PUNCTUATE PROPERLY

Correct punctuation is important for university assignments and professional communication. This guide will help you to understand why we use punctuation and to identify and fix common errors.

Full stops

Use full stops at the end of sentences to help your readers absorb one idea at a time. Each sentence typically contains at least one verb and one subject.

Verbs represent actions (e.g., *run*) or states (e.g., *be*) and tell you whether they are happening in the past (e.g., *ran*), present (e.g., *run*) or future (e.g., *will run*).

Subjects explain who or what the sentence is about (e.g., *he* in '*he jumps'*).

TIP

Avoid sentence **fragments** (sentences that are missing a subject or a verb).

An example of a fragment is *'Running fast.'* If you change this to *'She is running fast.'* you will have a full sentence.

Commas

Commas help the reader to absorb ideas within sentences by separating them from other parts of the sentence. Use commas:
- To separate a **minor idea** (dependent clause or phrase) from the **main idea** (independent clause), e.g., *When I saw the destruction, I cried.*
- To separate an **interruption from the main idea**, e.g., *The man, breathing heavily, dragged the box into the house.*
- To separate an **afterthought from the main idea**, e.g., *Commas are helpful when you elaborate on ideas, adding detail to an already complete thought.*
- To separate **items in a list** when there is no linking word between them, e.g., *Use commas between items in lists of names, words, numbers or phrases.*

TIP

Avoid **comma splices**, where a comma joins two separate sentences, e.g., *We flew to Bonnie Doon, they drove to Humpty Doo*.

This usage is incorrect. Rather than a comma, use a linking word (e.g., *while*), a full stop, or a semicolon (see below).

Semicolons

Semicolons divide ideas that are closely linked. Use semicolons to replace:
- A full stop between **closely related ideas** that could each be full sentences, e.g., *We had a holiday in Bonnie Doon; they went to Humpty Doo.*
- Commas in a complex **list** that has a lot of **additional internal punctuation**, e.g., *Those present included Mr. Burns, the billionaire owner of Springfield's nuclear power plant; Waylon Smithers, his devoted personal assistant; and Robert Underdunk Terwilliger Jr., PhD, better known as Sideshow Bob.*

TIP

Avoid semicolons when a comma, full stop or colon (see overleaf) is more appropriate.

Colons

Colons come **before explanations or lists** that clarify or exemplify what came before.

Main idea	Explanation or list
The job had three components:	drafting, editing and data entry.

Quotation marks

Quotation marks **separate our words from the words of others**. In Australia, most referencing systems favour single quotation marks ('x') unless otherwise specified.

> **TIP**
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> If you use single quotes, then you should use double quotes ("x") for quotations within a quote, e.g., *'The witches foretell the "bubbling up" of troubles in the political order of Macbeth' (Jones, 2010, p. 12).*

Apostrophes

We use apostrophes for **contractions** (e.g., *I am = I'm*) and **possessive nouns** (e.g., *the ball belonging to Alex = Alex's ball*).

Apostrophes go after the possessive noun (singular or plural). If the possessive noun ends in 's', the apostrophe goes after the 's'.
- If one fox lives in a den, it's *the fox's den.*
- If more than one fox lives in the den, it's *the foxes' den*.

> **TIP**
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> Avoid using apostrophes with possessive pronouns (*my, your , his, her, its, our, their).* Only use an apostrophe with 'its' when it is acting as a contraction for 'it is'.

Parentheses and square brackets

Parentheses (x) are useful in both formal and informal writing, but in different ways.

In formal writing, they can provide reference information, e.g., *Research on climate change shows global warming in some areas and cooling in others (Phatak 2013).*

In informal writing, they can provide extra ideas, e.g., *Many people who named their children 'Daenerys' are (not surprisingly) regretting their decision*.

Square brackets [x] allow you to add your own words into a quote. They are useful for providing context and clarifying meaning, e.g., *'The only time they [other birds] fly over the nest is when the cuckoo is not in it' (Cluett 2013, p. 11).*

> **TIP**
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> This guide only covers the 'tip' of the punctuation iceberg. There are many other types of punctuation – and rules!
>
> Don't panic! The more you write and read, the better your understanding will become.