Practice guide for primary and secondary schools

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Australian Education Research Organisation

Punctuation – What's the point?

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This practice guide is designed to complement our simple, compound and complex sentence practice guides. It offers an overview of essential punctuation for writing across primary and secondary school. While an effective combination of sentence types adds depth and variety to a piece of writing, correct punctuation is equally vital for clarity and coherence. Our aim is to provide clear examples to support you in teaching your students sentence-level, simple and complex punctuation.

The importance of correct punctuation

Correct punctuation plays a crucial role in enhancing the clarity, intonation, meaning and precision of our writing. It acts as a helpful guide, ensuring that readers can comprehend the meaning we are trying to convey in our sentences. If we neglect to use capital letters to begin our sentences, or omit proper punctuation marks to indicate their endings, how can the reader differentiate the end of one idea from the beginning of the next? Punctuation provides us with a valuable tool to effectively communicate and ensure our message is understood.

To support students to effectively communicate through writing, we need to explicitly teach correct use of punctuation. For this instruction to be effective, punctuation needs to be taught in conjunction with sentence structure. This approach ensures students learn to use punctuation purposefully, enhancing the clarity and impact of their writing.

This practice guide aims to provide clear definitions and practical examples of punctuation within the context of teaching sentence writing.

Sentence-level punctuation

Sentence-level punctuation helps to organise written language by indicating the beginning and end of sentences. A sentence is not complete unless it starts with a capital letter and ends with appropriate punctuation. The choice of punctuation significantly shapes the message conveyed to the reader.

Capital letters are used at the beginning of sentences.

> **T**he bike was rusted and falling apart.
>
> **W**e will watch the fireworks from the rooftop.

Full stops indicate the end of a sentence and are represented by a small dot. They separate sentences and allow the reader to pause and process the information before moving on.

> The rain is bucketing down**.**
>
> Our soccer match will be cancelled**.**



Simple punctuation

Simple punctuation refers to the use of:

- commas in lists
- question marks
- capital letters for proper nouns
- exclamation marks

These 'accessories' enhance the clarity and meaning of a written text, shaping the conveyed message and guiding the readers' understanding.

Commas separate information into readable units in lists.

> She wore a long**,** printed**,** floral dress.
>
> My favourite colours are blue**,** green**,** orange and purple.

Question marks indicate that a sentence should be read as a direct question.

> Is that a new hat that you're wearing**?**

Question marks should not be used for indirect questions, requests, invitations or instructions.

> I wonder where they went.
>
> Please take a seat.
>
> She asked if she could borrow my car.

Capital letters should also be used for proper nouns (the names of people and places), and for titles (**M**r, **M**rs, **D**r, **P**rime **M**inister, **L**ord **M**ayor and so on).

> **M**y friend **J**emima
>
> **M**r **D**awson

Exclamation marks at the end of sentences convey surprise or add emphasis. They indicate that a sentence should be read with very strong feeling (as an exclamation).

> You must be joking**!**
>
> What a stunning sunset**!**

Complex punctuation

While it is important for our writing to include sentence-level and simple punctuation, there are other types of punctuation that are vital for conveying meaning and structuring sentences effectively. Understanding and correctly using complex punctuation will enhance the clarity and impact of a piece of writing, ensuring it is truly 'on point'!

We know that **commas** are used in lists, however, their power extends beyond mere separation. **Commas** bring order to chaos, impart rhythm to sentences and guide the reader through complex ideas. The following page highlights the many uses of commas and their role in complex punctuation.

Commas are used to:

1. introduce words, mild interjections or names at the start of a sentence when using direct address

> Yes**,** you can book your appointment online.
>
> Paul**,** can you please hang the washing out?

2. separate clauses in complex sentences (for example, to mark an adverbial clause when it precedes an independent clause)

> Although she disliked team games**,** she played netball to spend time with her friends.

3. separate a noun phrase when it follows the subject or object of a clause

> Yoda**,** a fictional character in the Star Wars franchise**,** is known for his iconic syntax and unique way of speaking.

4. mark adjectival clauses (that is, when the information in the clause is not essential to the meaning of the sentence).

> Koalas**,** which are very cute animals**,** live on a diet of gum tree leaves.

Note: If the information is essential to the meaning of the sentence, then commas are not required.

> The kangaroo that I saw at the zoo had a baby in its pouch.

Note: It is an error to join 2 independent clauses with a comma alone. This error is known as the 'comma splice'.

> ✗ She loves to read fiction, fantasy is her favourite genre.
>
> ✓ She loves to read fiction, and fantasy is her favourite genre.

> ✗ The squad trained for hours, they still didn't qualify for the tournament.
>
> ✓ The squad trained for hours, but they still didn't qualify for the tournament.

The National Literacy Learning Progressions provide a developmental framework for teaching writing, including the use of commas. Teachers need to provide explicit instruction, tailored to the specific needs of individual students, on using commas to create more complex sentence structures.



Quotation marks[1] or inverted commas identify words that are direct speech or spoken or written words belonging to people other than the writer. Quotation marks can be used for quotes, dialogue and titles.

> **'**I never lose. I either win or learn.**'**
> – Nelson Mandela (quote)
>
> Jake said, **'**I can't believe you're leaving,**'** as tears filled his eyes. (dialogue)
>
> **'**Stayin' Alive**'** is considered one of the greatest disco songs of all time. (song title)

Quotation marks should not be used for indirect speech such as:

> She said that she didn't like chicken.

Double quotation marks are used for material quoted within single quotation marks.

> 'Albert Einstein famously tells us that, **"**Insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results,**"**' said Ewan.

Colons are used to introduce something. They are normally used to signal a list, an example, an explanation or a subtitle.

> Her favourite foods include**:** ice cream, bananas and figs. (list)
>
> She disliked team games**:** basketball and netball. (examples)
>
> This problem requires a specific formula**:** to solve it, you'll need to use the Pythagorean Theorem. (explanation)
>
> Charles Dickens**:** An Interesting Life (subtitle)

Semicolons are used within sentences to separate different though related pieces of information (independent or contrasting clauses). In this way, they function like a full stop, so if the semicolon cannot be replaced with a full stop in a sentence, it has probably been used incorrectly.

> She disliked team games**;** she particularly loathed netball.

Semicolons are also used to separate complex items in a list.

> I went to the supermarket and bought oranges, which are my favourite fruit**;** apples, which are my partner's favourite**;** blueberries, to eat with muesli**;** and avocado, for toast.

1 There are different conventions for the use of quotation marks. This guide follows the Australian Curriculum and National Literacy Learning Progression but recognises that other style guides may vary, especially in the use of double quotation marks.

The 2 uses of apostrophes

Apostrophes are primarily used in punctuation to indicate either possession or attribution, or contraction or omission of a letter from a word.

Possession or attribution apostrophes

Mr Wilson**'**s eyes

the detective**'**s memory

The rule for possession and attribution in the case of most singular nouns is to place an **apostrophe** and **s** after the word.

the elephant**'s** trunk

the boy**'s** hat

The rule for possession in the case of most plural nouns is to place only an **apostrophe** after the word.

the elephant**s'** trunks

the boy**s'** hats

Plural nouns that do not end in **s** have an **apostrophe** and **s** after the word.

the children**'s** books

the men**'s** clothing

Contraction or omission apostrophes

Contraction apostrophes are used in contractions, which are shortened versions of words. They indicate the omission of one or more letters in a word.

He**'s** a talented musician. (he is)

Please don**'t** touch that. (do not)

An important note on 'its' and 'it's'

Without an apostrophe, 'its' is the possessive form of it. This might seem counterintuitive as most possessive forms have an apostrophe, but 'its' is an exception to the general possession rule.

The dog wagged **its** tail.

'It's' with an apostrophe is a contraction which means 'it is' or 'it has'.

It's raining outside today.

It's been a long day.

Even more complex punctuation

Hyphens can be used in many ways. The most common use is to connect words or parts of words together to create a single idea or concept. They help to clarify meaning and avoid ambiguity.

For example, the phrase 'man eating shark' could be read as a man who is eating a shark, whereas *'man-eating shark'* makes it clear that the shark is the one doing the eating.

Hyphens are also used in some words with prefixes to distinguish them from words that might otherwise look the same.

For example, *'re-cover'* (to cover something again) is different from *'recover'* (to return to a normal state after an illness or injury).

Brackets or parentheses are used to enclose material that provide additional information or a comment within an otherwise complete sentence.

Round brackets are normally used for this function.

> Students are required to submit their assignments by Friday **(**late submissions will result in a deduction of marks**)**.

Square brackets are used to enclose additional material not included by the original author of the sentence.

> The study's results suggest a strong correlation between diet and heart health **[**consistent with previous research**]**.

Ellipses consist of 3 dots (...) and are used to build suspense, leaving the reader wondering what will happen next. They can also imply a trailing off or unfinished thought.

> She opened the door slowly, not sure what she would find on the other side **...**
>
> 'I was walking down the street and then I saw **...** never mind, it's not important.'

Ellipses can also be used to indicate that some words have been left out of a quote. This can shorten a lengthy quote or remove information that is not relevant.

> 'The cyclone caused extensive damage to homes, infrastructure, and **...** critical utilities such as power and water.'



Suggestions for instruction

For instruction to be effective, we need to teach punctuation in conjunction with sentence structure. Teaching punctuation in isolation fails to provide students with the necessary context and understanding of how it interacts with the overall structure and meaning of their writing. The following is an example of how you might teach students to correctly use a semicolon, in the context of a compound sentence.

1. **Present new learning**
    a. Explain and demonstrate the function of semicolons (e.g., to separate related ideas), using compound sentences as examples.

Mars is the fourth planet from the Sun**;** it is the second smallest planet in our solar system.

The atmosphere on Mars is thin**;** it mainly consists of carbon dioxide.



2. **Guided practice**
    a. Teach students how to separate ideas with a semicolon using worked examples and guided practice. Model using 2 simple sentences to show students how a semicolon can be used to create one compound sentence, like the following example.

Mars has a diameter of 6,779 kilometres. This makes it the second smallest planet in our solar system.

Mars has a diameter of 6,779 kilometres**;** this makes it the second smallest planet in our solar system.

You can also use run-on sentences to practise placing a semicolon between 2 independent clauses.

The temperature on Mars can be extremely cold it can drop to -62 degrees Celsius.

The temperature on Mars can be extremely cold**;** it can drop to -62 degrees Celsius.

    b. Students can identify the semicolon in a sentence, add a semicolon to prepared sentences, and/or apply a semicolon/s to their own sentences or paragraphs.

3. **Independent practice**
    a. Students can edit and revise their own work independently, enhancing their writing with semicolons.
    b. Provide correction and feedback.

Student punctuation resource

Table 1: Sentence-level, simple and complex punctuation uses and examples

Types of punctuation and how they are used	Sentence examples
Capital letters	
Capital letters are used: • at the beginning of sentences.	**M**y dog's name is Possum.
• for proper nouns (the names of people and places), and for titles (Mr, Mrs, Dr).	**P**ossum barked at **M**rs **J**enkins.
Full stops	
Full stops indicate the end of a sentence.	My dog's name is Possum**.**
Commas	
Commas are used: • to separate items in a list.	My dog Possum likes to eat**,** sleep**,** run and play.
• to introduce words, at the start of a sentence when using direct address.	Yes**,** you can bring Possum. Sam**,** where is Possum's lead?
• to separate clauses in complex sentences.	While it may seem strange**,** my dog's name is Possum.
• to separate a noun phrase when it follows the subject or object of a clause.	Possum**,** our family dog**,** loves to curl up on the couch.
• to mark adjectival clauses (when the information in the clause is not essential to the meaning of the sentence).	Possum**,** who is very cute**,** has a dark brown coat.
Question marks	
Question marks tell us that a sentence should be read as a direct question.	Has Possum been fed**?** Where is Possum's bowl**?**
Question marks **should not** be used for indirect questions, requests, invitations or instructions.	I wonder if Possum has been fed. Please feed Possum.

Types of punctuation and how they are used	Sentence examples
Exclamation marks	
Exclamation marks are used to add emphasis or convey surprise.	Possum, give my slipper back right now**!** Wow, look at Possum go**!**
Exclamation marks **should not** be used where emphasis is not being expressed.	Possum, give my slipper back.
Quotation marks	
Quotation marks can be used for: • direct quotes	**'**Grandma Poss made bush magic.**'** – Mem Fox
• dialogue	**'**Have you fed Possum?**'** asked Dad.
• titles.	**'**Possum Magic**'** is one of my favourite books.
Colons	
Colons are used to introduce something, including: • a list	Possum's favourite foods include**:** sardines, anchovies and carrots.
• examples	Possum is well-trained**:** she can sit, lie down, and roll over on command.
• an explanation	Possum is very funny**:** she often barks at her reflection in the mirror.
• a subtitle.	The Adventures of Possum**:** My Dog's Journey through the Neighbourhood
Semicolons	
Semicolons separate different, related pieces of information.	Possum loves playing fetch**;** she could chase a ball for hours.
Apostrophes	
Apostrophes can indicate: • possession	Possum**'**s ball is red. (singular noun) Possum jumped on the boys**'** sandcastle. (plural noun) She chewed through the children**'**s books. (plural noun that does not end in **s**)
• contraction or omission of a letter from a word.	I**'**ll (I will) walk Possum later. She**'**s (she is) a happy dog.

Appendices

Appendix A: Relevant Australian Curriculum content descriptions

Alignment with the Australian Curriculum English (V9) content descriptions	
Foundation	• identify punctuation as a feature of written text different from letters; recognise that capital letters are used for names, and that capital letters also signal the beginning of sentences while punctuation marks signal the end (AC9EFLA09)
Year 1	• Understand that written language uses punctuation such as full stops, question marks and exclamation marks, and uses capital letters for familiar proper nouns (AC9E1LA10)
Year 2	• recognise that capital letters are used in titles and commas are used to separate items in lists (AC9E2LA10) • create and edit short imaginative, informative and persuasive written and/or multimodal texts for familiar audiences, using text structure appropriate to purpose, simple and compound sentences, noun groups and verb groups, topic-specific vocabulary, simple punctuation and common 2-syllable words (AC9E2LY06)
Year 3	• understand that apostrophes signal missing letters in contractions, and apostrophes are used to show singular and plural possession (AC9E3LA11)
Year 4	• understand that punctuation signals dialogue through quotation marks and that dialogue follows conventions for the use of capital letters, commas and boundary punctuation (AC9E4LA12) • plan, create, edit and publish written and multimodal imaginative, informative and persuasive texts, using visual features, relevant linked ideas, complex sentences, appropriate tense, synonyms and antonyms, correct spelling of multisyllabic words and simple punctuation (AC9E4LY06)
Year 5	• use commas to indicate prepositional/adverbial phrases and clauses preceding another clause, and apostrophes where there is multiple possession (AC9E5LA09) • plan, create, edit and publish written and multimodal texts whose purposes may be imaginative, informative and persuasive, developing ideas using visual features, text structure appropriate to the topic and purpose, text connectives, expanded noun groups, specialist and technical vocabulary, and punctuation including dialogue punctuation (AC9E5LY06)
Year 6	• understand how to use the comma for lists, to separate a dependent clause from an independent clause, and in dialogue (AC9E6LA09) • plan, create, edit and publish written and multimodal texts whose purposes may be imaginative, informative and persuasive, using paragraphs, a variety of complex sentences, expanded verb groups, tense, topic-specific and vivid vocabulary, punctuation, spelling and visual features (AC9E6LY06)

Alignment with the Australian Curriculum English (V9) content descriptions	
Year 7	• understand the use of punctuation including colons and brackets to support meaning (AC9E7LA09) • plan, create, edit and publish written and multimodal texts, selecting subject matter, and using text structures, language features, literary devices and visual features as appropriate to convey information, ideas and opinions in ways that may be imaginative, reflective, informative, persuasive and/or analytical (AC9E7LY06)
Year 8	• understand and use punctuation conventions including semicolons and dashes to extend ideas and support meaning (AC9E8LA09) • plan, create, edit and publish written and multimodal texts, organising and expanding ideas, and selecting text structures, language features, literary devices and visual features for purposes and audiences in ways that may be imaginative, reflective, informative, persuasive and/or analytical (AC9E8LY06)
Year 9	• understand punctuation conventions for referencing and citing others for formal and informal purposes (AC9E9LA09) • plan, create, edit and publish written and multimodal texts, organising, expanding and developing ideas, and selecting text structures, language features, literary devices and multimodal features for purposes and audiences in ways that may be imaginative, reflective, informative, persuasive, analytical and/or critical (AC9E9LY06)
Year 10	• understand how authors use and experiment with punctuation (AC9E10LA09) • plan, create, edit and publish written and multimodal texts, organising, expanding and developing ideas through experimenting with text structures, language features, literary devices and multimodal features for specific purposes and audiences in ways that may be imaginative, reflective, informative, persuasive, analytical and/or critical (AC9E10LY06)

Appendix B: National Literacy Learning Progressions – Writing

Punctuation	Creating texts
P1 • identifies capital letters • identifies full stops	**P1** Not identified at this stage/year level.
P2 • writes basic sentence boundary punctuation (capital letter at beginning, full stop at end) • writes capital letters for some proper nouns	**P2** Not identified at this stage/year level.
P3 • uses sentence boundary punctuation including question marks or exclamation marks • consistently writes capitals appropriately for names of people	**P3** Not identified at this stage/year level.
P4 • uses commas in lists of nouns (add the sugar, lemon, water and juice) • uses apostrophes for regular single possessives (girl's) • capitalises key events, geographic names, titles (Easter, Sydney, Ms)	**P4** Not identified at this stage/year level.
P5 • uses quotation marks for simple dialogue ('I can't see it,' he said.) • uses apostrophes for plural possessives (planes' wings) • follows conventions of use of capitals in headings	**P5** • uses upper case letters correctly to indicate proper nouns • uses capital letters and full stops correctly at the start and end of sentences
P6 • writes commas to separate clauses where appropriate • punctuates more complex dialogue correctly ('The team has made some interesting recommendations,' she said, nodding. 'But I do not want to act upon them before I have read the full report.')	**P6** • intentionally uses simple punctuation (!, ?)

Punctuation	Creating texts
P7 • uses complex punctuation conventions (colons, semicolons, brackets) • uses punctuation conventions for quotations and referencing	**P7** • consistently uses correct simple punctuation (separates two adjectives before a noun with a comma – old, broken bike)
P8 • uses punctuation to clarify meaning in complex sentences, drawing on their knowledge of sentence structure (commas before introductory words, phrases or clauses; semicolons; colons; and dashes)	**P8** • uses all simple and some complex punctuation correctly
	P9 • uses complex punctuation correctly (apostrophes of possession)
	P10 • uses a range of complex punctuation flexibly and correctly

This Punctuation practice guide is designed to complement AERO's simple, compound and complex sentence practice guides as well as subject specific writing guides for English, Science and Health and Physical Education.

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