Punctuation guide

1. The uses of punctuation

Punctuation is an art, not a science, and a sentence can often be punctuated correctly in more than one way. It may also vary according to style: formal academic prose, for instance, might make more use of colons, semicolons, and brackets and less of full stops, commas, and dashes than conversational or journalistic prose. But there are some conventions you will need to follow if you are to write clear and elegant English.

In earlier periods of English, punctuation was often used rhetorically—that is, to represent the rhythms of the speaking voice. The main function of modern English punctuation, however, is logical: it is used to make clear the grammatical structure of the sentence, linking or separating groups of ideas and distinguishing what is important in the sentence from what is subordinate. It can also be used to break up a long sentence into more manageable units, but this may only be done where a logical break occurs; Jane Austen's sentence ‘No one who had ever seen Catherine Morland in her infancy, would ever have supposed her born to be a heroine’ would now lose its comma, since there is no logical break between subject and verb (compare: ‘No one would have supposed …’).

2. The main stops and their functions

The full stop, exclamation mark, and question mark are used to mark off separate sentences. Within the sentence, the colon (:) and semicolon (;) are stronger marks of division than the comma, brackets, and the dash. Properly used, the stops can be a very effective method of marking off the divisions and subdivisions of your argument; misused, they can make it barely intelligible, as in this example: ‘Donne starts the poem by poking fun at the Petrarchan convention; the belief that one's mistress's scorn could make one physically ill, he carries this one step further…’. (Here the comma and semicolon should change places.)

2.1. The full stop

Use it to separate sentences. Be careful not to use it to separate parts of the same sentence, as in this letter to the *Southampton Advertiser*: '[Mr Smith] is too much concerned with verbs, adverbs, commas and full stops. Many of the local teachers I have heard of don't know much about them either. If the final results of their teaching means anything.' Here the full stop before 'if' (which introduces a subordinate clause) should be a comma.

2.2. The exclamation mark

Considered rather vulgar in academic prose. Avoid.

2.3. The question mark

Use only for direct questions: 'What is happening?', but 'He asked what was happening.'

2.4. The colon

A rather formal stop, to be used sparingly. Its main uses are:

1. To introduce lists: 'The following features characterise the landscape of Milton's Hell: rocks, caves, lakes, fens, bogs, dens, and shades of death.'
2. To explain or enlarge on what has been said in the earlier part of the sentence: 'Spenser inherited the Platonic and Christian dualism: heaven was set over against earth, being against becoming, eternity against time.' This use is often equivalent to a verbal pointer like 'that is' or 'namely'. Simon Hoggart says in his *Guardian* diary, 'These people [the Tories] have a very clear view of recent history: they governed wisely and well.' The colon here makes it clear that Hoggart isn't vouching for the truth of the second part of the sentence; it simply explains the Tories' own view more fully.
3. To introduce long quotations (shorter quotations can be introduced by commas, or, if the sense runs on from the main sentence, may need no introductory punctuation).

2.5. The semicolon

Its main use is to link two sentences which are grammatically independent but closely related in meaning: 'Riding was an indulgence which she allowed herself in spite of conscientious qualms; she felt that she enjoyed it in a pagan, sensuous way, and always looked forward to renouncing it.'

The semicolon can also be used to mark a major division in a long sentence, especially where there are subordinate elements marked off by commas: 'Much in

all Milton's controversial writings is bitterly expressed, perhaps as bitterly felt; but Milton always kept in mind his conception of himself as the celebrant of great deeds, and a man akin to the Hebrew prophets, with a divine (though perhaps unwelcome) message to the English people.'

Although the semicolon is a useful way of linking related points in your argument, and can make your prose flow more freely, many good writers, especially journalists, use it very little. When you're considering whether to use one, always ask yourself whether two shorter sentences—as in this paragraph—might be more effective than one long one.

2.6. The comma

Perhaps the most difficult stop to use correctly.

Not to be used for all-purpose punctuation, as here: 'This narration by Milton shows the paradox of Satan, he can be admired for encouraging his followers, yet his words only appear worthy, close examination would reveal their shallowness.'

When linking grammatically independent sentences, use colons, semicolons, or full stops as appropriate.

Also, don't separate a subject from its verb, or a verb from its object, by a comma, however lengthy the subject or object may be. There should be no comma in the following examples: 'That Troilus can be so easily converted to the service of love, shows love's overwhelming power'; 'Chaucer shows in the Tale, the Wife's insatiable thirst for story-telling.'

Commas are used for two main purposes: to group ideas more clearly within the sentence, and to indicate subordination.

1. Sentence-division: A comma is often used before 'and' and 'or', and usually before 'but', when these words are used to link sentences together (where the sentences are long, semicolons can be used instead; see **2.5**).

It's advisable to insert a comma before 'and' when it introduces the last item of a list (this is sometimes called the 'Oxford comma'): 'My true love sent to me three French hens, two turtle doves, and a partridge in a pear tree.' Failure to do this can lead to ambiguity, as in the following example: 'As a prelude to the still-distant silly season, newspapers print features on one or more of the following topics: plans to revive the Channel tunnel, England's chances of regaining the Ashes, new sightings of Lord Lucan, how to make a town garden out of ten feet of concrete and Shirley Williams.'

2. Subordination: Commas are regularly used to mark off material which is not

essential to the main sense of the sentence: 'Olivia's steward, *Malvolio*, is "sick of self-love"'; 'Donne uses the dove, *a symbol of peace*, for his mistress.' Make sure that this material is marked off by commas on both sides; avoid sentences like the following: 'Nicholas, *the lover of Alison* is punished.'

Note particularly the punctuation of 'however'. When this is used as a conjunction, it requires no punctuation ('I drive brilliantly *however* much I drink'); but when—as most often in academic prose—it is a sentence-adverb, it should always be marked off by punctuation, either by commas ('This theory, however, is obviously wrong') or, where it is used to link two sentences, by a preceding semicolon and a following comma ('Lacan argues differently; however, he is obviously wrong').

Commas are sometimes used to mark off subordinate clauses; it's difficult to lay down hard-and-fast rules here, but one distinction which must be noted is that between defining and non-defining relative clauses:

1. Defining: 'The verse *that concludes the poem* is longer than the others' (the clause could not be dropped without affecting the main sense; no commas).

ii) Non-defining:

'The third verse, *which concludes the poem*, is longer than the others' (the clause could be dropped without affecting the main sense; commas).

Note the misuse of commas in the following example:

'The appointment of a priest, who is a supporter of homosexual equality, to a senior post on the Church of England Board of Education has upset some clergymen' (Telegraph).

(The clergymen are upset not because a priest has been appointed, but because he is *a priest who supports homosexual equality*; the clause is essential to the main sense and should not be marked off by commas.)

2.7. The dash

A relatively informal stop, used mainly to indicate a parenthesis rather more emphatically than the comma. If the parenthesis is in the middle of a sentence, remember that it should be concluded as well as introduced by a dash:

'A man's mind—what there is of it—has always the advantage of being masculine.'

Note that there are three kinds of dash, and your work will look more professional if you use them correctly:

i) the hyphen(-), dealt with under 4 below, which is used to link individual words together (e.g. 'sub-plot', 'twentieth-century').

ii) the 'en dash' (–), so called by printers because it takes up the same space as the

letter ‘n’. This rather longer dash is used to link sequences of numbers (e.g. ‘1898–1945’, ‘pp. 23–46’).
iii) the ‘em dash’ (—), the longest of the three, which takes up the same space as the letter 'm'. This is the one used for sentence punctuation.
You will find the ‘en dash’ and ‘em dash’ in Word if you go to ‘Insert’, then ‘Symbol’, then ‘Special Characters’ (where they are the first 2 items). There is a quicker shortcut for the ‘en dash’: hold down ‘Control’ and press the dash key at the top right-hand corner of your keyboard.
Don't put spaces on either side of any of these dashes.

2.8. Brackets

Round brackets indicate a parenthesis slightly more emphatically than the comma and more formally than the dash:

> ‘But for the event of my introduction to you (which, let me again say, I trust not to be superficially coincident with foreshadowing needs, but providentially related thereto as stages towards the completion of life's plan) I should presumably have gone on to the last without any attempt to lighten my solitariness by a matrimonial union.’

Square brackets are not an affected alternative to round brackets but the normal way of indicating your own interpolations in quoted material:

> ‘Now, as some of you know, I come from a city notorious for its bars and nightclubs featuring topless dancers … I have not personally patronised these places, but I am told on the authority of no less a person than your host at this conference, my old friend Philip Swallow, who has patronised them [here several members of the audience turned in their seats to stare and grin at Philip Swallow, who blushed to the roots of his silver-grey hair] that the girls take off all their clothes before they commence dancing in front of the customers.’

NB don't put marks of punctuation before brackets used within a sentence or a bibliographical reference; any punctuation should always come after the brackets, as in the following examples:
i) James A. Brundage, *Law, Sex, and Christian Society in Medieval Europe* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).
ii) ‘The problem with using manuscripts to establish social context is that by their nature they tell us about the readers of works (whether private readers or readers-aloud), not their hearers.’

3. The apostrophe

An endangered species. Keith Waterhouse's theory is that this is the result of a Marxist conspiracy to deprive large capitalist concerns of their apostrophes (e.g. 'Lloyds Bank') and redistribute them to small back-street groceries (e.g. 'Tomatoe's').
The apostrophe is used for two main purposes: to indicate the possessive of nouns (e.g. John's book, the boy's hat) and the omission of letters in contractions (don't, can't).

1. Noun possessive: if you are at all shaky on this, memorise the rules summarised in the table below:

	Singular	Plural
	the boy	the boys
Possessive	the boy's friend	the boys' friend

Note 1: Nouns ending in -s usually take the regular -'s in the singular (St. James's Square); but classical and biblical names in -s add only the apostrophe (Troilus' love; Moses' staff).
Note 2: Where the plural of a noun does not end in -s, the possessive ending is -'s (the men's room).

2. Omitted letters: as in don't, can't, who's (= who is), it's (= it is). The last two often get confused with the similar forms whose (= of whom) and its (= of it); remember that the possessive pronouns his, hers, its, yours, theirs and whose don't have an apostrophe.

4. The hyphen

This is used to form compound words (sub-plot, reading-room), but not all compound words have hyphens (microfiche, paperback), so check your dictionary when in doubt. Note particularly the way that hyphens are used to form compound adjectives: 'the eighteenth century' but 'an eighteenth-century poem', 'this is well known' but 'a well-known fact'.

Punctuation exercises

Practice sentences

Punctuate, or repunctuate, the following sentences correctly:

1. She had only one purpose in life she wanted to teach them to punctuate correctly.

2. Much of what comedy proposes to teach us, is already part of our lives.

3. Surrey emerges as a pioneer of the sonnet form, which later became known as the Shakespearian sonnet.

4. The wallet, lost on a Corporation bus by a Southampton widow, has been returned with all its cash and contents intact. Mrs. Kathleen Giffard of Millbrook Towers thought she would never see the wallet containing £117 again. (*Southampton Evening Echo* news item)

5. Astrophil is however a highly-developed character.

6. Jonson's style is neoclassical, however, Shakespeare's plays show little regard for rules.

7. He as the eagle a symbol of power and his mistress as the dove a symbol of peace and gentleness will come together.

8. The Christian ethic states that extra marital sex is sinful.

9. I look after two year old children [*two possibilities; what is the difference in meaning?*] while studying twelfth century literature.

10. The Sheikh offered me two mens jacket's three of his fathers camel's and twenty of his followers concubine's.

11. This poems style is really difficult, its impossible to say what its meaning is.

Answers, with additional notes, on pp. 9–10.

Punctuation games

From the late Middle Ages onwards, English poets have used punctuation to play games with the language. Two examples follow, both from dramatists using the comic potential of a not-very-educated reader who can't handle the conventions of

punctuation and completely misrepresents the intended meaning of the text; see if you can repunctuate to make better sense of the text than they can.

1. An unsuccessful proposal of marriage

Sweete mistresse where as I loue you nothing [*not*] at all,
Regarding your substance and richesse [*riches*] chief of all,
For your personage, beautie, demeanour and wit,
I commend me vnto you never a whit.
Sorie to hear report of your good welfare,
For (as I heare say) suche your conditions [*qualities*] are,
That ye be worthie favour of no living man,
To be abhorred of every honest man,
To be taken for a woman enclined to vice,
Nothing at all to Vertue giving her due price. . .
And now by these presentes [*witnesses*] I do you advertise [*inform*]
That I am minded to marie you in no wise.
For your goodes and substance, I could bee content
To take you as you are...

2. 'Our sport shall be to take what they mistake'

Prologue (Peter Quince): If we offend, it is with our good will.
That you should think we come not to offend
But with good will. To show our simple skill,
That is the true beginning of our end.
Consider, then, we come but in despite.
We do not come as minding to content you,
Our true intent is. All for your delight,
We are not here. That you should here repent you,
The actors are at hand; and by their show,
You shall know all that you are like to know.
Theseus: This fellow doth not stand upon points.
Lysander: He hath rid his prologue like a rough colt; he knows not the stop. A good moral, my lord: it is not enough to speak, but to speak true.

Answers on p. 11.

Practice sentences: answers

References are to the sections in the outline of punctuation above.

1. She had only one purpose in life**:** she wanted to teach them to punctuate correctly.
*The second sentence enlarges on a point made in the first one, so the two sentences are linked by a colon (see **2.4**).*

2. Much of what comedy proposes to teach us is already part of our lives.
*'Much … teach us' is the subject of the sentence (cf. 'This is already part of our lives'), and shouldn't be separated from its verb by a comma (see **2.6**).*

3. Surrey emerges as a pioneer of the sonnet form which later became known as the Shakespearian sonnet.
*'Which … sonnet' is a defining relative clause (distinguishing the new sonnet form used by Surrey from the Petrarchan sonnet form, which had long been in use), and so shouldn't be preceded by a comma (see **2.6**).*

4. The wallet lost on a Corporation bus by a Southampton widow has been returned with all its cash and contents intact. Mrs. Kathleen Giffard of Millbrook Towers thought she would never see the wallet, containing £117, again. [*Southampton Evening Echo* news item]
*In this sentence, the phrase 'lost … widow' is functioning like a defining relative clause (cf. 'which was lost …'), explaining which wallet is being referred to, so shouldn't be marked off by commas; the phrase 'containing £117', however, is non-defining (Mrs. G. never expected to see **her wallet** again, full stop), and should be marked off by commas.*

5. Astrophil is, however, a highly-developed character.
*'However' used as an adverb (= 'nevertheless') within a sentence should always be marked off by commas; see **2.6** (the rules are slightly different, however, when it is used to link two sentences; see next example).*

6. Jonson's style is neoclassical; however, Shakespeare's plays show little regard for rules.
*Here the two sentences must be linked by a semicolon (see **2.5**), not a comma; 'however', which is part of the second, qualifying, sentence, follows the semicolon, but must also be marked off on the other side by a comma (see previous example).*

7. He as the eagle, a symbol of power, and his mistress as the dove, a symbol of peace and gentleness, will come together.
*'A symbol of power' and 'a symbol of gentleness' are subordinate material, and should be marked off from the main sentence by commas on either side (see **2.6**). You could use brackets instead of commas (this is sometimes clearer when the sentence is long and complicated).*

8. The Christian ethic states that extra-marital sex is sinful.
The hyphen makes it clear that it is sex outside marriage, not additional sex within marriage, which is sinful (though in practice Christianity tends to be disapproving even of the latter …).

9. I look after two year old children [*two possibilities; what is the difference in meaning?*] while studying twelfth-century literature.
Should be either 'I look after two-year-old children' (any number of children aged two) or 'I look after two year-old children' (two children, both a year old). 'Twelfth-century' here is used adjectivally, so has a hyphen; but 'the literature of the twelfth century' wouldn't require a hyphen.

10. The Sheikh offered me two men's jackets, three of his father's camels, and twenty of his followers' concubines.
*Different forms of the possessive: plural nouns not ending in -s (like men) take -'s in the possessive, singular nouns (like father) take -'s in the possessive, plural nouns ending in -s (like followers) take -s' in the possessive. At all costs avoid the 'grocer's apostrophe' (i.e. using -'s for the regular plural (non-possessive) form: 'Lovely Banana's Today'). See **3**.*

11. This poem's style is really difficult; it's impossible to say what its meaning is.
*Two independent sentences here, but connected in meaning, so link them by a semicolon (see **2.5**). Note the apostrophes here, and particularly the distinction between it's = it is and its = of it. See **3**.*

Punctuation games: answers

1. An unsuccessful proposal of marriage

Sweete mistresse, where as I loue you, nothing [*not*] at all
Regarding your substance and richesse [*riches*], chief of all
For your personage, beautie, demeanour and wit,
I commend me vnto you; never a whit
Sorie to hear report of your good welfare,
For (as I heare say) suche your conditions [*qualities*] are
That ye be worthie favour, of no living man
To be abhorred, of every honest man
To be taken for a woman enclined to vice
Nothing at all, to Vertue giving her due price. . .
And now by these presentes [*witnesses*] I do you advertise [*inform*]
That I am minded to marie you—in no wise
For your goodes and substance; I could bee content
To take you as you are …

2. 'Our sport shall be to take what they mistake'

Prologue (Peter Quince): If we offend, it is with our good will
That you should think we come not to offend,
But with good will to show our simple skill;
That is the true beginning. Of our end
Consider, then: we come, but in despite
We do not come. As minding to content you,
Our true intent is all for your delight;
We are not here that you should here repent you.
The actors are at hand, and by their show
You shall know all that you are like to know.