In speech we can use voice tone and pauses to create meaning and emphasis - in written language punctuation is used. In spoken language we tend to use long, rambling sentences, repetition, and general, non-specific words which are clear in a shared context - if your audience doesn't understand what you mean they can ask for an explanation. However, as you will probably not be present when your writing is read, accurate sentence structure and punctuation are essential to communicate your ideas effectively. This guide will cover the basics in sentence structure and punctuation.

The sentence

The sentence is a group of words, which makes sense on its own. Simple sentences consist of one main clause. All main clauses must include a verb, and a subject, but also may contain other components.

Below are examples of possible sentence structures, simple sentences (one main clause), compound sentences (more than one main clause) and complex sentences (at least one main clause and one subordinate clause).

**Simple sentences (one clause)**

A verb alone is the shortest sentence grammatically possible in English but usually only used in spoken language (the subject is 'you' - the listener).

- Sit!
- Help!

A subject and verb is the basis of most written sentences. The verb must agree with the subject in present tense (for example, ‘I am’, ‘you are’, ‘he is’).

- He waits.
- They know.
- They are leaving.

A subject, verb and object, or subject, verb, object and object. The object is the what or who the action verb is done to.

- I opened the window.
- He gave her the letter.
A subject and a complement. The complement includes a state verb, (not an action verb) and gives more information about the subject.

- He is a doctor.
- The music sounds wonderful.

A subject, verb and adverb or adverbial phrase. The adverbial phrase gives more information about the action verb.

- Jane worked swiftly.
- The doctor stayed in his office all day.

**Compound sentences**

Compound sentences are made up of two (or more) main clauses (each of which could be independent sentences), for example:

- Alex studies graphic design, and Simon studies architecture. (Could be: Alex studies graphic design. Simon studies architecture.)

**Complex sentences**

Complex sentences are made up of an independent clause joined by one or more dependent clauses. A complex sentence always has a subordinator such as ‘because’, ‘since’, ‘after’, ‘although’, or a relative pronoun such as ‘that’, ‘who’, or ‘which’, which indicates that that clause is subordinate to the main clause and cannot stand alone as a sentence.

- Although he was invited to the meeting, he was unable to attend.
- The researcher had a lab assistant, who had worked in a similar role before.

Some sentences can be a combination of compound and complex, for example:

- The package arrived in the morning, but the courier left before I could check the contents.

**Full stops (.), question marks (?) and exclamation marks (!)**

These three punctuation marks indicate sentence endings.

The full stop is used to indicate the end of declarative sentences (statements).

- Jane went to the market.
The question mark (?) is used to indicate a direct question when placed at the end of a sentence.

- When did Jane leave for the market?

The exclamation point/mark (!) is used when a person wants to express a sudden outcry or add emphasis.

- My mother-in-law's rants make me furious!

Question marks and exclamation marks are not commonly used in academic writing because generally it is considered inappropriate to ask your reader (for example, your assessor) direct questions, or to use exclamation marks which indicate heightened emotion.

**Commas (,), semicolons (;) and colons (:)**

These are used to indicate a separation of ideas or elements within the structure of a sentence, or the separation of complete clauses. They occur where pauses would occur in spoken language.

Commas are very commonly used, for example to present items in a list. For example:

- I would like you to watch the video, take notes, copy diagrams, make sketches and be prepared to answer questions on the content.
- Suzi bought the white, cream and blue shirts.

To separate main clauses, or main and subordinate clauses, for example:

- First we went to the movies, and then we went to the beach.
- Although suitable protective clothing was available, most of the operatives were not wearing it.
- After the main points had been presented, the students were asked for their comments.

Pairs of commas can be used to cordon off information that is an addition, and not essential. The reader can 'leap-frog' the commas and the sentence will still make sense.

- The President of the Speleological Society, Jim Brown, gave an interesting talk on 'Caves under the Mendip Hills'.
- The College, which is situated in the centre of Canterbury, has an excellent reputation.
Semicolons are used to connect independent main clauses, so never use them if you are not able to use a full stop in the same position. However, they indicate a closer relationship between the clauses than a full stop does. For example:

- John was hurt; he knew she only said it to upset him.
- Thank you for your letter dated 06.06.2011; we apologise for the delay in replying.
- Students should try to keep track of their thinking throughout the project by using a research or design journal; these are useful tools.

Semi-colons can also be used to separate items in a list (like commas).

- In the library, there were some students researching their latest project; one or two tutors checking the availability of books for the next project; and a librarian restocking the shelves.

 Sometimes semi-colons can be followed by conjunctions.

- The students were not entirely sure that their solution to the question posed was going to work; nevertheless, they decided to give it a try.
- Darkness came down on the field and city; and Amelia was praying for George, who was lying on his face, dead, with a bullet through his heart.

A colon (:) is usually used after a word introducing a quotation:

- Berger (1972:54) claims:

  “In the average European oil painting of the nude the principal protagonist is never painted. He is the spectator in front of the picture and he is presumed to be a man. Everything is addressed to him.”

Colons can also be used to introduce a list:

- An essay usually includes the following components: an introduction, a main body of text and a conclusion.

Or they can be used to introduce an explanation or example:

- The results of the student survey were clear: there was a need for a change in policy.
**Dashes (–) and hyphens (–)**

The dash can be used to connect continuing or inclusive numbers or to connect elements of a compound adjective when either of the elements is an open compound, such as ‘1880 – 1945’, or ‘Princeton - New York trains’.

Sometimes, in informal writing, dashes are used to indicate a break in thought or to introduce an aside, similar to pairs of commas. In formal writing these uses tend to be replaced with commas or semicolons.

▶ I pay the bills - she spends all the money.
▶ Visitors may stay overnight - or longer - in the hostel nearby.

A hyphen (–) is used between the parts of a compound word or name or between the syllables of a word, especially when divided at the end of a line of text.

▶ Between a compound name: ‘Mrs Creely-Reynolds’
▶ Within a compound word: ‘up-to-date’, ‘well-known’, ‘reddish-brown’.
▶ Between syllables of a word when text is divided between lines:

  ‘The thought-
-ful girl brought soup to her ailing neighbour.’

**Brackets () {} []**

Brackets are symbols used to contain words that are a further explanation. However, they can be replaced by commas without changing the meaning in most cases. For example:

▶ John and Jane (who were actually half brother and sister) both have red hair.

In academic writing, brackets are most commonly used for referencing, for example:

▶ Smith (1997:64) argues that...

  “The medium is the message” (Macluhan, 2001)
**Apostrophes (‘)***

An apostrophe (‘) is used to indicate the omission of a letter or letters from a word or the possessive.

Omission of letters from a word is generally to be avoided in formal academic writing:

- It's late. (In formal writing this should be 'It is late').
- Don't tell her! (In formal writing this should be 'Do not tell her').

**Possessive:**

- Jon's work is excellent.
- Today's news is devastating.

If the 'possessor' is plural the apostrophe goes after the 's', for example:

- The student's work is excellent. (One student - not plural).
- The students' work is excellent. (More than one student - plural).

If the 'possessor' ends in an 's' the apostrophe generally goes after the 's', for example:

- Mr Jones' computer has been stolen.

**Quotation Marks (‘...’) and Speech Marks ("...")***

Quotations marks are used primarily to mark the beginning and end of text attributed to another and repeated word for word.

- ‘Seeing comes before words’ (Berger, 1972:7)

However, they can also be used to indicate the unusual or dubious status of a word.

- It has been argued that animation is a 'completely fake' medium, because...
- The so-called 'pornographic' images were censored.

Speech marks are generally used to indicate dialogue.

- "Are you going to Anna's party tonight?" asked Chris.
- "No way, not after the stuff she said about me!" retorted Meg.
However, they can be used in the place of quotation marks in academic writing, although increasingly single quotation marks are more usual.

**Ellipses**

The ellipsis is generally represented by three periods (...) which are used in writing or printing to indicate an omission.

Ellipses are frequently used within quotations to jump from one phrase to another, omitting unnecessary words that do not interfere with the meaning. Students writing research papers or newspapers quoting parts of speeches will often employ ellipses to avoid copying lengthy text that is not needed. For example:

- “Another institutional difference between film and literature is to which texts are censored. Films tend, in the west, to be much more heavily censored than literature; while the former uses icons, the latter uses symbols. One effect of that is that graphic detail can be shown more powerfully using images.’ (Lacey, 2000:196)

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