

Opinion
Editing, Writing & Publishing



Punctuation Mistakes in the English Writing of Non-Anglophone Researchers

OPEN ACCESS

Received: Jul 14, 2020
Accepted: Jul 28, 2020

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Disclosure

The author has no potential conflicts of interest to disclose.

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Punctuation mistakes of non-Anglophone researchers often remain unnoticed and unaddressed by researchers themselves, peer reviewers, journal editors, and English language instructors. There are a number of factors complicating the current situation with often overlooked punctuation mistakes. Firstly, punctuation is often viewed as a less important subject when compared to other areas of writing difficulties,¹ such as organization of scientific ideas, choice of persuasion strategies, text structure, sentence grammar, and appropriate style.² Furthermore, there is a wide variation in the use of punctuation even by native English speakers due to insufficient attention to its main rules in language classes.³ Finally, with the unprecedented growth of the number of nonnative English speakers, certain deviations from language style and punctuation standards seem to become more accepted. In fact, some top journals have switched to flexible instructions, displaying greater tolerance of minor language inconsistencies in the writing of non-Anglophone researchers.⁴

Correct punctuation is important because of the following functions⁵: 1) it indicates the beginning and end of textual units and connects them through the presence or absence of punctuation marks; 2) it is used for emphasizing or adding tone. As such, punctuation is one of the authors' tools for conveying meaning and facilitating the readers' understanding of the text.⁶ Its correct use is extremely important for research writing, where the comprehension of ideas, complicated in itself, may be aggravated by improper punctuation. Furthermore, an incorrectly punctuated text may look careless and damaging to the authors' reputation.⁵

Sharing this vision of the significance of punctuation for clear and rhetorically effective research writing, I will further try, proceeding from my pedagogical and ad hoc editor's experience, to pinpoint and illustrate typical mistakes made by nonnative authors. The majority of the examples are taken from the manuscripts drafted by Slavic biomedical researchers. The punctuation problems described below are generally similar to those faced by authors all over the globalized world.⁷⁻⁹

Punctuation marks include the period (.), known in British English as a full stop, comma (,), semicolon (;), colon (:), dash (–), hyphen (-), square brackets ([]), braces (also called “brackets”) { }, parentheses (), apostrophe (’), quotation marks (“ ”) or inverted commas in British English (‘ ’), question mark (?), exclamation point or mark (!), ellipsis (...), and slash (/). While not all of these punctuation marks cause problems in research writing, some appear to be rather troublesome. This particularly refers to the comma – a source of major difficulties for non-Anglophone authors, who tend either to overuse or underuse this frequent punctuation mark.

One of the most common mistakes relates to inserting comma before a relative clause which begins with *that*, as in the following example: *We consider side effects, that are characteristic of stimulating agents*. Such wrong use of the comma may be caused by the transfer of native (Slavic) syntactic and punctuation patterns.

A more complicated type of mistake occurs when nonnative authors are unable to distinguish between the so-called identifying and non-identifying clauses, which begin with *who*, *whose*, *whom*, and *which*. The former identify persons or things mentioned in the main clause and are not marked by commas, while the latter provide additional information about someone or something that has already been identified and are always given in commas. Therefore, in the sentence *The ways and methods of seed storage, which use liquid nitrogen, are called cryoconservation* commas are unnecessary since the clause in boldface is an identifying one. Such clauses can be reduced in various ways, e.g., *The ways and methods of seed storage using liquid nitrogen are called cryoconservation*. However, in the sentence *The plant seeds which botanical gardens all around the world collect from the natural places of growth were kept in the laboratories at room temperature* commas should be inserted before *which* and after the last word in boldface as this clause is obviously a non-identifying one.

It is also important to mention a mistake of not separating with commas infinitival, participial, prepositional phrases and adverbial clauses at the beginning of the sentence as well as words and word-combinations denoting time, place, manner, or reason in the same sentence position. As can be seen in the following example, commas have mistakenly been omitted in the sentences: *To establish the optimal correlation we researched the influence of acidity; While the molecular mechanisms of this phenomenon are still unclear some experimental evidence has been obtained; Thus the seeds collected from elite trees should be stored in optimal conditions*. Authors should bear in mind that marking the boundaries of preliminary sentence units with commas helps the reader to unambiguously understand the main statement.⁵ At the same time, it is important to observe the rule of not using a comma before the same phrases and clauses at the end of the sentence. The following example illustrates the violation of this rule: *X et al. describe the role of non-wood forest products for livelihoods strategies in rural areas, using three species of edible fruits*.

Another mark which may cause some problems is the semicolon. Its use is currently viewed as a matter of personal choice and style rather than correctness.¹⁰ At the same time, non-Anglophone authors tend to replace it by a comma in the sentence positions where it is highly desirable, namely after logical connectors introducing the second of the independent clauses in a sentence, e.g.: *The fourth group includes the species for which the control variant has zero resemblance, at the same time, the storage of the seeds in liquid nitrogen stimulated the similarity*. As can be seen from this example, the semicolon is weaker than a comma but stronger than a period; overall, it is used to connect clauses which are closely related to each other.

Nonnative authors often do not distinguish the dash (which encloses parenthetical information and is also used to mark range of numbers or time span) from the hyphen, used to form compound words. For instance, in the sentence *The mixture was left for 12-18 hours, and then 200-300 mL of water were poured* a hyphen is mistakenly used to indicate time span and a volume range; in this situation, the so-called en dash (a shorter variant of the dash, of the length of the letter n) should be used. In the majority of cases, authors confuse these punctuation marks because of careless typing rather than due to the insufficient awareness of the punctuation rules. However, this is not an excuse for a seasoned author.

One more area of punctuation mistakes is that of the apostrophe use. This important mark denotes possession. Because of the linguistic phenomenon of homophony (when certain words have similar pronunciation but different spelling), nonnative researchers often confuse the pronoun *its* and the contracted form of *it is* (*it's*). The following excerpt from a research article illustrates this rather common mistake: *This technique has several important advantages. The main motivation for it's use is as follows ...* Also, some researchers are unaware of the apostrophe use with two or more proper names and put these marks after each name, as in *Watson's and Crick's model*, although the first apostrophe is unnecessary. Another common mistake relates to the apostrophe use with possessive forms of proper names in the simultaneous application of the apostrophe and the definite article (as in *the Mendelson's syndrome*), although correct versions can include only either of the two: *the Mendelson syndrome* or *Mendelson's syndrome*.

The slash, which is used much more rarely than other punctuation marks, may also cause problems. Its main function consists in the expression of “genuine alternatives.”⁵ As the following example demonstrates, sometimes researchers are not sufficiently aware of this role of the slash: *Further experiments are required for the identification of cell components/metabolites*. In this sentence, use of *or* is preferable as the juxtaposed notions are not alternatives.

Finally, authors sometimes seem to forget that it is necessary to consistently write in the initially chosen English style (American or British) throughout their manuscripts. They may mistakenly combine British spelling with American punctuation and vice versa. For example, in the sentence *The modelling of these processes has been addressed by biologists, chemists, and medical researchers* the word *modelling*, spelt with double *l*, signals British English, while a comma after the penultimate item (*chemists*) in a series of three terms is typical of American English (this comma is often called a serial, Oxford or Harvard comma). Also, it is important to differentiate between British single inverted commas (‘ ’) and American double quotation marks (“ ”) and to use them in consistence with spelling and grammar of the text. It should also be noted that the use of hyphens may differ. For example, hyphens are often used in British English to join prefixes with the main word (as in *co-operate*), while unhyphenated forms (*cooperate*) are common in American English.

Certainly, there are punctuation marks which generate fewer problems, mostly due to their limited use in scientific literature. The exclamation mark, for example, rarely appears in research papers as it expresses emotions, alien for this type of writing. Similarly, the question mark which is used to express doubt or to signal the end of direct questions, typical of oral speech, is not generally recommended in scientific texts. However, it can sporadically be used to raise a research problem to be solved in the paper, as in the following example: *The main question of this study is as follows: are yeast cells or their extracellular metabolites able to reduce aurate to AuNPs ...?* Such direct questions are strong rhetorical devices and require careful preliminary consideration before use.

To sum up, punctuation deserves authors' and editors' attention since it shows relationship between textual passages and helps to produce “easily understandable and readable sentences” which constitute “building blocks” of any consistent research text.¹¹ Correct use of punctuation marks can be achieved by regularly reading English research literature and frequently consulting linguistic reference materials.^{5,12,13} Inclusion of topics related to punctuation into research writing courses and webinars may also improve scientists' writing skills. Finally, knowing the punctuation rules can help to avoid fatal mistakes that occur in such sentences as “Let's eat Grandma!”.

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