

How to Punctuate a Good Sentence

Paragraphs and sentences divide your work into its separate ideas, so the reader can follow your argument step by step. Punctuation is equally important in organising the ideas inside each sentence.

The fundamental piece of academic punctuation is the fullstop – always show the reader where each sentence ends.

It is evident that with all the conflicting information, one thing is clear, people are individuals and have individual needs and are motivated by different things depending on how they have been socialised.

Remembering that each sentence is a subject + predicate, this passage can be seen to contain two sentences, each starting with a capital and finishing with a fullstop. Trying to finish a sentence with a comma (as happens here) is one of the most widespread student mistakes. The idea works better as

It is evident that with all the conflicting information, one thing is clear. People are individuals and have individual needs and are motivated by different things depending on how they have been socialised.

The other widespread mistake is commas, partly because they do several different things. The best rule here is that commas separate things – that is, push the different pieces of the sentence apart – so you should only use them if you're sure you want to separate two ideas.

In the first sentence, “It is evident that one thing is clear” is the sentence, and “with all the conflicting information” is added to it. As the writer, you decide whether the two pieces should be close together or distinct. If you want them to be distinct – that is, if you want to separate them – then you do that with commas before *and* after the addition.

It is evident that, with all the conflicting information, one thing is clear.

The same thing happens in the second sentence, where the basic sentence “People are individuals and want different things” is added to with the explanation “depending on how they're socialised”.

People are individuals and have individual needs and are motivated by different things, depending on how they have been socialised.

Another well-known use of commas is in lists, separating the list items to keep them in order. The second sentence lists three actions, but joining three things with “A and B and C” feels awkward; putting a comma between the first two items is smoother.

People are individuals, have individual needs, and are motivated by different things, depending on how they have been socialised.

Hopefully you can see that last version is too confusing. With too many commas, the reader struggles to see which pieces are being separated and how you’ve organised the whole idea. Fortunately, most commas are optional and you can remove the less important ones. Generally, try to have no more than two commas in the same sentence (unless there’s a long list).

It is evident that, with all the conflicting information, one thing is clear. People are individuals with individual needs and different motivations, depending on how they have been socialised.

Other punctuation marks exist – about a dozen in common use, and more in particular disciplines – and some of them are useful here. Parentheses (or brackets, like this) and dashes can separate new information very firmly, and can be especially useful if you don’t want to use brackets.

It is evident that, despite all the conflicting information, one thing is clear.

It is evident that (despite all the conflicting information) one thing is clear.

It is evident that – despite all the conflicting information – one thing is clear.

Colons (“:”) are also useful when you name something then follow up with a more detailed explanation. If you use a colon, the sentence must finish immediately after the explanation.

It is evident that, with all the conflicting information, one thing is clear: people are individuals with individual needs. As part of this, their different motivations depend on how they have been socialised.

Other common punctuation marks in academic writing include

- quotation marks to “show quotes”
- single quotation marks, usually ‘similar to quotation marks’
- hyphens to join double-barrelled words
- apostrophes to show someone’s ownership
- semi-colons to join two clauses; they are used occasionally
- ellipses to show words “removed... from a quote”
- square brackets to show words “replaced [in] a quote”
- bullets for itemised lists, especially in reports

Three punctuation marks almost never used are

- apostrophes to run words together (you can’t do these)
- question marks (would you even use a question?)
- exclamation marks (no, never!)

With a few rare exceptions, academic writing uses direct sentences (not questions) relying on calm, reasoned statements of fact and analysis (not excited emotional appeals). Virtually every sentence ends in a fullstop.

Thinking about punctuation also forces you to logically analyse your sentence, and helps stop it becoming too long or complicated. For example,

- the first sentence is now “It is evident that one thing is clear”, and you easily see that it doesn’t really say anything. Simplify it.
- you now see that the second sentence is a list, so you can connect – or disconnect – the ideas depending on how closely you want them together within your argument.

Punctuation and grammar work together, and correcting one helps you correct the other.

Despite the conflicting information, the clear consensus is that people are individuals, with individual needs and motivations depending on how they have been socialised.

The last issue to mention here is capitals. Many students like to use capitals to emphasise particular words, such as

Females excelled at Verbal Aptitude tasks as predicted.

This was correct several hundred years ago, but isn’t used in modern English. In academic writing, capitals are only used for

- the start of a sentence
- the start of a name (of a person, place or organisation)
- in abbreviations
- “I” when you’re talking about yourself (rare)

They aren’t used for emphasis.

Females excelled at verbal aptitude tasks as predicted.