



## Grammar and punctuation guide

### Grammar

#### Parts of speech

##### Nouns

<b>Common noun</b>	A general person, thing or place, for example <b>company, queen</b>
<b>Proper noun</b>	A specific (named) one within the class. These always start with a capital letter, for example <b>British Airways PLC, Queen Elizabeth II</b>
<b>Collective noun</b>	A singular word for a collection of individuals, for example <b>board, government, company</b> Verbs can be in either the singular or the plural for these. Whichever you choose, be consistent: The British Government <b>has</b> decided that <b>it</b> will... The committee <b>have</b> said that <b>they</b> may...
<b>Abstract noun</b>	Things that you can't touch like ideas, feelings and emotions, for example <b>clarity, wisdom, truth</b>

##### Verbs

###### Three sorts of verbs:

Action or "doing" words: He **jumped**, she **sings**, they **played**, I **will cook**

Possessing words: I **have**, you **had**

Being words: I **am**, they **will be**, you **would have been**

###### Infinitives

To jump, to sing, to have, to be

###### Tenses

A finite verb has a tense - past, present or future. A non-finite verb has no tense:

I **came**. He **saw**. We **conquered**. (Past tense)

I **am** happy. (Present tense)

I **will go** to the shops. (Future tense)

**Swimming** keeps you fit. (Non-finite)

I forgot **to register**. (Non-finite infinitive – no tense)

###### What is a participle?

Participles are forms of the verb generally ending in **ing** for the present participle and **ed** for the past participle. They can behave as adjectives in a sentence.

I like **swimming**. (present participle)

I bought a new **washing** machine. (present participle, used as an adjective)

I was **interested**. (past participle, used as an adjective)  
He looks **exhausted**. (past participle, used as an adjective)

### Verbs must agree with subject nouns.

If it's a plural noun, use a plural form of the verb: The apple **is** tasty; the bananas **are** mouldy.  
Use a singular verb after **each**, **either**, **none** and **neither**.

### Adjectives

Words giving more information about nouns, usually placed just before them in the sentence:  
The **white** cat hissed, and showed her **sharp** teeth.

But they can be linked to the noun by a verb:  
The cat was **white**.

Adjectives can be comparative or superlative:  
**good**, **better** (comparative), **best** (superlative)  
**funny**, **funnier** (comparative), **funniest** (superlative)

### Adverbs

These give more information about verbs (and sometimes adjectives or other adverbs):

I think **quickly**. The scheme worked **beautifully**. (modifying verbs)  
She is a **very** clever negotiator. (modifying the adjective **clever**)  
Amal presented **particularly** well. (modifying the adverb **well**)

### Pronouns

We regularly use these instead of nouns, often to avoid repetition:

Clare is a partner. Clare specialises in employment law. I like Clare. (repetitive)  
Clare is a partner. **She** specialises in employment law. I like **her**.

The pronoun usually refers to the last-used noun to which it is capable of referring. Make sure this is what you intend.

### Prepositions

These are words that show how two nouns or pronouns relate to each other in time or place. They usually come just before the second one. Examples are **above**, **against**, **below**, **by**, **between**, **into**, **in**, **near**, **on**, **over**, **under**.

### Conjunctions

These join words, phrases and sentences together. Examples are **and**, **although**, **but**.

### Sentence structure

#### Sentence

A sentence makes complete sense on its own and always includes a verb. Sentences can be statements, questions or commands, ending in full stops, question marks or exclamation marks.

## Clause

Sentences contain **clauses**. Some are **main clauses**, others **subordinate** (or **dependent**). Every sentence must have a main clause or it won't make sense. Not all sentences have subordinate clauses. A subordinate clause will generally have a subject and a verb but won't make sense on its own.

## Phrase

A phrase is a “clump” of words that don't make sense on their own unless you read them in context.

## Subject and object

The subject of a sentence is the “doer” – the noun (or pronoun) that agrees with the verb. The object is the person or thing having something done to them. Sentences may have just a subject, both a subject and an object or just an object.

The **cat** [subject] hissed. The **dog** [subject] just growled.  
The **cat** [subject] drank the **milk** [object]. The **dog** [subject] bit the **cat** [object].  
The **bone** was gnawed. [object]

## Common grammatical mistakes

### Misused pronouns

Pronouns need to match their role as subject or object. Which is correct?

Harry wanted to talk to Adam and **I**.  
Harry wanted to talk to Adam and **myself**.  
Harry wanted to talk to Adam and **me**.

Strip out the other person to find the right answer:

Harry wanted to talk to **I**. (wrong)  
Harry wanted to talk to **myself**. (wrong)  
Harry wanted to talk to **me**. (right)

Which is correct?

I'm as clever as **him**.  
I'm as clever as **he**.

Finish the sentence to find the right answer:

I'm as clever as **him** is. (wrong)  
I'm as clever as **he** is. (right)

### Who and whom

These are relative pronouns acting as either the subject or the object (or following to/for/by/with/from). People often use **who** when they mean **whom**. To get the correct one, consider whether the person is the subject of the clause. If they are the subject, use **who**. If not, use **whom**.

### Fewer/less

Countable nouns (pencil, lady, tree) take **fewer**. Uncountable nouns (time, milk) take **less**.

## Number/amount

This is a similar rule to fewer/less. Countable nouns take **number**. Uncountable nouns take **amount**.

## Split infinitive

This is putting something between the word **to** and the rest of the infinitive form of the verb, for example "**to** boldly **go**". These days it's acceptable to split an infinitive if the sentence reads better that way. But know your audience; don't split an infinitive if it might upset the reader.

## The misplaced "only"

The word **only** changes the meaning of a sentence depending on its position. If using the word **only**, place it close to whatever you are limiting (ideally immediately in front of it), unless it reads strangely.

## That or which?

Use **that** to add essential, defining information: The book **that** is on the table is mine.

Use **which** (with a comma) to add non-defining information: The book, **which** is on the table, is mine.

## Compared with/to

Compare A **with** B when you are drawing attention to the differences; compare A **to** B when you want to stress their similarity.

## Different to/from/than

Many people prefer **from**, so it's safer to use it.

# Punctuation

If you don't use punctuation correctly, some people will judge you, and (worse) you may change the meaning of what you're trying to say.

## Commas

Used correctly, commas help to make statements precise and help the reader to understand what you have written.

### Three common mistakes:

- Using commas to join sentences instead of a semicolon or full stop
- Not using enough commas to make the sentence easy for your reader
- Using only one comma when you need a pair

### What are the rules for commas?

- Commas for joining sentences (with a conjunction)

Use these when you join two complete sentences, using a joining word like **and**, **but**, **or**, **yet**, **so**, **for** or **nor**. Never join two sentences with just a comma.

I don't like bananas, **nor** do I much like apples.

- Commas for inserting phrases into a sentence

You need a pair of commas if there's a phrase in the middle of a sentence that could come out altogether and still leave a sentence that makes sense:

His father, who is an engineer, is living in Dubai.  
The results, which were not as good as the company hoped, came out last week.  
The announcement, therefore, was pessimistic.

- Commas after an introductory phrase

If you add a phrase at the start of a sentence, you need a comma after the inserted phrase unless it's very short:

Wanting to pre-empt the negative press coverage, the company issued its results early.

- Commas for lists

They divide items in lists, but are not usually necessary before the **and** near the end, unless an item in the list has an **and** within it:

I like bananas, apples, peaches and pears.  
I shop at Lidl, Marks and Spencer, and Aldi.

- Commas to separate adjectives describing the same word

Use these when the comma is really replacing an **and**:

It was a bright, spacious room.

But don't use them when one of the adjectives is describing the other. If you say "a bright, purple jacket", "bright" and "purple" are both describing the jacket. If you say "a bright purple jacket", "bright" is describing the shade of purple and "purple" is describing the jacket.

## Apostrophes

### Missing letters

In a contraction, the apostrophe stands for one or more missing letters, for example **I'm**, **you've**, **it's**. Don't use these in formal writing.

### Possessives

If the possessor is singular, the apostrophe usually comes before the **s**:

The seller's property (property of the seller)

If the possessor is plural, the apostrophe usually comes after the **s**:

The sellers' property (property of the sellers)

In plural possessors not ending in **s**, the apostrophe goes before the **s**: The children's property, the men's club.

**It:** The possessive is always **its**, not **it's**. **It's** can only mean **it is** or **it has**:

Its lid came off when I pulled. It's not sealed.

## Plurals

Never use apostrophes to make plurals. These are correct:

We sell carrots and cabbages. [not carrot's and cabbage's]

I collect DVDs. [not DVD's]

I was born in the 1960s. [not 1960's]

We're going to dinner with the Smiths [not Smith's]

## Hyphens

Views differ on hyphens. We've picked some of the most useful rules.

### Hyphens in compound adjectives

- Put a hyphen in compound adjectives when they are in front of the noun: a long-standing arrangement, the up-to-date records, a profit-making organisation, value-added services, a three-year project, a six-month notice period
- But don't use a hyphen if the first word is an adverb ending in **ly**: a carefully worded email
- Don't hyphenate compound adjectives if they come after the noun: an arrangement of long standing, the records are up to date, an organisation making profits, services bringing added value, a project of three years, notice of six months

### Hyphens with prefixes

- Use a hyphen if otherwise the meaning isn't clear:  

She recovered the sofa (got it back)  
She re-covered the sofa (gave it a new cover)
- Use a hyphen if otherwise there will be two letters the same:  

non-negotiable, pre-empt, re-elect, co-operate (although this is increasingly set together)
- Use a hyphen after a prefix (for example non-, post-, mini-, anti-) if a capital letter or numeral follows:  

un-American activities  
pre-1500 literature
- Use a hyphen after a prefix if you're adding it to a word that already contains a hyphen (or reword it so it's less cumbersome):  

anti-money-laundering legislation

### No hyphens with phrasal verbs

There can be confusion with words that come from phrasal verbs (verbs with two parts):

to log on, to set up, to mark up, to catch up

- Hyphenate these words when you use them as compound nouns or adjectives:  

Nouns	Here's the mark-up. What's the set-up here? It's time for a catch-up.
Adjectives	my log-on details, the setting-up costs, a catch-up meeting

- But don't hyphenate them as verbs:

I set off my expenditure against income.  
Let's catch up next week.  
To log on, please enter your full name.

## Colons

The main use of the colon is before an explanation, a list or a quotation. It mostly appears at the end of an opening paragraph (see the first line of **Semicolons** below.) A colon followed by a dash looks old fashioned these days.

## Semicolons

The main uses of the semicolon are:

- at the end of a sub-clause or bullet point (as here);
- between the items in a list when at least one individual item already contains a comma or conjunction (although you could consider using bullet points for these instead):

The long-term plans of the business include large offices in London, Paris and New York; smaller offices in Dubai, Moscow and Johannesburg; and an outsourcing team in Belfast; and

- between two related clauses or sentences that are complementary to each other, but which could each stand alone:

We can't guarantee that a licence will be issued; you shouldn't arrange for shipment.  
[You could use a full stop here, but not a comma or a dash.]

Don't use semicolons as a substitute for commas in other situations.

## Brackets

If you often use brackets, you may be trying to squeeze too many ideas in one sentence.

If you follow a complete sentence with a whole sentence in brackets, the full stop at the end of the bracketed sentence goes inside the final bracket:

I trained as a lawyer. (I was the first in my family.)

If the part in brackets is a whole sentence but the sentence continues afterwards, you can either have no punctuation or a question mark or exclamation mark:

I trained as a lawyer (I was the first in my family) but moved into HR in 2012.  
I trained as a lawyer (I was the first in my family!) but moved into HR in 2012.

If only the end part of the sentence is in brackets, the full stop goes outside the final bracket:

The letter refers to the council's plan to close the dump (paragraph 2).

Avoid brackets within brackets. Use commas instead, or split the sentence.

## Dashes

These are like brackets, but more informal. They work well in emails, but not in formal writing. Ideally, a dash should be longer than a hyphen. You can use a pair or just one.

## Quotation marks or inverted commas

You can either use double or single inverted commas for quotations as long as you are consistent. Use the opposite for quotations within quotations. To introduce a quotation, you have a choice of a colon (never a semi-colon), a comma or nothing at all.

## Abbreviations and contractions

If an abbreviation ends with a different letter from the original word (a true abbreviation), use a full stop to indicate the missing letters: **Rev. Green** and **Prof. Plum**

If an abbreviation ends with the same letter as the original word (a contraction), in British English there is no need for a full stop: **Dr Smith** not Dr. Smith, **Mr Jones** not Mr. Jones, **St Mark** not St. Mark

## Capitals

People often over-use capitals. Use them only as follows:

- For the word I: **I** like apples.
- At the start of a sentence: **T**he cat sat on the mat.
- For days, months, festivals but not seasons: We celebrate **C**hristmas in **w**inter, on 25 **D**ecember. It falls on a **T**hursday this year.
- For adjectives relating to a place: He has a **F**rench accent.
- For acronyms and initialisms: **NATO**, **BBC**
- For titles – usually just the first word and any proper nouns, as in this seminar title: **P**ublic procurement update: **F**ocus on implementing the **R**emedies **D**irective.
- For defined terms in agreements and other formal documents
- For proper nouns like **B**arclays **B**ank **p**lc, **A**ustralia, the **S**ale of **G**oods **A**ct

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