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COMMAS

Commas are widely misunderstood, and generally underused by those writing in an academic context. Common misconceptions are that they should be used “when you take a breath” and that they “shouldn’t be used before *and...*”. You should use commas to separate different pieces of information within a sentence. Here’s an example:

There is widespread misunderstanding regarding use of commas and apostrophes, and both are important to ensure clarity in writing.

You’ll see that the comma in the above sentence is used before *and* to separate two distinct pieces of information.

APOSTROPHES

These can be pesky little blighters that can cause all manner of confusion, but they’re essential to clarify meaning. Hopefully the examples below will help you get to grips with them.

The chair’s leg is broken.

Chair’s – this is a possessive: it is the leg of the chair.

Chairs’ legs are often broken.

Chairs’ – again a possessive, but this refers to the legs of multiple chairs; **legs** does not have an apostrophe as this is simply the plural of **leg**.

The chair’s got a broken leg.

Chair’s – this is **chair has**, different from the possessive **chair’s** above.

The chair’s broken.

Chair’s – the **chair is** broken.

Someone should really mend these chairs...

No apostrophe for **chairs** here, as this is simply the plural of **chair**.

The kids’ bedroom is untidy.

Kids’ – this is the bedroom of more than one kid.

The kid’s bedroom is untidy.

One lazy kid who can’t tidy a room.

The children’s playground...

Children’s – apostrophe-s here, as **children** is already a plural. Similarly, **the people’s champion**.

There can be confusion over whether to put an apostrophe before or after the s regarding names, etc.

Officially, if there’s an s then the apostrophe goes after, but there’s also a school of thought that this only applies if the s actually has a z sound:

James’ coat was wet.

James ends in a z sound.

Thomas’s coat was wet.

Thomas ends in an s sound.

However, if you’re referring to a brand or company that has an apostrophe, then you have to keep it:

McDonald’s’ burgers are very popular. Similarly, ***M&M’s’ market share...***

Punctuation Basics

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ITS, IT'S and ITS'

OK, the easy one first: **its'** does not exist. Never has, never will. So, that established...

It's is *only ever it is* or **it has**.

The chair's broken: it's one of the legs.

Here we've got **chair's** for **chair is**, then **it's** because we're saying **it is** one of the legs. The colon separates the statement from the reason (more on that later).

The chair's wobbly; I think its leg is broken.

Chair's here shortens **chair is**, but there's no apostrophe for **its**, because we're not saying **it is** or **it has**. There's a semi-colon for the run-on sentence.

If unsure just ask yourself whether you're saying **it is** or **it has**. If not, then **its**.

COLONS AND SEMI-COLONS

Use a colon to indicate a list, reason or example to follow:

There are three primary colours: red, yellow, blue.

Unattended belongings will be removed after 30 minutes: this is a security issue.

Also use semi-colons to separate several longer clauses after a colon:

Today the student asked me about punctuation, and we covered several points in depth: the correct way to use an apostrophe in several contexts; use of a semi-colon in run-on sentences and to separate clauses; the difference between hyphens and dashes.

Also use a semi-colon with a run-on sentence:

Library attendants regularly patrol the building; unattended belongings will be removed after 30 minutes.

HYPHENS AND DASHES

Use hyphens to join related words:

Peer-to-peer sharing... / One-to-one tutorials... / This is a long-term trend.

However, examples like the latter can be context-specific, so:

The trend is evident over the long term.

Dashes can be used to indicate text that deviates from the main point:

Apostrophe use needed some explaining – so many variations! – but we got there in the end.

But use brackets for supporting information:

The Cold War (1947-1991) was a state of geopolitical tension between the Soviet Union with its satellite states, and the United States with its allies following World War II.