



The Essay Writer's Guide to Punctuation

Punctuation is vital to a well-written academic essay, as it appears in every sentence you write. This guide will look at how punctuation can be used to improve the style and flow of your essay, and some common errors that should be avoided.

• The Full Stop

All grammatically complete sentences will end with a full stop. As always, there are some exceptions to this rule, for instance, headings, subtitles and bullet points would not finish with a full stop. A full stop indicates a mental and visual break. Try reading your assignment aloud, and if you find yourself running out of breath, you might need to drop a few more in. Additionally, full stops are used in abbreviations such *e.g.* or *i.e.*, but you should always opt for the fuller form in your essay.

, The Comma

The comma is one of the most important pieces of punctuation in academic writing but is often the most overused and misused. A typical sentence should contain one or two commas. If you have more than three, you might want to consider breaking your sentences down into smaller parts. A comma should be used for the following purposes:

- ⚙ To separate items in a list *i.e.* This essay will consider child language acquisition in terms of imitation, modelling, child-directed speech and parent-child interactions.
- ⚙ To signify introductory or transitional words and phrases *i.e.* However, research has found...
- ⚙ To separate two independent clauses¹ *i.e.* Research has suggested that child-language acquisition is largely parent-driven, but also biologically determined.

Comma splicing is a common mistake in writing. It occurs when grammatically complete sentences are separated by a comma, for example: Child language acquisition is reliant on both parents engaging with their child, this is a factor that is not considered in earlier research on the topic.

If you read this sentence aloud there is a swift pause in a place that doesn't seem right. Comma splicing is a mistake that will impact upon the clarity and precision of your writing, and potentially

¹ Use the acronym FANBOYS to know which words are coordinating conjunctions which will require a comma. F = for, A = and, N = nor, B = but (not because!), O = or, Y = yet and S = so (Enago Academy, 2018).

elongate sentences unnecessarily. Read your sentences aloud in order to find errant commas and try reformulating long strings of text into smaller sentences.

? The Question Mark

Question marks are used at the end of sentences that are framed as questions. Questions can be:

- ⦿ Direct *i.e.* How do we know that this research is valid?
- ⦿ Indirect *i.e.* Would you know the difference between the homophones affect and effect?
- ⦿ Rhetorical *i.e.* Foreign policy is currently in a state of flux. Who will pay the price?

In essay writing, questions aren't typically asked, and even though rhetorical questions are a powerful writing technique, they should be avoided. Osmond (2013) recommends that if your writing naturally asks your reader a question, you should also provide an answer.

Question marks can also be used in academic writing for formatting and functional purposes (Walden University, 2018):

- ⦿ If a title has a question mark, you should always include it *i.e.* *Who Loses from Brexit?* is a paper that looks at the impact of Britain's departure from the EU on citizens across the country.
- ⦿ In quotations *i.e.*, Smith (2009: p.10) asks the question "Who is culpable for the misinformation of a nation?"

! The Exclamation Mark

The exclamation mark is the most controversial piece of punctuation in all kinds of writing. In terms of academic writing, an exclamation mark should never make an appearance in your academic writing, unless you are using a direct quote from an author who used one.

⋮ The Colon

The most common use for a colon in writing is to signal the beginning of a list or to denote an example:

i.e. Several groups were surveyed for the study: students, lecturers and business support staff.

A colon can also be used within a sentence if the first part of a sentence requires elaboration. Typically, the first half of the sentence will pose a problem, and the second half will reply:

i.e. The results of the survey were varied amongst the groups: students had a higher level of satisfaction than staff.

Colons are also used for block quotations, to indicate a break in the format of an essay.

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The Semi-colon

The function of semi-colons in academic writing can be confusing to some, but they can be useful when you have a limited word count and need to be succinct.

- Join two independent clauses *i.e.* The psychology of gender can be considered as a duality of perspective. Some believe it is determined by the environment; others believe it is biologically ordained.
- Join two independent clauses with an adverb *i.e.* The study demonstrated difficulty in obtaining participants; moreover, difficulty was experienced in acquiring a location too.
- To separate elements in a series that already contains commas *i.e.* The most common student responses were: black, red and blue; Monday, Tuesday and Thursday; and February, April and May.

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The Apostrophe

Think of apostrophes as the 'jealous' punctuation mark. In academic writing it is used to demonstrate possession, and its placement will depend on who the possession belongs to.

- Singular possessive *i.e.* Tarrt's novel (1999) *The Secret History*...
- Plural possessive (regular) *i.e.* The Nurses' association published a code of ethics.
- Plural possessive (irregular) *i.e.* Children's literature will be made more freely because of the study.

The apostrophe is also used to indicate a contraction; two words which have been shortened into one, such as *can't*, *don't* or *wouldn't*. You should use the fuller forms of these words in your academic writing, for instance *cannot*, *do not* or *would not*.

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The Hyphen/Dash

Technically, the hyphen and the dash are two separate pieces of punctuation, but they are considered too informal for academic writing with one of their uses, so you need only concern yourself with using them in compound nouns. A compound noun is a word made up of two nouns, joined together with a hyphen, *i.e.* peer-reviewed.

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Quotation Marks

These are used when you want to quote someone else's work in your text, *i.e.* "Sword (2012: p. 97) that an academic writer should "play around with *point of view*". For quotes that are more than 40 words, you will need to use block quotation.

() Brackets/Parentheses

The APA referencing style makes use of brackets or parentheses for several reasons.

- ⚙ To refer to a table, figure or appendix *i.e.* Supermarkets have varying prices for everyday essentials (see Table 5).
- ⚙ For in-text citations *i.e.* Torvill (1973) states that ice-skating... **or** Ice-skating was the epitome of elegance and grace (Torvill, 1973).
- ⚙ To establish an acronym *i.e.* The World Health Organisation (WHO) has produced multiple reports on...

Sources Used

Enago Academy. (2018). How to Effectively Use Commas in Academic Writing (Part 1) [blog].

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Osmond, A. (2013). *Academic Writing for Grammar and Students*. London: Sage.

Walden University. (2018). Punctuation: Question Marks [online]. Retrieved on 14 December 2018 from <https://academicguides.waldenu.edu/writingcenter/punctuation/questionmarks#s-lg-box-2830150>