PUNCTUATION RULES
What is a sentence?

A sentence is a group of words which makes sense on its own.

Sentences need at least a subject and a verb: the subject is the person or thing doing the action in the verb.

Sentence examples:

- Jim sneezed.
- The cat purred.
- The old man spoke.
- Jane looked around.
- A young dog barked loudly.
- Where is Dad going?
- Do you like sweets?
- I hate and detest mushrooms!

Full-stops, questions marks and exclamation marks

All of these end a sentence.

Full-stops end sentences called statements.

Question marks end sentences which are questions.

There are two ways of forming a question:

1. By starting the sentence with a question word (who, where, why, how, when, what, which)
   e.g.
   - Where are you going?
   - When will Mum arrive?

2. By changing the order of words in a sentence
   e.g.
   Statement sentence: You are old.
   Question sentence: Are you old?

Exclamation marks end sentences which are commands, show strong feelings or are jokes.

Examples of command sentences:
- Attention!
- Stop right there!
- Sit!

Examples of strong feelings:
- I’m scared!
- What a wonderful day!

Examples of jokes:
- What do you call a girl with a frog on her head? Lily!
- When is a door not a door? When it is ajar!

Capital letters

Capital letters have two jobs.
1. They are used to show the start of a sentence.

2. They are used at the beginning of important words:
   a. They are used to show the beginning of a proper noun

Examples of proper nouns:
- Betty
- Paris
- Spain
- New York
- Howe Lane
- Marks and Spencer
- River Thames

b. They are used to show the beginning of proper adjectives
   e.g. French, English, German

c. They are used to show the main words in the titles of books, films, TV programmes etc.
   e.g. Peter Pan; The Wind in the Willows; The Wizard of Oz; Eastenders

**Apostrophes for short forms**

One use of an apostrophe is to show where a letter (or letters) has been missed out when two words have been shortened into one word

Examples of one letter being missed out:
- Do not = don’t (o left out)
- It is = it’s (i left out)

Examples of more than one letter being missed out:
- We will = we’ll (wi left out)
- They have = they’ve (ha left out)
- She would = she’d (woul left out)

**Be careful about possible confusions!**

It’s is the short form for it is or it has

- e.g. It’s your birthday.
- It’s been a lovely day.

Its means belonging to it

- e.g. That house lost its chimney in the storm.
- My bike had its tyres replaced last week.

We’re is the short form for we are

- e.g. We’re late.

Were is the past tense of the verb to be

- e.g. We were late.
Commas in a list

We put commas in a list to replace all of the ands except the last one.  
Each item on a list might be one word or a longer phrase.

Examples:
1. We bought sugar and eggs and flour and butter  
   We bought sugar, eggs, flour and butter.
2. He packed his shorts and a swimming costume and a towel and his goggles.  
   He packed his shorts, a swimming costume, a towel and his goggles.
3. We ordered a large pizza for two and a couple of Cokes and some garlic bread and a dish of olives.  
   We ordered a large pizza for two, a couple of Cokes, some garlic bread and a dish of olives.

Commas for ‘extra bits’

We use a comma (or a pair of commas) to mark off where an ‘extra bit’ has been added to a sentence.

[An ‘extra bit’ is a simple way of saying a subordinate clause or an adverbial phrase.]

The ‘extra bit’ of a sentence does NOT make sense on its own.

Adding an ‘extra bit’ to the beginning of a sentence
You MUST put a comma after it.

Examples:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sentence</th>
<th>Sentence with ‘extra bit’ at the beginning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jack sneezed.</td>
<td>When the dog came in, Jack sneezed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bill kicked the door.</td>
<td>Because he was angry, Bill kicked the door.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>They got married.</td>
<td>Two years later, they got married.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Adding an ‘extra bit’ to the end of a sentence
You CAN put a comma before it.

Examples:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sentence</th>
<th>Sentence with ‘extra bit’ at the end</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sally fainted.</td>
<td>Sally fainted, because she was ill.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The cat climbed a tree.</td>
<td>The cat climbed a tree when it saw the dog.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We must go out.</td>
<td>We must go out even though it is snowing.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Adding an ‘extra bit’ the middle of a sentence
You MUST put a comma before and a comma after it.

Examples:

**Sentence**
Jim started to laugh.

**Sentence with ‘extra bit’ in the middle**
Jim, who always saw the funny side of things, started to laugh.

A car raced towards him.

A car, which Jim did not notice at first, raced towards him.

Most people like you.

Most people, even those who have only met you once or twice, like you.

**Commas to mark off a name (or its equivalent)**

If you are speaking to someone and use their name, you should mark it off from the rest of the sentence with a comma or commas.

**e.g.**
Look at the picture, Jenny.
Mr Jones, please come with me.
Come here, Millie, and show me what you’ve written.

This also applies to other words which stand in for names.

**e.g.**
Comrades, listen to me!
Look at the board, children.
Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to this great event.
We are so glad to see you all, both family and friends, and we thank you for joining us today.

**Possessive apostrophes**

Apostrophes are used to show that one noun owns the next noun.

If the owning noun does NOT already end in -s, we add ‘s to it.

**Examples:**

Bill owns the dog = Bill’s dog
My mum owns the car = My mum’s car
The old man owns the hat = The old man’s hat
A dog owns a fluffy tail = A dog’s fluffy tail
The children own their faces = The children’s faces

If the owning noun DOES already end in -s, we add ‘ to it.

**Examples:**

The cats own their tails = the cats’ tails
Some babies own their faces = some babies’ faces
The cars own their windscreens = the cars’ windscreens
Speechmarks and other linked punctuation

Speechmarks go before and after the actual words spoken
(and notice that the second of the pair of speechmarks goes AFTER the other punctuation mark)

e.g.  “Hello,” said Bill.
       “I think,” said Jim, “that we should go to the park.”

The first word spoken in a speech sentence always has a capital letter
(even if it comes in the middle of a sentence)

e.g.  “Come in,” said Bill.
       Jim said, “Come in.”

BE CAREFUL: the word after the second of the pair of speechmarks does NOT have
a capital letter, unless it is a proper noun.

e.g.  “Come in,” said Bill.
       “Come in,” Bill said.

There is always a punctuation mark after the speech, before the second of the pair
of speechmarks

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>e.g.</th>
<th>Notice that the choice in the middle of a sentence is: ,  ?  !</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Hello,” said Bill.</td>
<td>“Hello?” said Bill.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Hello!” said Bill.</td>
<td>Jim said, “Hello.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Jim said, “Hello?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Jim said, “Hello!”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

If the ‘he said’ phrase comes at the beginning of the sentence, it can be followed
by a comma or a colon.

e.g.  Mum said, “Come in.”
       The policeman said: “We have made an arrest.”

If the speaker continues to speak in the same paragraph, the punctuation is more
complicated

e.g.  “Hello,” said Bill. “Are you coming in?”

Bill has said two sentences. There is a full-stop before the second sentence which
begins with a capital letter.

e.g.  “While you were away,” said Jim, “we kept an eye on your house.”

Jim has said one sentence, which is interrupted by the ‘said Jim’ phrase.
There is a comma after ‘said Jim’ followed by a small letter.
**Paragraphing direct speech**

New speaker = new paragraph (NOT a new line)

e.g. **new paragraph shown by leaving an empty line**

“Hello,” said Mary.

“Hi,” replied Jane.

e.g. **new paragraph shown by indenting (new line + gap at the beginning)**

“Hello,” said Mary.

“Hi,” replied Jane.

More examples:

**New paragraph shown by leaving an empty line**

“I can’t understand,” said Mary, “why on earth you let your little sister be such a pain all the time.”

“I can’t do anything about it,” sighed Jane. “If I have a go at her, my parents just yell at me!”

**New paragraph shown by indenting (new line + gap at the beginning)**

“I can’t understand,” said Mary, “why on earth you let your little sister be such a pain all the time.”

“I can’t do anything about it,” sighed Jane. “If I have a go at her, my parents yell at me!”

Choose one way of showing new paragraphs and stick to it!

REMEMBER: paragraphs are the same for all reasons. Speech paragraphs are more frequent but are shown in exactly the same way.

**Quotation marks**

These are usually single speech-marks.

They have two main purposes:

1. To show that the words inside the quotation marks were said or written by someone else

e.g.

As Hamlet asked: ‘To be or not to be? That is the question…’

Cork has ‘the best covered market in Europe’, according to Rick Stein.

You will also see many writers use double speechmarks for quotes; there are no set rules about this. For example, you may see the same quote in a newspaper headlines in single speech-marks and in the report below in double speech-marks.
2. To show that the reader should not take the word or phrase seriously; that it is a joke or a play on words

e.g. Bill’s idea of being ‘helpful’ is to make twice as much mess as there was before! There was a ‘first day at school’ feel at the Olympic Basketball Arena.

**The colon**

In scripts and direct speech

The colon is used after the character’s name to show that s/he is speaking the words that follow.

e.g.

Jim: Where are we?
Bill: In a dungeon, under the castle.

The police officer commented: “We have traced several of the bank robbers and arrests have been made.”

Jay Williams, an author, said: “This review is a disgrace!”

In the middle of sentences

The overall purpose of a colon in a sentence is to indicate that the words which follow it are giving more detail about what came before it.

- To introduce a list

  e.g. These are grape hyacinths: my mother’s favourite flowers.

- To give more detail about one item already mentioned.

  e.g. She wore a huge emerald: a gift from her husband.

**The semi-colon**

The semi-colon has two quite separate purposes.

To divide lengthy items in a list

If each item in a list is really long, it is better to use semi-colons to separate them.
The fair contained many wonderful rides: a merry-go-round with brightly-painted horses, leaping up and down as the music played; a towering helter-skelter, down which children and adults whisked on coconut mats; swingboats which rose higher and higher into the air on each pass; and a miniature railway, which puffed around the outer edge of the field.

(Notice that:
- Some of the items contain commas, which is why it helps to divide the items with semi-colon, to avoid confusion.
- There is a semi-colon before the final ‘and’ of the list, again to avoid confusion)

To replace a full-stop

You might replace a full-stop with a semi-colon for the following reasons:
- You want the sentence to be longer (e.g. in narrative, to make events move quickly).

  e.g.
  As Danny ran round the corner, his heart thumping wildly, he risked a swift glance over his shoulder, to see if his pursuers were gaining on him; a flash of blue showed they were not far behind so, in an instant, Danny ducked down an alleyway, where he knew of a secret entrance, and, sliding aside a concealed door, threw himself into a dark space, just as the door silently closed again.

- You want to link ideas more closely (e.g. you haven’t really finished explaining a point)

  e.g.
  Many churches are becoming emptier and emptier, even on Sunday mornings. Some commentators explain this with reference to busy modern lives: people exercise, go shopping, do the housework, watch TV, instead of worshipping; of course, it is important to realise that people have always had busy lives, so this is not really a valid argument.

- You want to create a two-part balanced sentence, in which the semi-colon acts as a kind of pivot.

  e.g.
  Jane loves visiting art galleries; her husband finds them dull as ditchwater. Sally has been a bride three times; Jane has been a bridesmaid only once.

The dash

1. The dash is used for two similar purposes:

To show an interruption (often in speech)

  e.g.
  “Come in,” said Mr Gilbert, “and take - “
  “Oh, no you don’t!” butted in Mrs Gilbert.

    Jim: Where are we -
    Bill: Do stop asking that question!
To show surprise (which can also be linked to an interruption)
e.g. Jim was about to open the door when - CRASH! Something hit it very hard on the opposite side.
You won’t believe what I saw - an eagle!

2. The dash is used for a longer break within a sentence than that made by a comma (especially in direct speech).

e.g. “Umm - I think so,” said Barry.
They stood waiting - until, at last, Dad looked up.

3. The dash can be used in note-taking to separate points

e.g. 1066 - Battle of Hastings - Senlac Hill - William of Normandy - invader - English troops exhausted after long march from York.

4. The dash can be used to show that someone is speaking each word separately

e.g. “You - crawl - back - here - after - weeks - and - weeks - oh, where’s my wand?”

When typing, you must leave a space on either side of the dash, or it will become a hyphen.

Ellipsis

1. Something left out

Ellipsis is used to show a longer pause, either within or at the end of a sentence. Strictly speaking, ellipsis is used to show that something is missing, or has been left out. However, not all writers use it as strictly as this.
e.g. He started to tell them the story...but they were soon nodding off.
A white hand held the door steady, preventing her from closing it...

2. A speaker trails off

Ellipsis is also used when someone is talking and they just trail off, leaving the rest of it unsaid. This is not the same as a sudden interruption.
e.g. “Well,” said mum, “I’m not sure if...”
“Go on,” said dad impatiently.

Notice that ellipsis is often used to create suspense.
The hyphen

1. Join two words together to create another word.
   e.g. The old-fashioned kitchen was covered in dust. Wood-shavings gleamed in the candle-light.

   When typing there is no gap between the hyphen and the letters before and after it.

2. Dividing a word because not all of it will fit on a line.
   e.g. As Bill bent down to pick up his bag, he heard a strange sound coming from the classroom.

   The hyphen must go at the end of the line with the first part of the word on it. The word should be divided between syllables.

3. Showing that a speaker is stammering or stuttering
   e.g. “H-h-help me,” he stammered. “I c-c-can’t,” whispered the man.

Brackets

- Brackets are used to show that the writing within them is not, strictly speaking, an essential part of the sentence; it is an extra piece of information which is not directly what the sentence is about.

  e.g. The law says (Children’s Act 1995) that parents must not expose their children to undue risk.
  [The name and date of the law are not necessary to the point about parents putting their children at risk.]
  This unsettling film (out on Monday at £12.99) includes what the referees are saying to the linesmen on their headsets.
  [The release date and price are not directly relevant to what is included in the film.]

- Brackets are also used when an acronym is given in full, or the full name is followed by its acronym.

  e.g. The RSPCA (Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals) commented that this was one of the worst cases they had come across.
  The Trades Union Congress (TUC) was not prepared to comment on the case.

- Brackets are used when an alternative way of saying the same thing is given - often for measurements, currency etc.

  e.g. The cost of a bus to New York was £35 ($42).
  You need 110g (4 oz.) of butter.
• Brackets are used to give the origin of a quote from a text in an essay.
  e.g.
  ‘It is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.’
  (Macbeth Act V lines 26-27) shows Macbeth’s despair after his wife’s death.
  Described as being ‘on a knife-edge’ (Daily Telegraph Wed 17 Aug 2011)
  Arsenal need to work very hard indeed to maintain their previous standard.

**Pair of dashes**

1. A pair of dashes is used to show that the writing within them is not an essential part of the sentence, but it is relevant to the point of the sentence.
   e.g.
   In rugby - and in cricket, come to that - players accept that referees may make mistakes.
   Edward forgot all about the question he was asking - how Melanie had escaped - and stared at the necklace in her hands.

2. A pair of dashes is used to show that someone has made a separate point or comment in the middle of a sentence. This is usually in direct speech, or writing which is similar to direct speech.
   e.g.
   “I meant to tell you - but that disgusting dog distracted me - that I was going out, but I forgot.”
   As we approached Newcastle - my home-town, I should tell you - the sun was setting over the River Tyne.

*Notice that dashes create longer pauses than commas, and therefore create the effect of jerkiness in writing.*

**The forward slash**

**To give alternatives**

The forward slash is put between two or more words (or parts of words) which could be appropriate, or could be the correct response.
   e.g.
   We would like to attend on Monday/Tuesday/Wednesday*.
   *Please delete those which do not apply.

I/We would like to attend Parents’ Evening on 4th July.

If your child is already 12, s/he will be thinking about her/his choice of Upper School.

[There are also many uses of the forward slash in computing.]
**Punctuation rules check-list**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rule</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Capital letters and full-stops mark sentences</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sentences end with full-stops, questions marks or exclamation marks</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Capital letters on proper nouns</td>
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<tr>
<td>Apostrophes for short forms</td>
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<tr>
<td>Capital letters in direct speech</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other punctuation in direct speech</td>
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<td>Quotation marks</td>
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<td>Colon</td>
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<td>Semi-colon</td>
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<td>Dash</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

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