PUNCTUATION

This booklet provides an overview of punctuation commonly used in academic writing.

The comma (,)
Commas can improve the clarity of a sentence by grouping ideas together. There are four general rules about using commas. Following these rules can help you to avoid ambiguity and make sure your message is clear.

However, when commas are used unnecessarily, they can be distracting for the reader and interrupt the flow of your writing. An informal guideline for when you are unsure about if you need a comma or not is: if in doubt, leave it out.

Guiding rules for commas
Use commas:

- after the introductory part of a sentence.
  - Consequently, the students passed the exam.
  - Due to their hard work, the students passed the exam.

- between two ideas joined by and, or, nor, but, or, yet and so
  - The students had worked hard all term, so their results were excellent.
  - The students found the exam very difficult, yet they all passed easily.

- before and/or after words and phrases which provide additional information
  - One student, who started the course this year, won a national prize.
  - The exam, which was worth 85%, was the main form of assessment.
  - The exam was the main form of assessment, accounting for 85% of the marks.

- to list items in a series.
  - In an exam, make sure you are prepared, organised, careful and thorough.
  - (One verb applies for all the items in the list so no comma before ‘and’)
  - In an exam, make sure you read the questions carefully, plan your answers, organise your time, and check your answers.
  - (Different verbs apply for each item in the list so use a comma before ‘and’; verbs- read, plan, organise and check)

The semi-colon (;)
A semi-colon is used as a stop that is one level weaker than a full stop. That is, it is used instead of a full stop in linking independent clauses (clauses that could stand by themselves as sentences) that are closely related:

- A clear timeline is critical in a project; it helps in defining the scope of the tasks to be done.

A semi-colon can also be used to separate out items in a list.

- The project team will need to consider the range of materials to be purchased, such as modeling equipment and computers; the extent of the lease on the temporary office; the software to be updated and the day to day costs.
The colon (:)  
The colon’s function is to further explain or add to what has been referred to before. It acts as a substitute for expressions such as: that is to say, that is (i.e.), or namely and is often used to begin a list.

- *It could be argued that three elements are important at the start of any project: a good plan, a committed team and fine weather.*

A colon can also be used to separate two independent clauses where the second provides further detail or interpretation of the first.

- *It is important to be able to work within the restrictions of the job: available resources, good information and clear understanding of the background will be imperative.*

The colon is also useful:

- for introducing a quotation
- for separating the subtitle of a book from its main title.

Note, while semicolons always separate information of equal value (usually two independent clauses), colons can separate information of unequal value. The first part of the sentence using a colon should be a an independent clause but the second part need not.

The apostrophe (’)

The apostrophe has two functions. It is used to show:

- where letters have been omitted, as in don’t and can’t
- possession.

The apostrophe should not be used in ordinary, non-possessive plurals. The plural is shown simply by adding “s”, and an apostrophe is unnecessary.

- ✔ They wrote reports and proposals.
- ✗ They wrote report’s and proposal’s.

The possessive apostrophe is used as follows:

- add an apostrophe and an “s” to a singular word – the student’s assignment, her tutor’s email address
- add an apostrophe and an “s” to plural words that do not end in “s” – the women’s responses, the people’s will
- add an apostrophe and an “s” to plural words already ending in “s”, add only an apostrophe – the students’ results, the employees’ work conditions.

Do not use the apostrophe with possessive pronouns.

- ✔ It is hers.
- ✗ It is her’s.

*It’s* means *it is* or *it has*. Don’t use the apostrophe to show possession of it:

- ✔ The new system has its own problems.
- ✗ The new system has it’s own kitchen.
Bullet points
A list of bullet points always needs to be introduced. Either an opening phrase or sentence can do this.

Following an introductory phrase, you need to:

- use a colon to introduce a list
- use lower case for first letter
- make sure that the bullet point fits grammatically with the introductory phrase
- put a full stop at the end of the list only.

E.g. You can reduce the symptoms of occupational overuse syndrome by:

- using correct typing posture
- taking regular breaks
- ensuring that your monitor is placed in correct position.

Bullet points do not usually have punctuation at the end of each point; however, there should be a full stop at the end of the last point. If the bullet points are complete sentences, they should have correct sentence punctuation as in this example:

There are several actions that can assist in avoiding Occupational Overuse Syndrome.

- Always use correct typing posture.
- Make sure that your monitor is set in correct position.
- Take regular breaks to avoid excessive strain.

Read the sentence below. How might you re-write it using bullet points?

Providing that this product is used in accordance with the operating instructions, providing that it has not been misused, providing that no unauthorised alteration, modification or substitution of any part of it has been made, and providing that the serial number has not been defaced or altered, this product is guaranteed for five years from the date of purchase against faults in the manufacture or the materials.

1. Identify the main idea:

   This product is guaranteed for five years from the date of purchase against faults in the manufacture or the materials. However, it is necessary to:

2. List the supporting ideas (qualifications and modifications):

   - use the product in accordance with the operating instructions
   - ensure that it has not been misused
   - make sure that no unauthorised alteration, modification or substitution of any part of it has been made
   - locate the serial number and make sure that it has not been defaced or altered.

Alternatively, turn your material into separate but related sentences:

This product is guaranteed for five years from the date of purchase against faults in the manufacture or the materials. Our guarantee is subject to the following conditions:

- The product must be used according to the operating instructions.
- The product, or any part of it, must not be altered or modified without our authorisation.
- The serial number must not be defaced or altered.
Exercise

_Punctuate the following passage:_

Our service is professional commercial and responsive we appreciate that our clients not only want to achieve the right result they want value for money our commitment is to provide services in a cost effective way we take a disciplined approach to ensure that all matters we work on are appropriately resourced and we encourage our clients to meet all of the people working on their behalf.

Our partners and other team members are readily available at short notice we provide clients with direct telephone email and mobile phone contact details for all key team members in the event that any key team member is likely to be absent from the office for an extended period of time we notify our clients and discuss alternative arrangements.

The markets and practice areas we focus on reflect two priorities our clients’ interests and emerging areas which are becoming increasingly significant for our firm, our clients and business generally we focus on five key areas commercial government technology and intellectual property business banking insurance and claims management.

Exercise

_Put semicolons, colons, dashes, quotation marks where they are needed in the following sentences._

1. Several alternatives were considered in the project including solar energy wind power gas and electricity.

2. In last week’s Financial Review a very interesting newspaper there was an article on engineering in Alaska.

3. In presenting to a group the speaker should consider the following the background knowledge of the audience the arrangement of the room in which they’ll present and the technology available for presenting visual information.

4. It’s not easy to isolate its cause but we think its due to the recent torrential rain.

5. The new project may be to everyone’s advantage.

6. The idea is according to the guidelines provided that the project recommendations should be implemented before the end of the year.

7. Mr Jones the president of the organisation agreed with the new approach.

8. It’s a well known fact that your time at university is a valuable opportunity to learn skills that will prepare you for your life’s work.

_Answers_

**Exercise 1**

Our service is professional commercial and responsive we appreciate that our clients not only want to achieve the right result they want value for money our commitment is to provide services in a cost effective way we take a disciplined approach to ensure that all matters we work on are appropriately resourced and we encourage our clients to meet all of the people working on their behalf.

Our partners and other team members are readily available at short notice we provide clients with direct telephone email and mobile phone contact details for all key team members in the event that any key team member is likely to be absent from the office for an extended period of time we notify our clients and discuss alternative arrangements.

The markets and practice areas we focus on reflect two priorities our clients’ interests and emerging areas which are becoming increasingly significant for our firm, our clients and business generally we focus on five key areas commercial government technology and intellectual property business banking insurance and claims management.

**Exercise 2**

1. Several alternatives were considered in the project, including solar energy, wind power, gas and electricity.

2. In last week’s Financial Review, a very interesting newspaper, there was an article on engineering in Alaska.

3. In presenting to a group, the speaker should consider the following: the background knowledge of the audience, the arrangement of the room in which they’ll present, and the technology available for presenting visual information.

Or

In presenting to a group, the speaker should consider the following:

- the background knowledge of the audience
- the arrangement of the room in which they’ll present
- the technology available for presenting visual information.

4. It’s not easy to isolate its cause but we think it’s due to the recent torrential rain.

5. The new project may be to everyone’s advantage.

6. The idea is according to the guidelines provided, that the project recommendations should be implemented before the end of the year.

7. Mr Jones, the president of the organisation, agreed with the new approach.

8. It’s a well known fact that your time at university is a valuable opportunity to learn skills that will prepare you for your life’s work.