

They also need to know that when the question is indirect, the sentence does not need a question mark:

*She wondered what he was thinking of.*

*He asked whether the train was on time.*

## Capital letters

Historically, capital letters have been used to portray formality. In the forum of Ancient Rome, the emperors' deeds were written in capital letters. Until the nineteenth century it was common for all nouns to be capitalised in English (they still are in German). Today, however, dropping the initial capital letter from a company name can be seen as a mark of significant success. The move from *Hoover* to *hoover*, now a generic term for vacuum cleaners, and *Google* to *google*, now often a generic term for search engines (despite the Google company's efforts to resist this), demonstrates how influential these companies have become.

The rules for using capital letters are generally quite straightforward.

- A sentence always begins with a capital letter.
- A proper noun, such as your name, always begins with a capital letter.
- A proper noun, such as a country or place and words relating to them, begins with a capital letter: Portugal, Portuguese. You do not capitalise these words when they are part of a fixed phrase such as 'french windows'; this has no direct connection with France.
- Titles of special days, books, plays and films begin with a capital letter: Diwali, *The Tempest*, *Mission Impossible*. A capital letter is needed for all the main words, but not for connecting words such as 'a', 'of', 'the': *The House at Pooh Corner*, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time*.
- Use capital letters at the beginning of an abbreviation if the original form starts with a capital letter: Doctor, Dr. If you are using the first letter of abbreviated words, every letter should be a capital: MP (Member of Parliament).
- The pronoun 'I' is always capitalised.

There are some interesting exceptions.

- Although the names of the days of the week and the months of the year are written with a capital letter, the seasons (spring, summer, autumn, winter) are not.
- Whether or not you capitalise the main words in the title of a book at the end of an academic assignment will depend on the referencing system being used. The American Psychological Association (APA, 2010) style, for example, only requires you to use a capital letter for the first word of a title: *Grammar, punctuation and spelling in primary schools*. The referencing system used in this book does require capital letters for main words.

## The comma

The use of the comma can only be understood when children have an understanding of the nature of a sentence. Brien (2012) writes that this is one of the most difficult pieces of punctuation to teach, because writers need to make judgements about when it is helpful. She points out that *many writers have a quirky approach to commas because they want to depict idiosyncratic speech or distinct authorial voice*, citing Jane Austen's lavish use of commas as an example (2012, p.113). Truss suggests that the comma, more than any other mark, *requires the writer to use intelligent discretion* (2003, p.96). There is a well-known story about Oscar Wilde arriving exhausted at a dinner party. When asked why, he said: *I spent the entire morning putting a comma in and the afternoon taking it out* (Harborough Sherard, 1902, p.72).

A comma is generally used in one of two ways: to help the reader by separating parts of a sentence; or to separate items in a list. Both are intended to make the sentence clearer. For example, 'Let's eat Dad' is decidedly worrying without a comma before 'Dad'.

Children are regularly taught that commas are not used before 'and'. We may be wiser to include the word **normally** in the sentence, as there are times when commas before 'and' can be useful. Take a look at this sentence:

*My favourite jacket potato toppings are tuna, beans and bacon and cheese.*

This sentence doesn't make clear whether 'bacon' is a favourite and 'cheese' is another favourite, or whether it is 'bacon and cheese' together or beans and bacon together. Adding commas clarifies things:

*My favourite jacket potato toppings are tuna, beans, and bacon and cheese.*

*My favourite jacket potato toppings are tuna, beans and bacon, and cheese.*

Using semi-colons (see later in the chapter) might clarify things still further so that there can be no misunderstandings:

*My favourite jacket potato toppings are tuna; beans; and bacon and cheese.*

*My favourite jacket potato toppings are tuna; beans and bacon; and cheese.*

### Avoiding the comma splice

The comma splice occurs when a comma is used to connect two independent clauses or a clause and an independent phrase. Here is an example:

*Jenny threw open the door, she was in a bad mood.*

A simple rule of thumb to tell whether a comma is being used to 'splice' main clauses together is to see if you could substitute a full stop. In this example, the two clauses make sense separately.

*Jenny threw open the door. She was in a bad mood.*

In this case a full stop works well, but it can lead to very staccato sentences and you may want to suggest a closer link between the clauses. If you want to show that some sentences are more closely linked in meaning than others, you could substitute a dash or a semi-colon:

*Jenny threw open the door – she was in a bad mood.*

*Jenny threw open the door; she was in a bad mood.*

It would also be possible to link the clauses by inserting a conjunction such as 'and', 'but', 'although', 'even though', 'yet' or 'because'.

*Jenny threw open the door even though she was in a bad mood.*

### Activity

Some comma-splicers will be good punctuators in many other respects. You may even be known to comma-splice when you are under pressure. Look at the following sentences and identify which sentences are correct, and where there is a comma splice. Choose ways of correcting them.

*I hate writing assignments, I always leave them until the last minute.*

*Sally loves to keep fit, she runs a marathon at least once a year.*

*The team was determined to win, they had lost the last four matches.*

*Walking round Windermere, we saw a beautiful rainbow.*

*This is a lovely cheesecake, you must give me the recipe.*

*Despite the bad weather, the village fete was a great success.*

The following sentences are correct as they each have a main clause and a dependent phrase:

*Walking round Windermere, we saw a beautiful rainbow.*

*Despite the bad weather, the village fete was a great success.*

The other sentences have two clauses which could be linked, but a comma is not sufficient for this. They could be punctuated as follows:

*I hate writing assignments: I always leave them until the last minute.*

*Sally loves to keep fit: she runs a marathon at least once a year.*

*The team was determined to win: they had lost the last four matches.*

*This is a lovely cheesecake: you must give me the recipe.*

Alternatively, you might use a dash rather than a colon.

### Exclamation marks

*Cut out all those exclamation marks*, F. Scott Fitzgerald wrote. *An exclamation mark is like laughing at your own jokes* (cited in Clandfield, 2011).

Despite Fitzgerald's exhortation, the exclamation mark is having something of a renaissance. Texts, tweets and e-mails in particular are often littered with exclamation marks; sometimes to the extent that they have become a replacement for the full stop.

*'Hiya!! Look at this!!'*

*and the reply 'Thanks!!!!'*

This may simply be because the exclamation mark feels like a friendlier and more informal form of punctuation. An e-mail that says 'Thanks for the tickets!!' has much more emotion than 'Thanks for the tickets'.

An exclamation mark is conventionally used at the end of a sentence. It can be:

Exclamative: *What a nightmare!*

Imperative: *Go away!*

Declarative: *It's a wrap!*

An interjection to show strong emotion: *Oh no!*

We can draw on a wealth of material when children are learning about exclamation marks. They are highly visible in environmental print: tabloid newspaper headlines provide a rich source and collecting these can be a helpful addition to your working wall, or classroom display.

As with other aspects of punctuation, once you have taught children how to use them you are likely to find that they are overused as they are tried out in different contexts. This is quite