

Punctuating correctly – The Basics

Here you can learn the basics of

- **placing commas, semi-colons and colons in an academic text,**

and a bit about apostrophes and hyphens.

An associated [worksheet](#) is also available.

General Information

In written English, punctuation is a hot topic. Despite what many say, there are few hard and fast rules, but there are guidelines. Using these guidelines correctly can help your reader and make your text more understandable. Here are the basics for commas, semi-colons (;) and colons (:)

Commas

1. If you don't start a sentence with the subject, put a comma just before the subject, e.g., *Generally, the summer is hot.*
2. If you have finished the message of your sentence but want to add a comment, place a comma before the comment, e.g., question tags: *Nice day, isn't it?*
3. If you want extra information in a sentence but the sentence would still make sense without it, place the information in commas, e.g., *The writing workshop, which lasted two days, took place in Cologne.*
4. If you are joining two sentences with a conjunction (e.g., *and, but, yet*), put a comma before the conjunction, e.g., *Anne lives in Bad Honnef, but she works in Cologne.*
5. If you have a list of more than two items, separate the items using a comma. This is also true for lists of adjectives, e.g., *It was a long, intense, tiring day.*

Semi-colons

1. If you want to join two sentences without using a conjunction (e.g., because you want the reader to think of them as two separate but closely related sentences), place a semi-colon between them, e.g., *The workshop was long; however, it was also interesting.*
2. If the items in a list contain a comma, then separate the items using a semi-colon, e.g., *the day was long, over eight hours; interesting, on writing; and tiring, especially because I got to bed late the night before.*

Colons

1. Use them before a list, e.g., *The workshop covers the following: punctuation, style, getting published, and text correction*
2. Use them before an example/explanation, e.g., *The workshop was obligatory: the students had to come whether they wanted to or not.*

Apostrophes and Hyphens

Apostrophe e.g., *Anne's book*.

- a. Apostrophe for contractions – *Don't*. Do not use this symbol for contractions in written academic English, e.g., don't write *can't*, always write the full word(s): *cannot*.
- b. The genitive apostrophe – *Anne's pencil* – comes
 - before the *s* for a singular noun: *The book's cover was old* and for plurals that don't end in *s*: *The children's room*;
 - after the *s* for a plural noun that ends in *s*: *The books' covers were old*.
Guidelines for singular noun ending with an *s* vary. *The boss' partner* and *The boss's partner* are both possible. Just be consistent.

Hyphen e.g., *A long-winded speech*

Apart from indicating where a word continues on the next line, hyphens are mainly used to join a) a prefix to a word (*self-selection*), b) two adjectives (*a long-winded speech*) or c) two words as a compound noun (*copy-editing*). There are no strict guidelines about their use. If using a hyphen would help the reader, use it, e.g., *The long-awaited, high-profile speech*. Again, be consistent.

Useful Book Resources

Truss, L. 2009. *Eats, Shoots and Leaves*. Harper Collins.

Hacker, D. & Sommers, N. 2017. *A Pocket Style Manual*. 8th ed. Bedford/St. Martins.

Final Comments/Tips

- The semi-colon can be useful for connecting sentences without using a connecting word or phrase. E.g., instead of writing *English is a useful language. Additionally, Spanish is also useful*, you could write *English is a useful language; Spanish is also useful*.
- The Oxford/serial/American/last item comma (i.e., the comma before the final *and* in a list: *I like potatoes, vegetables, and fruit*) is a question of style and may be mentioned in a journal's Author Guidelines. If there are no guidelines, decide for yourself whether to use it or not – but be consistent. Sometimes, not using it can cause confusion, e.g., *Yesterday, I visited my parents, Angela Merkel and Donald Trump*.