

appendix 4 punctuation

the basic sentence

We don't separate the basic parts of a sentence (subject and verb, verb and object, etc).

The standard of living of the dock workers was slowly improving.

(NOT *The standard of living of the dock workers, was slowly improving.*)

Many of them were able to begin buying their own homes.

(NOT *Many of them were able to begin buying, their own homes.*)

before the basic sentence

If we put **long adverbial expressions** (saying *when*, *where* etc) before the basic sentence, we often use a comma (,). Compare:

At that time the standard of living of the dock workers was slowly improving.

During the late 1920s and early 1930s, the standard of living of the dock workers was slowly improving.

after the basic sentence

We don't usually use commas when **adverbial expressions** come **after** the basic sentence.

The standard of living of the dock workers was slowly improving during the late 1920s and early 1930s.

inside the basic sentence

When adverbial expressions come **between** or inside parts of the basic sentence, we usually put commas **before** and **after** them.

The standard of living of the dock workers, during the late 1920s and early 1930s, was steadily improving.

noun phrases

We don't usually separate a noun from the adjectives or other expressions that go with it.

the mainly foreign labourers (NOT *the mainly foreign, labourers*)

the mainly foreign labourers in the north-eastern docks (NOT *the mainly foreign labourers, in the north-eastern docks*)

the mainly foreign labourers who made up the work force in the north-eastern docks

(NOT *the mainly foreign labourers, who made up the work force in the north-eastern docks*)

However, we do use **commas** to separate **non-defining expressions** (see page 210) after nouns.

Andreas Bergmeister, who established the dock-workers' union, ...

sentences with conjunctions

We often put **commas** in sentences with conjunctions, especially in longer sentences. (See page 254.)

Compare:

The situation changed when the export markets began to contract.

The situation changed noticeably for the worse after 1932, when the export markets began to contract.

We **usually** use a **comma** if we **start** with the conjunction.

When the export markets began to contract, the situation changed.

For one-clause sentences with conjunctions (e.g. *Because the world had changed.*), see page 256.

indirect speech

We **don't put commas** after verbs of saying, thinking etc in **indirect speech**.

Many commentators declared that the economy was in deep trouble. (NOT *Many commentators declared, that ...*)

No one knew how serious the situation would become. (NOT *No one knew, how ...*)

We **don't put question marks (?)** in **indirect questions**.

Workers asked why they were losing their jobs. (NOT *Workers asked why they were losing their jobs?*)

a useful rule: no comma before that

We **don't put commas** before **that** (conjunction or relative pronoun).

They did not understand that the economic conditions that had existed earlier had disappeared for good.

between separate sentences

Between separate sentences (with no conjunction), we use a full stop (.) or a semi-colon (;), but **not** a **comma** (see page 256). Compare.

*Orders began to dry up, **and** most firms started to reduce their work force.* (comma and conjunction)
Orders began to dry up. Most firms started to reduce their work force.
OR *Orders began to dry up; most firms started to reduce their work force.*
BUT NOT *Orders began to dry up, most firms started to reduce their work force.*

conjunctions and adverbs

Note that some linking words (e.g. *consequently*, *however*, *therefore*), are **adverbs**, not conjunctions. A sentence beginning with an adverb is **separate** from a sentence before it; a full stop or semi-colon is necessary between the sentences. (For more details, see page 254.)

Orders began to dry up. Consequently, most firms started to reduce their work force.
(NOT *Orders began to dry up, consequently most firms ...*)
Orders began to dry up; however, some firms tried to carry on as before.
(NOT *Orders began to dry up, however, some firms ...*)

commas between adjectives

Before a noun, we use commas mostly to separate adjectives that say the same kind of thing. Compare:

a tall, impressive figure a long, boring speech
gloomy economic forecasts surprising new developments

After a noun, adjectives are punctuated like a list (see below).

His speech was long, detailed, boring and irrelevant.

lists

We use commas to separate the different things in a list (but not usually before *and* unless the last item is long).

The developing crisis affected manufacturers, distributors, marketing organisations, banks and credit agencies.
... marketing organisations, banks, and some of the major credit agencies.

direct speech

Quotation marks ('...' or "...") are used to show direct speech (somebody's actual words). Commas are generally used to introduce direct speech; colons (:) are sometimes used in official reports.

Mrs Otago said, 'It is essential that we work together.' (NOT <It is essential that ...> OR – It is essential that)
The Prime Minister said: 'The Government is doing everything possible ...'

figures

We use commas after thousands and millions, and full stops in decimal fractions (see page 311).

losses of £5,500,000 losses of £5.5m (= 'five and a half million pounds')

colons (:

Colons are sometimes used to introduce direct speech (see above), and to introduce details and explanations.

Manufacturing industry was in crisis: in particular, textiles and shipbuilding.
British firms were no longer competitive: labour costs had priced them out of the market.

dashes (–)

Dashes are common in informal writing. They can be used in the same way as colons, semi-colons or brackets; they can also introduce afterthoughts.

I really don't know what we're going to do – Joe's out of work, and there's no money coming in.
Harry might get a job at the market next month – at least, that's what he says.

apostrophes (')

For apostrophes in contractions (e.g. *isn't*), see Appendix 5. For apostrophes in possessives (e.g. *John's*), see page 130. For apostrophes in plurals, see page 303.

abbreviations (short forms of words)

We use full stops after some abbreviations, like e.g. (meaning 'for example'). *Mr* and *Mrs* have full stops in American English, but not usually in British English.

A high-level meeting between some of those most concerned, e.g. Mrs Otago, the Industry Secretary, Mr Bergmeister, and other union representatives, ...