

PUNCTUATION – the bare bones

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Punctuation is often overdone. Here are my thoughts on basic punctuation – what we need for our writing to make sense.

Punctuation is not for decoration. It's to help meaning. Why won't the words alone convey the meaning you want to convey? Why do we need punctuation at all?

Well, words were meant to be spoken – writing them down didn't happen until later, and then often in pictorial form like the Egyptian hieroglyphs that often showed the person looking at them what was meant.

Next, whatever we say or write is for particular audiences and particular purposes. We are getting our words across to small children or to adults or to fellow experts or to learners. We are teaching or informing or entertaining or even guiding readers through a foreign country in a travel book or labelling photos or diagrams or medicine bottles as concisely as we can.

Another thing: our written words are just narrative or they represent conversation. People speak differently when they are chatting to each other from when they are explaining something to a student, for example. This has to be made clear in our writing.

In English we all use the vocabulary and grammar that we share but we put words together differently. We put them together in clumps that have meaning in that context only, at that time.

How can we write all these things and show exactly what we mean with words alone?

We can't. We need the emphasis and so on that we use in speech. We need to show clearly whether someone is speaking or being quoted – talking softly or shouting. We need also to convey all that we can convey in speech by facial expression, hand gesture, shrugging of shoulders, tilting of head and other body language but don't have access to in a paper or a book. So we use punctuation.

The trouble is that we often over-punctuate in an attempt to be sure the message gets through. We need to think more carefully about how we put the words together so that they are meaningful with no punctuation – or very little.

1. Punctuation is useful but it can also get in the way of reading and understanding.

Take that last sentence: I was taught that I should join two independent clauses with a comma as well as a coordinate conjunction: I should have put a comma before 'but' in that sentence. Or should I? Isn't it perfectly clear without the comma? These two independent clauses are related because the 'it' of the second clause is the same thing as 'Punctuation' in the first clause.

The comma (,) is probably the most over-used of all punctuation marks. We can do without it most of the time. It has its uses of course in lists:

2. Please bring books, pencils, writing pads and calculators to the exam.

The commas make it clear that there are four different items you need to bring to the exam. Again, we don't need a comma before the conjunction 'and' because it works perfectly well on its own.

Now that we have computers, we can write that list as a bullet list:

3. Please bring to the exam the following items:

- books
- pencils
- writing pads
- calculators.

We don't need all the commas that we need in a narrative list. We just need a full stop at the end of the list. We need to make sure that the list is in parallel structure – that is, all the items in the one list are the same format: all nouns or noun phrases (as in this example), all verbs or the same parts of verbs, all whole sentences, and so on.

Notice the sentence I wrote a few paragraphs back:

4. 'It has its uses of course in lists'.

Do you want to put commas around ‘of course’? Why? It doesn’t interfere with the meaning of the sentence so it’s all right as it is. If it were a longer expression and perhaps a real ‘aside’, or an introductory phrase before the main clause of a sentence, it might be different. I’m not advocating the removal of all commas – only those that are unnecessary. If we learn to write in plain English (using shorter sentences and active voice wherever feasible), we will avoid a lot of commas.

I could rewrite that last sentence to avoid some unnecessary punctuation:

5. Write in plain English using shorter sentences and active voice wherever feasible. That way you avoid a lot of commas.

And we’ve avoided the need to use brackets at the same time.

Commas aren’t the only offenders – we tend to pepper our writing with **dashes** – the more the merrier – or so it would seem. See what I mean? Dashes are useful when we want to show pauses. But we don’t have to pause every few words, unless we’re writing a novel with a lot of gushing prose being uttered by breathless characters.

In formal writing we need to be sure to put **full stops** at the ends of sentences. Avoid what’s called ‘run-on’ sentences like this one:

6. We will meet at 9.30 in the assembly hall for the lecture about the life cycle of the butterfly, the school jazz concert will begin at 2.30.

That should be two sentences. The comma should be a full stop. The second sentence is not closely related to the first sentence so not even a semicolon is strong enough.

What about **semicolons (;)**? Very useful if used economically.

The comma and the semicolon can sometimes be swapped. They both contain a comma. The semicolon and any of the end punctuation marks (. ? !) can sometimes be swapped. They all contain full stops. But a comma and end punctuation can never be swapped. Remember that and you will never again write ‘run-on’ sentences.

Here’s how a semicolon can be used to good effect:

7. Jim, the president of the society; Joan, the secretary; Peter, the treasurer and five other committee members held a meeting.

Here we use the semicolon to separate the items in a list when they each have internal commas.

8. We will go to the dining room for lunch after the meeting; lunch will be at 12 noon.

Here the semicolon is joining two independent clauses that are closely related where 'and' would be inappropriate.

End punctuation always has a full stop in it: . ! ? So it can only be used at the end of a complete thought.

Be careful to use the **exclamation mark** sparingly. It really doesn't have a place in formal business writing but can be useful in informal writing and in novels.

9. Use it for truly exclamatory sentences only: I absolutely loathe the taste of broad beans! Or in interjections: Ouch! Or very short warning shouts: Look out!

The **question mark** should only be used at the end of a direct question:

10. 'Are you coming with me?'

Be careful to distinguish between direct and indirect speech: 'Are you coming with me?' is a direct question. 'I asked you whether you would be coming with me' is reported speech – indirect. So no question mark.

This brings me to quoted speech in general and what to do about **quotation marks**. In Australian English, we tend to use single quotation marks for a main quotation, with double quotation marks for a quotation within a quotation, as in an expression like 'I would call it "dinky-di" but that's because I'm Australian'. It is the reverse in most United States writing. Follow what your style guide tells you. An important thing to remember is that punctuation that belongs with the quoted words goes inside the quotation marks. Punctuation that goes with a carrier sentence goes at the end of the entire carrier sentence. For example:

11. 'Are you coming with me?'

but the same question now enclosed in a carrier question:

12. Did he ask 'Are you coming with me?'

The use of quotation marks is more complicated than just that example. You need to consult a text book to learn more than we have space for in this article. See suggested reading at the end.

Earlier, I mentioned getting rid of **brackets** where possible. It's not always possible so it's useful to know what ways there are of separating words from the main sentence. Here are some examples:

13. Use a pair of commas (**, xxx ,**): Jim Jones, the new president, presided at the meeting. The words in commas are necessary to an understanding of just who Jim Jones is.

14. Use a pair of dashes (**- xxx -**): We ran to the nearest clump of trees – those gum trees over there – and back. The words in dashes aren't entirely necessary to an understanding of the rest of the sentence, but useful.

15. Use a pair of round brackets (parentheses) when you want to give the technical name of something as here. Round brackets are the strongest form of separation in most writing.

16. Use square brackets [**xxx**] to enclose things like Latin expressions such as [sic] which means 'thus' and perhaps tells the reader that this is the way the author spelt the word and you can't change it because it's part of quoted material from a book.

17. Use 'squiggly' or 'curly' brackets {**xxx**} (called 'braces' in the US) in mathematical equations – not in everyday writing.

Note that the word 'parentheses' is often used to refer to any form of separation or delimiting device. The words contained in that delimiter are called a 'parenthetical expression'.

Apart from regular punctuation marks there are other ways of indicating what we mean when we write:

White space: If we cram a lot of words into long paragraphs about several topics, or if we use narrow margins for economy of space, we can be seen as more interested in saving space than in getting a message across. Reasonable margins and reasonable space between fairly short paragraphs can show that you have the reader's reading comfort in mind. If you have to include photos or other illustrations in your writing, make sure that there is a bit of space around them – photos jammed up against text make neither text nor photo stand out.

Line-end justification: This is related to the use of white space. What we write must be easily readable. The most readable text is that which is left-justified (straight left alignment, but 'ragged' at the right-hand end of every line – it's more natural because it follows natural spacing between words). The most difficult text to read is that which is fully justified (straight left and right sides to the text – achieved by the text

being automatically dragged across the page so that all the lines end at the same place, no matter how unnatural the spacing looks). For most purposes, it's best to choose left-justification unless, as in this website, the preferred style is full justification.

Bold or italic text: We can use **bold** or *italic* occasionally to show emphasis, or to indicate that this is the first time this technical term has been used in this chapter, for example. Book titles in reference lists are also italicised. But don't overdo either bold or italic. There is a saying: 'To emphasise everything is to emphasise nothing'. Anything done for emphasis, including underscoring and 'putting in quotes', needs to be sufficiently uncommon as to make it stand out. Notice that I have used bold in this article to indicate when I am writing about something new – nowhere else.

Capitalisation: If we want to make something look special, we tend to give it an initial capital, as in Prime Minister Jones. But we would write 'There were fifteen prime ministers attending the meeting from all parts of Asia'. No capitals needed. The trend in Australia is to use what's called 'sentence case' for book titles in reference lists: *Effective writing: plain English at work*, rather than 'title case': *Effective Writing: Plain English at Work*. The fewer initial capitals the better in such lists and in chapter headings, titles of courses, journal articles and so on.

Special considerations: If you are writing for a publisher, get their style guide and follow it – they may have quite different punctuation and formatting requirements in their country or in their publishing house from those you are accustomed to. If you are writing poetry for publication, you have quite a lot of latitude about how to punctuate – discuss your ideas with your publisher. If you write scientific material, make sure that you use the punctuation that will be understood by all scientists – that will mean following a scientific style guide.

Finally, remember what I said at the beginning: punctuation is for meaning, not decoration. Use it sparingly and only as much as is needed to get your meaning across to your target audience.

Suggested reading

James, Neil 2007, *Writing at work*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney

Murphy, Elizabeth Manning with Hilary Cadman 2014, *Effective writing: plain English at work (2nd edn)*, Lacuna Publishing, Sydney

Tredinnick, Mark 2008, *The little green grammar book*, UNSW Press, Sydney

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