

## ***Use of punctuation in English***

### **1. The comma ,**

#### *a. Coordinate clauses*

Two coordinate clauses are separated by a conjunction and/or a comma.

More specifically:

- commas are used before the coordinators ***but, yet*** and ***nor***

*His first films met with great success, but/yet his popularity soon waned.  
The new testing regulations will not help teachers, nor are they likely to improve educational standards.*

- commas are optional before ***and*** or ***or***; they are recommended with longer clauses, as this guides the reader to an accurate reading of the grouping of words.

*The musicians played and the children sang.  
The musicians played traditional folk songs all night long, and all the children joined in with the singing.  
The musicians played, the children sang(,) and everybody danced.  
Students can go home for lunch(,) or they can eat in the canteen.*

#### **NB**

A comma is highly recommended if it separates (phrasal or clausal) items belonging to different syntactic constituents, and/or if it signals conceptual groupings within phrases/clauses, thus preventing ambiguity and making the processing of the text easier.

*I saw Anne and Jane.  
I saw Anne, and Jane saw Peter.  
The committee discussed the case, and the chair adjourned the meeting.*

*A. Who's coming to the party?  
B: Paul and Mary, Susy and Bob, and Alice.*

#### *b. Lists*

Commas are used to separate items in a list. ***And*** or ***or*** are often found before the last item, and in this case, the final comma may be omitted.

*Britons are now emigrating to Germany, France, Belgium (,) and/or Holland.*

*c. Adjectives*

Commas are used to separate adjectives which describe the same noun, unless they are separated by **and**.

*She was a brave, determined leader.*

*She was a brave, determined and wise leader.*

*d. Adverbial clauses*

Commas are often used when the adverbial clause comes at the beginning of the sentence.

*In a tiny village near the English-Welsh border, some very strange things have been happening.*

**(BUT:** *Some very strange things have been happening in a tiny village near the English-Welsh border.***)**

*If all the money is raised in the next few weeks, the expedition will leave.*

**(BUT:** *The expedition will leave if the money is raised in the next few weeks.***)**

*e. Non-restrictive relative clauses and appositions*

Commas are put around non-restrictive relative clauses and appositions.

*His daughter, who had worked with him for many years, took over the business.*

*Dangerous substances, banned in many countries, are still being used.*

*Mr Barrett, the mayor of Eastville, will lead the discussion.*

**NB**

In this case, the commas can be replaced by dashes or parentheses.

*f. Linking adverbs*

Commas are used to separate linking adverbs from the rest of the sentence.

*However, antibiotics are often used incorrectly.*

*Antibiotics, however, are often used incorrectly.*

*Antibiotics, are often used incorrectly, however.*

*g. Geographical locations*

Commas are used to separate the name of a place from the county, state or country in which it is found.

*They live in Alberta, Canada.*

*h. Forms of address in letters/emails*

Commas are used after forms of address and in signature lines after the salutation.

*Dear Michael,  
Thanks you for your mail ...*

*Best regards,  
Katherine Jones*

*i. Line breaks*

Commas may be used to signal that information units (e.g. in addresses or signature lines) are to be understood as if written on separate lines.

*Please address all correspondence to Peggy Johnson, 154 Willow Road, AB346  
London, UK.  
Have a great weekend. Bye, Sarah*

*j. Question tags*

Commas are used before questions tags.

*This was a great experience, wasn't it?*

*k. Intonation and emphasis*

Commas can be used to mark level intonation (i.e. steady, constant, neither rising nor falling pitch) combined with a pause. This can signal added emphasis to the phrases or clauses separated by the comma.

*The problem was resolved, to everyone's surprise and pleasure.*

**NB**

Commas are **not** used before or after restrictive relative clauses or before *wh*-noun clauses.

*The man who sits by the fountain every day was once the richest landowner in the village.  
Nobody knows where Johnson went that autumn.  
Tell me who came yesterday.*

## 2. The colon : (see also section 6. below)

### a. Explanations

A colon can introduce an explanation for the first part of the sentence, as an alternative to a linker expressing reason.

*In the end the documentary was not broadcast **because** it was said to constitute a threat to national security.*

*In the end the documentary was not broadcast: it was said to constitute a threat to national security.*

### b. Details

A colon can be followed by additional, more specific information about the first part of the sentence, as an alternative to a linker introducing details.

*Nearly everybody played a part in the war effort, **that is**, millions of people were involved in Civil Defence and other voluntary organisations.*

*Nearly everybody played a part in the war effort: millions of people were involved in Civil Defence and other voluntary organisations.*

### c. Lists

Colons can be used to introduce a list of items.

*The researchers recommended the following changes: a reduction of working hours, greater involvement in decision-making, and an improvement in working conditions.*

## 3. The semi-colon ;

### a. Compound sentences

A semi-colon can be used instead of a full stop to separate two grammatically independent clauses when there is a close semantic connection between the two.

*By 1598 the cumulative debt was 85 million; by the time Olivares came to power it was up to 120 million.*

*b. Lists*

Semi-colons can be used instead of commas to separate items in a list, especially if these items are long or complex.

*Nearly everyone played a part in the war effort: over a million men joined the Home Guard; even larger numbers of volunteers were active in Civil Defence against air raids; thousands of women were recruited into the Women's Land Army.*

**NB**

Another feature of the semi-colon is that, like the full stop, but unlike the comma (see above) it marks **falling** intonation.

*You will not be required to repay the grant; however, the grant alone will not cover all costs incurred.  
The grant alone will not cover all costs incurred; you will not be required to repay the grant, however.*

**4. The full stop (AmE — period) .**

As well as marking the end of a sentence, full stops are used after initials and abbreviations.

*C. S. Lewis, Ms. Bennett, Dr. Jones, U. K.*

However, in modern British English the full stop is often omitted after abbreviations.

*Mr and Mrs Mason, USA*

It also separates a unit from a decimal in figures

*1.25%*

The full stop marks falling intonation, independently of the semantic-syntactic unit it is associated with

*Until the advent of the mobile phone, which brings out the ostrich in us. (Kate Fox, 2004, *Watching the English*, London, Hodder, pp. 145-146)*

## 5. Dashes and brackets/parentheses — ( )

Dashes can be used in informal writing to separate a comment (i.e. a parenthetical remark) from the rest of the sentence.

*One month later — who knows why — he decided to leave for South Africa.*

### **NB**

The information unit surrounded by dashes is pronounced at a lower pitch than the rest of the sentence.

### **NB**

Brackets/parentheses or commas can be used instead of dashes to separate parenthetical information units from the rest of the sentence. Of the two, commas are preferred unless there is a lot of information and the risk of causing confusion.

*When these occupations are structured and predictable, as in the transition from junior hospital doctor to consultant, reactions to work and politics are often conditioned more by expectations of the final position to be reached than the lowly position taken up on entry to the career.*

### **BUT**

*When these occupations are structured and predictable (as in the transition from apprentice to journeyman to master craftsman, or from junior hospital doctor to registrar to consultant), reactions to work and politics are often conditioned more by expectations of the final position to be reached than the lowly position taken up on entry to the career.*

The dash can also be used to introduce an afterthought, where it could be replaced by a colon (see sub-section 2.a above).

*And if Dwayne tells you he's going to be a rap star, don't mention the negative odds — give an example of someone who hit the charts. (Anthony Marais, 2002, *Xenophobe's guide to the Californians*, London, Oval Books, p. 61)*

When punctuating dialogue, the dash can indicate an interruption or a broken-off sentence.

*"Well, you see, what I mean is that it's like—"*

## 6. Quotation marks “ ” ‘ ’

Quotation marks can be double " " or single ' '. Double marks are more common in hand-written texts, whereas single marks are usually found in printed material. Note the use of punctuation marks and capital letters in the following examples, in particular the position of the comma in the quoted text.

*She said, 'You're looking wonderful.'*  
*'You're looking wonderful,' she said.*  
*'I don't think,' she said, 'that I will be going tonight.'*

### NB

In a conversation between one or more people, a new line is started for each change of speaker.

*'Do you think it will be fine today?' she asked.*  
*'I don't know,' he replied.*

### NB

When the reporting clause comes BEFORE the reported text, then a colon is used to introduce a quotation.

*As my father always used to say: 'The road to hell is paved with good intentions.'*

Quotation marks are used in handwriting where print would use italics:

- for names of books, magazines, newspapers, films, musical compositions and paintings;

*Tolstoy began writing 'War and Peace' in 1865.*

- for words in a foreign language and to signal non-literal meaning or emphasis.

*The concept of 'weltanschauung' dates back to the nineteenth century.*

*A: What does MAZE mean? B: It means 'labirinto'.*

*Yesterday I finally spoke to the 'great' man.*

*It is 'necessary' to act immediately*

## 7. The apostrophe

Apostrophes are used in genitive forms, contracted forms, abbreviations and plurals of abbreviations.

*Einstein's theory of relativity*  
*the students' complaints*  
*The party's over.*  
*They don't care about us.*  
*We landed at Miami Int'l Airport.*  
*the CEO's of the two companies*

### NB

*Its*: possessive determiner of *it* vs *It's*: contracted form

## 8. Capital letters

Capital letters are used in the following circumstances:

- at the beginning of sentences and quotations
- for names of people, places, works of literature, the days of the week, the months, nationalities, and all the planets except the earth (but not for the sun, the moon or the seasons)

*George Clooney*  
*London Bridge*  
*Bleak House, The Taming of the Shrew*  
*Monday, Tuesday ...*  
*January, February ...*  
*English, Greek ...*  
*Mars, Venus ...*

### NB

The words *north*, *south*, *east* and *west* are usually only written with a capital letter when they form part of a place name.

*The house faces north.*

### BUT

*They come from North Carolina.*



- for titles

*John Schwarz is a professor.*

**BUT**

*This article was written by Professor Schwarz.*

- for names of organisations or institutions;

*The Ministry of Defence  
Friends of the Earth*

- for words connected with religion.

*God, Creator, Almighty, Lord*

**BUT**

*Thor was the god of thunder.*

**9. The hyphen** -

*a. Compound nouns*

If the second component of the compound noun is an adverb, a hyphen is used.

*a passer-by*      (plural *passers-by*)  
*a cover-up*      (plural *cover-ups*)

If the first component of the compound noun is a letter, a hyphen is used.

*a U-turn, a T-shirt, e-mail*

For terms denoting members of the family, hyphens are used with the words *in-law* and *great-*.

*mother-in-law, in-laws, great-uncle*

**NB**

Compound nouns may be written either as one word (*boyfriend*), as two words (*film star*), or with a hyphen (*theatre-goer*). These must be learnt individually as there are no rules concerning the use of the hyphen, and there is very often more than one possible spelling.

*babysitter/baby-sitter, air conditioning/air-conditioning,  
letterbox/letter box/letter-box*

*b. Compound adjectives*

Hyphens are used in the following circumstances:

- in compound adjectives expressing measurement

*a three-year-old boy, a ten-mile journey, a two-minute silence*

- in compound adjectives in which the first component is a noun and the second component is a participle

*fire-fighting equipment, tax-paying citizens, voice-operated  
device, colour-coded text*

- in compound adjectives in which the first component is an adverb and the second component is a participle IF they premodify a noun

*She was very well known in those circles.*

**BUT**

*She was a very well-known actress.*

- in compound adjectives ending in **-ed** formed from noun phrases

*with a good nature / good-natured  
with blue eyes / blue-eyed*

*c. Noun modification*

Hyphens are often found when phrasal or clausal expressions are used to modify nouns.

*You can do it yourself!*  
*He is out of work.*  
*Derelict land makes a do-it-yourself adventure playground and a meeting place for out-of-work teenagers.*

*d. Coordination compounds*

Hyphens are used in coordination compounds.

*Italian-Czech dictionary, staff-student ratio, Franco-Prussian war*

*e. Numerals and fractions*

Hyphens are used to separate tens from units, and units from fractions.

*twenty-two, two-thirds*

*f. Prefixes*

Hyphens are used when the second item begins with a capital letter.

*anti-American*

Hyphens are used when the second item is a number.

*pre-1914*

Hyphens are common after prefixes such as *co-*, *ex-*, *half-*, *non-* and *self-*.

*co-worker, ex-president, half-sister, non-profit, self-control*

## 10. The exclamation mark (AmE — exclamation point) !

Exclamation marks are used for exclamatives, signalling positive or negative emotion (surprise, anger, interest, fear etc.)

*That's great!*

*Be careful!*

*You idiot!*

Exclamation marks are very common in informal writing, where more than one may be used.

*Can't wait to see you!!!*

## 11. The question mark ?

The question mark indicates a question.

*What's your name?*

*Is this yours?*

*Was it good or bad?*

It can mark rising intonation (to signal interest or surprise and to attract attention)

*And?*

*Excuse me?*

*You have told him about us?*

### NB

*Wh*-questions, however, end in **falling** intonation.

## 12. The slash /

The slash indicates a series of alternatives (equivalent to *either/or* and *and/or*), in contrast to the use of the hyphen to signal coordination (see sub-section 9.d above).

*The speaker/writer*

The slash may be used to separate units of information.

*C:/Documents/English/grammar/punctuation*

### **13. The triple dot (suspension point — dot dot dot) ...**

The triple dot is used to signal an incomplete statement. It is common in informal writing.

*Carpe Diem... This time tomorrow you might be swimming.*  
(Anthony Marais, 2002, *Xenophobe's guide to the Californians*, London, Oval Books, p. 31)

When enclosed in square brackets, it can also signal that a part of a text has been omitted

*"The course feedback [...] provided insight into lecturer preferences."*

### **14. Indentation or blank lines**

The beginning of a new paragraph is signalled by one of the following: indentation or a preceding blank line.

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