

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:

The internet grammar of English: www.ucl.ac.uk/internet-grammar/

Edufund: www.edufind.com/english-grammar/colon

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

