

# CHAPTER 8

## Punctuation

Punctuation is a form of signalling, showing how you intend your document to be read in order to make its meaning quite clear. When you speak, you ‘punctuate’ your speech automatically: your voice rises at the end of a question, you pause at appropriate moments, or you might use forms of words such as ‘by the way’, or ‘that means’. When you are writing, punctuation takes the place of these aural signals.

You need to think carefully about how you punctuate your documents, because it does not happen naturally, as it does in speech. Most punctuation marks indicate pauses, and different marks indicate different lengths of pause: generally, the pause for a full stop is longer than that for a semicolon, while a comma has the shortest pause of all.

You need to strike a balance between too many and too few punctuation marks. If you have too many, your document is broken up too much and becomes disjointed. If you use too few it becomes difficult to follow. The following passage has no punctuation marks at all. As you can see, it is very difficult to see what the writer means.

I am afraid that owing to the fact that the Managing Director is out of the office at the moment it is not possible to agree to your request immediately not that it is likely to be turned down of course but we do need his approval for agreements of this nature however he will be back next week and I will make sure that he deals with it as soon as possible.

Here is the same passage, but over-punctuated.

I am afraid that, owing to the fact, that the Managing Director is out of the office, at the moment, it is not possible to agree to your request, immediately. Not that it is likely to be turned down, of course; but we do need his approval for agreements of this nature. However, he will be back next week; and I will make sure that he deals with it, as soon as possible.

As you can see, it is very disjointed to read – almost jerky, in fact. Now let us see how it looks when properly punctuated.

I am afraid that, owing to the fact that the Managing Director is out of the office at the moment, it is not possible to agree to your request immediately – not that it is likely to be turned down of course, but we do need his approval for agreements of this nature. However, he will be back next week and I will make sure that he deals with it as soon as possible.

This version is easier to read, and the sense is quite clear the first time you read it.

Punctuation is to a certain extent a matter of style, but there are certain rules that must be followed if your documents are to make sense to your readers. In this chapter we will be looking at both the rules and the points of style governing punctuation marks.

### The Purposes of Punctuation

Punctuation serves four main purposes.

- **It divides passages up.** Punctuation separates what you are writing into easily absorbed parts: sentences, clauses and phrases. Look at the following sentence: 'I am enclosing our latest catalogue, in which you will find all our current models.' The comma breaks the sentence into two parts, which are easier to read than one long one.
- **It indicates a relationship.** It can signal the relationship between one part of a sentence and another, as in the following: 'The catalogue (which has just been published) contains details of our current models.' The brackets indicate that the clause they enclose is an aside, not part of the main theme of the sentence.
- **It differentiates between two meanings.** An example of this is in the following two sentences:
  - Sales are up by 15% more than we budgeted for.
  - Sales are up by 15%, more than we budgeted for.
 Although exactly the same words are used, the two sentences have different meanings; the difference is in the comma.
- **It creates emphasis.** You can emphasise certain words or phrases, as in 'There is only one possible outcome in this situation – bankruptcy.' Using the dash in this way emphasises the word 'bankruptcy'.

## Full Stops

The rules for using full stops are quite simple and widely understood. There are just two occasions when they are used.

- to end a sentence, as in 'Mr Graham has passed your letter to me.'
- after initials or abbreviations, as in 'P.J. Darwin', 'Inc.', 'Co.' But note that a full stop is not necessary after a contraction – an abbreviation in which the first and last letters are the same as in the full word, like 'Dr', 'Mr', 'Ltd' – or between the letters in abbreviations such as 'BBC' or 'USA'. Then it is a matter of your own personal choice.

## Commas

The rules governing commas are not as straightforward, or as definite, as those for other punctuation marks. They are the most flexible, and where you use them is largely a matter of taste. They can be used in a variety of situations.

### Separating words or phrases in a list

When you are listing items, they should be separated by commas, as in 'We can offer a choice of beige, black, dark blue or grey trim.' Note that it is not usual to have a comma before the final 'and' or 'or' – only put them in if it is necessary for clarity. If the list is a

complex one, where each item is a long phrase or a clause, it might be better to use a semicolon (see under 'Semicolons' below).

You can also use commas to separate adjectives qualifying the same noun, as in 'Please enclose a large, self-addressed envelope.' In this context it is a matter of preference; as long as the passage is easy to follow, it is not essential to use commas. One situation when you *must* leave it out is when the adjective and the noun actually go together to form a compound noun. In 'Please supply a large filing cabinet', for example, 'filing' does not qualify the noun, it is part of it. A filing cabinet is very different from an ordinary cabinet, so filing does not describe the cabinet in the way that 'large' does. So you should not have a comma between 'large' and 'filing'.

## Joining two clauses

When two clauses are joined by a co-ordinating conjunction, you can use a comma or not. So you can write either:

- I strongly disagree and I think you should reconsider.

or

- I strongly disagree, and I think you should reconsider.

Whether you use a comma in this context will depend not only on your own preference, but also on the length of the sentence and the amount of separation you want to indicate. If your sentence is long, you may want to put in a comma, introducing a pause so that the reader can absorb what he or she has read so far. If the ideas in the clauses are not closely related, you might put in a comma to increase the impression of separation, whereas if they are very closely linked you might leave it out so as to bring them closer in the reader's mind.

## Separating an introductory signal

When you use a signalling device to indicate the direction your document is about to take, you can use a comma to separate it from the rest of the sentence, as in 'Finally, may I offer my congratulations on your success this year.' This is again a matter of personal preference, but generally that slight degree of separation makes the sentence easier to follow.

## Creating parenthesis

You can use commas as parentheses, when you insert something which either expands on the main part of the sentence without affecting it, or qualifies part of it. Here are two examples:

- This is not, I am sure, what the Board had in mind.
- Mr Jones, the Senior Partner, will be in touch shortly.

In both these cases, the main part of the sentence stands perfectly well on its own, without the section in parenthesis.

If something is in parenthesis, you should always signal that with some punctuation device, otherwise your reader will not know how it fits in with the sentence as a whole. But you can also use brackets and dashes for this, as indicated below.

## Introducing quotations

You must use either a comma or a colon to introduce direct speech or a quotation of a full sentence from another source. You are unlikely to use direct speech very much in business writing, but you might find yourself quoting from another source. If so, you should say: 'Jonathan Wallace's report says, "We must encourage our employees to participate fully in the decisions that govern their working lives."'

If you are only quoting a few words, then you should not introduce the quotation with a comma. So you would say: 'Jonathan Wallace's report says that we should encourage our employees to participate fully in "the decisions that govern their working lives".' In this case, only the last part of the clause is a direct quotation, so no comma is used to introduce it.

## Separating phrases and clauses for easier reading

Depending on the length and complexity of a sentence, you can use commas to separate some of the constituent phrases and clauses to make it easier to read:

- Since you have not replied to my letter, I assume that you agree with my suggestion.
- Reading your report, I was struck by its clarity.

In neither of these sentences are the commas essential, but they do help to make them easier to follow.

## Avoiding confusion

Commas can be used to avoid confusion, even in situations where you would not normally use them. Look at the following sentence: 'The outfits are available in red and white and brown and beige.' One might guess from the way it is expressed that they are available in two combinations of two colours, not in four individual colours. But to make your meaning absolutely clear, it would be better to say, 'The outfits are available in red and white, and brown and beige.'

As this section shows, the use of commas is largely a matter of taste and style, but you should not overuse them, otherwise you will introduce too many pauses and your document will become disjointed. Look at the following sentence: 'However, if we invest in new plant, and the market falls again, as it could easily do, we might, conceivably, find ourselves with too much production capacity, which could, perhaps, cause even graver problems.' None of these commas is actually wrong, but there are just too many of them. We are forced to read the sentence in jerks. You need to use your discretion and cut out a few inessential ones so that the sentence flows.

## Semicolons

The semicolon is probably the most undervalued of all punctuation marks; it can be extremely useful, yet it is very seldom used. Like the comma, its use is to a certain extent a

matter of personal preference and style. Basically, it is used to indicate a longer pause than a comma would give, but shorter than a full stop. There are four situations in which it is useful.

## Making a clear separation

A semicolon can be used to separate statements that are closely connected, but not so closely as to justify either a comma or a conjunction, as in 'I like your proposal; it is well thought out and workable.' Here the two ideas are connected, so it would look wrong if they were two separate sentences. On the other hand, 'I like your proposal because it is well thought out and workable' ties the two ideas too closely together. It sounds as though you like the proposal *only* because it is well thought out and workable.

## Emphasising a statement

A semicolon can be used to emphasise a statement or make it more punchy. As you can see if you read the above example again, almost any statement after a semicolon is given extra emphasis. Here is another example: 'We must improve our productivity; we face bankruptcy if we do not.' The second part of the sentence stands out starkly – far more so than if it had been written 'We must improve our productivity because we face bankruptcy if we do not.' But note that this device can only be used to emphasise a whole clause; single words or phrases should be emphasised by using a dash (see below).

## Conveying contrast

Semicolons can be used to balance contrasting statements, as in: 'We offer a home delivery service; other firms do not.' As in the above examples, the emphasis is on the second statement, but the main purpose of the semicolon here is to highlight the contrast between your service and that of other firms.

## Separating longer items in a list

As we saw under 'Commas' above, items in a list are usually separated by commas. When the items are longer, however, semicolons might be better. There are no hard and fast rules about this, but a good rule of thumb is that semicolons should be used when the items themselves contain commas, or when they are clauses. Look at the following examples:

- I recommend the following: that we increase our sales staff by five; that we double our advertising budget; and that we introduce more stringent quality control measures.
- We have three main requirements: high-quality, durable materials; reasonable prices; and fast, reliable delivery.

In the first sentence, the items in the list are clauses. To separate them only with commas would make them appear to run into each other. In the second, there are commas in two of the items in the list. If the items themselves were separated by commas, it would be confusing to read.

Note that, unlike commas, when you are using semicolons in this way, you *should* have a semicolon before the final 'and' or 'or'.

# Colons

Colons have only three uses:

- They are used to introduce lists, especially those where the items are separated by semicolons (they are not essential if the items are short and are separated by commas), as in: 'I would be grateful if you could let me have your cheque in payment of the following invoices which are overdue: No. 14352 of 6 January, No. 21345 of 29 January and No. 25431 of 10 February.'
- They can be used to indicate two sides of the same theme; the first part of the sentence makes a statement, and the second part explains it. Here are two examples:
  - The solution is simple: train more operators.
  - The reasons are the same in both cases: we are undervaluing our key staff.
- They can be used instead of commas to introduce direct speech or quotations.

# Brackets

There are two kinds of brackets:

- round brackets (also called parentheses), which are the kind we are most familiar with: ( ).
- square brackets, which look like this: [ ].

They serve different purposes, and should therefore not be confused.

## Round brackets

Using round brackets in most contexts is a bit like saying, 'By the way' in speech. They are used for asides, for indicating that a passage is not part of the main theme of the sentence, but is added by way of explanation or comment. So you might write: 'There is still £2,470 outstanding on your account (see enclosed statement).'

The part in brackets is an extension of the sentence, but it does not express part of its theme or idea.

### Commas, Brackets or Dashes?

If you want to put a passage in parenthesis you have three options: you can enclose it in commas, round brackets or dashes. But which should you use? The rule of thumb is that commas denote less of a pause than brackets, which denote less of a pause than dashes. So you can choose your punctuation marks according to the degree of separation you want: commas will connect the passage closely to the rest of the sentence and brackets less closely, while dashes will separate it out most of all. You can see this in the following examples:

- Jackie Milton, the new Chief Executive, will be visiting your department tomorrow.
- Jackie Milton (the new Chief Executive) will be visiting your department tomorrow.
- Jackie Milton – the new Chief Executive – will be visiting your department tomorrow.

In the first sentence, the passage in commas is a simple description of Jackie Milton, and is closely linked to the first part of the sentence. In the second, the writer is saying the equivalent of 'and by the way she is the new Chief Executive'; the assumption is that the reader may not already know that. And in the third, the writer appears to want to emphasise the fact that she is the new Chief Executive, and therefore separates the passage from the main clause even more, making it stand out.

Beware of using brackets for very long passages. They break up the sentence and cause the reader to pause, and if the break is too long the reader will lose track of what the sentence is about. Consider the following passage: 'Susan King (who was appointed Managing Director to succeed Martin Wilson, who resigned in January) will be addressing the conference next week.' The passage in brackets is so long that by the time it ends, the reader may have difficulty remembering what the subject of the sentence is. Anything that long should be placed between commas, as in: 'Susan King, who was appointed Managing Director to succeed Martin Wilson, who resigned in January, will be addressing the conference next week.' Now the break in the sentence is not quite so long, and it flows more smoothly.

Round brackets are also used to enclose explanations of terms or abbreviations, or to show reference sources. It is normal practice to explain an abbreviation or technical term only once, the first time you use it. So you might write: 'A great deal of the development work in this area is done by NGOs (non-governmental organisations). Unfortunately, these NGOs do not always co-ordinate their efforts to best effect.'

As we have seen, if you are writing a report and referring to, or quoting from, someone else's work, you should acknowledge their contribution. This is often done by putting your source in brackets after you have referred to it: 'A leading human resources management expert believes that all managerial personnel should be retrained in the techniques of managing change (H.K. Burton, *Human Resources Management in a Changing Environment*).' If you have an acknowledgements section in your report, and the full title of the source you are referring to is shown there, then you might just show the author (and possibly the page on which the reference appears).

## Square brackets

You will not often need to use square brackets, but it is as well to know how their use differs from that of round ones.

Square brackets are used when you are quoting directly from another source and you want to add something of your own – usually an expansion or explanation. The following passage shows an example: 'Bani Desai's report states: "If we wish to improve our image then we must ensure that our treatment of them [the customers] is not only courteous but also helpful and efficient."' This indicates that *you* have inserted 'the customers' to explain who 'them' refers to.

## Dashes

However and wherever you use them, dashes increase the emphasis of what you are saying. The part of the sentence after the dash – or between the dashes in the case of two – will always carry more emphasis than without the dash. They have four main functions.

- As we have seen, two dashes can be used to put something in parenthesis, when you want more emphasis and greater separation of the passage from the rest of the sentence than brackets provide.
- Two dashes can also be used to pull together or summarise several items, as in: 'Computers, filing cabinets, printers, bookshelves – in fact all office equipment – should be listed.'

- One dash can be used to sum up or comment on what has gone before in an emphatic way, as in: ‘You did not pay within the specified time so we stopped your account – as is normal practice.’
- One dash can also be used like a colon, to indicate two sides of the same theme, but with more emphasis. So you could say either:
  - There can be only one outcome: large-scale redundancies.
 or
  - There can be only one outcome – large-scale redundancies.

The dash in the second version makes the second part of the sentence stand out more, and therefore makes it starker.

## Apostrophes

The apostrophe has three uses.

- It is used to show that a letter or letters have been left out of a word, as in ‘don’t’ for ‘do not’ or ‘let’s’ for ‘let us’. In most business correspondence you should not be using such contractions, however, so this use should not concern you.
- It is often used when writing the plural of a letter, as in ‘We must ensure that all the i’s are dotted and the t’s crossed.’
- Its most common use in a business context is to denote the possessive form of a noun, as in ‘Peter’s letter’ or ‘the ‘clients’ files’. Note that when it is used to denote the possessive of a plural noun that ends in ‘s’, the apostrophe comes after the ‘s’; with a singular noun or a plural noun that does not end in ‘s’, it comes before the ‘s’. So you should write ‘the customer’s account’ but ‘the customers’ accounts’, ‘ladies’ clothing’, but ‘women’s clothing’.

There is a tendency sometimes to leave the apostrophe out when writing the possessive, particularly in posters or signs. So you will often see ‘Ladies Wear’ or ‘Mens Hairdresser’. Do not be tempted to follow suit. It looks careless or ignorant, and it can affect the clarity of your document.

Some people have trouble with possessives of names that end in ‘s’. Should they, for example, write ‘Mr Jones’s order’ or ‘Mr Jones’ order’? There is no hard and fast rule, and either is acceptable.

Two words that constantly cause problems are ‘its’ and ‘it’s’ – when should you use the apostrophe and when not? The answer is that it’s is short for ‘it is’, and ‘its’ means ‘belonging to it’.

## Quotation Marks

Often called inverted commas, as their name implies these marks indicate quotations. They are used:

- for direct speech, as in: ‘He said, “I cannot agree with your proposal.”’ You will seldom use direct speech in business documents.



- when quoting the exact words of a person, document or publication: ‘Norman Tipton wrote of a “potentially damaging recession looming”.’ In this usage, if the quotation is a complete sentence, then the full stop goes before the quotation mark; if it is just a phrase, but comes at the end of your own sentence, then the full stop comes after the quotation mark.
- for irony, as in ‘The Committee has come up with a “radical” new proposal.’ The implication is that you do not believe the proposal is actually very radical.
- To indicate a claim or point made by someone else, which you do not want to form part of your own argument, as in ‘Smiths have developed a new “quick-dry” paint.’ This means that Smiths are claiming that it is quick to dry. You are neither confirming nor denying the claim; it may be that you do not have enough information to make a judgement or that whether the paint is actually quick to dry or not is not important to your argument, it is the claim that matters.

Whether you use single (‘) or double (“) quotation marks is a matter of personal preference. However, very occasionally you may need to write a ‘quote within a quote’. Then, if you are using single quotation marks the ‘quote within a quote’ should be in double marks and vice versa. So you could write:

- Kendall says, ‘The provision of unnecessary “executive” gimmicks for management is proving costly.’

or

- Kendall says, “The provision of unnecessary ‘executive’ gimmicks for management is proving costly.”

## Exclamation Marks

Exclamation marks, as their name indicates, are used for exclamations. They are seldom necessary or advisable in business correspondence, as you should not be exclaiming, but reasoning and persuading. Some people use them for emphasis, but this is incorrect and looks amateurish. So do not be tempted to write something like ‘We offer the cheapest prices in town!’ You should be able to provide all the emphasis you need by your choice of words, or with other devices.

There is one situation in which it might be legitimate to use an exclamation mark in less formal business correspondence, and that is in a semi-humorous context to denote irony, as in: ‘He claimed he was late because he fell over getting out of bed and hurt his leg!’ The implication is ‘What a silly excuse.’

## Question Marks

There is only one rule for using question marks: they end sentences that are questions, as in: ‘Could we meet on Tuesday to discuss your report in detail?’ However, you can also use them in informal documents, especially internal memos and e-mails, as a sort of shorthand. So you might write: ‘We must meet (? Friday) to discuss the arrangements.’ This means ‘We must meet to discuss the arrangements. Would Friday suit you?’ I must

emphasise, however, that it is an informal device, and should only be used in internal and informal communications.

## Hyphens

The hyphen is a very useful device, particularly in avoiding confusing or awkward constructions. It is used in the following ways.

- It connects two or more words to form a compound word. This can be a compound noun, as in 'car-park', or a compound adjective, as in 'a ground-floor office'. With compound nouns, it is not always easy to know whether they should be written as one word, hyphenated, or as two words, so you may need to consult your dictionary to be sure (and with some it can be a matter of personal style). With compound adjectives it is simpler. It is usually easier to understand a sentence if compound adjectives are hyphenated. So you would write 'a like-minded colleague' or 'a cost-saving exercise'. However, if the first word is an adverb ending in '-ly', then you should not hyphenate it. So you would write 'a well-designed product', but 'a beautifully designed product'.
- It also connects a letter to a noun to form a compound, as in 'T-junction' or 'U-turn'.
- It is used to differentiate between words beginning with 're-' that are spelt the same but have different meanings. So 'reform' means 'improve', whereas 're-form' means 'form again', 'recount' means 'tell', but 're-count' means 'count again'.
- In a similar way, it can be used to differentiate between two possible meanings of the same passage. So you could have a 'grey flecked carpet' (a 'grey carpet that is flecked' or a 'grey-flecked carpet' (a carpet with grey flecks).
- It makes a compound number, as in 'twenty-eight'.
- It can be used to avoid the awkward repetition of a letter, as in 'co-operate' or 'anti-inflation'.

### EXERCISE 25

Punctuate the following passages.

1. The Managing Director who is abroad at present has asked me to reply to your letter concerning the contract for the new equipment although we agree with the terms in general there are a few points we would like explained
2. Our new catalogue enclosed contains details of all our latest lines in particular you may be interested in the following the Newline desk the updated ergonomically designed Comfort swivel chair and the Locksafe filing system as a regular purchaser you could also save money with our valued customers discount
3. We have five different models each with its own special features and they all come in a choice of finishes so whatever your needs you will find one to suit you
4. The expansion of our business is a long term project and we need an efficient sympathetic management consultant to help us a recent report said any small business hoping to expand will find its chances of success greatly improved by the employment of a consultant to advise it we would I think be foolish to embark on this exercise without outside help
5. We are very concerned about your payment record your payments are invariably two months late at the moment we are awaiting payment of invoices 14325 16754 and 23156 all of which are well overdue