

Punctuation

Using commas and apostrophes



Punctuation is all about clarity and making sure your reader understands what you have written. There are precise rules, which can be learnt, but just being more aware of commas should help you to write more clearly. For example, think about the difference a comma makes in these two sentences:

I like fish and chips.
I like fish, and chips.

Here are some more common uses and examples.

To separate words in a series or several adjectives which describe the same thing.

Examples

The student was carrying a large, blue, nylon holdall.
For breakfast I have toast, jam, coffee and orange juice.
April, June, September and November all have 30 days.

Commas are used to separate certain phrases from the rest of the sentence. We could remove the part separated by commas (in italics below) and the sentence would still make sense.

Examples

The manager, *who must be kept informed*, should make the final decision.
A chocolate biscuit, *on the other hand*, will be higher in calories than an apple.
The man, *who had been reading*, suddenly looked up.

Commas come before words such as: *and; but; so; or; although; until; unless, since; and while; when* these words are used to link two complete sentences.

For example: the two complete sentences (underlined below) can be joined using 'but'.

Students enjoy socialising.
Their tutors want them to study more.
Thus: Students enjoy socialising, but their tutors want them to study more.
(notice comma)

However, you do not always need a comma if your whole sentence is very short. Compare the two examples here:

Example A (could be with or without a comma)

1) The sun was shining so everyone was happy. OR
2) The sun was shining, so everyone was happy.

Example B (a comma is required)

The sun was shining when all the children ran outside, so everyone was happy.

If you are not sure whether to include a comma, try reading your words out loud. The point where you pause is often the point where you need a comma.

The apostrophe

The apostrophe shows that something belongs to somebody or to something.

The apostrophe goes with the word which shows the owner.

If the owner is singular (one), add 's' and put the apostrophe before it.

If the owner is plural the apostrophe goes right at the end of the plural word.

Singular examples

The President's speech.

...someone's mistake

Yesterday's news.

This country's industrial heritage...

The University's reputation is important.

The Prime Minister's ideas.

Plural examples

The students' essays are improving.

My tutors' remarks were helpful.

My parents' house is near a park.

We observe other countries' traditions by...

The ladies' changing room was closed.

Doctors' training last several years.

Plural exceptions are where the word already suggests 'more than one' or where the plural is not formed by adding 's' or 'ies'.

Examples

Men's socks are usually cheaper than women's socks.

The best way to store children's toys is in plastic crates.

He was the people's choice.

Everyone's answers were different.

Personal pronouns (his, hers, theirs, ours, yours, its) do not need possessive apostrophes.

Examples

The student began his essay.

The tutor said the handouts were hers.

The book had lost its cover.

The committee said the decision was theirs.

The apostrophe is also used for contractions (shortened words) although it is not good style to use this form of writing in academic essays.

- It's no good (It is no good)
- We'll ask 10 people (We will ask 10 people)
- They won't be able to remember (They will not be able to remember)
- We can't hear you (We cannot hear you)

It's (with apostrophe) always means 'it is'. It never means anything else.

The apostrophe does not make words plural.

The following examples show the incorrect use the apostrophe, followed by the correct use.

In the 1970's, should be, In the 1970s.

DVD's for sale, should be, DVDs for sale.