A QUICK GUIDE TO PUNCTUATION

The following brief overview to basic punctuation comes from Baden Eunson's (1994) book *Writing Skills.* For a more detailed reference we recommend the following.

Style Manual for Authors, Editors and Printers (6th ed) (2002) Canberra, AGPS

If you are interested in a humorous discussion of the problems with punctuation, try reading one of the following:

Truss, L. (2003) Eats, Shoots & Leaves: the zero tolerance approach to punctuation London, Profile Books

Walsh, B (2000) Lapsing into a Comma Chicago, Contemporary Books

PUNCTUATION

The various marks of punctuation are useful tools, but they are often misused.

· Full stop/period

The full stop is used to indicate the end of a sentence:

> I wrote the report.

A sentence can be defined in many ways, but a simple definition of a sentence is: 'a complete unit of thought, consisting of at least a subject and a predicate that are not introduced by a subordinating word. It must also contain a finite verb (a verb that has a subject)'.[22]

A sentence often also has an object:

I	wrote	the report.
subject	verb	object

A dependent clause also has a subject and a verb, but begins with a subordinating conjunction (*because, although, unless, if*, etc.):

> Because I wrote the document.

A dependent clause is thus not considered to be a sentence.

Problems arise when the full stop is used as end punctuation for *sentence fragments*:

> Wrote the document. (no subject)
> The document with the yellow cover. (no finite verb)
> Writing the document yesterday. (no subject, no finite verb)
> Because the document was written. (dependent clause)

, Comma

The main use of the comma is to separate two independent clauses that are linked with a coordinating conjunction. An independent clause is a group of words that could well stand as a sentence if the first word was capitalised, and coordinating conjunctions are simple words such as *and, but, for, yet, or, nor* and *so*. Thus an effective use of the comma would be:

> I wrote the document, but she didn't like it.

The main misuse of the comma occurs in the *run-on sentence*:

> I wrote the document, she didn't like it.

Here, there is no coordinating conjunction, and the construction is, as constructed, unacceptable. Note that independent clauses can also be linked by colons and semicolons.

Commas are also misused when certain types of phrases and clauses are punctuated. Consider, for example, these sentences:

> Colleges, responding to new government funding programs, are becoming more market-oriented.

> Colleges using this new database may have an advantage.

Both sentences feature phrases modifying or telling us about the same subject, *Colleges*. In the first sentence, the phrase *responding to new government funding programs* could be chopped out, and the sentence would still be meaningful and fairly specific:

> Colleges are becoming more market-oriented.

In the second sentence, the phrase *using this new database* cannot be removed as tidily. If removed, the sentence now reads:

> Colleges may have an advantage.

This is almost so general as to be meaningless.

Non-restrictive elements, such as non-restrictive phrases and clauses (for example, *responding to new government programs*), can be removed from a sentence without detracting too much from the basic meaning of the sentence. These elements are usually set apart with commas, although sometimes parentheses or dashes are used. Restrictive elements (for example, *using this new database*) cannot be removed without changing or destroying the meaning of the sentence, and should not be set off with punctuation such as commas.

: Colon

The main use of the colon is to introduce quotations, summaries or lists — for example:

> John Paul Getty once made this observation: 'If you can calculate how much you have, then you are not a billionaire.'

> We need to inventory the following items: printers, answering machines and mobile phones.

Colons can also be used to show a summarising or restating of words:

> She disliked the layout, the fonts, the paper type and the graphics: she was unhappy, in short, with the whole look of the document.

The colon is not often misused, but one example of its misuse is to place it where it is not needed — for example:

> The secretary typed: letters, memos and reports.

; Semicolon

Semicolons are used primarily to separate independent clauses in sentences. A writer may choose to totally separate independent clauses by regarding them each as sentences, with a full stop (and a capital letter) separating them. If the writer wishes to show a 'softer' separation, then the semicolon is ideal:

> They were surveying the valley floor; the others, however, were surveying the plateau.

One of the most common misuses of the semicolon is to use it as a colon:

> We need to inventory the following items; printers, answering machines, and mobile phones.

⌐'⌐ Apostrophe

The apostrophe is used to show abbreviation or contraction:

it's too expensive (it is . . .)

It is also used to show possession or ownership:

the computer's cable (singular possessive)

the three computers' cables (plural possessive)

Misuse occurs when singular and plural possessives are confused:

the computers' cable

the three computer's cables

Misuse also occurs with personal pronouns, such as *it*, *you*, *she*, and so on. These have their own possessive forms (*its*, *yours*, *her/hers*, etc.), and do not require an apostrophe. Thus, examples of such misuse would be:

The screen was remarkable for it's low-radiation properties.

It is mine, not your's.

⌐' '⌐ Quotation marks

Quotation marks (single or double) are used to set off direct speech:

Her actual words were that 'The board will increase funds by 8 per cent next year.'

If a quotation appears as four lines or less in your text, then simply incorporate it into your sentence, and lead into it:

The data reveal that 'There is an underlying variable at work which we have not yet been able to identify.' (Ryman, 1996: 45)

If the quotation is longer than four lines of your text, then lead into the quotation with a colon, leave two lines, indent at least ten spaces on a typewriter or word processor (or about 2 centimetres if you are writing by hand), and run the quotation as a block separate from your text. In this situation, quotation marks are unnecessary.

Quotation marks are also used to set off words that are being defined, or used in a special sense:

By 'outsourcing', I mean getting rid of specialised services from the core organisation, and then hiring such services back in from contractors as the need arises.

This process has been called 'verbing', but such is the controversy surrounding the process that it seems unlikely that the word will ever lose its quotation marks. This use of quotation marks cues the reader that it is an unusual usage.

Misuse occurs when a writer introduces a block of quoted text, but still places quotation marks around the text.

⌐( )⌐ Brackets

Brackets are used to set off interrupting material in your text:

The latest figures available (June, 1996) show a different trend, however.

Brackets are also used to set off numbers, such as

Section (3.A)

and

We need to discuss a number of things today: (1) software upgrades, (2) the re-wiring of the fourth floor computer room, and (3) next month's field survey.

The main misuse of brackets occurs when writers forget that brackets come in pairs, and only include one (usually the opening one) in their text.

| ! | **Exclamation mark**

An exclamation mark is used to show an emphatic declaration or a strong command:

> Nonsense! Jump out of the way!

Misuse occurs when writers overuse them. The power of the exclamation mark resides in its not being used too often.

| ? | **Question mark**

The question mark is used primarily to indicate a direct question:

> How can we expect these machines to function if they are not maintained?

The question mark is not often misused, but an example of misuse is when indirect speech is reported:

> He asked me if I had heard anything about the new grant allocations?

CAPITALISATION

Capital letters are used to begin a sentence. They should not be used for material that comes after a colon. Capitals are used for proper names and proper adjectives (Lake Erie, Shakespeare, Shakespearean), but not for common nouns or adjectives (lake, poet, poetic). Capitalisation practices vary greatly. At the very least, the first word of a heading should be a capital, and other words (except minor words like *a, the, to, from, of*, etc.) may take a capital. If you are not required to adhere to a particular style, adopt a certain style, but then stick to it. Note the remarks about traditional versus open punctuation (p. 65).

SPELLING

There is very little that can be said in a brief space about the rules of English spelling, except to point out that sometimes there are as many exceptions as there are rules.[23] There is no substitute for consulting the dictionary and, in the case of personal names and proprietary names, asking others. Many people will accept flawed data in a document, but they won't accept it if their name is misspelt.

Use computerised spelling checkers, but don't rely on them: current models of such software will only tell you if a word is spelled correctly; they will rarely tell you if the word is the correct one for the context. Similar caution should be exercised when using computerised grammar checkers: current versions will not help you identify all grammatical problems in your text and, apart from that, a fair amount of grammatical knowledge is needed to understand what a grammar checker is telling you.

In reading documents from different parts of the world and in writing for audiences in different parts of the world, you should be aware of the differences between British and American spellings (table 2.6). Historically, some of these differences arose because some American scholars decided to 'reform' some British spellings. Some so-called 'American' spellings (and phrases), however, did in fact emanate from the British Isles — it's just that the British people who took such language to America originally did not dwell in the most linguistically prestigious area — London and its environs.

In modern times, American spellings have been accepted widely around the globe, although the weight of British tradition ensures that British spellings are well entrenched in many countries.

Table 2.6: American and British spelling patterns

	British		American
-our	colour, labour	-or	color, labor
-ae, -oe	encyclopaedia, foetus	-e	encyclopedia, fetus
-que	cheque	-ck	check
-em	empanel	-im	impanel
-en	enquiry	-in	inquiry
-c	disc	-k	disk
-re	centre, metre	-er	center, meter
-e	acknowledgement	-e omitted	acknowledgment
-ll	travelled	-l	traveled
-ise[24]	organisation, realise	-ize	organization, realize
-xion	connexion, inflexion	-ction	connection, inflection
-s	maths	-	math
-mme	programme, kilogramme	-m	program, kilogram
-ogue	catalogue	-og	catalog
-au	gauge	-a	gage
-c	defence, licence (n.)	-s	defense, license (n.)
-ou	mould, smoulder	-o	mold, smolder

(Source: Eunson [1994c].)

Writing skills: overview

In this chapter, we have considered concepts such as: passive and active voice, nominalisations, 'verbings', abstract versus concrete phrasing, circumlocution, tautology, gender, pronoun reference, subject–verb agreement, use and misuse of modifiers, parallelism, punctuation and spelling.

Effective writers will deploy their knowledge of the principles of grammar, usage and mechanics to more effectively write and edit workplace documents. Note, for example, how some of these principles are summarised in the checklist approach given in figure 2.2.