

Grammar and Punctuation



Introduction

Knowing how to arrange words to form sentences and correctly punctuate your work helps explain your views to your reader but also ensures you don't lose marks. Writing well is an important skill for both studying and the workplace, often resulting in higher marks for written submissions.

This guide gives a reminder of the basics and explains common punctuation to help improve your written work.

Sentences

Every sentence must have a verb (the action or doing word) and a noun (the thing or the person).

The lady was frying an egg.

The **lady** is the noun, or subject of the sentence.

Frying is the active verb; the doing word.

The **egg** is the object because the subject (the lady) is doing something with or to the object.

A sentence should always begin with a capital letter and always ends with a full stop (.), question mark (?) or exclamation mark (!).

Single words are not sentences.

Paragraphs

Your writing is easier to read if you group sentences into paragraphs. In a paragraph, every sentence should contain a piece of information about the overall topic of that paragraph.

Paragraphs break up your writing into sections which make it easier to read and often easier to follow. You should leave a single line space between each paragraph.

Capital letters

Capital letters are the 'big letter' form of the alphabet, as shown below:

A B C D E F G H I J K L M N O P Q R S T U V W X Y Z

You need to use a capital letter at the beginning of every sentence and also for proper nouns (see page 3). When you talk about yourself in writing, always use a capital I:

I have experience of working in a busy restaurant.

Post codes should always be written in capital letters:

DD5 1NY

Abbreviations should also be written in capital letters:

BBC
DVD
SECC

Nouns

Everything has a name, every person has a name. All names are nouns; a noun is often called a naming word.

Sam went to the shops and bought some mangoes, a diamond and a car.

The nouns in this sentence are:

Sam (proper noun, see below)
shops
mangoes
diamond
car

Nouns are usually a person, a place or a thing. See the section on proper nouns (below) to see if you need to capitalise the first letter of each word.

Proper nouns

A proper noun is the name of something, or someone. All first names and surnames, street names and company/shop names have capital letters, just as places and official titles must have capital letters.

First names: John, Jane etc.
Surnames: Smith, McDonald etc.
Street names: High Street, Kings Road etc.
Place names: Dundee, France, Buckingham Palace etc.
Company / institution names: Dundee and Angus College, Google etc.

Titles should have capital letters:

Official titles: Pope, President, Her Majesty

People's titles: Dr, Mrs, Mr, Miss

Other titles: name of a boat (Titanic), a house (The White House), a pub, hotel, restaurant (The Kings Arms), stadium/venues (Old Trafford, Hampden Park, The Rep Theatre)

Section titles in your assignments should have capital letters.

Publications are also proper nouns, like The Times newspaper or The Beano comic. A book like Pride and Prejudice also must be capitalised.

Abstract nouns

Abstract nouns describe things you cannot see or touch, like emotions.

Some examples:

Joy	Sadness
Dreams	Thought

Nouns might tell you the gender of something, for example a son is male and a niece is female.

Pronouns

Pronouns, such as he and she, are used instead of a noun.

Using a pronoun helps your writing flow by avoiding repetition of nouns. The pronoun saves you from repeating the proper noun in this example:

Kristen went to the market to buy material and then Kristen made a dress.

Kristen went to the market to buy material and then she made a dress.

Adjectives

Adjectives are describing words. You would use them to give additional information about a noun or pronoun.

For example:

Michael is a man.

Michael is a tall, handsome, young man.

Michael is the proper noun and man is the noun, but we have described Michael's age and physical appearance by using adjectives.

Verbs

A verb is a doing or action word, they explain in a sentence what is happening. Remember the lady frying the egg? Without the verb we would only know there was a lady (noun) and an egg (noun), not what was happening. By adding the verb 'frying', we know what the lady is doing and what is happening to the egg.

Verbs often end with 'ing', for example:

Running	Skipping	Writing
Reading	Cooking	Drinking

but can also take other forms:

to Google something
to run somewhere

Adverbs

Adverbs are often used to explain the meaning of another word. They sometimes alter the meaning a little, always adding extra information or context. Adverbs can be split into four main groups:

How
When
Where
How much

} something happens

How adverbs

Usually, **how** adverbs are created by adding **ly** to an adjective, for example:

Quiet becomes **quietly**
Bad becomes **badly**

Adverbs can also change the meaning when **ly** is added, for example:

Hard is not used the same way as **hardly**
Low has a different meaning to **lowly**

Sometimes when converting an adjective into an adverb, the spelling will change. For example:

Happy becomes **happily**

Adverbs can look just like adjectives:

The train arrived **late** at the station.

Liz worked **hard** to pass her assessment.

When adverbs

When adverbs explain when something happened or will happen, giving time context:

Soon	Yesterday
Immediately	Tomorrow

Already is classed as a **when** adverb as it indicates a timeframe, for example:

I have **already** done that.

Where adverbs

Where adverbs explain where something happens:

Everywhere	Nowhere	In
Out	Above	Behind

Emma looked **everywhere** for her keys. She found them **above** her piano.

How much adverbs

These show the extent to which something is happening:

Quite	Almost	Completely
Very	Too	Less

It was **too** hot to go out in the sun.
The washing was **quite** dry.

Tenses

A verb tense explains when an action takes place. It must be either:

Past
Present
Future

Present tense

I am at work.

Past tense

I was at work.

Future tense

I am going to work.

Past tense

Words which explain actions in the past often use ed at the end of the word:

Peter **helped** Emma tidy up.
Sam **asked** the class to stay behind.

Auxiliary verbs help explain which tense is being used:

Present: I **am** helping
Past: I **was** helping
Future: I **will** help

Conjunctions

Conjunctions are used to join words or groups of words together. They can change the meaning of the sentence.

Common conjunctions are:

And	But	Yet
For	So	Or

Conjunctions often join sentences before a reason:

Irene went to the cinema **because** it was her birthday

Conjunctions can show two sides of an argument, or contrasting opinions:

Although	Even if	While
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Sam likes mangoes while Peter prefers apples.

Conjunctions can show time:

When	Whenever	Before
After	Since	Until

We will go for a picnic when it stops raining.

Conjunctions can be more than one word, often split in the sentence:

We will still go out whether the news is good or bad.

Conjunctions

A preposition is used before a noun or pronoun, showing where, when or how the noun or pronoun is connected to another word in the sentence.

To	At	On	In	Up	Down	With
Of	For	Near	Under	Through	After	Into

Prepositions will often explain position or location of something:

The road runs alongside the fields.

Prepositions tend to be short words:

As far as	On top of
In spite of	Except for

Sometimes prepositions are groups of words:

Alistair will miss class due to other commitments.

Finishing sentences

Finishing sentences

A full stop is the punctuation mark used at the end of most sentences.

A full stop looks like this .

It is needed when finishing a statement, for example:

The grass is green.

A full stop can be used to signify a shortened word or missing letters, for example:

info.

Dr.

etc. (shortened form of et cetera)

Question marks

When we are speaking, we can make it clear we are asking a question by the tone of our voice. When we are writing, we do this by finishing the question with a question mark.

A question mark looks like this ?

Sometimes a single word can be a question:

Who?	Why?	When?	Where?	How?
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If a sentence starts with one of these words, it is very likely to be a question and should end with a question mark.

Question marks

An exclamation mark looks like this !

They are usually used to show surprise, shock or joy:

Ouch!	Brilliant!	Yikes!
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Exclamation marks can be used to strengthen a command:

Pay attention!

Be quiet!

They can also be used to show amusement:

That was silly!
What good fun!

Question marks

A comma helps written sentences make sense to the reader. You may often find them at natural pauses if sentences were read aloud.

A comma looks like this ,

For example:

Excellent, thanks for doing that so quickly David.

Commas are used after words in a list or directions:

Once you reach the main road, take the first left, then the second right and you should get to the park.

Sam ordered staplers, drawing pins, paper clips and staples for the team.

Note: the last two items in a list should be joined with the conjunction **and**.

Semi-colons

A semi-colon is more common than a colon. A semi-colon can be used in place of a conjunction, often to join related sentences.

A semi-colon looks like this ;

For example:

Peter had to go home; he was feeling very unwell.

Both halves can be sentences in their own right:

Peter had to go home. He was feeling very unwell.

The sentences are closely related, so joining them with a semi-colon is appropriate.

Colons

A colon looks like this :

It would be used to start a list, quotation or an example, for example:

Irene was experienced in: office filing; typing; photocopying and book keeping.

Emma explained: "I love sociology and study skills."

Brackets

Brackets look like this ()

Brackets often contain supplementary information and are always used in pairs:

Jessica (Sam's daughter) loves eating yoghurt.

The information between the brackets can be described as in parenthesis. The sentence must read correctly without the information in parenthesis. If it is more than supplementary it should be included in the sentence itself.

Hyphen

A hyphen looks like this -

A hyphen looks like a dash, but it is used to join words together:

Stratford-upon-Avon
Right-hand side

Sometimes a hyphen will give context to words which are not normally joined by one:

College-wide

This reads more easily than College wide, giving context to something relating to the whole College.

Dashes

A dash is not the same as a hyphen, though they look the same.

A dash looks like this —

A dash is used before and after additional information in a sentence, or after a secondary thought:

Alistair is a member of MENSA – the high IQ society – and gets their newsletter.

A dash can be used singly and may sometimes be used in place of a colon or semi-colon:

Peter went home – he was feeling unwell.

Inverted commas

Inverted commas are upside-down commas used in written work to show when someone is speaking. They can be used singly or in pairs.

They look like “ ” or ‘ ’

Quotations should always use inverted commas in pairs:

Emma explained: “I love sociology and study skills.”

When you are referring to colloquial language (slang) it is sometimes appropriate to use single inverted commas:

They thought the new building was ‘wicked’.

In this instance, wicked could be read with the meaning of nasty if it were not in inverted commas.

Apostrophes

An apostrophe looks like this ’

It has two main functions:

To show the **omission of letters**

To show **possession of a noun**

Omission of letters:

Have	
I've	I have
You've	You have
Would've	Would have not Would of
Who've	Who have

Not	
Doesn't	Does not
Can't	Cannot
Won't	Will not
Didn't	Did not
Weren't	Were not
Shouldn't	Should not

Couldn't	Could not
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Other common abbreviations

It's	It is
Let's	Let us
There's	There is
She's	She is
You're	You are
They're	They are

An apostrophe can also mean that something belongs to someone:

Sam's bike	Peter's book	Michael's shop
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When there is a single owner, like above (only Sam owns her bike) use the apostrophe with a single letter s, for example:

Sam's bike

When the word is plural (there's more than one owner/person) and the word already ends in s or es, add the apostrophe after the s:

The elves' workshop

The workshop belongs to all Santa's elves – the elves belong to Santa.

The footballers' kit

In this example it is the whole team's kit, not a single footballer's kit.

If a plural word does not end in an s, add the apostrophe then the s, like team's kit, children's play park.

Some belonging words do not have an apostrophe at all:

The alligator ate its prey.
The bag is yours.

These are not shortened words, they are pronouns. With a name, like Sam, you need the apostrophe:

That is Sam's bag.

With a pronoun you don't:

The bag is hers.

Synonyms

A synonym is a word you can use in place of another, but it means the same thing:

Rapid, speedy, quick

Happiness, joy

Antonyms are opposites:

Hot / cold

Old / new

Smooth / rough

Americanisms

Although Americans use the English language, there are spelling differences between some common words:

British spelling	American spelling
Favourite	Favorite
Behaviour	Behavior
Colour	Color
Centre	Center
Metre	Meter
Curb	Kerb
Grey	Gray
Tyre	Tire

Using a z in place of an s is another common Americanism:

British spelling	American spelling
Realise	Realize
Optimise	Optimize

Microsoft Word can auto-detect the language you are using. Be careful as it is often set to American English. You can change this by going to the Review tab, selecting the language drop down menu and then Set Proofing Language.

Select English (U.K.) and then Set As Default.

Acronyms

An acronym is a special kind of abbreviation. It is a word or phrase made from the first letter, or group of letters, from each of the abbreviated words:

NATO: **N**orth **A**tlan**T**ic **T**reaty **O**rganisation

Although NATO is an acronym, it is commonly accepted as a word now and may often be written in lower case with a capital letter: **Nato**

Other words which were previously known as acronyms and are now commonly accepted words include:

Radar: **R**adio **D**etection and **R**anging

Scuba: **S**elf-contained **U**nderwater **B**reathing **A**pparatus

Proprietary eponym

Although this sounds complicated, it's a very common and simple occurrence.

When a product from a brand becomes very popular, like Hoover's vacuum cleaner or Apple's iPod, the whole product market is referred to by the brand name.

I got a new iPod.

If it was not made by Apple, it is a new MP3 player or digital music player, not an iPod.

The hoover is broken.

Unless it was made by Hoover, the vacuum cleaner is broken.

Choosing the correct word

Who's and whose

Who's is the shortened version of **who is** or **who has**:

Who's going to the beach this afternoon?

Who's finished their essay?

Whose is used to ask who something belongs to. It is also used to say which person or thing you mean, or to give more information.

Whose pen is this?

The students, **whose** bus was late, missed the start of their exam.

To check if you are using the correct **whose** or **who's**, say or write the sentence with the word who is. If it sounds correct, use **who's**. If it sounds wrong, use **whose**.

Whose pen is this? ✓

Who is pen is this? ✗

Remember shortened versions of words (also see page 13) should not be used in formal writing tasks such as your College assignments.

I and me

If you are having difficulty deciding whether to use I or me in your sentence, rewrite it without mentioning the other person to see if I or me sounds correct.

Sam and I are going to the new restaurant for lunch tomorrow

I am going to the restaurant for lunch tomorrow. ✓

Me going to the new restaurant for lunch tomorrow. ✗

She asked if she could go for a walk with Alistair and **me**.

She asked if she could go for a walk with **me**. ✓

She asked if she could go for a walk with **I**. ✗

To, two and too

To has a number of uses and is used the most out of these three words:

I am going **to** the shops

To find the treasure you must follow the map

Craig wants **to** learn **to** speak French

Two is the number 2:

Lisa has **two** exams today.

There were **two** tigers at the zoo.

Too means also, very, more than etc.:

Can I come to the party **too**?

I was **too** excited about Christmas to sleep.

Alistair's shoes are **too** small for his feet.

Their, there and they're

Their means to belong to them:

The students read **their** books in the library.

The kittens closed **their** eyes.

There refers to a place. It is also used with is, was, are, were, etc.:

The shop is along **there**.

There is a fly in my soup.

There was a dog running along the beach.

There are great books in the College library.

There were lots of students in the library.

They're is the shortened version of they are:

They're going on work experience.

I don't know how **they're** getting there.

Remember to use **they are** for formal writing tasks such as your College assignments.

They're is suitable for informal writing tasks such as an email to a friend.

Like

Below are some example sentences where **like** has been exchanged with a more appropriate word for a formal writing task such as a College assignment:

I often visit local tourist attractions **like** The McManus and Discovery Point.

I often visit local tourist attractions **such as** The McManus and Discovery Point.

It looks **like** your friend will win the race.

It looks **as if** your friend will win the race.

Remember if you are stating that something is similar to something else in your College assignment, you would be required to give further explanation:

This style of painting is **like** Van Gogh's approach.

This style of painting is **very similar** to Van Gogh's approach because...

There are some sentences where it is OK to use **like**:

I own a pair of shoes just **like** yours.

We can meet in the quiet study room, **like** we did last week.