

Punctuation Marks

Introduction

Punctuation is important and sometimes even essential to meaning, as the following two examples illustrate:

- i. The accused said the magistrate was a public menace.
- ii. The accused, said the magistrate, was a public menace.

As you can see, the omission or inclusion of the comma, which is the most frequently used and abused punctuation mark, can change the entire meaning of a sentence.

If you are not sure about punctuation especially when it comes to an assignment for which you will be graded, it is very much in your interests to carefully check your work. There are various guides to assignment writing which offer helpful advice on punctuation, but sometimes it can be hard to find exactly what you want.

This point can be made emphatically clear by a quick look at '**A Manual for Writers**', in which the author, Kate Turabian, presents eight pages of advice on using quotation marks.

Thus, the very business of checking your punctuation **can** be both difficult and time consuming. Nevertheless, it is your responsibility and the effort put into it will be rewarded.

When to Punctuate

At degree level, punctuation must be systematic, if it is to make clear the relationship between the parts of a sentence (as already outlined in the introduction) and indicate the tone, feeling and emphasis we give to words in our speech.

In spoken language we make these distinctions by such actions as: pausing, changing pitch and volume, altering our pace, and employing various gestures and expressions. When it comes to writing we have to fall back on punctuation to help us get across these aspects of 'meaning'.

Punctuation Marks

You may not need to use all of the ten punctuation marks discussed herein but you will have to use most of them. It is very important that you do things correctly. (The examples given are illustrative of correct usage, but are not definitive.)

Full stop (.)

This is used:

- at the end of a sentence
- at the end of abbreviations and initials

(if your sentence ends with an abbreviation such as *etc.* only use one full stop, do not write *etc..*)

Question marks (?)

This is used:

- at the end of a sentence asking a question
- before a word or expression which may be doubted (for example, Socrates, born?500BC)

Exclamation mark (!)

This is used:

- after any exclamatory word or phrase (e.g., Stop! Oh no!)
- at the end of a sentence which is exclamatory (e.g., Go to your room immediately!)

Comma (,)

This is used:

- to separate the main parts of a sentence where the second part is not closely identified with the first (e.g., Children should use this entrance, and adults should use that one.)
- to avoid momentary misunderstandings (e.g., On the floor below, the apartments are much smaller.)
- to separate items in a list (e.g., salt, pepper and vinegar.)
- after a salutation (e.g., Dear Sir,)
- to separate groups of figures in numbers of four figures or more (e.g., 10,000.)