

Introduction to Punctuation

Punctuation has two main functions:

It separates units of grammar.

It indicates a specific grammatical function.

The practice of using heavy or light punctuation, especially in the use of the comma is as much to do with publishing traditions as it is with individual preference.

In fact I'll go in the old red bus this time. (light)

In fact, I'll go in the old, red bus, this time. (heavy)

The main punctuation conventions:

- A sequence of **unseparated letters** identifies a **word**.
- The **hyphen** joins **parts** of a word.
- The **space** separates words.
- The **comma** separates words, phrases, and some clauses*.
- The **colon** (:) makes a more **definite separation** between a clause and what follows.
- The semi-colon (;) shows **coordination**, especially between **clauses**.
- The **full-stop**, **question mark** and **exclamation mark** separate sentences (along with an initial capital letter).
- A combination of **sentence marks** and **space** (especially the **indentation** of the first line) separate **paragraphs**.
- **Pairs** of punctuation marks show that one construction has been included **within** another: commas, dashes, parentheses (brackets) and quotation marks.

The prize, a bottle of beer, was much appreciated.

The prize - a bottle of beer - was much appreciated.

The prize (a bottle of beer) was much appreciated.

I saw the words 'a bottle of beer' on the card.

He said, "A bottle of beer is the prize".

* clause: a part of a sentence which includes a subject and word pertaining to it, e.g. When people want to persuade us, ... Although he knows the language well, ... To escape reality, ...

The apostrophe 's' (genitive nouns)

The chief meaning of the genitive case is **possession**:

my daughter's bike = her bike.

Additional meanings:

- express an **origin**: the girl's story
- **describe** something: a summer's day
- **measure** a period: ten day's leave
- express the role of the **subject**: the boy's application (that is, the boy applied).
- express the role of an **object**: the boy's release (that is, someone released the boy).

The of - genitive

the ship's name = the name of the ship

Inanimate nouns take the of - genitive

e.g., China's future, the body's needs, my life's aim.

Position of the apostrophe:

When the noun is **singular**, the apostrophe **precedes** the 's'.

the girl's shoes = one girl

When the noun is **plural**, the apostrophe **succeeds** the 's'.

the girls' shoes = two or more girls.

A few irregular plural nouns require a preceding apostrophe

e.g., the men's shoes (two or more men)

the women's shoes (two or more women)

Words already ending in 's' do not require another's' but do require an apostrophe to indicate possession

e.g., Charles' book, Paris' streets, Socrates' work.

IT'S and ITS' or ITS

There is now a strong tendency to omit the apostrophe. Signwriters, typographical designers, e-mail users do not use it. As a result many people are uncertain about the correct use of the apostrophe. However educated writers condemn the misuse of it's.

It's always means **it is** or it has - the apostrophe indicates the omission of a letter:

it is - it's.

it has - it's (got, run, been)

Similarly don't, won't, can't, shan't, shouldn't etc., indicate the omission of several letters:

can not - can't

do not - don't

will not - won't etc.,

The genitive *its* i.e., **The cat licked its paws**, is not usually marked with an apostrophe. Traditionalists may still use **its'** to indicate possession, but it has dropped out of general use.

So remember: it's always means IT IS, IT HAS, it never indicates possession.

[In speech it's cannot be distinguished from its, of course; it is the context which indicates the meaning].

Colons /Semi-colons

Colon (:) Semi-Colon (;

Tip: To remember which is the colon and which is the semi-colon, think of the colon as two 'full stops'. It is logical then that semi (meaning 'not whole') has only one full stop (and a comma to complete the sign).

Usage

The most common use of the **colon** is to separate a main clause from a list.

Example: The shopping list consisted of: nails, screws, a hammer and a screw-driver.

Sometimes the main clause is followed by a series of phrases, or clauses.

Example: The complaints engendered by a long trip on the liner were ingenious: the ice was not cold enough, the elephants in Ceylon were too small, a Frenchman protested that an actor in the Orient Express film called his countrymen Frogs. (Whicker, A (1975) in Punch Magazine)

The most common use of the semi-colon is to separate two clauses, but with the purpose of **co-ordinating** them. (A semi-colon **could** be used instead of a full stop).

Example: Read what interests you; read what you have time for; read the English written to-day, not 200 years ago.

The old Keble imposed certain religious restrictions on its dons; those restrictions have, however, been lifted in recent years.

Punctuate the following:

i was lost for a month within the worlds largest liner on her first world cruise sailing across the pacific to LA then florida as a perpetual motion traveller in a rush to get everywhere ive had no time to experience big ships a life so aimless that trivia loom large on the QE2 complaints as warrants the ultimate liner were ingenious the ice was not cold enough the elephants in ceylon were too small a frenchman protested that an actor in the orient express film called his countrymen frogs an american objected when the ships band played second hand rose thats my name and theres nothing second hand about me she said

Extract from "*Floating Pounds*", (*Punch*; 16/4/75) by Alan Whicker.

Guide

Although there is no strict rule regarding how often, or when, the colon and semicolon should be used, keep in mind that this author tends to use medium to heavy punctuation.

Check the passage is punctuated with:

5 full stops	2 hyphens	2 colons	19 capital letters
2 semi-colons	6 commas	5 apostrophes	1 set of speech marks