

Using punctuation for clarity and effect

6

After completing this chapter you should know:

- how to use capital letters and full stops
- how to use commas and dashes
- how to use colons and semicolons
- how to use speech marks
- how to use apostrophes.

Learning Summary

6.1

Ending and beginning sentences



Use a **capital letter** to start a new sentence and a full stop to end one, unless it is a question, or an order or exclamation. A question ends with a question mark. Orders (commands) and exclamations end with a single exclamation mark:

- Get out, now!
- Ouch!

You should start a new sentence when you have written a complete sentence and are not adding a dependent **clause** to make a subordinated sentence:

- Dad's hobby is tropical fish. He has a huge tank full of them. ✓
- Mum goes rock-climbing, she says it keeps her fit. ✗ **(Two complete sentences)**
- My sister does karate, which is a form of martial art. ✓
- My brother plays rugby. Which I hate. ✗ **(One subordinated sentence)**

A **comma splice** is an incorrect use of a comma when there should be a full stop and new sentence.



For many students, the problem is knowing when to end a sentence. For what a sentence is, see Topic 5.1.

1. What punctuation marks can end a sentence?
2. What mark follows an order?
3. What is the problem with this sentence? 'Dave is tall, he has to stoop in doorways.'

Progress Check



6.2

Commas and dashes

Commas and clauses

Correct use of commas helps your reader to understand your meaning. Compare the following:



- After eating, Gary, Lyn and Kevin went skating.
- After eating Gary, Lyn and Kevin went skating.

Unless Lyn and Kevin are cannibals, which is correct? Why?

In this example, the comma comes after a **subordinate clause**. This is a phrase that adds information to the main clause ('Gary, Lyn and Kevin went skating'). This is an important use of commas. Here are more examples. Notice that the subordinate clause can come at the beginning, the end or the middle of the sentence. The commas help the reader to understand the sentence.

*Black Elk, a **Lakota medicine man**, visited England and met Queen Victoria.*

***A lifelong teetotaler**, Granddad says he does not need alcohol to have a good time.*

*I met her in a café, **a grimy little place on the King's Road**.*

*She works for a living, **which is more than can be said for you**.*

Commas in lists

Commas also break up the items in a list:

I enjoy French, Welsh and English.

I bought salad, crisps, cheese and mustard.

Without the comma, the reader might think, at least for a moment, that you could buy 'salad crisps'. Note that in simple lists the final comma is usually left out because the 'and' replaces it. However, in some lists a comma still helps the sense:

I brought orange juice, apple pie, and a huge tub of ice cream for my aunt.



Commas with people and names

See these examples where the comma, or lack of it, helps make the sense clear. In each case the subject of the sentence is emboldened.

- **The builder**, who is a vegetarian, brings his own lunch.
- **The builder who is a vegetarian** drinks tea, but the other builder prefers coffee.

You do not need a comma in these sentences:

- My cousin Wilf lives in Devon.
- My brother Jack is a mechanic.

However, commas do help here:

- The tallest boy in the class, Nigel, was able to reach the ball.

Using dashes

Some people use dashes lazily, in place of other punctuation. However, they are effective when used properly. A dash **shows a break in the flow of ideas**, as in an 'aside' or a passing explanation:

Lynda was on crutches – she had broken her leg – and could only walk a short distance.

(Saves having to say 'because she had broken her leg'.)

Shakespeare was the son of a glove maker – a commoner.

(Explains a significant point.)

The other woman – a dancer – was slim but muscular.

(Adds information, partly to explain; saves saying 'who was a dancer')

A dash can also be used in **dialogue** to show a sentence that is left incomplete:

Liam turned pale. 'But what about –'

'No time for that,' I answered, pushing him through the door.



Arrange a collection of items in front of you. Make up two sentences using them in lists and two with subordinate clauses.

1. Where do the commas go? 'I love Canada which has cold winters and hot summers most of all.'
2. Why is a comma not usually used before the last item of a list?
3. I have two cousins. Should I say, 'My cousin who lives in Ely...' or 'My cousin, who lives in Ely...'?
4. What does a dash show?

**Progress
Check**