

# A QUICK GUIDE TO SOME COMMON PUNCTUATION ERRORS

The commonest punctuation errors are bad use of the apostrophe (’), the semi-colon (;) and the colon (:). Here are some quick and easy rules to help bring you up to speed.

## Apostrophe

There are 2 main uses of the apostrophe: to indicate missing letters and to indicate possession (i.e. ‘belonging to’ or ‘of’ someone or something). **The missing letter rule takes priority.**

Examples of missing letters:

can’t for *cannot*, didn’t for *did not*, don’t for *do not*, doesn’t for *does not*, shouldn’t for *should not*, wouldn’t for *would not* etc.

*Won’t* also has an apostrophe when it stands for *will not*, even though *will* has changed to *wo*. *Shan’t* has one as well, even though technically it should have two, for the missing *ll* and *o* in two separate places (we just don’t write *sha’n’t*).

The apostrophe is **not** used to make plurals: so *1970s* not *1970’s* is modern usage. *Photo’s* is interesting as you can argue the apostrophe is standing for the missing letters *graph* of *photographs*, but modern usage tends to just use *photos*. Writing *banana’s* when you mean *bananas* (plural) is just wrong.

Examples of possession:

**First of all, forget anything anyone has told you about adding s’ (s apostrophe) as it is just confusing. 3 simple steps do it all.**

- 1. Put the word into singular or plural as the very first step:** e.g. boy, boys, accountant, accountants, child, children, woman, women, princess, princesses, James, Jameses (i.e. a family you call the Jameses).
- 2. Add ’s in each and every case.**
- 3. If it then sounds ugly, drop the s but keep the apostrophe in place.**

Thus:

the boy’s books (one boy), the boys’ books (more than one boy – *boys’s* would sound ugly),

the accountant’s fees (one accountant), the accountants’ fees (more than one accountant – *accountants’s* would sound ugly)

the child’s toys, the children’s toys (not *childrens’* ....)

the woman’s shoes, the women’s shoes (not *womens’* ....)

the princess’s jewels, the princesses’s jewels – but this last one sounds ugly **so drop the last s** and make it the princesses’ jewels

James’s house, the Jameses’s house – but this last one sounds ugly **so drop the last s** and make it the Jameses’ house.

Remember that the missing letter usage takes priority, so where there is a conflict, use the apostrophe for missing letters and forget about it when it could be used for possession but would look the same as the missing letter version.

Therefore **it’s** stands for **it is and nothing else!** While it could mean *of it*, the missing letter rule has priority and so we don’t use the apostrophe in *its* (meaning *of it*) to avoid them looking the same. An easy way to remember this is that we don’t use an apostrophe in *his*, *ours*, *theirs*, *yours*, because if we did, it would mean *of hi*, *of our* (when it should be *of us*), *of their* (when it should be *of them*), *of your* (when it should be *of you*). *Hers* is a case where you could argue it would correctly mean *of her*, but that’s just one of those things!

The main point is to remember that the missing letter rule has priority on the apostrophe, and treat *its* (meaning *of it*) like *his* meaning *of him*.

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## The semi-colon

The semi-colon also has 2 uses, but there's no priority as there is no conflict.

One use is to separate long phrases in a list, especially where commas might result in phrases using *and* being misinterpreted.

Example:

*This is what I look for in staff: a proper sense of punctuality; a commitment to our ideals; recognition of other people's time and efforts; and above all, courtesy towards our customers.*

The semi-colons prevent us thinking that what is required is *recognition of ... courtesy towards our customers*, when what is wanted is the courtesy itself.

The other use is to balance parts of a sentence as in *To err is human; to forgive divine*, although a comma would do here as well. In most cases, it is best to have a main verb either side of a semi-colon (a main verb being something like 'he did', 'I want') and for the parts separated by the semi-colons to be on the same subject matter and therefore connected in thought.

Examples:

*I have been to that town many times before; its streets are often in my thoughts.*

*We often wondered what became of him; his disappearance was utterly inexplicable at the time; despite what you have said, it is hardly any clearer now.*

To be frank, you can live without semi-colons and the main thing is to avoid misuse as in the following, which is just wrong:

*There was no time to think about the consequences before we had to leave; our home for the last ten years.*

## The colon

The colon also has 3 main uses, but there's no priority as there is no conflict.

One is to introduce a list of items. *My needs are: health, wealth, a good woman, and a new pair of shoes.*

The longer the list (which can be a series of bullet points), the greater the need to use the colon to introduce it. In this usage the colon essentially substitutes for the words *namely* or *that is to say*.

Another use can be to introduce speech, especially if it is a long speech. *The Prime Minister said: 'And here I bring to your attention the detailed speech I made last week, which explained that..blah, blah...'*

Another use is to introduce examples, especially before an *i.e.* or an *e.g.* explanation: *e.g. this very sentence is itself an example of the usage.* What follows a colon is therefore often a more detailed explanation of what is written before it.

## 3 bonus points!

*Practice* and *practise* are noun and verb respectively – easy to remember because the difference is just like *advice* (noun) and *advise* (verb): *ice* is what's done; *ise* is to do it.

When typing text it is not these days usual to leave two spaces before the start of a sentence. You don't see it in books, so one space will do.

With speech marks, the *he said* bit normally has a comma after it and before the opening speech marks, and the final punctuation goes **inside** the closing speech marks. The words said still start with a capital letter, because they are the start of the spoken sentence.

*He said, 'That's no good to me.' "That's no good to me either," she said. He replied, "Is there time?"*

The only time final punctuation goes outside the speech marks is if a quote or title is being talked about as in: *Of course Bogart never actually uttered the words "Play it again Sam". I loved "The Wind in the Willows".*

