

Common Punctuation Mistakes

Academic writing requires the use of correct punctuation, as incorrect punctuation can negatively impact the readability or clarity of your text. This handout introduces you to some of the most common punctuation mistakes found in students' writing, and provides you with basic usage rules for two important punctuation marks: comma (,) and semicolon (;).

Sentence Fragments

These are incomplete sentences that are missing a main subject, a main verb (i.e., a tensed verb – this does not include infinitives and gerunds), or both:

X To combat the harsh weather conditions.

X With density being a crucial factor in the analysis.

Sentence fragments include incomplete dependent clauses (i.e. subordinate sentences that need a main clause to make sense):

X Although it can also increase the permeability of the membrane.

X Which can cause complications.

Commas (,)

Many people are unsure of how to use commas. The table below summarises some of the most common uses of commas in academic writing.

Table 1
Use of Commas

Commas to divide items in a list	Their essays focused on healthcare, therapy, and rehabilitation.
Commas after introductory phrases/sentences	Due to inconclusive results, it is necessary to repeat the study. Having considered the need to drink enough water, we must also consider the negative effects of drinking too much water.
Commas in complex sentences	Carl Jung, who was originally seen as a protégé by Freud, is known for his work on archetypes and how they influence human behaviour. English is what is known as a dense language, where meaning is often conveyed in fewer words than in a Latin-based language.

Misused commas can confuse the reader, cause a sentence to be meaningless, or change the meaning of the sentence to something which you do not intend to say. Some of the most frequent mistakes are listed below.

- Missing commas

X If the water boils the specimen will be ruined.

✓ If the water boils, the specimen will be ruined.

X Water quality in one lake affects the whole system as all lakes are connected by aquifers.

✓ Water quality in one lake affects the whole system, as all lakes are connected by aquifers.

X This depends on the harvest time which can vary based on the type of crops.

✓ This depends on the harvest time, which can vary based on the type of crops.

- Unnecessary commas

✗The specimen will be ruined, if the water boils.

✓The specimen will be ruined if the water boils.

✗This research was conducted, to contribute to the ongoing debate on AI.

✓This research was conducted to contribute to the ongoing debate on AI.

- Comma splice (i.e. when a comma is used to join two independent sentences)

✗We analysed the data, the results were inconclusive.

✓We analysed the data, but the results were inconclusive. / We analysed the data; the results were inconclusive. / We analysed the data. The results were inconclusive.

Semicolons (;)

The semicolon can also cause confusion among writers. Table 2 summarises common uses of semicolons in academic writing.

Table 2
Use of Semicolons

Semicolons to divide items in a complex list	The participants were asked, for example, when they acquired their second language ; if they use both languages regularly ; and how they self-rate their level of proficiency in reading, listening, writing, and speaking.
Semicolons to join independent sentences that are related to each other	Sensory inputs merely modulate that experiment; they do not directly cause it.
In elliptical constructions	In 1992, Starbucks had fewer than 200 stores; in 2002, almost 20,000.

Common misuses of semicolons include:

- Semicolon in place of a comma

✗The paper discusses efficiency in greenhouse automation; while also highlighting areas for future exploration and refinement.

- Semicolon in place of colon (:))

✗The studies took place in the following animals; mice, cats, fruit flies, and alligators.

Resources:

Wallwork, A. (2023). *English for academic research: grammar, usage and style*. Springer.