

Punctuation

Good punctuation is crucial for successful academic writing and essential if your essay/report is to flow well, be clear and easy to read. Using punctuation correctly enables you to communicate and express your ideas and arguments in a plain and easily understandable manner.

Fullstops (.)

- mark the end of a sentence: My assignment is due next Tuesday.
- punctuate numbers and dates: My assignment is due on 12.6.13.
- indicate abbreviated words: Cats, dogs, horses etc. are all domestic animals.

Colons (:)

- indicate a list, summary or quotation will follow: The Minister made a brief statement to the media: “No further action will be taken on the matter at this stage” **or** You should bring the following items to the camp: sleeping bags, warm clothing, plates, and cutlery.

Semi-colons (;)

- separate two closely linked sentences. A full stop could be used but the direct link between the two parts would be lost: To err is human; to forgive, divine **or** I enjoy 19th century novels; my favourite author is Jane Austen.

Commas (,)

- separate information in longer sentences into readable units: If you are going to the dairy, could you please buy some milk.
- separate a secondary, descriptive phrase in the middle of a sentence from what goes before and after. The sentence would still make sense if the phrase was omitted. Often the secondary phrase is introduced by words like “which”, “when”, “who”, “if”, “as”: The door in the office, which has been jamming, has now been oiled; The person in the classroom, who is a specialist in Microsoft Word, will assist students with formatting their assignments; Tai Poutini, as we all know, is a polytechnic based on the West Coast.
- separate items in a list: The details required are name, date of birth, address, and telephone number.

Note: If you are unsure about the placement of commas, read the sentence aloud. Place the commas at the natural pauses.

Brackets ()

- are used in citations for dates, page numbers and references: Smith and Mercer (1989); (Stoner, 2008, p. 36); (p. 213).

- are used to enclose an acronym after the full title is written: Crown Research Institute (CRI); Industrial Training Organisation (ITO); New Zealand Nurses' Organisation (NZNO). After the full title with the acronym has been spelt out once, the acronym can be used alone in the rest of the assignment.

Dashes / hyphens (-)

- Do not use dashes (which are another form of brackets) in a formal piece of academic writing
- Hyphens are used to link two words which will then work together as one idea. These are called compound words: post-industrial, information-related, open-plan.

Apostrophes (')

- are used to indicate a contraction or shortened version of a word. The apostrophe shows where letters have been omitted: She'll = She will; didn't = did not; can't = cannot; we're = we are.

NB: such contractions are not usually acceptable in formal academic writing

- are used to indicate ownership or possession. The apostrophe always goes straight after the person or thing doing the owning. If the thing belong to one person, insert the apostrophe between the noun and the 's'; if it belongs to more than one person, insert the apostrophe after the 's': The boy's ball = the ball belonging to one boy; The boys' ball – the ball belonging to two or more boys. Other examples: Einstein's theory; men's room; children's books; women's health; a woman's dress; all the students' assignments.

NB: the vexed question of it's/its:

It's always means 'it is'. **Its** as a possessive (that is, indicating ownership) does not need an apostrophe: It's Friday today = It is Friday today BUT The dog wagged its tail. Because you do not usually use the contraction, **it's**, in academic writing, you should never need an apostrophe in the word **its** in an assignment.

Ellipses (...)

- consist of three fullstops with a space on either side. They are used to indicate the omission of a word or words from a direct quotation, which has been shortened for some reason: Sher and Doherty (2008) state that "While one of our goals is to create delicious, flavourful world cuisine ... we also emphasize eating organic, whole foods" (p. 1). A phrase about missing animal products is omitted.

Further reading (available from TPP library)

Beazley, M. & Marr, G. (2001). *The writer's handbook*. 2nd ed. Putney, NSW: Phoenix Education.

Faigley, L. (2011). Part 6: Punctuation, in his *The little Penguin handbook*. French's Forest, NSW: Pearson Australia.

Hacker, D. & Sommers, N. (2013). *The pocket style manual : APA version*. 6th ed. Boston: Bedford/St Martins.

Lauchman, R. (2010). *Punctuation at work: simple principles for achieving clarity and good style*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Publication manual of the American Psychological Association. (2010). 6th ed. Washing, DC: APA.