

## Quick Guide: Commas, semi-colons and colons

The most common punctuation mark that we are asked about on our writing courses is the apostrophe (see Quick Guide March 09). After this, we are frequently asked about the use of commas, semi-colons and colons. So here are the **top ten tips**, with a few examples to show how these are most commonly used:

- 1. Comma: used to separate a list of items or details in a sentence.** *'We can supply them in red, blue, yellow or green.'* *'I look forward to receiving copies of the invoice, statement, delivery note and original order.'*
- 2. Comma: used to separate an introductory signal or a phrases at the beginning of a sentence.** *'Finally, I would like to congratulate you on your success this year.'* *'Apart from the above points, please confirm that you are willing to proceed.'*
- 3. Comma: used to mark off subordinate phrases or clauses.** *'Mr Brown, the senior partner, will be in touch by the end of the week.'* *'The accounts department, which consists of 20 people, is undergoing computer training.'*
- 5. Comma: used as a separator between parts of a sentence,** when there is a natural pause when the sentence is read. *'If you send the documents by Thursday, we will complete the sale by the following Monday.'*
- 4. Have you heard of the 'Oxford comma'?** It is an optional comma before the word 'and' at the end of a list. So called because it was traditionally used by printers, readers and editors at Oxford University. It is acceptable and can be necessary for clarity when the items in the list are not single words. *'These items are available in black and white, red and yellow, and blue and green.'*
- 6. Semi-colon: used to separate phrases in a list or a list of lists!** Often these lists are typed vertically with bullet points. *'We have offices in Paris, Nice and Calais; Frankfurt, Cologne, Hamburg and Berlin; Sydney, Melbourne and Perth; and New York, Chicago and Los Angeles.'*
- 7. Semi-colon: used to link two statements that are closely related.** The two statements could be written as two separate sentences but by using a semi-colon you are showing that they are related. *'The conference was a great success; we have generated 100 new contacts.'*
- 8. Colon: used to introduce a vertical or a running-text list.** *'She has several positive characteristics: charm, dignity and approachability.'*
- 9. Colon: used to act as a 'why-because' marker** which leads the reader from one idea to its consequence. *'There's one big problem with tennis on the radio: you can't see it.'*
- 10. Colon: used to separate two sharply contrasting and parallel statements.** *'During Wimbledon, television is like someone with a reserved ticket: radio is for the enthusiast who has queued all night to get in.'*

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