

2.6 Punctuation, how important is it ... really?

The answer to the above question is *very* important, and for a number of reasons. First of all, written work (and indeed its author) will normally be judged partly on how well their writing is punctuated. A poorly punctuated assignment or research project will often be marked down simply *because* it's poorly punctuated. Furthermore, rightly or wrongly, the ability to punctuate well (or not) is seen as a reflection of the education or erudition of the writer. This latter point is important when you consider that it may influence the way in which your reader evaluates your work and the ideas it contains, regardless of how sound they may actually be in themselves.

But there are also more fundamental reasons why punctuation is important. Most crucially, punctuation helps to make your writing more comprehensible to your reader by dividing it up into manageable chunks and showing the relationships that exist between clauses, sentences and even paragraphs and sections. A sentence, for example, without any punctuation is very difficult to decipher and the process of trying to understand it can be a tiresome and irritating one. Reading a poorly punctuated essay is not an experience lecturers and examiners enjoy, so it's in your own best interests to punctuate well and keep your reader in a good and sympathetic mood!

Punctuation also indicates whether the ideas and/or words you are using to express them are your own or those of somebody else; it can even convey a writer's attitude or feeling – just think of how exclamation marks are used.

This section on punctuation is not designed to be comprehensive; it could not possibly be so when you think that there are books on punctuation that run into hundreds of pages. What I seek to do below is provide you with a few fundamental punctuation rules, – or guidelines – a number of which are the subject of numerous mistakes in undergraduates' work. Examples are presented to illustrate each rule and, most importantly, to give you a sense of how that particular punctuation type 'works'. So let's begin with ...

Capital letters

Rule no. 1: Use a capital letter at the beginning of a new sentence:

The words we know form part of our internalised grammars.

Every language has word classes. They are a universal feature of languages.

Rule no. 2: Use capital letters for proper nouns or adjectives (e.g. people, places, book titles, theories, organisations, institutions):

Many Asian languages, such as Thai, Chinese and Burmese, are tone languages.

The syntactic structures of Black English were investigated by William Labov.

Chomsky's 1959 Review of Verbal Behaviour by B. F. Skinner heralded a revolution in approaches to language and linguistics.

Klein's Introduction to Language and Linguistics is an invaluable resource for students new to the field.

(Note how 'Language' and 'Linguistics' are both capitalised here because they are part of the actual name of a book, whereas in the previous example they are simply used in a generic way to refer to language and linguistics in general.)

Samuel Johnson is celebrated as the author of the first English dictionary.

Quirk and Greenbaum's Grammar of Contemporary English is often cited as the definitive reference work on English grammar.

The work of the Council of Europe was an important influence in promoting a communicative approach to the teaching of languages.

Important research into language testing has been conducted at the University of Lancaster.

Rule no. 3: Use capital letters at the beginning of main words (sometimes called 'content words') in titles:

Principles of Pragmatics

A First Dictionary of Linguistics and Phonetics

Syntax: A Linguistic Introduction to Sentence Structure

Rule no. 4: Use capital letters for titles and the abbreviated forms of proper names:

Dr Remick Professor Stupor Associate Editor the U.S. TESOL

Sir William Jones

Commas

Rule no. 1: Use commas to separate items in a list. Before the last item in a list a comma is unnecessary:

Nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs and prepositions are often referred to as 'parts of speech'.

Whereas English developed out of Anglo-Saxon, the Romance languages, such as French, Spanish, Italian, Portuguese and Romanian, had their origin in Latin.

Sapir stated that 'Language is a purely human and non-instinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions and desires by means of voluntarily produced symbols.'

Some of the methods and approaches to language teaching that have appeared in recent years include Suggestopedia, Communicative Language Teaching, the Natural Approach, the Silent Way and Audiolingualism.

Rule no. 2: Use commas to separate introductory phrases from the sentences they introduce:

Despite considerable research having been done in the area, second language acquisition has to date had little impact on pedagogy.

Having discussed the various theories that appear in the literature, McKay states categorically that Accommodation Theory offers 'the best account of any theory currently on offer'.

Although an utterance may not appear to be relevant superficially, we assume nonetheless that it is relevant at a deeper level.

After discussing Speech Act Theory, Harris goes on to consider the work of Grice, Lakoff, Leech and Sperber and Wilson.

Besides formal correctness, it has been argued that appropriateness and attestedness are necessary facets of language use if one is to claim full communicative competence.

Because of the brain's 'plasticity', pre-pubescent children who suffer brain damage are often able to re-learn their first language to some degree.

Given that we all learn a first language, each one of us must come hard-wired with a language acquisition device that enables us to acquire language according to the input we receive from those around us.

In general, bilingual children fall behind in their studies initially, only to catch up and overtake their peers later on.

Note that in all the above examples, where a comma appears after the introductory word or group of words, it would be natural to pause slightly if one were speaking the sentences. This is one way useful way of identifying when a comma is required.

Rule no. 3: Use commas after connecting words and phrases which show a clear relationship between two clauses or sentences.

Such connecting words include:

<i>however, ...</i>	<i>nevertheless, ...</i>	<i>therefore, ...</i>	<i>for this reason, ...</i>
<i>consequently, ...</i>	<i>as a result, ...</i>	<i>similarly, ...</i>	<i>conversely, ...</i>
<i>additionally, ...</i>	<i>hence, ...</i>	<i>thus, ...</i>	<i>on the contrary, ...</i>
<i>similarly, ...</i>	<i>moreover, ...</i>	<i>furthermore, ...</i>	<i>for example, ...</i>

The theory, then, was fundamentally flawed; however, it did serve to open up new and productive avenues of inquiry.

It is, nevertheless, difficult to conclude from this that certain ethnic groups are inherently better language learners than others.

We express our personality and individuality in our language behaviour via the social categories that are encoded in language variation in the community of which we are members.

Furthermore, the social meaning that is assigned to the variables of accent and dialect is largely determined by so-called stereotypes.

For Wilkins, the term 'notion' incorporates functions. Conversely, Halliday uses the term 'function' to refer to the formal encoding of meaning within a grammar.

Rule no. 4: Use commas after words and phrases such as clearly, obviously, sadly, unfortunately, without a doubt, which say something about your attitude or feeling:

Unfortunately, Freedman fails to explain adequately how he draws the conclusions he does from his data.

Chomsky has, without a doubt, had a greater impact on linguistics in the last fifty years than anyone else.

Obviously, this research is in need of replication.

Rule no. 5: Use commas after first(ly), second(ly), third(ly), finally, etc.

Secondly, the fact that a sound is marked does not automatically render it less important for intelligibility.

Finally, there is the argument which states that grammar cannot be acquired through an explicit focus on form.

Rule no. 6: Use commas to separate and distinguish additional or incidental information inserted into a sentence:

Affixes, the subject of section three, are a good example of this tendency in language.

Behaviourism, which was to become part of the theoretical basis of Audiolingual methodology, was most closely associated with Skinner.

It was, needless to say, this coincidence of events within different and very diverse disciplines that led to a shift of paradigm.

Malinowski, an anthropologist of the early twentieth century, coined the phrase 'context of situation' and raised awareness of the importance of context to meaning.

Semi-colons

Rule no. 1: Use semi-colons to indicate pauses longer than those associated with commas but shorter than those associated with full-stops:

One might speculate that it is because the learner draws variably on his interim competence according to the situational demands made upon it; that his interlanguage contains variable rules as well as invariant categorical ones and in this respect resembles fully fledged languages.

Functionalism in language teaching was taken by many to mean the complete exclusion of any focus on form in the classroom; grammar and the explicit teaching of rules simply had no place.

Language never fossilizes; it constantly changes and adapts in response to the purposes for which its users choose to employ it.

In each of the above examples, you'll notice that there's a very close connection between the idea that appears before the semi-colon and the one that appears after it. The idea following the semi-colon appears to expand on or explain the idea preceding it, and so the semi-colon effectively indicates the closeness of that relationship. Although it's *always* possible to substitute a semicolon with a full-stop, in doing so you lose the opportunity to make that relationship more explicit to the reader.



One of the easiest ways to think *about* a semi-colon is as something which performs a function that is midway between that of a comma and that of a full-stop.

Rule no. 2: Use semi-colons immediately before linking words such as *however, moreover, furthermore, nevertheless, therefore and instead:*

Scholars of slang generally acknowledge it as an illustration of creativity and vibrancy in language; nevertheless, there are those who still consider it to be a decadent, impoverished form of language.

Native speakers of certain languages other than English are simply unable to hear particular sound distinctions in English; for example, /b/ and /v/ are indistinguishable to many Japanese.

It appears, then, that all children learn a first language unless they suffer some kind of physiological impairment; furthermore, the research suggests that in doing so they all follow an invariable developmental sequence – a natural order of acquisition.

Rule no. 3: Use semi-colons to separate items in a list, where the list of items is long and/or each item in the list is too long to be separated by a comma:

People have to be taught to observe, whether it be the doctor learning to observe and 'read' the human body; the artist learning to observe and 'read' great paintings; or the geologist or geomorphologist learning to observe and 'read' the landscape. The language-learning student is no different; they have to learn to observe and 'read' the way in which a particular grammar 'works'.

Compare the above list with that under Rule no. 1 (Commas), where shorter items in a list are normally separated by commas.

Colons

Rule no. 1: Use colons to introduce explanations or examples:

Linguistic repetition is a feature of a structural orientation to teaching with its emphasis on knowing: learners are required to practise particular structures so as to facilitate unconscious assimilation.

How to Write Better Assignments: A Student Handbook (a book title)
Reference, Sense and Denotation: An Analysis of Descriptive Meaning
(an essay title)

The distinction between a formal and a notional approach can be illustrated by considering the following data from the African language Akan, from central and southern Ghana:

1a	<i>Kofi ware</i>	<i>Kofi is tall</i>
1b	<i>Kofi reware</i>	<i>Kofi is getting tall</i>
1c	<i>Kofi aware</i>	<i>Kofi has grown tall</i>

The essay will look at a number of different learner factors including:

- *age*
- *motivation*
- *aptitude*
- *preferred learning style*
- *previous language learning experience*

The term 'propositional structure' relates to:

- (1) *the type of 'state' or 'action' described by the sentence;*
- (2) *the 'participant roles' involved in the state or action.*

Other phrases that are often followed by a colon include '*for example: ...*', '*Consider this example: ...*' and '*There are one/two/three such cases: ...*'.

Notice how the statement of each 'rule' in this section on punctuation includes a colon which precedes a series of examples designed to illustrate that rule!

Rule no. 2: Use colons to introduce quotations:

He acknowledges that his tasks are factual and rational in meaning-content and that they require no procedures for increasing emotional involvement, but adds: 'This does not imply any denial of value to emotional involvement in learning.'

In this regard, Brown argues that:

For complex social and psychological reasons, they are less sure that they have grasped the topic being spoken of, the opinion being expressed about it, and the reasons for the speaker wanting to talk about it.

Notice how, in the second of these two examples, the quotation is indented slightly and separated from the main text by a single line. This is because it is a longer quotation – something we shall return to in Chapter 8, *Referencing and Quotations*.



In order to understand how colons function it can be helpful to think of them as a substitute for language and to ask yourself how one might express their function or meaning in words. With this in mind, we can say that a colon means something like '... and here it is', 'Here we are', 'thus ...' or 'as follows ...'

Parentheses

Rule no. 1: Use parentheses when citing references in your text:

This phenomenon has been described as 'a normal facet of language development and thus one to which all languages are susceptible, irrespective of whether or not it is perceived as desirable or acceptable' (Franklin 2007, p. 67).

In this regard the 'Track-it' concordancing website (<http://www.track-itconcordancer.com>) has been a particular boon for researchers and teachers alike.

Rule no. 2: Use parentheses to identify and enclose information which is relevant to, but additional and slightly peripheral to, the main idea of a sentence.

Searle develops this idea during his discussion of the 'speech act' (a concept originating in the work of philosopher John Austin), and it has since been further refined.

Rule no. 3: Use square brackets to enclose information which is not part of the original quotation:

Havelock states that 'it [Murdoch's account] ignores many factors necessary in a detailed description of communication by language'.

According to the subject's diary, she 'studied English every weekday except Wensdays [sic] for five years'.

(Use the word 'sic' after a word that you have copied to signal that you know it has been spelled, punctuated or used incorrectly and that it is not your mistake!)

Inverted commas (quotation marks)

The use of double or single quotation marks is really a matter of convention rather than rule. In some cases double inverted commas are used as the first level of quotation mark and single inverted commas as the second level (i.e. a quotation within a quotation); in other cases the opposite is true. Given that most linguistics writing uses APA style (see section 8.4), that is what you will see in the examples below.

Double inverted commas

Use double inverted commas to indicate a direct quotation:

According to Cutting, the individualism of pragmatics "underestimates the extent to which people are caught up in, constrained by, and indeed derive their individual identities from social conventions" (2002, p. 120).

In her criticism of Leech's approach to politeness, Thomas argues that there seems to be no motivated way to restrict the number of maxims and that it would be possible to create a new maxim to account for every single regularity in language use. This, she says, "makes the theory at best inelegant, at worst virtually unfalsifiable" (1998, p. 167).

As we shall see in Chapter 8, longer quotations are often inset slightly and follow a free line. These longer quotations do not require inverted commas, despite also being direct quotations.

Single inverted commas

Rule no. 1: Use single inverted commas to identify a quotation within a larger quotation:

In discussing the notion of signification, and in particular the distinction between signs and symbols, Lyons states that

... there is no consistency in the way in which various authors have defined these terms. For example, Ogden and Richards (1923: 23) distinguish symbols as 'those signs which men use to communicate with one another', whereas Pierce (1940: 104), who also treats symbols as a subclass of sign, defines them '... on the basis of the conventional nature of the relation which holds between sign and significatum'.

(Lyons 1989, p. 95)

Drew states that "there is a limited and quite small number of written genres, and, in the words of Kress, 'the individual can no more create a new genre type than he or she can create a new sentence type'" (Drew 1990, p. 77).

Rule no. 2: Use single quotation marks when you wish to identify or focus attention on a particular word or phrase:

Contrary to the view expressed by Cowper, the terms 'variability', 'variation', and even 'variety' have always held certain negative connotations.

Some have used the word 'impoverished' to describe the language learners produce in communicative classrooms that are student-centred.

'Hahesh mi konam' is generally considered to be the Persian equivalent of 'You're welcome' in English.

Rule no. 3: Use single quotation marks to indicate that a word with an otherwise generally understood meaning, has a more specialised meaning in the particular context in which you are using it.

In applied linguistics, and second language acquisition (SLA) theory in particular, 'acquired' takes on a particular meaning and is used to describe knowledge of language that has been internalised through a natural process of exposure. It contrasts with learned knowledge, which results from a conscious focus on form.

Rule no. 4: Use single quotation marks when you wish to indicate that a word or phrase has been misused or applied inaccurately or inappropriately:

The 'theory' Krashen proposed, in the form of the Monitor Model, was critically undermined in an article by Gregg (1984) in which he argued that because it was not falsifiable, contained ill-defined terms and unmotivated constructs, and lacked explanatory power, it could not properly be termed a theory.



Single inverted commas are sometimes used to indicate a direct quotation – indeed, single inverted commas are becoming more commonly used in this role than double inverted commas. Ultimately, however, what is most important is that you use the two consistently.

Note: rules 2, 3 and 4 are unlikely to apply in books that use single quotes as their first level of quotation mark.

Hyphens

Rule no. 1: Use hyphens in compound words (word units of more than one word)

Compound words can be categorised according to these types:

numerical: seventy-eight, twenty-three thousand, one-fifth, two-thirds

adjectival: hypo-allergenic, south-east, non-profit, post-natal, high-impact, quasi-legitimate, run-down, up-market, bi-monthly
nominal: bell-curve, super-conductor, well-being, mass-market, by-election, President-Elect

Particular subjects on the curriculum can be seen as different sub-cultures in which reality is variously reformulated. (nominal)

The writing of seventy-five second-language students from five first-language backgrounds was monitored and all instances of article use recorded. (numerical/adjectival)

A discourse-based view of language prioritises an interactive approach to analysis of texts. It involves considering the higher-order operations of language at the interface of cultural and ideological meanings and returning to the lower-order forms of language which are often crucial to the patterning of such meanings. (adjectival)

Prabhu's task-based learning prepares learners to engage in a particular kind of problem-solving activity via a 'pre-task'. (adjectival/nominal)

Pragmatics is one area of inquiry that acknowledges the non-linguistic dimension of communication and its importance to meaning. (adjectival)

It should be noted that compound adjectival and nominal phrases are also sometimes run together without a hyphen. Thus, in your reading you might encounter *postnatal*, *superconductor*, etc.

Rule no. 2: Use hyphens after the prefixes pre- and post-:

In the post-9/11 world, the kind of rhetoric adopted by governments to speak about terrorism and its sponsors changed dramatically.

McFlannery is currently engaged in post-doctoral research on pidgins and creoles.

Prior to conducting a series of interviews, with a view, ultimately, to analysing the language of child-abuse counsellors, the team were required to obtain pre-approval from the Human Research Ethics Committee.

Before subjects were selected, they were pre-tested in order to determine whether or not they were suitable given the aims of the study.

For another example, look at example 3 of rule no. 1 above.

Rule no. 3: Use a hyphen when you have to split a word across two lines:

Like definitions generally, definitions of applied linguistics have sought not only to describe but are inevitably normative, reflecting how the writer thinks the world ought to be.

Dashes

Rule no. 1: Use dashes to enclose information that is incidental or additional to the main idea of a clause or sentence:

In normal circumstances of communication – where there is successful uptake – most language users do not analyse language in this way.

Audio-lingual methods are based on an isolation of language structure – a declarative knowledge which teachers seek to convert into procedural knowledge by pattern practice and the use of drills.

This is defined as background knowledge about the content area of a text – for example, a text about stocks and shares, oil drilling, or about interior design.

Owing to the worldwide political, economic, scientific and cultural dominance of the English language – especially in its function as lingua franca – a tendency towards ‘cultural universalism’ and ‘cultural neutralism’ has been set into motion.

Most attempts – and there have been many – to use insights from generative linguistics to inform the design of pedagogical materials, have not been particularly well received.



Notice how, in the second and third examples above, it is not necessary to ‘close’ the additional information with a second dash because this piece of information finishes the sentences (unlike in the first example).

Rule no. 2: Use dashes as an alternative to the phrases ‘for instance’, ‘for example’, ‘such as’ or ‘that is to say’, when illustrating a point with specific examples:

Cross-linguistic examples of this kind also exist which may suggest subtly different cultural perceptions: nuclear waste in English is uncountable; the near equivalents in Spanish – desechos radiactivos and residuos radiactivos – are both countable and plural.

Franco speaks of meaning that is a product of the relationship between an expression and the cultural situation in which it is used – pragmatic meaning.

Increasingly, a global vocabulary is emerging particularly, though not solely in the domain of technology – taxi, internet, googling, broadband, cable, mobile, air conditioning, iPod.

Apostrophes

Rule no. 1: Use apostrophes to indicate the omission of one or more letters:

It’s the spoken language which is fundamental in the sense that human beings normally learn to speak before they learn to read or write.

(Here, the apostrophe substitutes for the missing 'i' in the word 'is'.)

She's been bilingual since she was eight years old.

(Here, the apostrophe replaces the 'ha' in 'has'.)

After just two years here, they've become fluent in the language.

(And here, the apostrophe replaces the 'ha' in 'have'.)



Although there will be times when you need to use them (if you are transcribing, for example), you should know that, generally speaking, the use of shortened forms is discouraged in academic writing, as it is generally associated with more casual writing. So, instead of writing 'She's', for example, write the full form 'She is'.

Rule no. 2: Use apostrophes to indicate ownership or possession:

The islanders' language differed markedly from that of the nearest mainland community.

Juan's Spanish was more colloquial than his brother's.

The young boy's academic development was initially slowed down as a result of his acquiring three languages simultaneously; however, this quickly changed and he was soon outperforming his peers.

The two young boys' academic development was initially slowed down as a result of their acquiring three languages simultaneously; however, this quickly changed and they were soon outperforming their peers.

Junichiro, Kumiko and Fusako's two-year visit to London left them fluent in English.

In every case, the children's acquisition of past tense consistently followed clear developmental stages.

(Here, 'children' is an irregular plural and is therefore treated as if it were singular – hence the placing of the apostrophe before the 's'.)



Notice how, in examples 3 and 4 above, the apostrophe is placed differently. In example 3 it's placed before the 's' in 'boys' because there's only one boy whose academic development is being talked about. In example 4, however, the academic development of more than one boy is being discussed; the apostrophe, therefore, should go after the 's'. This is also true of example one, where there is more than one islander. Notice too how, in the fifth example, there is more than one 'owner' or 'possessor' but each is mentioned independently. In this case, the apostrophe should be placed after the last owner mentioned.

TRY IT OUT!

In the two passages below, most of the punctuation has been removed. Read the passages carefully and insert any punctuation you feel is necessary.

Passage 1

linguistic scholars engage in a study of our ability to communicate and the means we employ to that end *for its own sake* the roots of this study are found in the basic philosophical quest into the nature of knowledge itself how do we know what we know how do we organise our experience how do we communicate with others this study is sufficient unto itself for most modern linguistic scholars the teacher of english deals with the more immediate task of applying the findings of the language scholars to the training of the young in more effective and more efficient use of their innate language gifts linguistic scholars are interested in the teacher's task as they are interested in all facts of language and its use but for the language scholars it does not loom so large in importance the teachers are by the same token interested in language study but only as one facet of their primary function which is to help students learn the linguistic scholars bear a relationship to teachers of english that is analogous to the relationship of the research scientist to the general practitioner of medicine one seeks information the other seeks to apply that information to the more efficient handling of specific problems

(From Herndon, 1976, p. 5)

Passage 2

the rationalist notes that on an abstract level all languages work in the same way they all have words and sentences and sound systems and grammatical relations and he attributes these universals of language to the structure of the brain just as birds inherit the ability to fly and fish to swim men inherit the ability to think and to use language in a manner which is unique to their species a given language english for example has to be learned but the capacity to learn languages *is inherited the child is not a passive agent in language acquisition he actively goes* about learning the language of his environment language use becomes almost automatic but what a person learns is more than a set of conditioned habits if you read all the books in the english language you will find very few sentences which are habitually used and are exact duplicates of each other otherwise you would suspect quotation or plagiarism knowledge of a language allows a person to understand infinitely many new sentences and to create grammatical sentences which no one else has ever pronounced but which will be understood immediately by others who know the language

(From Diller, 1978, p. 7)