

Punctuation 2

How to use
• colons
• apostrophes

Colons (:)  
A colon is mainly used to introduce a list or a series:

Example 1: An assistant is required who can do the following: input data, write reports, and complete tax forms.

Example 2: Wilson et al. (2012) discuss a variety of factors affecting social mobility, namely: education; cultural 'capital'; early years influence; and health.

Example 3: There are several issues which need to be addressed: the size of the group sample; the sex and age of the respondents; the length of time they have lived in the city; and the type of work they are involved in.

Note: If each item in the list is more than a few words long then it is more usual to separate them with a semi-colon (;) rather than a comma.
Note: avoid using a colon before a list when it directly follows a verb or preposition that would ordinarily need no punctuation in that sentence

Incorrect  I want: butter, sugar, and flour. ×
Correct    I want butter, sugar, and flour.

Incorrect  She has visited all the islands, including: Mull, Iona, and Orkney. ×
Correct    She has visited all the islands, including Mull, Iona, and Orkney.

Apostrophes (’)

The apostrophe is used to

(a) show that letters are missing (contraction)
(b) indicate ownership (possession)

Contractions: are not normally used in academic writing

When letters are missing in a word and the word becomes shorter, the apostrophe is used to show where the missing letters have been left out.

I am → I’m
You will → You’ll

Contractions are used in informal writing. Essays and reports should not contain informal writing. Words should be written in full.
Possession:

Apostrophes are also used to show that something belongs to something else. Look at the examples and note the position of the apostrophe.

The boy’s football  -  the boy owns one football
The boy’s footballs  -  the boy owns more than one football.
The boys’ football  -  the boys all share ownership of the one football.
The boys’ footballs  -  the boys own several footballs.

Note the position of the apostrophe with these plural irregular nouns (e.g. children, people, men, women).

Incorrect:  two childrens’ hats  ×
            (the plural is children, not childrens)
Correct:   two children’s hats
            (children + apostrophe + ‘s’)

Incorrect:  the twelve womens’ responses  ×
            (the plural is women, not womens)
Correct:   the twelve women’s responses
            (women + apostrophe + ‘s’)

Incorrect:  the peoples’ government  ×
            (the plural is ‘people’, not ‘peoples’)
Correct:   the people’s government
            (people + apostrophe + ‘s’)

Common problems with apostrophes:

Its/it’s

The dog chewed its bone.
(no need for an apostrophe. ‘its’ is a pronoun which stands in for ‘the dog’s’ and indicates ownership.

It’s an amazing idea.
(A missing letter has been replaced by the apostrophe. ‘It’s’ here really means ‘it is’.

Whose/who’s

Whose books are these?
(Whose is a special kind of pronoun – like ‘its’ – which indicates ownership so there is no apostrophe.

Who’s arriving late?
(a missing letter has been replaced by the apostrophe, so ‘Who’s’ here really means ‘who is’.

Useful websites:


Edufund: [www.edufind.com/english-grammaricolon](http://www.edufind.com/english-grammaricolon)

For more information on this and other aspects of academic study, please see our website at: www.els.qmu.ac.uk

If you would like to talk to someone in the Effective Learning Service then email us at els@qmu.ac.uk

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