THE COMMA

Here are some of the most basic ways in which you might choose to use a comma.

- To show that one part of a sentence is separate to another:

  When you have finished your dinner, put your plate in the dishwasher.

  If you like, you can come to the party with me.

If you are adding extra information in the middle of a sentence, then you use a comma to separate this from the main part of the sentence. You should only do this, however, if the extra information could be removed without substantially changing the meaning of the sentence.

The Junior Cert students, who had been working hard since September, were delighted to be finished their exams.

- If the extra information could not be left out without changing the meaning of the sentence, then you should not use commas:

  The students who have worked very hard this week will not be given homework for the weekend.

The sentence shown above says that *only* the students who have worked hard will not be given homework for the weekend. If you put the extra information in commas, then the sentence would mean that *all* students will not be given homework for the weekend. See below:

The students, who have worked very hard this week, will not be given homework for the weekend.

- When writing a list:

  I am studying Irish, English, French, Geography, History, Chemistry and Biology.

  You do not need to put a comma before the 'and' in a list.

- When addressing a person by name:

  Eoghan, may I borrow your calculator?

  I like your new coat, Aisling.

Note. A comma is not as strong as a full stop and should not be used to separate two parts of a sentence which would both make sense when used on their own. In that case, a semi-colon or a full stop should be used. Short, clear sentences are far better than long, poorly-constructed sentences. A good exercise in punctuation is to ask someone to read your work aloud. Listen carefully. You may be surprised to hear the difference in meaning between what you intended to say and what you hear.

THE SEMICOLON

A semicolon looks like a comma with a dot above it. It is used when both parts of a sentence could stand on their own but, if they were written as separate sentences, the effect might be a bit abrupt. The semi-colon is best used when the two parts of the sentence are closely linked and support one another. A semi-colon can replace a conjunction (joining word) such as 'and', along with a comma.

It was very late. We were utterly exhausted. (Full stop used)

It was very late; we were utterly exhausted. (Semi-colon used)

It was very late, and we were utterly exhausted. (Comma and conjunction used)

If you are writing a list and some of the items in the list contain a comma already, then you can use a semi-colon to separate the items.

I have a dog; a huge, fat cat; a goldfish; three brown, hairy guinea pigs and a rabbit.

FULL STOPS, QUESTION MARKS AND EXCLAMATION MARKS

Full stops are used to end sentences. They are also used instead of exclamation marks when you are giving an order which contains no sense of urgency.

I am finally finished my homework.

Please hand up your homework at the end of the class.

When you are giving a command or expressing strong emotion, you may wish to use an exclamation mark. There is never a good reason to use two exclamation marks, one after the other. Using more than one exclamation mark simply makes the writer sound hysterical and rather foolish. Exclamation marks should be used sparingly– if at all – in serious writing. You should never use a question mark and an exclamation mark together. Here are some examples of the correct use of exclamation marks:

Get out immediately!

Help!

How dreadful!

Question marks should be used at the end of a direct question:

Where is Conor?

Who broke my favourite mug?

What is wrong with Aisling?

When are we going to the cinema?

You should not use a question mark at the end of an indirect question. Indirect questions are statements, so they end with a full stop.

She wondered if I was always late for class.

Siún asked what I wanted for dinner.

The teacher asked who was staying in for extra study.

THE APOSTROPHE

This is the source of the most common errors in writing. The basic rule is, if in doubt, leave it out. If you do use an apostrophe, be sure you know **why** you are using it.

Apostrophes are mainly used to indicate possession (ownership of something) and omission (leaving something out).

The most common misuse of apostrophes is in the formation of plurals. The worst offenders seem to be dates and acronyms. See below for examples of correct usage:

Most of the students in my school were born in the 1990s.

I bought five CDs on Saturday.

Eoghan buys all his DVDs on the internet.

Possession

Note: There is an easy way to get this right 99% of the time.

1. Who or what is the possessor?
2. Put an apostrophe *directly* after that noun

Where would you put the apostrophe in this sentence?

The teacher corrected Aislings homework.

Who owns the homework? Aisling owns the homework. Put the apostrophe directly after the word *Aisling*.

The teacher corrected Aisling's homework.

Where would you put the apostrophe in this sentence?

The teacher corrected the childrens homework.

Who owns the homework? The children own the homework. Put the apostrophe directly after the word *children*.

The teacher corrected the children's homework.

When a noun is singular, then you use an apostrophe and *'s* to indicate possession.

the boy's book

the dog's bone

Aisling's garden

Siún's toy

nobody's problem

If a singular noun already ends in *s*, then you have a choice between adding 's to the word or simply putting an apostrophe after the final *s*. Usually people decide based on how the word would sound if it were read aloud. All of the examples below are correct, but some sound better than others. Read them aloud and see for yourself.

Lucas's book

Lucas' book

Mr Jones's house

Mr Jones' house

Francis's dog

Francis' dog

If the singular noun ends in *ss* or *x*, like boss or fox, then you add *'s* to show possession.

The fox's tail

The boss's mistake

When a word changes form in the plural, then you simply add *'s* to the plural form

For example, *child* becomes *children* in the plural, so you would say 'The children's teacher praised their work.'

The men's coats

The women's coats

In the case of joint possession, you add *'s* to the final possessor

Eoghan, Breffni and Aisling's house

Conor and Killian's bedrooms

Romeo and Juliet's marriage

Omission

Apostrophes can be used in place of missing letters in contractions (shortened words).

I'm = I am

We're = We are

The two most common misuses of apostrophes of omission are outlined below:

1. It's = It is. If you are not sure which to use, imagine that you are saying 'It is'. Would what you have written make sense in that case?

'The dog ate it's bone.' Wrong. Would you write, 'The dog ate it is bone'?

'The dog ate its bone.'

Right. 'Its' in this case is a possessive pronoun. See the list of possessive pronouns below:

My

Your

His

Her

Its

Our

Your

Their

None of these pronouns takes an apostrophe.

2. *'Would've', 'Should've' etc.*

The problem here is not so much the omission as the recreation of what some students believe to be the original. The fault lies in the way we pronounce things. The contraction 've' sounds like 'of' when spoken aloud.

*'Would've' = 'Would have', **not** 'Would of'.*

*'Should've' = 'Should have', **not** 'Should of'.*

*'Might've' = Might have, **not** 'Might of'.*

Here is a general rule: there is no construction in English in which 'should', 'would', 'might' or 'could' are followed with 'of'.

QUOTATION MARKS

Quotation marks (also called inverted commas or speech marks) are used to indicate the opening and closing of direct speech.

'I will see you after class,' said the teacher.

When you are writing direct speech (dialogue), you should start a new paragraph whenever you change speaker. Look at the following example from Mildred Taylor's *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*:

But I remained silent. I never did approve of group responses. Adjusting my head in my hand, I sighed heavily, my mind on the burning of the Berrys.

'Cassie Logan?'

I looked up, startled.

'Yes, ma'am?' I jumped up quickly to face Miss Crocker.

'Aren't you willing to work and share?'

'Yes'm.'

'Then say so!'

'Yes,'m,' I murmured, sliding back into my seat as Mary Lou, Gracey, and Alma giggled. Here it was only five minutes into the new school year and already I was in trouble.

Quotation marks are also used to indicate the title of novels, films, poems etc. (When titles are typed, they are usually indicated by italics, but this is not an option when the titles are hand-written.)

The novel I am studying this year is 'Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry' by Mildred Taylor.

My favourite poem is 'Base Details' by Siegfried Sassoon.

COMMONLY MISSPELLED WORDS

Address

Hint: Double *d* and double *s*.

Affect

This is a verb.

The subject choices you make now will affect your future.

Apparent

This word ends in *-ent.*

A lot.

Two words. You do not write 'atable', 'achair' or 'adog', so why write 'alot'? There is no such word.

Argument

There is no 'e' before the final 'ment'.

As well.

As with 'a lot', there is no such word as 'aswell' or 'aswel'.

Deceive

Remember the general rule: 'i' before 'e' except after 'c'.

Definite

This is one of the most commonly misspelled words. Remember this: there is no 'a' in 'definite'. The word is related to the word 'finite' in maths.

Definitely

See above, but add 'ly'.

Effect

This is a noun. Think of *the* ending in *e*, and *effec*t beginning with e. If you could put *the* before it, then it's *effec*t.

I noticed the effect the teacher's words had on the class.

I tried my best, but to no effect.

This story had a powerful effect on me.

Grateful
Think of 'grate', not 'great'.

Independent

Remember, this word ends in 'ent', not 'ant'.

necessary
Remember: one *c* and a double *s*.

Practice

The noun is spelled with a final 'ice', like the word 'ice, which is a noun.

The verb is spelled with a final 'ise'.

I am going to be late for piano practice.

I practise the piano every day.

Questionnaire
Remember: double 'n', plus 'aire'.

Really
Remember that **really** is spelled with a double **l**.

Rhythm
Remember: 'rhy' at the start.

Separate

This word is separated by 'par' in the middle.

Truly

Drop the final 'e' in the word 'true', and add 'ly'.

Unfortunately

The ending of this word is 'ately'.

Villain

The ending of this word is 'ain'.

Weird
Weirdly, this word does not follow the '*i* before *e* except after *c*' rule.

Who's

This is a contraction of *who is.* If you are not sure when to use *who's*, replace it with *who is* and see if your sentence makes sense.

Who's coming to the party on Saturday night?

Who is coming to the party on Saturday night?

She doesn't know who's coming to the party on Saturday night.

She doesn't know who is coming to the party on Saturday night.

It should not be confused with 'whose'. (See below.)

Whose

This is the possessive form of *who* or *which*.

Whose book is this?

She doesn't know whose book it is.

The letter whose subject was unclear was not published in the newspaper.