a child.

No dogs please.
No dogs, please.

Quote Marks

The convention, in the United Kingdom, is to use double quote marks (**“**) at the beginning and end of the quotation, and single quote marks (**‘**) for any quotations within the quotation.

The rules for where to place the punctuation marks are also very simple and logical. When the punctuation relates to the quotation, the marks go inside the quotes marks; when it relates to the sentence, it goes outside.

e.g. “do I really have to go shopping?” cried Sarah.
e.g. Repeatedly making the statement “ …but I believe in Father Christmas” is seriously calling your judgement into question.

All of the above is fine and dandy unless you are in America; but we are not; so that’s ok then.

Brackets

Brackets come in pairs (please try and remember this as people can get quite nervous if you forget to close them; it’s a bit like waiting for the other shoe to drop). They are used to: add information, to explain, to illustrate, to clarify.
Over use of brackets, however, is indicative of someone who has not thought carefully about what they are trying to say.

Dash

The dash is really coming into its own these days – with the increasing use of e-mails – text messages – and general literary shorthand. It’s just so convenient. It encourages us to be lazy – ignore punctuation completely – and generally get very sloppy. It is very difficult to use a dash wrongly, so yippee for the dash! Over use, however, does tend to create a sort of breathless, headlong, dizzy style of writing.

Here are some legitimate uses for the dash:

In **pairs** like weak brackets

Andy was (and I still can’t believe this) still moaning about the traffic wardens.

Andy was - and I still can’t believe this - still moaning about the traffic wardens.

When spoken aloud, there is very little difference between the two but on paper, the brackets seem to exclude the phrase while the dash includes it.

To introduce an **explanation, clarification** or **amplification**

Thailand– formerly known as Siam – is a premier tourist destination.

To gather up the **subject** of a sentence when it is very long or to introduce a **humorous** or **whimsical** ending.

e.g.

A little still she strove, and much repented.
And whispering, "I will ne'er consent" –
Consented. Byron

Hyphen

Finally, the humble hyphen. I feel a bit of a soft-spot for the humble hyphen having one of my very own, but much has been written about its pending demise. Woodrow Wilson said the hyphen was, " the most un-American thing in the world", which is quite amusing really as you can't say un-American without one.

Some words simply have to be hyphenated in order to make **sense**. There are, for example, huge differences between the phrases

A long-standing friend	and	a long standing friend.
Extra-marital sex	and	extra marital sex
A cross-channel ferry	and	a cross channel ferry

Similarly, a re-formed alcoholic makes sense and a re formed alcoholic is something I would very much like to see. On the other hand, I would not like to meet a cross section of the public.