

# PUNCTUATION

*A look at some common mistakes using punctuation in academic English*

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Punctuation is the use of small typographical symbols ( . , ; : ) to segment and conjoin textual items at the morphological, lexical, phrasal and clausal level. Grammar is enabled through good punctuation and punctuation is eased with correct grammar. Hence punctuation is an important part of writing, and teachers should be aware of the punctuation conventions in English so that they can teach these in class.

I will not try and reproduce all the rules of punctuation in this article. Trask (1997) has a very good website which demonstrates these rules. Instead, I will show the most common mistakes that students of English make with punctuation. I will list the five most egregious mistakes: the ones which interfere most with the reading process.

### 1. THE RUN-ON SENTENCE

In the 'run-on' sentence, students tend to use commas to separate independent clauses rather than full stops (periods). In the following example, at least one extra full stop should be inserted (possibly two). Can you say where would be best?

**INCORRECT:** At the beginning of the essay, the first t-unit talked about the main purpose of the essay which is ok, but the second t-unit then suddenly shifted the topic to people needing help and giving help, which in the first place readers would expect some general description of the content of the essay, but the topic shifting made it hard to establish the relevance of the utterances.

### 2. THE STRANDED SUBORDINATE CLAUSE

With the stranded subordinate clause, students end the subordinate clause with a full stop and then provide the main clause. The subordinate clause however should be attached to the main clause with a comma.

**INCORRECT:** Since the relative clauses follows the head noun in English. The Chinese learner of English will have problems learning them.

The problem with the incorrect punctuation above is that a reader reaches the full stop and wonders what the subordinate clause is attached to.

### 3. TOO MUCH WHITE SPACE

A few students don't understand that most punctuation marks should follow and be attached to the words they follow. There should be no space between the word and the punctuation mark. So for example:

**INCORRECT:** In this report , I am going to conduct a semantic analysis of an essay produced by a student of English . This report will focus on conversational implicatures and coherence . For conversational implicatures , I will analyse 'what is said' and 'what is mean' and how this affect the coherence of the article .

This may seem like a simple error but it is surprising how many students make this mistake. It suggests we need to take care with the formatting of the punctuation marks.

#### 4. INFORMAL PUNCTUATION: OVERUSE OF ??? AND !!!

In academic writing exclamation marks should be kept to a minimum. It is better to try and indicate surprise and intrigue through the language. So the use of three exclamation marks together to emphasise the surprise is a definite no-no. Reserve these for your text messages if you wish but not for academic writing.

**INCORRECT:** which also means that getting a heart from brain death patient is the only way to do this kind of operation. However the third reason is not an advantage of heart transplantation!!!

#### 5. WRONG USE OF SEMICOLON. MY ADVICE IS AVOID IT.

The semicolon is a simple punctuation mark to use but is often misunderstood. My advice is to avoid it altogether. You can almost always replace it with a full stop without changing the meaning. If you do use it, make sure you use it correctly. Can you say why the semicolon has been misused in the following example?

**INCORRECT:** Second is semantic consistency which has two dimensions, one is internal specificity which refers to the need for the receiver to understand the utterance of sender and disambiguate the meaning of the content; another one is external that means the content should be consistent with what has been previous stated in the text.

## SOURCES

Trask, L. (1997) Guide to Punctuation. University of Sussex.  
<http://www.sussex.ac.uk/informatics/punctuation/>