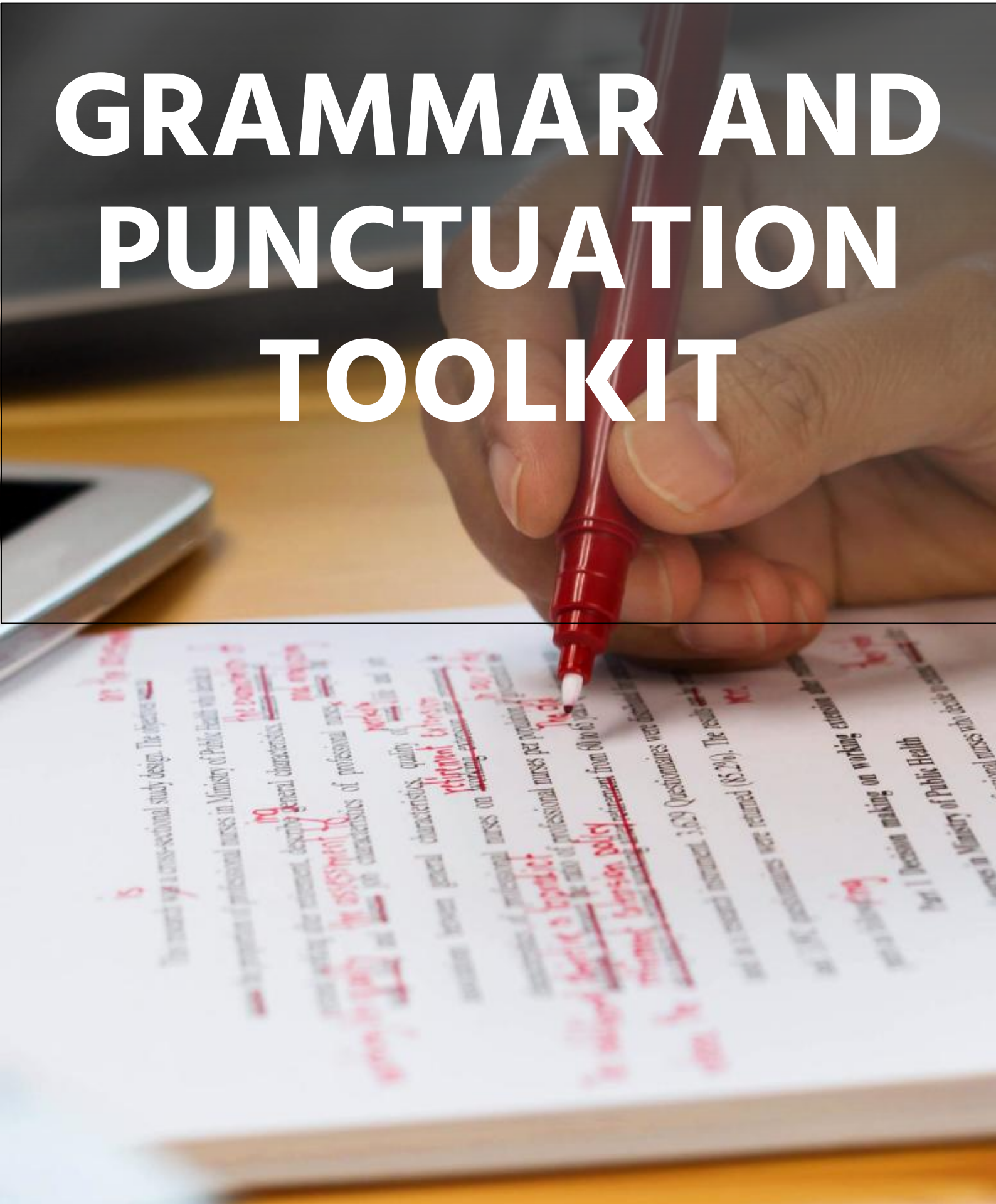




GRAMMAR AND PUNCTUATION TOOLKIT



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Introduction



A panda walks into a café. He orders a sandwich, eats it, then draws a gun and fires two shots in the air.

‘Why?’ asks the confused waiter, as the panda makes towards the exit. The panda produces a badly punctuated wildlife manual and tosses it over his shoulder.

‘I’m a panda’ he says, at the door. ‘Look it up.’

The waiter turns to the relevant entry and, sure enough, finds an explanation.

“Panda. Large black and white bear-like mammal, native to China. Eats, shoots and leaves.”¹

This little anecdote was the inspiration for a book called *Eats, Shoots & Leaves*. This is a fun way of showing how attitudes can be influenced by punctuation!

Many people who get confused between using a comma, a semicolon or a dash, and who don't know where to put the apostrophe or where the inverted commas go, wish that punctuation didn't exist. Punctuation is most probably the part of the grammar of any language that is misunderstood, misused or abused most by writers who don't understand the value of those little black marks.

Effective punctuation can add to the intended meaning of words and sentences, or it can create confusion when you use it in the wrong place, or not at all. Have a look at the following quotation from *Eats, Shoots & Leaves*²:

*Every Lady in this Land
Hath 20 Nails on each Hand
Five & Twenty on Hands and Feet
And this is True without Deceit.*

Could you decipher the meaning? Here is what it really says: “Every lady in this land has 20 nails. On each hand five, and 20 on hands and feet. And this is true without deceit.”

Shop owners are notorious for their inability to use the apostrophe correctly. While it invites, at times, a chuckle from those people who notice the spelling of words, it becomes more of an irritation when newspaper headlines are ambiguous as the one mentioned in *Eats, Shoots & Leaves*³: “*Fan's fury at stadium enquiry*”. In the

¹ Lynne Truss, *Eats, Shoots & Leaves*, Profile Books Ltd, 2003, back cover blurb.

² Ibid, p 10.

³ Ibid, p 2.

report that followed, it became clear that the incident concerned a whole mob of people who were angry and not a single mad fan as suggested in the headline.

Look at this headline: "*Sons photos to be released soon*". What does it mean? Does it refer to one son or more than one?

Have you ever seen something similar to the following advertisements?

"Warm pizza's delivered directly to you're home."

"New CD's, video's, DVD's and book's for sale at a special price for one day only!"

Could you spot the errors? If you haven't noticed immediately that *pizzas*, *CDs*, *videos*, *DVDs* and *books* should be without the apostrophe and *your* should not be spelled *you're*, don't despair. We hope that these notes will put you on the straight and narrow in terms of the use of punctuation marks.

Understand Why We Use Punctuation



Punctuation exists to clarify meaning in the written word and to facilitate reading. Too much can hamper understanding through an uneven, staccato text, while too little can lead to misreading.

Within the framework of a few basic rules (fewer still in fiction), an author's choice of punctuation is an ingredient of style as personal as his or her choice of words.

What follows below are some rules and uses of the punctuation marks used in English. This is by no means a comprehensive discussion of punctuation, as this topic is worth an entire book. The information is taken mainly from *The Oxford Style Manual*, *English Grammar* and *Eats, Shoots & Leaves*.

If you are intrigued by the power of those little dots and marks that are scattered through our writing and can cause heated arguments amongst wordsmiths, buy yourself the book by Lynne Truss, *Eats, Shoots & Leaves* (ISBN 9 781861976772). Apart from venting her frustrations about the incorrect use of the apostrophe, the author renders a well-researched and humorous account of the development of the rules around punctuation.

Gain a Sound Knowledge of the Punctuation Rules



The Full Stop [.]

A.k.a. period (US), full point

Emphatic, abrupt and unambiguous in meaning. Strong dramatic use in stylised prose. An end stop.

Use the full stop in the following instances:

To control length of sentence, e.g. in the following piece of dramatised prose:

The noise was overwhelming. Beat. Beat. Beat. I couldn't hear the music. It was the rhythm that kept pounding through my body.

- At end of statement sentences, rhetorical questions, requests, implied question by indirect speech, e.g. in the rhetorical question: *What will they think of next.* Or the Implied question by direct speech: *She wants to know whether you are coming.*
- After numbers when making lists (e.g. 1.; 2.; 3. ...)

Don't use the full stop

- In headlines, column headings, titles of works, after signatures or to end a sentence after an abbreviation when a full stop is used. For instance, in the title, *The rise and fall of the British Empire*
- After items in a displayed list unless one or more of them is a complete sentence

The Question Mark [?]

The end mark to indicate a question, e.g. Where are you going?

Use the question mark to

- End a direct question
- Indicate questions in a series, i.e. all the questions in a series of questions will have their own question marks. For instance. *Has John been in this morning? He is not ill, is he? Did he phone at all?*

- Indicate that a question has been asked when it is embedded in another sentence, e.g. *I'm not sure, but would you be the right person to contact?*
- In direct speech, e.g. *"Why not?" she wondered.* (Note, there is no comma after the question mark.) or: *She wondered, "Why not?"* (Note that the question is started with a capital letter.)

Don't use the question mark

When an indirect question has been asked, e.g. *I asked him if he was coming over*, or as in the following example cited in Good Writing Skills⁴: *Why should allegations that go unchallenged in the US be the subject of legal action in Britain, asks Roy Greenslade.*

Beware of the following and use sparingly

- The combination of a question mark and exclamation mark, e.g. *Do you mean they arrive today?!*
- Using a question mark directly after a phrase to indicate uncertainty, e.g. *Homer was born on Chios (?)*
- Using a question mark directly after a word to indicate sarcasm, e.g. *With friends (?) like these, you don't need enemies.*

The Exclamation Mark [!]

Used to indicate an element of surprise or a strong emotion, e.g. *What a surprise!* *Who do you think you are!* (In the second sentence, the emotive exclamation was stronger than the question implied by the sentence.)

⁴ Graham King, Good Writing Skills, HarperCollins Publishers, 2004, p 101.

It should be used very sparingly in serious writing. Unless it is **really** necessary to indicate hysteria, don't use two or three exclamation marks in your writing. In combination with a question mark, it indicates incredulity to a question.

Quotation Marks [“...” and ‘...’]

A.k.a. inverted commas

Used to indicate direct speech (a quotation of the actual words spoken).

Use quotation marks as follows:

- Indicate the actual words spoken by a person, whether they are a full sentence, more than one sentence, or just one word.
- When a quotation is interrupted in mid-sentence, re-open the quotation with quotation marks and start with a lower case (small) letter.
- Before closing or re-opening quotation marks, there must be a point of punctuation, such as a comma, question mark, exclamation mark or full stop. For instance: “*John,*” asked Mary, “*would you do me a favour?*”
- When using a quotation within another quotation use single quotation marks, e.g. “Well, Jane said – and these are her very words – ‘*Tom is a thief and a cheat.*’ *What do you think of that?*”
- (Note: This rule is country-specific. Sometimes, double quotation marks are used within single quotation marks. Therefore, remember the following: (a) make sure you know what style is used in the publication you write for; and (b) be consistent in your use of quotation marks as double-single-double, or single-double-single.)⁵
- When the punctuation mark is not part of the quoted material, as in the case of single words and phrases, place it **outside** the closing quotation, e.g. They were called “the Boys from Dover”, I am told. Why does he use the word “poison”? When the quoted matter is a complete sentence or question, its terminal punctuation mark falls within the closing quotation mark and is not duplicated by another mark outside the quotation mark, e.g. “*What is the*

⁵ R.M. Ritter (Ed.), *The Oxford Style Manual*, Oxford University Press, 2002, p 148.

use of the book,” thought Alice, “without pictures or conversations?” Boldly I cried out, “Woe unto this city!”

- When the terminal punctuation of the quoted material and that of the main sentence serve different functions of equal strength or importance, use both, e.g. *She had the nerve to ask, “Why are you here?”!*

The Comma [,]

The comma is the most flexible and versatile of all punctuation marks. Using commas correctly is a bit of a balancing act. It takes practise to “hear” where the comma is necessary to clarify meaning or where it is redundant, albeit correctly used according to the rules. The modern tendency is towards the use of fewer commas to prevent distraction from the meaning of the sentence. However, using too few commas can cause confusion, as in the following sentence: *They were sick and tired of the seemingly endless journey.* Compare the previous sentence to: *They were sick, and tired of the seemingly endless journey.*

The following is a summary⁶ of the main uses of the comma. If you would like a full list and description of when to use a comma and when not, consult a good style guide.

Use the comma to:

- Set apart names and persons, e.g. *Are you coming home, John?*
- Itemising words or word groups, e.g. *Please place all the towels, costumes, clothing and valuables in the lockers; and please place all clothing, equipment and personal belongings, but not jewellery and money, in the lockers.*
- Enclosing additional thoughts or qualifications, e.g. *the class thought it was, arguably, one of his finest works.*

⁶ Graham King, *Good Writing Skills*, HarperCollins Publishers, 2004, p 85 - 90.

- Setting apart interjections, e.g. *Oh, that's a pity!*
- Indicating pauses before direct speech, e.g. Jill said, "*If you feel ill, go home.*"
- Introducing questions in a statement, e.g. *You will be going soon, won't you?*
- Emphasising own point of view, e.g. *Of course, he was a good driver.*
- Setting off comparative or contrasting statements, e.g. *The more he studied, the less he seemed to understand.*
- Reinforcing statements, e.g. *It'll come right in the end, I'm sure.*
- Separate adjectives that define separate attributes, e.g. *The night resounded with a loud, persistent, chilling ringing.* But when the adjectives work together to create a single image, such in: large brick Victorian mansion, commas are not necessary.
- Indicate where a phrase or clause does not define or qualify the subject and is non-essential information, e.g. ***The wild hyacinths**, which are now at the height of their season, tint the woods with a pale blue mist.* (The underlined clause is not essential information.)
- Mark off adverbial clauses beginning with: **when, while, after, as soon as, where, for, since, as, because, so that, if, unless, provided that, though, although, even though, so, so ... that, as much as, as far as, as if.** For instance, ***When** he arrived, he was ushered inside.*
- Use a comma before the final extension phrase, such as etc., and so forth, and the like, e.g. *We had chicken pie, potatoes, carrots, turnips, **etc.** for lunch.*
- Use a comma with names when the surname comes before the name, e.g. *Brown, Tom.*

- In a date, use the comma to separate the name of the day from the date, e.g. Wednesday, 12 August 2007 or in US style, August 12, 2023.

Don't use commas in the following instances

- When a semicolon or conjunction (linking word) is needed to unite two sentences, e.g. The house is large, it has five bedrooms. This sentence could be improved by using a semicolon or a conjunction, as in:
 - The house is large; it has five bedrooms. (semi-colon)
 - The house is large **and** has five bedrooms. (conjunction)
 - The house is large **because** it has five bedrooms. (conjunction)
- Avoid using the Oxford comma – the final comma before **and** in a list – unless there is the possibility of ambiguity. This sentence does not need a comma after Sandra: *Martin spoke to Elaine, Louise, Sandra and Peter*. The following one needs a comma after blue, to make the meaning clear: *The colours are red, blue, and white*. (Compare it to: *The colours are red, blue and white*. In the latter “blue and white” could refer to the two colours in some sort of combination.)
- The trend nowadays is **NOT** to enclose adverbs and adverbial phrases (**however, indeed, for example, anyway, on the contrary**) with commas if the meaning of a statement is clear without them. For instance, the old usage would be: *You are, nevertheless, guilty of the first charge*. It is quite acceptable to write: *You are nevertheless guilty of the first charge*. The rule here is to read the sentence carefully for ambiguity, as in the following example: *The hospital informed us that both the victims were happily recovering*. Can you see that this sentence is ambiguous? We don't know whether the sentence means that the victims were enjoying themselves, or whether the hospital was happy to report their recovery.
- Where a phrase or clause defines or qualifies the subject, weld it to the subject by omitting the commas, as in: *The two lead actors who appear in 'Grease' won their respective roles after a grueling eight years in musicals*.

- Don't use a comma where what follows has become part of the name, for instance, Bob the builder, My son Ben is... (However, when you transpose the names, you need a comma, e.g. Ben, my son, is ...; The builder, Bob, is...)
- Don't use a comma to separate a defining word, phrase or clause, which is one that cannot be omitted without affecting the sentence's meaning, e.g. *Men **who are bald** often wear hats.*
- Don't use a comma after citing a page number, e.g. *In The Oxford Style Manual, page 119 you can read more about the use of the comma.*
- Don't introduce a comma between a subject and verb, or verb and object, even after a long subject where there would be a natural pause in the speech, e.g. *Those who have the largest incomes and who have amassed the greatest personal savings should be taxed most.* There should be no comma before "should", even though it is a long sentence.
- Punctuation is omitted from salutations and endings, before the signature, e.g. *Dear Sir* (new line, no comma); *Yours sincerely* (new line, no comma).
- No punctuation is used in the address if it is written on separate lines (block style), but commas are used to separate the elements in a run-on postal address.

Hyphens [-], Dashes [–] and Ellipses [...]

A hyphen's uses are to:

- Join two or more words into a new, compound word, e.g. *mother-in-law*; *suntanned*

- Separate a prefix from the root word to prevent double vowels or consonant clusters (this rule is also changing and the common way of writing is currently to write words such as *co-ordinate* as *coordinate*. Other examples: *pre-eminent*, *de-ice*, *will-less*).
- Avoid confusion with an existing word, as in *re-cover* (to give it a new cover) vs. *recover* (return to normal).
- Join words and capital letters, e.g. *un-American*, *U-boat*, *pre-Victorian*, *T-junction*.
- Divide words at the ends of lines. There are a few rules about word divisions:
 - Don't divide one-syllable words or words pronounced as one word (e.g. *wound*, *passed*).
 - Avoid dividing words that end in –ed, –ted, and –er, even when they are pronounced as separate syllables, e.g. *wounded*, *calmer*.
 - Don't break a word to leave a syllable with an unstressed central vowel, e.g. *libel*, *noble*, *people*.
 - Never leave one letter, or fewer than three letters before or after a division, e.g. *very*, *envy*, *hero*, *holly*, *again*.
 - Divide hyphenated words at the existing hyphen, e.g. *counter-clockwise*. (Don't add another hyphen).
 - Divide compound words where it is obvious, e.g. *tele-vision*.
 - Divide most gerunds and present participles at –ing, e.g. *carry-ing*.
 - Divide between a doubled consonant before –ing, e.g. *admit-ting*.
 - When a word ends in –le (e.g. *chuckle*, *puzzle*), divide it before the l when adding –ing, e.g. *puzz-ling*.
 - When not sure, divide a word after a vowel and take over the consonant, e.g. *preju-dice*.
 - Divide a word between two consonants or two vowels that are pronounced separately, e.g. *splen-dour*, *cre-ate*.
 - Don't divide words where it may affect the pronunciation, e.g. *le-gend* (not leg-end)
 - Don't divide words that would look odd when divided, e.g. *beauty*, *poker*.
 - Don't break place names, numerals (or separate them from their abbreviated units, e.g. *20 kg*), or carry over parts of abbreviations, dates or numbers to the next line.

Dashes should be used sparingly, in the following instances:

- To indicate an abrupt change of thought in recorded speech, e.g. “*I want now to speak about jet-lag – no, I’ll leave that until later.*”
- To show hesitation, e.g. “*Well – er – all I can say...*”
- To set off strong interpolations from the rest of the sentences (more forceful than setting off phrases not essential for the meaning of the sentence with commas), e.g. “*My advice – if you will forgive my bluntness – is to think before you speak.*”
- To introduce a phrase at the end of a sentence, e.g. “*She has but one hobby – scrap-booking.*”
- To indicate an abrupt interruption in mid-sentence, e.g. “*Well, Sir, I had to go because – “No excuses, boy!”* (The dash is a stronger indication of interruption than an ellipsis, which is used to indicate the trailing off of thoughts.)

Ellipses are used in the following instances:

- To indicate a passage of time, or to leave the rest of the sentence to the imagination of the reader, e.g. *His eyes glinted evilly....* (**Note the use of a fourth dot as a full stop at the end of the sentence. An ellipsis at the end of an incomplete sentence is not followed by a full stop**, e.g. “*If we could only ...*”. The sentence following ellipses should start with a capital letter, e.g. “*If we could only ... But we can’t,*” she sighs.)
- To indicate an omission. The ellipses (three dots) are normally separated by the normal space of the line.

Note: Use ellipses sparingly in your text; it can smack of melodrama. And please don’t use ellipses in the place of other punctuation marks when you write e-mail messages. Write complete sentences and end them with full stops (not exclamation marks!).

Parenthesis

Any word or group of words that is not essentially part of the sentence or necessary for the grammatical structure of a sentence, are in parenthesis. There are three punctuation marks that indicate parenthesis, namely **commas**, **brackets** and **square brackets**.

Commas: used when more information is given about the subject, e.g. *Mr Smith, the plumber, was at the council meeting today.*

Brackets: *The council appointed a plumber (Mr Smith) to do maintenance on the city rest rooms.*

Square brackets: When quoting from a passage and it is necessary to add an explanation which is not in the original text, square brackets are used. E.g. "Patrick [Smith] is a valuable addition to our team"

Semicolon [;]

The semicolon is a very useful punctuation mark that is not used often nowadays, as most people don't really understand the difference between a semicolon, a colon and a comma.

A semicolon is used as follows:

- To link two or more simple sentences without using a coordinate conjunction, e.g. *The boy left his school books at home; he hadn't done his homework.* This also applies when the second or subsequent clause is introduced by one of the following adverbs: **however**, **nevertheless**, **therefore**, **of course**, **in fact**, **for instance**. Example: *The accused had hoped for a reprieve; **instead**, he was sentenced to a term in jail.* (Note the comma after *instead*.)
- When several subordinate clauses relate to the same verb, e.g. *At yesterday's Speech Day, the principal **said** that he was particularly pleased with the academic standard in the school; that he noted a marked increase of interest in sport; that the prefects had acquitted themselves well; but that the new boys*

had not shown sufficient concern for the traditions of the school. (Each of these clauses relate to the verb “said”.)

- To punctuate lists where individual items already require the use of a comma and the semicolon is used to structure the internal hierarchy of its components, e.g. *I should like to thank the Warden and Fellows of All Souls College, Oxford; the staff of the Bodleian Library, Oxford; and the staff of the Pierpont Morgan Library, New York.*
- When the same verb applies to two clauses and has been omitted in the second clause, e.g. *My father **smokes** a hookah; my mother a pipe.*

Colon [:]

The colon usually indicates that some example or explanation is to follow. It is used as follows:

- to introduce a list or example, e.g. *The following items should be bought: two HB pencils, blue ink pens, two hardbound books, etc.* But **don’t use a colon** when a statement is introduced that completes the sentence formed by the introduction, e.g.
He took care to
 - *copy the papers*
 - *circulate them to everybody, and*
 - *record the transaction.*
- To separate two statements where the second explains the first, e.g. *Many factory workers were late this morning: the fog caused several trains to be cancelled.* The colon fulfils the same function as words such as *namely, that is, as, for example, for instance, because, as follows, and therefore.*
- To introduce a lengthy quotation from a book.
- In the punctuation of direct speech and dialogue in plays, to indicate a certain character is about to speak.
- To introduce direct or paraphrased speech or quoted material more emphatically than a comma would, e.g. *He asked me a simple question: Who was first?*

- After the title of a work to introduce the subtitle, e.g. *The Methodology of Sabre Fencing: A History*.

Apostrophe [’s]

The apostrophe has two main functions in English, namely: to indicate possession and to mark contractions.

Possession

- Use ‘s after singular nouns and indefinite pronouns that do not end in s, e.g. the boy’s job, in a week’s time, one’s car.
- After plural nouns that do not end in s, e.g. children’s clothes, women’s rights.
- Plurals ending in s gets only the apostrophe after the s, e.g. the scissors’ point, the neighbours’ children
- Singular nouns ending in s or z sound and combined with sake gets the apostrophe alone, e.g. *for goodness’ sake*.
- In compounds (words joined together with hyphens) and phrases with **of**, use ‘s after the last noun when it is singular, e.g. *my sister-in-law’s car*, *the King of Spain’s daughter*. But use the apostrophe alone after the last noun when it is plural, e.g. *The Queen of the Netherlands’ daughter*.
- Use ‘s after a list of nouns when possession is shared, e.g. *Gilbert and Sullivan’s musicals*. But repeat ‘s after each noun if the possession is not shared, e.g. *Shakespeare’s and Jonson’s comedies*.
- To indicate residences and places of business, e.g. *at Jane’s*, *at the doctor’s*.
- Some large businesses leave out the apostrophe in their names, e.g. *Harrods*. Others keep it, e.g. *Jack Daniel’s*.
- Use ‘s after non-classical personal names ending in an s or z sound, e.g. *Charles’s*, *Marx’s*, *Leibnitz’s*. But it is also permissible to use the apostrophe alone after longer non-classical names that are not accented on the last or penultimate syllable, e.g. *Barnabas’(s)*, *Xerxes’*, *Erasmus’*
- Use ‘s after French names ending in silent s or x, when used possessively in English, e.g. *Dumas’s*, *Descartes’s*, *Lorilleux’s*.

Plurals

- Do not use an apostrophe when creating plurals. This includes names, abbreviations, numbers and words not usually used as nouns, e.g. *The Joneses, the 1990s, the three Rs, tos and fros, dos and don'ts, ins and outs, both Xs.*
- Beware of the “greengrocer’s apostrophe”, e.g. *lettuce’s, cauli’s, “trouser’s reduced”.*
- Confusion can arise when words, letters or symbols are referred to as objects rather than their meaning. These items are normally either italicized or set in quotes with the **s** set outside the quote, e.g. *can’t tell her Ms from her Ns, “a”s, “e”s.*

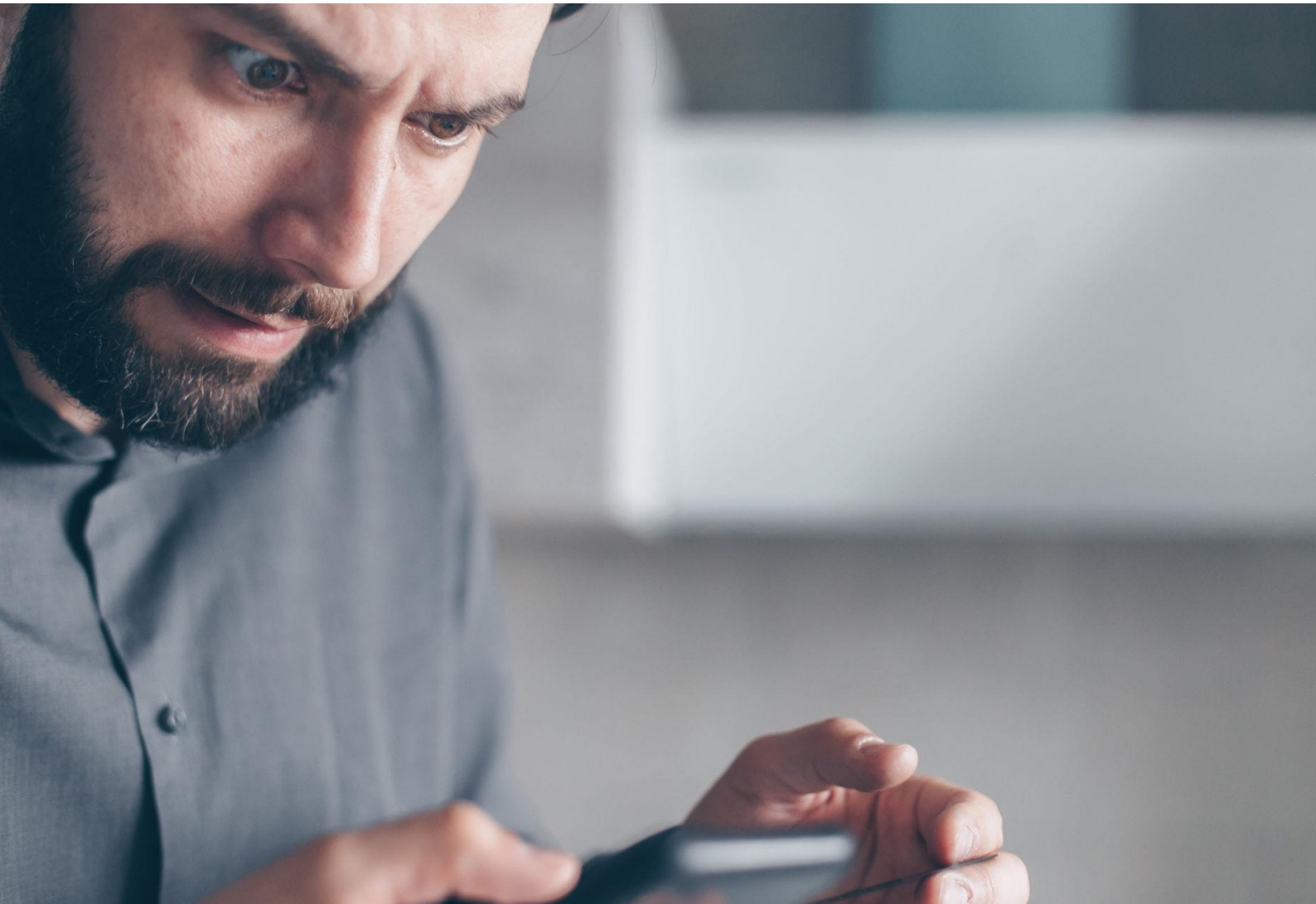
Contractions

- Use apostrophes in the place of missing letters in contractions, e.g. *won’t, should’ve, g’day, shelt’ring.* The apostrophe is printed close up to the adjacent letters.
- When an apostrophe marks the elision of a final letter or letters, such as **o’** or **th’**, it is not set close up to the next character but rather followed by a full space to avoid misreading, e.g. *o’ clock.* Use an apostrophe to splice a suffix when an abbreviation is used as a verb, e.g. *OD’s, SOS’ing.*

We’ve come to the end of the list of the most commonly used punctuation marks. It is worth the effort to make sure that we use the right punctuation marks, because, as quoted by Lynn Truss from Thomas McCormack’s *The Fiction Editor, the Novel and the Novelist* (1989), “The purpose of punctuation is ‘to tango the reader into the pauses, inflections, continuities and connections that the spoken line would convey’”.

Punctuation to the writer is like anatomy to the artist: He learns the rules so that he can depart from them as art requires. Punctuation is a means, and its end is: helping the reader to hear, to follow.

Common Grammar Errors



Many of us hate the word 'grammar'. It reminds us of boring classes, pedantic teachers and difficult work. However, using grammar correctly is a vital skill for any business writer.

Poor grammar interferes not only with communicating a clear message, but also suggests that the writer is careless and even unprofessional. Using the correct grammar conveys your information accurately and portrays your company and yourself as articulate and competent.

The following are examples of common errors in speaking or writing English. Watch out for them.

Misrelated participles

A participle is a word that relates to two parts of speech. It is a verb because it shows action, and at the same time, it describes a noun and therefore fulfils the function of an adjective. It often happens that a participle is used to describe the wrong noun, as in the following example:

Climbing into bed, the sheets felt cold.

Climbing is the participle, describing the noun, sheets. Can the sheets climb into bed? Can you see that this is wrong? The correct way of using the participle would be in a sentence such as:

Climbing into bed, Jane shivered. The sheets felt cold.

Climbing relates to Jane, as it describes an action performed by her.

Number correspondence

Should you use the verb in its singular form or in its plural form? Look at the following examples and see if you can get them right before referring to the rules below them.

- The wife and mother is/are totally unreliable.
- Whiskey and soda is/are a pleasant drink.
- The wife and the mother is/are totally unreliable.
- The whiskey and the soda is/are on the table.
- The mother with her children is/are strolling in the park
- The children as well as their mother is/are strolling in the park.

- Not only the singer but also her fans was/were there.
- A small number of people was/were present at the launch.
- The small number of people who was/were present, enjoyed the launch.
- The staff is/are dissatisfied with the working conditions.
- The staff is/are to be interviewed separately.
- No one was/were going to attend the meeting.
- Everyone was/were asked to take off his/their blazer.
- None of the peaches is/are ripe.
- Mathematics is/are a difficult subject.
- Data is/are available.
- The media is/are invited.
- After the press conference, the media was/were seen running to their cars.
- Her tactics was/were questionable.
- The reason for the destruction is/are the heavy winds.
- The heavy winds is/are the reason for the destruction.

Rules for number correspondence:

- Use a singular verb when two nouns refer to one person or thing, but when the definite article (the) is inserted before the second noun, use a plural verb, e.g. The wife and mother *is*...; The wife and the mother *are*...
- When using with and as well as, the number of the verb agrees with the first noun, e.g. The mother *with* her children was....; The children *as well as* their mother were....
- When using not only...but also, either...or, neither...nor, the verb agrees with the number of the last verb, e.g. Not only the singer but also her *fans* were there.
- If the word, number, is preceded by an indefinite article, the verb is plural. When preceded by a definite article, the verb is singular, e.g. A number of people were present; The small number of people attending was unusual.

- Collective nouns take a singular verb when referring to the group as a whole, but a plural verb when referring to individuals in the group, e.g. The staff was unhappy...; The staff were interviewed separately.
- No one, everybody, anybody, everyone, anyone takes a singular verb and pronoun, e.g. Everybody was asked to take off his blazer. (Never use “their” with one of these words.)
- None used to ALWAYS take the singular verb, but it is one of the rules that changed with time. If the noun that follows none is plural, then use a plural verb, e.g. None of the peaches are ripe. When it is singular, use a singular verb, as in: none of the fruit is edible.
- Nouns with a plural form indicating one object, such as illnesses (measles and mumps), subjects (mathematics, news) take singular verbs, e.g. Mathematics is a difficult subject.
- Data is a plural with a singular form, namely *datum*, but hardly anybody uses it. It has become the norm to use data together with a singular verb, although it is not incorrect to use it with a plural verb. Example: The data is available.
- When referring to the media as a group, use the singular verb, e.g. The media was invited to attend the press conference. When you refer to members of the media, use the plural, as in: After the press conference, the media were seen running for their cars.
- Words ending in -ics can be either singular or plural, depending on the context, e.g. Using the right tactics is important; Her tactics were questionable.
- Is/are: Remember that the verb must always agree with the number of its subject as in: The reason for the destruction is..., while: The heavy rains are the reason for the destruction. In the first sentence, “reason” is the subject and in the second sentence, “rains” is the subject.

Was/were

It seems as if there was no consistency in the following sentences: If I were a rich man.... If it was not clear to you, you should have asked. She groaned as if she

were in pain. The general rule is to use *were* for possibility, a condition, a wish or something imagined, and *was* for a fact.

Pronouns

The following pronouns are used only as a **subject** of a verb: I, we, he, she, they, and the following pronouns only as the **object** of a verb or preposition: me, us, him, her, for instance:

I spoke to them (them = object)

It is they, who.... (they = subject)

It is I who made the mistake (I = subject)

You and I should do it.... (You and I = subject)

On behalf of my wife and me....(my wife and me = object)

He is younger than I (I = subject.)

Who/whom

Who is used as the subject of a verb, whom as the object of a verb or preposition, e.g. Who is that? To whom are you speaking? That is the man whom I saw.

That/which

That is used with a defining adjectival clause. A defining clause is never enclosed within commas and contains essential information that cannot be left out of the sentence, for instance, "The documents that have to be signed today are on your desk."

Which is used with a non-defining adjectival clause, which contains non-essential information that is merely descriptive, for instance, "The documents, which arrived yesterday, have to be signed by you".

Owing to/due to

Use “owing to” when you can replace the phrase with: “as a result of” or “because of”, and “due to” when it means “caused by”, for instance:

Owing to the bad weather, we could not arrive on time.

The accident happened due to bad weather.

The pluperfect tense (past perfect tense)

When referring to two incidents that happened in the past, the pluperfect is used for the one that was completed before the next one began, for instance: After she had done the reading, she completed the exercise. In the pluperfect, the auxiliary verb “had” has to be attached to the past participle (verb + -ed or -en) indicating the first action.

Split infinitive

This is a common mistake made when people insert a word between “to” followed by a verb, for instance: “to frequently say” is wrong. The right way of saying this is: “He frequently used to say...”

One/you

Be consistent in the use of one or you. If you start by using you, continue to do so. Don’t switch to you and vice versa. The following sentence is **wrong**: One has to make sure that you....

It would be correct to say: “One has to make sure that one...” or “You have to make sure that you...”.

Each other/one another

Each other refers to two people, for instance, “The two boys were shouting at each other”.

One another refers to more than two, for instance, “The four boys kept interrupting one another”.

Like and as/as if

Use “like” when it is followed by a phrase, e.g. “He drinks like a fish”.

Use as/as if when it is followed by a clause, e.g. “Do not behave as I do”, and “She worked as if her life depended on it”.

False ellipsis

Ellipsis is when a word in a sentence is omitted but understood, for instance, “He entered the room and [he] sat down.”

A false ellipsis happens when the understood word is incorrect, for instance: Few ever have, or can accept defeat. (This implies the following: Few ever have accepted defeat, or can accept defeat.) It would be correct to say: Few ever have accepted or can accept defeat.

Ambiguity

Ambiguity refers to a statement with more than one meaning, as in the following example: “She informed her that she was invited to the party.” Who was invited?

Take care with the word, “only” and make sure the word is in the right position to make it clear what you mean, for instance:

Pete wore a jacket and tie to work only. (Only to work and nowhere else.)

Pete wore only a jacket and tie to work. (What about trousers and shoes?)

Only Pete wore a jacket and tie to work. (No one else did.)

Mixed metaphor

A metaphor is a figure of speech in which two unrelated things are compared.

For example:

He is a tiger in the ring. (A boxer is compared to a tiger.)

A mixed metaphor happens when two mutually exclusive or contradictory metaphors are used in a single image.

For example:

He is a tiger in business and bulldozes his way to the top. (Two unrelated images are used.)

The following is correct:

He is a tiger in business and claws his way up to the top. ("Claws" relates to "tiger".)

Books for Your Bookshelf



- A good English dictionary, such as Oxford, Collins, Penguin
- A good thesaurus, such as *Roget's Thesaurus*, or any of the Oxford dictionaries and thesauri
- A good style guide, such as *The Economist Style Guide*, *Oxford Style Manual*, or a style guide from any other well-known British publisher.
- A textbook on good writing skills that explains writing and grammar rules and their exceptions, such as the *Collins Book of Good Writing Skills*. Some of the grammar reference guides used in schools and colleges are concise and excellent sources of basic information.

These are books recommended by yourdictionary.com.

Grammar Books

- [Eats, Shoots & Leaves: The Zero Tolerance Approach to Punctuation](#)
- [Grammatically Correct](#)
- [Line by Line: How to Edit Your Own Writing](#)
- [Sin and Syntax: How to Craft Wickedly Effective Prose](#)
- [Sleeping Dogs Don't Lay: Practical Advice for the Grammatically Challenged](#)
- [The Blue Book of Grammar and Punctuation: An Easy-to-Use Guide with Clear Rules, Real-World Examples, and Reproducible Quizzes](#)
- [The Elephants of Style : A Trunkload of Tips on the Big Issues and Gray Areas of Contemporary American English](#)
- [The Only Grammar Book You'll Ever Need: A One-Stop Source for Every Writing Assignment](#)
- [When You Catch an Adjective, Kill It: The Parts of Speech, for Better And/Or Worse](#)
- [Woe Is I: The Grammarphobe's Guide to Better English in Plain English, Second Edition](#)

Vocabulary Books

- [100 Words Almost Everyone Confuses and Misuses \(The 100 Words\)](#)
- [100 Words To Make You Sound Smart \(100 Words\)](#)
- [30 Days to a More Powerful Vocabulary](#)
- [Red Hot Root Words, Book 1](#)
- [Red Hot Root Words: Mastering Vocabulary With Prefixes, Suffixes And Root Words](#)
- [Root Awakenings: Vocabulary Development Using Classical Word Roots](#)
- [The Thinker's Thesaurus: Sophisticated Alternatives to Common Words](#)
- [The Wrong Word Dictionary: 2,000 Most Commonly Confused Words](#)

Writing Books

- [A Writer's Guide to Powerful Paragraphs](#)
- [Effective Writing: Stunning Sentences, Powerful Paragraphs, and Riveting Reports](#)
- [Effective Writing: A Guide for Social Science Students](#)
- [Grammar Girl's Quick and Dirty Tips for Better Writing](#)
- [Keys to Great Writing](#)
- [The Oxford American Writer's Thesaurus](#)
- [Words Fail Me: What Everyone Who Writes Should Know about Writing](#)