

Punctuation

Apostrophes

Apostrophes have two uses:

- when the words are shortened 'a contraction', such as **it's**, **they're**, **don't**, **can't**
- to indicate possession, such as the **cat's** whiskers, the **bee's** knees.

This page gives guidance on how to use apostrophes correctly in both cases so that you can make your English clearer.

Contractions

In the first use – the apostrophe suggests that a letter is missing.

- it is** becomes **it's**
- they are** becomes **they're**
- do not** becomes **don't**
- cannot** becomes **can't**.

We also shorten anything with is or has to an 's'.

- Tuesday's** the day when I play golf. (Tuesday is)
- This **week's** gone quickly. (week has gone)
- This **year's** been the best financial result in a decade. (year has been)

Possession

The key to this is

1. Find the person or thing that owns or possesses.
2. Put the apostrophe immediately afterwards.

For example:

The Departments customer services

Start with a simple question and answer.

Question: Who owns the **customer services**?

Answer: The **Department**

So put the apostrophe straight after the 't' at the end of Department and you get:

The **Department's** customer services

Colons

Colons introduce something: an idea, a list, an explanation, a spoken or written remark. For example:

The first rule is: look before you leap.

Far and away: travels with my Aunt

Colons are not used within a list to separate items.

You can also use a colon to introduce speech. For example:

He said: "The Department has reached its target this year."

He wrote: "The future of the Department depends on reaching our targets."

Check your style guide to see if this style is used.

Semi-colons

Semi-colons separate complete but closely related items.

The worst part of the day was leaving for work in the morning; the best was getting home again at night.

They invested all their cash in what looked like a promising pension; it turned out to be little more than a pyramid scheme.

They are also useful for breaking up lists, especially when the items in the list are more than one word.

This case study describes what we did; what worked; the remedial action we took when things did not work; the people involved; the documents we edited; the budgets; and what we are doing now.

Semi-colons are not commonly used in a bulleted list.



Commas

There are three basic reasons for using commas.

- avoid ambiguity
- divide sentences
- separate items in lists

Avoid ambiguity

Commas help to make the meaning of a sentence clearer. In the example below the comma changes the meaning of 2.1 per cent.

The annual return was 2.1 per cent below the benchmark of 5 per cent.

The annual return was 2.1 per cent, below the benchmark of 5 per cent.

In the first sentence 2.1 per cent refers to how much lower the annual return was than the benchmark. In the second sentence, 2.1 per cent refers to the annual return.

Divide sentences

Use commas to divide sentences into manageable portions. Here is a long sentence:

On reaching a conclusion the committee will then present their findings to the executive while staff draw up a set of guidelines on a department-by-department basis maintaining contact with committee members in order to incorporate feedback from the executive.

And here is the same sentence broken up with commas:

On reaching a conclusion, the committee will then present their findings to the executive, while staff draw up a set of guidelines on a department-by-department basis, maintaining contact with committee members, in order to incorporate feedback from the executive.

But this sentence is still far too long at 43 words. It would be better to change some of the commas to full stops and write this paragraph in more than one sentence.

On reaching a conclusion the committee will then present their findings to the executive. Meanwhile, staff will draw up a set of guidelines on a department-by-department basis, maintaining contact with committee members. This will allow them to incorporate feedback from the executive.

Shorter sentences are easier to understand and more direct. If sentences are too long there's a danger of losing the intended meaning – and losing your audience.

Lists

Use commas to link words in a simple list. eg:

You can find answers to FAQs in five sections of the report: finance, employment, education, benefits, and debt.

What to watch out for

Note that the traditional rule of not using a comma before 'or' or 'and' is not rigid. You may need it there to avoid ambiguity, or where you want to give each item in a list equal weight. For example:

They proclaimed a government of, by, and for the people.

Full stops

Full stops are the most common and the most important punctuation mark because they show where the sentence ends.

You need to use them a lot to write plain English, because you will write in short sentences.

Sometimes full stops are used in abbreviations. For example:

Mr. and Mrs. Ian Reiser
Cdr. Lance Grange
Coles Ltd.
Lehman Brothers Inc.
the A.R.A.
A.I.D.S.

However, this is becoming quite old-fashioned and it is acceptable to write:

Mr and Mrs Ian Reiser
Cdr Lance Grange
Coles Ltd
Lehman Brothers Inc
the ARA
AIDS

You should consult your own organisation's style guide to find out whether you should use full stops in abbreviations or not in your own writing.

The top 3: punctuation errors

Single quotation marks for double quotation marks.

Commas and periods outside – rather than inside – closing quotation marks.

Hyphens for dashes.

