Punctuation marks indicate pauses and logical links. The place or absence of punctuation can therefore completely change the meaning of a sentence.

Compare: ‘Woman, without her man, is nothing.’

‘Woman! Without her, man is nothing.’

Punctuation marks play different roles, indicating the relationship between the central part of the sentence (known as main clause or control unit), and additional information (including subordinate clauses or ‘support units’ – see ‘Writing Clearly: Perfect Sentences’ factsheet).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Punctuation</th>
<th>Purpose</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Comma ,</td>
<td>To insert extra information, when used in pairs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>To separate items in a list</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Before a new part of the sentence starting with ‘but’, ‘or’, ‘so’ etc</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>To mark off a word or phrase at the start or end of the sentence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colon :</td>
<td>To introduce a list</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>To introduce a quotation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>To introduce an explanation or illustration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Semi-colon ;</td>
<td>To join full sentences which are closely connected (optional, can be replaced by a full stop)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>To separate items in a list when the items contain commas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Full stop .</td>
<td>To mark the end of a sentence</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Commas are the most common punctuation mark, and are generally placed before and after groups of words which are less important and could be left out.

A subject and its verb can be separated by a phrase surrounded by 2 commas, but should never be separated by a single comma.

For example: Support staff, who are often underpaid, do all the hard work.

NOT Support staff who are often underpaid, do all the hard work.
Apostrophes are used for 2 purposes:

1. To mark possession: Laura’s book; children’s toys; St James’s Hospital; one student’s essay; several students’ essays.

2. To indicate contraction: don’t = do not; it’s = it is or it has

Possession

1. When the owner does not already end in –s, add ’s:
   - The author’s key finding (discussing one author)
   - The study’s conclusion (just one study)
   - Dr Smith’s latest publication
   - Children’s services

2. When the owner ends in –s and is in the plural, just add an apostrophe after the final ’s:
   - The researchers’ hypothesis (discussing several researchers)
   - The studies’ conclusion (several studies)

3. When the owner’s name ends in –s in the singular, make sure you do not change the spelling of their name. You can add ’s or just an apostrophe: both spellings are OK:
   - Professor Jones’ lecture
   - St James’s Hospital

4. Indicating periods of time follows the same rules as possession, where the apostrophe could be replaced by ‘of’:
   - One month’s notice
   - Twelve days’ delay

Contraction

An apostrophe indicates contraction, i.e. when letters have been removed. This makes your writing more casual, and is not appropriate in formal assignments.

- They’re = they are
- Can’t = cannot
- It’s = it is or it has

It’s or its?

Note that ‘it’s’ is only spelt with an apostrophe when it is short for ‘it is’ or ‘it has’; in all other cases it is spelt its without any apostrophe, and is equivalent to his or her:
‘The article was ground-breaking: its author made some original points.’

Support

Study Development offers workshops, short courses, 1-to-1 and small groups tutorials.

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