

Punctuation

When to use apostrophes, bullet points and colons in your sentences.

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Write out “and” at all times. Ampersands should never be used, even in tables, charts and graphs.

EXAMPLE

distribution, hotels and restaurants sector
HMRC

Ampersands don't simplify reading. A serial comma must be added instead.

EXAMPLE

distribution, hotels and restaurants, and transport, storage and communication sectors

Not

distribution, hotels & restaurants and transport, storage & communication sectors

Apostrophes have two functions:

- to show possession

- to show letters are missing.

EXAMPLE

It's always a good idea to follow house style (contraction of "it is")
Please use Sarah's statistics (showing possession)

Possession

The apostrophe shows that something is owned by someone. For example, the Statistician's Office is the office owned by the Statistician. Depending on who is doing the owning, the apostrophe is used differently.

If the possessor is singular, use an apostrophe followed by "s".

EXAMPLE

The report's contents (contents belonging to the report)
The statistician's opinion (opinion belonging to the statistician)

If the possessor is singular and ends in s, use an apostrophe followed by "s".

EXAMPLE

James's driving test
ONS's web standards

If the possessor is plural and doesn't end in s, use an apostrophe followed by "s".

EXAMPLE

The women's average salary
The department's staff

If the possessor is plural and ends in s, use an apostrophe after "s".

EXAMPLE

The statistics' source
The statisticians' discussion

Contraction

The apostrophe here is used to show where letters are missing in a word. For example: do not › don't

Contractions should be used. Avoid using 'should've', 'could've', 'would've' though, as these are hard to read.

The most common are:

Word	Contraction
Are not	Aren't
Cannot	Can't
Could not	Couldn't
Did not	Didn't
Does not	Doesn't
Do not	Don't
Had not	Hadn't
Have not	Haven't
He had/would	He'd
He will/shall	He'll
He is/has	He's
I had/would	I'd
I will/shall	I'll
I am	I'm
I have	I've
Is not	Isn't
It is/has	It's
Must not	Mustn't
Shall not	Shan't
She had/would	She'd
She will/shall	She'll
She is/has	She's
Should not	Shouldn't
That is/has	That's
There is/has	There's
They had/would	They'd
They will/shall	They'll
They are	They're
They have	They've
We had/would	We'd
We are	We're
We have	We've
Were not	Weren't
What will/shall	What'll
What are	What're
What is/has	What's
What have	What've
Where is/has	Where's
Who had/would	Who'd
Who will/shall	Who'll

Who are	Who're
Who is/has	Who's
Will not	Won't
Would not	Wouldn't
You had/would	You'd
You will/shall	You'll
You are	You're
You have	You've

Avoid using too many brackets in text and make sure they're always closed. If the whole statement is within brackets the final full stop should be inside them.

Use round brackets when adding supplementary information to the text.

EXAMPLE

The arithmetic was wrong (which is unheard of)
The Royal Society for the Protection of Animals (RSPCA)
(The Authority has the final say on these.)

Use square brackets when adding comments or corrections.

EXAMPLE

The judge stated: "You [Mr Sykes] have suffered."
On Twitter she said: "The statistecs [sic] seemed wrong"

We use bullet points in two different ways.

As a list within the text

Use bullet points to make text easier to read. Make sure that:

- you always use a lead-in line
- always use a space between the lead-in line and the bullet points
- the bullets make sense running on from the lead-in line
- each bullet is short (no more than one sentence)
- you use lower case at the start of the bullet, unless it starts with a proper noun
- you don't use full stops within bullet points – where possible start another bullet point or use commas, dashes or semicolons to expand

- you don't put "or", "and" after the bullets
- there is no punctuation at the end of bullet points
- if you add links they appear within the text and not as the whole bullet
- there is no full stop after the last bullet point

Your list should have at least three bullet points. If you have fewer, rewrite your content as individual sentences or paragraphs.

For bullet points following a heading

There is no lead-in line and the bullet points follow on directly from a heading or subheading. Each bullet point:

- starts with a capital letter
- finishes with a full stop
- is short (no more than one sentence)

EXAMPLE

Main points

- There were 240,854 marriages in 2013, a decrease of 8.6% compared with 2012 and the first decline since 2009.
- Civil ceremonies accounted for 72% of all marriages in 2013.

Use a colon to introduce an idea, list or quotation. The clause before the colon must be a full sentence. If not, don't use a colon.

An idea

Use the colon to introduce an idea that's an explanation or continuation of the one before the colon.

EXAMPLE

There is one thing you need to know about statistics: they are fascinating.

Start the explanation or continuation with a capital letter if it's a formal quote that's a full sentence, or more than one sentence.

EXAMPLE

There is one thing you need to know about statistics: They are fascinating and I don't know why anyone would

think differently. Truly they have made my life better.

There is one thing you need to know about statistics: "A better thing has never been created," said the Chief Statistician.

A list

Use a colon to introduce a list.

EXAMPLE

The statistics incorporate varied data: housing, schooling and population information.

Not

The statistics incorporate: housing, schooling and population information.

A quotation

Use a colon to introduce a quotation. The quotation should begin with a capital letter.

EXAMPLE

The judge stated: "You have suffered."

There are three situations in which to use the comma.

A list

Use a comma to separate three or more items in a list.

EXAMPLE

For breakfast there are sausages, bacon, beans and tomato available.

The comma before "and" is usually removed. However, if the last two items in the list could merge together, it is better to separate them with a serial comma to avoid confusion. This is the only time it should be used.

EXAMPLE

My favourite ice cream flavours are strawberry, chocolate, banana, and toffee.

This shows that banana is a separate flavour to toffee, so people don't think it is "banana and toffee".

To separate introductory parts

Use a comma to separate the introductory part of a sentence from the main part.

EXAMPLE

Despite his misgivings, the scientist felt the experiment went well.

Use a comma if the introductory part of the sentence changes the meaning.

EXAMPLE

Sadly, the numbers showed he had lost the election.

Use a comma if the introductory part of the sentence can merge into the sentence itself.

EXAMPLE

Inside, his heart was beating fast

Not

Inside his heart was beating fast

The comma can be left out if the introductory part of the sentence is very short and doesn't merge.

EXAMPLE

Soon the statistics will be on the website.

To separate asides in a sentence

Use a comma to separate anything that is not vital to understanding the meaning of the sentence. There should be a comma at the beginning of the aside and at the end.

EXAMPLE

The monthly death statistics, not always the most cheerful, were always informative.

An en dash looks like this: –

A hyphen looks like this: –

Some content management systems, including GOV.UK's Publisher, don't recognise the en dash and will replace it with a hyphen. If in Microsoft Word, use en dashes.

Microsoft Word automatically converts hyphens to en dashes when they are preceded by a space. Elsewhere, you can use "Ctrl" and "-" (minus on the number keypad). Be aware that the minus sign and the hyphen are easily mistaken for each other.

Adding extra information

This is a good device for adding extra information that isn't essential to the rest of the sentence. Be careful: these can make writing difficult to read if overused.

EXAMPLE

There are some statistics – fascinating ones at that – on the ONS website.

Breaking a sentence

This shows other kinds of break in a sentence where a comma, semicolon, or colon would be traditionally used.

EXAMPLE

There are some statistics on the website – they are fascinating

For headlines

EXAMPLE

Consumer Services Price Indices – expected availability

Hyphens must be used for the following situations.

Hyphens have several specific uses. These are for linking, and for compound modifiers.

Linking

Use hyphens as prefixes and suffixes to words, or show that these are required for a word to be understood.

EXAMPLE

Henri IV betrayed his co-religionists

Hyphens are used for all words with “e” as a prefix, except for “email”.

EXAMPLE

e-commerce
e-book
e-learning

Hyphens are used for all words with ‘co’ as a prefix.

EXAMPLE

co-ordinate
co-operate

Hyphens aren’t used for words with “re” as a prefix, unless the word afterwards begins with an “e”.

EXAMPLE

replay
re-examine

If in doubt, check using the [Oxford English Dictionary](#).

Compound modifiers

Hyphens are used in compound words where component words have a combined meaning or a relationship.

EXAMPLE

a five-storey building,
a well-explained report
the long-term effects.

However, if you use this after the subject of the sentence, it is not hyphenated.

EXAMPLE

a report that was well explained

It is best to check if the word is a compound modifier in the [Oxford English Dictionary](#).

There is one exception to this rule. The term “police recorded crime” does not require a hyphen.

An ellipsis is a row of three full stops, used to show that words have been left out. How it looks depends on where it is in the sentence:

The beginning of a sentence

There should be no space between the ellipsis and the word.

EXAMPLE

...We are aware that each country is unique.

In the middle of a sentence

There should be single spaces before and after the ellipsis.

EXAMPLE

We are aware that each country ... is unique.

The end of a sentence

There should be no space before it and no full stop.

EXAMPLE

We are aware that each country is unique...

If this is in a quotation, the sentence can be closed by a full stop after the quotation mark

EXAMPLE

"We are aware that each country is unique...".

Exclamation marks are generally used to show emotion, commands and interjections. Don't use these unless quoting directly.

Full stops are used to end sentences. Only use one space after them. Don't use them after initials, or in titles, abbreviations or acronyms. They also shouldn't be used in any heading, subheading, title, date or name that occupies a line to itself. If a sentence's final clause is in brackets, and that clause ends in ? or !, then there must be a full stop outside the brackets. Full stops should also be used to end release calendar summaries as screen readers need this to stop reading.

EXAMPLE

Mr J A Rank

Miss

etc

BBC

“What do you think it is?”

(The thunder and lightning are terrifying!)

Question marks are used to show the end of a question. The sentence after the question mark always begins with a capital letter.

EXAMPLE

Where have you put the release?

If it is used in the middle of a sentence, it is followed either by a word starting with a lower case letter or another punctuation mark, such as an en dash.

EXAMPLE

“Where now?”, they wonder.

A question mark isn't needed after sentences framed as questions out of politeness or common usage:

EXAMPLE

May I take this opportunity to thank you for your contribution to this project

When a question takes the form of direct speech, the first letter should be capitalised and the whole question put in quotation marks:

EXAMPLE

“Why are there discrepancies in the count?” she asked

Use double quotation marks. Single quotation marks are only for quotations within quotations, and titles of articles in books and journals.

EXAMPLE

‘A Lesson in Empathy’ in Psychology Today magazine

As a general rule, if a quotation is 35 to 40 words or more, it should be distinguished from the body of the text. This is usually done by indenting it. Don't use quotation marks.

Use a semicolon to show a link between two clauses. This should not be used if it makes a sentence over 25 words.

It is used to show that the second clause of a sentence is dependent on the first – that there is a link between them.

EXAMPLE

Each person is different; it's what makes life exciting

The fact that each person is different is the thing that makes life exciting. There is nothing else that can make life exciting in this situation, apart from each person being different. The ideas before and after the semicolon must be full sentences that could stand alone if necessary. If not, a semicolon must not be used.

EXAMPLE

Each person is different
It's what makes life exciting

The / symbol is usually used to show "or". Use "or" instead of the slash to avoid confusion. If a slash is needed, there should be no space either side of it.

EXAMPLE

masculine or feminine or neuter
house name or number

In statistical work, the slash can indicate rates, such as miles/day or input/output.

In computing a forward slash / is used differently to a backslash \ so make sure you use the correct one.