

Four Steps to Improve Your Punctuation

1) Avoid comma splicing

Many people are not very confident with where to put commas. The comma splice is usually wrongly placed between independent clauses (ideas).

Jamil is writing the report, he should have it ready by Friday. ✘

Both parts of this sentence are independent clauses (complete ideas) so should not be joined by a comma. Here are two correct versions:

Jamil is writing the report. He should have it ready by Friday. ✔
Jamil is writing the report; he should have it ready by Friday. ✔

The majority of comma splicing errors could be corrected by using a semi-colon or separating the information into two sentences.

2) Stop overusing capital letters

Some people or companies use capitals to try to make their products or services seem more important.

Names should only have a capital when they refer to the individual name of a person, place or product:

The meeting will take place at the hotel by the park.
We work in partnership with our local college.

No capitals are needed for *hotel* or *college* because they are not individual names. They are known as common nouns.

The meeting will take place at the Hilton Hotel by the park.
We work in partnership with Tripton College.

Above, the capitals show the individual names of the places. These are known as proper nouns.

3) Use possessive apostrophes correctly

To use a possessive apostrophe you generally need to have two nouns together. This means two people, places or objects. (The nouns may be separated by a descriptive word - you can see an example on the next page). You should not put an apostrophe on a word that is followed by a verb.

Sandra's report will be presented to the team on Friday.

Sandra and *report* are both nouns. The report 'belongs' to Sandra so an apostrophe needs to be used on Sandra's name.

The team's new office will be decorated by the 10th of December.

Team and *office* are both nouns and are only separated by the adjective *new*. The office 'belongs' to the team so team must have an apostrophe.

The documents are going to be delivered on Friday.

Documents does not need an apostrophe as it is followed by a verb and nothing 'belongs' to the documents.

4) Position the apostrophe correctly in plurals

If the first noun that needs the apostrophe is a plural, the apostrophe goes after the 's' not before.

The computers' keyboards needed to be cleaned.

We need to show that more than one computer is being referred to above, which is why the apostrophe needs to be after the 's'. If there was no apostrophe, the reader would not know if there was one computer or many.

The reports' covers had been damaged during delivery.

The apostrophe shows there are many reports not just one.

There are some exceptions to this rule. The main exceptions are:

The men's toilets are located in the reception.
The women's changing area is in need of some repairs.
The children's crèche will be closed on Tuesday.

The apostrophe goes before the 's' because the spelling of the words men/women/children (instead of man/woman/child) already tell us that the words are plural. Therefore, the apostrophe does not need to be positioned after the 's' to tell us this information.