Focus on Writing

The semi-colon & the colon

The semi-colon and the colon can be useful in academic writing as they enable you to structure complex ideas more coherently.

The semi-colon ;

The semi-colon has two main uses:

- It separates items in a list after a colon, for example:
  The noisy crowd moved on: some people waved flags; others clapped their hands; the children danced to the music; and barking dogs followed the throng.

  Note: it joins the last two items together with the word ‘and’.

- It avoids the need for a conjunction (such as ‘and’ or ‘but’) and emphasises the relationship between one part of a sentence and another.
  The temperature outside rose unbearably; cooling fans were turned on in the office to reduce the heat.

  Note: this lets you build up long and coherent sentences.

The colon :

The colon has three main uses:

- It introduces a list of items (see above) which are then separated by semi-colons. Or it simply introduces a list, for example:

  Make sure you bring the following:
  - Pens
  - Pencils
  - Rulers
• It is used in a sentence when the second part of the sentence expands upon the first part, for example:  
  The old timetable had serious drawbacks: students had little time for private study and tutors had too much marking to do.

• It introduces a quotation or example, for example:  
  The story was featured on the front page: “Straw threatens hooligan fans with lifetime ban.”  
  (The Independent, 20th June)

The full stop & the comma
The full stop and comma structure your writing. They are essential components you can use to give your writing meaning.

The full stop
The full stop is used at the end of all sentences that are not questions or exclamations. Read your work aloud to make sure you are writing complete sentences and using full stops correctly.

• The full stop is also used in abbreviations and after initials, for example:
  D. H. Lawrence, C. S. Lewis
  p.m. (post meridiem), e.g. (exempli gratia)

However, some initials are familiar to us without full stops, for example:
  BBC

It is becoming common practice to leave out all non-essential punctuation, for example:
  Mr J E Smith BSc

The comma
There are five main ways to use the comma:

• The comma is used to separate items in a list:  
  The students were asked to bring pens, pencils, rulers and paper to the tutorial.

  Note: the last two items on the list are separated by the word ‘and’.

• The comma is used to separate direct speech from indirect speech, for example:
  ‘The exam was challenging,’ she said.
  Parker suggests that, ‘exams should be abolished’

• Where you are tempted to use brackets, use a pair of commas instead, for example:
  All students, except those who were ill, attended the course.

• Use a comma after an introductory word or phrase, for example:
  However, all the evidence supports this point of view.

• The comma is used before words like ‘but’, ‘or’, ‘so’ and ‘yet’ and followed by a complete sentence, for example:
  Yesterday the railway station was closed, but today everything is back to normal.
Using language – standard English etc.

There are several ways of using language. You need to know this in order to make sure you use the right language when writing for academic purposes.

**Standard English**

Standard English is written or spoken English used formally, for example:

*It is an unusual way to behave.*

*Do you want some help? etc.*

You are expected to use standard English in your assignments because it is more precise.

**Colloquial English**

Colloquial English is written or spoken English used informally, for example:

*It's a funny way to carry on.*

*Need a hand? etc.*

You should avoid colloquial English in your assignments because it is imprecise.

**Slang**

Slang is a highly colloquial language. Its vocabulary is short-lived consisting of new words or current words used in a new way, for example:

*freebie = something given away free*

*wicked = brilliant, excellent etc.*

“Slang is a colourful, alternative vocabulary. It bristles with humour, vituperation (abuse), prejudice, informality…” (*Oxford Dictionary of Modern Slang* 1996)

Slang is totally inappropriate for your assignments unless you are quoting it.

**Idioms**

Idioms are groups of words that we use all the time in conversation but are not suitable for written work, for example:

*it's Greek to me = I don't understand it*

*the salt of the earth = good person*

*kick the bucket = die*

**Accent**

Accent is simply the way we pronounce words and is usually dependent on where we come from, for example: a Cornish accent, a French accent etc.

**Dialect**

Dialect is usually spoken by a regional speaker using the grammar, vocabulary and idiom that are distinctive of that region, for example:

*Aw remember th'first time at aw iver had a five paand nooat, it wor yeller wi age, an' th'edges wor riven a bit. (Yorkshire dialect)*

*Doan' you 'member de house dat was float'n down de river, en dey wuz a man in dah, kivered up… (Huckleberry Finn by Mark Twain)*
Sentences

A sentence is a self contained and understandable group of words in a certain order. It can make a statement, ask a question, issue a command or shout an exclamation. A sentence should make complete sense on its own.

The statement sentence

For the purposes of academic writing, you should always use the statement form of the sentence. This sentence always begins with a capital letter and ends with a full stop, for example:

The lecture is an hour long.

Sentence structure

Every statement sentence consists of two parts:

- One part names the person or thing about which something is being said and is called the subject.
- One part tells us what is happening to the person or thing named by the other part and is called the predicate.

Subject: The lecture
Predicate*: is an hour long

For a sentence to make complete sense, you need to include both parts.

*predicate – a Latin word meaning to declare or proclaim (The Concise Oxford Dictionary)

When sentences go wrong

If you are using a PC to word process your work, you may notice the appearance of a green wiggly line underneath part of your sentence. This indicates that something is wrong with the grammatical structure of the sentence itself. It may be one of the following:

- Run-on sentences are two sentences that need to be separated with a full stop or semi-colon, for example:

  The student has not done enough studying, this is because she is always out. (incorrect)
  The student has not done enough studying; this is because she is always out. (correct)
  The student has not done enough studying. This is because she is always out. (correct)

- Sentence fragments are sentences which do not make complete sense on their own. Often they need attaching to another sentence to make sense, for example:

  The flowers on the windowsill are wilting. Which is a shame. (incorrect)
  The flowers on the windowsill are wilting, which is a shame. (correct)
Sentences & paragraphs
Well constructed sentences and paragraphs are essential for academic writing and enable you to formulate a coherent argument.

Short and long sentences
It is essential that you know how to write properly constructed sentences. If you find it difficult to express your thoughts clearly on paper, start by writing short sentences. These are easy to follow and allow you to express at least one complete thought at a time. As you become more confident with your writing, long sentences will allow you to express more complex ideas helped by the use of the colon and the semi-colon. Short sentences are appropriate for report writing which requires a focused and concise style. Longer sentences are appropriate for essay writing which involves elaborating on points of view, arguments and evidence in answer to a question.

Paragraphs
Paragraphing is one of the most important conventions of written English. It is a visual aid designed to draw the reader's attention to the organisation of a piece of extended text. Paragraphs consist of sentences grouped together. The sentences within the paragraph usually deal with one topic or idea. A paragraph can stand alone as a piece of coherent writing.

How you divide a piece of work up into paragraphs will depend on the subject matter of your assignment. Generally, you start a new paragraph as you move onto a new topic or theme within a larger topic. The length of paragraphs can vary, however, consistently short paragraphs are difficult to read and can appear aimless. Long paragraphs, on the other hand, can lose the reader as s/he tries to grapple with a multiplicity of ideas without a pause.

A paragraph in the main body of an assignment might include the following:

- A topic sentence – introduces the issue you are discussing and frames the whole paragraph.
- Sentence with supporting evidence – uses the views of others to support the issue you are discussing.
- Evaluative sentences – evaluates why the supporting evidence you have chosen is significant in relation to the issue you are discussing.
- Linking sentence – links back to the title of your essay or into the topic of the next paragraph.
The components of a sentence (parts of speech)

Each word in a sentence performs a different function. They are known collectively as parts of speech. They interact with each other so that the sentence makes complete sense on its own.

Parts of speech

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nouns</th>
<th>words which name or identify people, places, things</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Verbs</td>
<td>words which express action</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pronouns</td>
<td>words used instead of nouns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjectives</td>
<td>words which describe or give information about nouns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adverbs</td>
<td>words which describe actions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prepositions</td>
<td>words which mark relationships between two things, eg about, after, around, beside, between, by, from, in, off, over, through, to, under, up, with</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conjunctions</td>
<td>words which act as links between words, eg after, although, as, because, but, since, till, until, before, either…or, neither…nor, for, if, than, unless, whilst, that, lest, whether…or</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The definite article</td>
<td>the words ‘the’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The indefinite article</td>
<td>the words ‘a’ (‘an’ before a word beginning with a vowel)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Definitive article</th>
<th>Adjective</th>
<th>Noun</th>
<th>Verb</th>
<th>Indefinite article</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The bright student failed a</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjective Noun Pronoun Verb Possessive adjective</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>difficult exam. He saw his</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Noun Preposition Pronoun Conjunction Pronoun</td>
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<tr>
<td>tutor about it and they</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verb Possessive adjective Adjective Noun Adverb</td>
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<tr>
<td>discussed his poor performance thoroughly.</td>
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This is only a starting point. If you are not confident about this aspect of your writing, there are many good texts on grammar that will help you to find out more.
The apostrophe

The apostrophe is a punctuation mark that is frequently left out or misused. You need to use the apostrophe correctly to help your reader make sense of your writing. Note how it is used in the academic texts that you read. It has two main uses:

- to indicate possession
- to denote omission of letters from words

Possession

The student's books – the books belonging to one student

The students' books – the books belonging to more than one student

The women's books – the books belonging to the women (the word ‘women’ is already plural so the apostrophe just shows possession)

Omission

Apostrophes are used to show that letters from words are missing. These shortened forms of words are called contractions and are not suitable for academic writing. Here are some examples:

- can't – cannot
- hasn't – has not
- isn't – is not
- shouldn't – should not
- here's – here is

The apostrophe can also be used to show that digits are missing, for example:

- the '67 vintage car

The classic mistake!

It's and its

It's – a contraction which means it is or it has
Its – a possessive adjective (like his and her), for example: The dog hid its bone.