

A Quick Guide to Full Stops (.)

Full stops are an essential component of any writer's toolkit. This guide will give you an overview of the basics.

For information and guidance on how to link sentences together using conjunctions and commas, please consult [A Quick Guide to Commas](#) and [A Quick Guide to Writing Sentences](#). For guidance on when to use a semicolon instead of a full stop, please see [A Quick Guide to Semicolons](#).

Please note: This guide contains various exemplars. Where a particular exemplar is incorrectly written, it has a cross next to it (X). Where an exemplar is correctly written to differentiate it from an inaccurate one, it is followed by a tick (✓)

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1: Definitions

i. Full Stop (.)

A full stop is a punctuation mark that is used to end declarative sentences.

A declarative sentence is any sentence that makes a statement:

- There is a range of therapeutic approaches available.
- Some behaviours may have more than one function.
- I am a student.

Following a full stop, we should always use a capital letter at the start of our next sentence:

- A decision to buy a house is important. Seeking professional advice can be helpful.
- Caring for patients with vascular disease has always been challenging. There is now a clearer understanding of the need to provide specialist nursing.
- Small business organisations are usually managed by their owners. This is generally the situation for sole traders.
- Sociologists have taken a variety of approaches to studying the lives of athletes. They have generally used the concept of subculture to describe the cultural system of sports.
- Personal development for professional working is crucial to the person-centred approach. It cannot be left to the vagaries of individual therapy.

2: Why Are Full Stops Important?

If we did not use full stops, it would be very difficult to read and understand written English. Consider the two different versions of this passage. Which one would you rather read?

Version 1

- Appropriate interactions between patient and nurse demand effective communication even the most 'basic' of nursing activities can be enhanced by appropriate communication it has also been found that inappropriate verbal and non-verbal behaviours can provoke anxiety

Version 2

- Appropriate interactions between patient and nurse demand effective communication. Even the most 'basic' of nursing activities can be enhanced by appropriate communication. It has also been found that inappropriate verbal and non-verbal behaviours can provoke anxiety.

A common mistake is to use commas where full stops are necessary. This is called comma-splicing:

Version 3

- Appropriate interactions between patient and nurse demand effective communication, even the most 'basic' of nursing activities can be rendered accurate by appropriate communication, it has also been found that inappropriate verbal and non-verbal behaviours can provoke anxiety.

To Recap:

Firstly, 'run-on' sentences should be avoided, as used in 'Version 1' on page 3. A run-on sentence is when two or more consecutive sentences merge together due to the absence of a full stop:

A: Risk taking is a part of life it should be managed properly. X

B: Risk taking is a part of life. It should be managed properly. ✓

However, it is also incorrect to insert a comma instead of a full stop. This is called comma-splicing:

A: Risk taking is a part of life, it should be managed properly. X

B: Risk taking is a part of life. It should be managed properly. ✓

PAUSE

It is sometimes acceptable to use a semicolon (;) instead of a full stop in the kinds of sentences shown above. For guidance on this, please consult [Section 2 of A Quick Guide to Semicolons](#).

3: What Full Stops Do

i. Different Subject and Different Statement

It may be helpful to think of a full stop as a way of dividing our writing up into distinct units of meaning, or statements that refer to a main subject and an associated action or situation. Consider the following example:

- The lecture was interesting. The students were listening.

Here we have two subjects: (The lecture), and (The students). We want to say something about each of them, so we put them into separate sentences.

We can now add some extra details about the students and the lecture — while still giving each of them one sentence:

- The lecture about the possibilities of AI was very interesting. The students in the hall were listening carefully to every word.

The purpose of the full stop is to separate what we want to say about ‘The lecture’ from what we want to say about ‘The students’. Because we have two different subjects, and need to make a different statement about each of them, we need two sentences.

ii. Same Subject, Different Statement

Sometimes we might be writing about a particular subject while wanting to make more than one statement about that subject.

- The students were listening. They were taking notes.

In the second sentence, the word ‘They’ refers to the students. However, because we have referred directly to them again (using the word ‘They’), and because we then make a different statement about them, we must start a new sentence.

iii. (It is / was), (This is / was), and (There is / are / was / were)

Sometimes we may have to write a sentence in which the subject (underlined in the sentences below) appears at the end:

- It is advisable to make an early medical intervention.
- This was a surprising statistic.
- There are evident problems with the data.

A common error is to attach these kind of sentences onto the end of other sentences, using a comma. This is known as comma splicing, which was explained on pg. 3. In the examples below the 'B' version is correct in each pair.

- A: The procedure is flawed, it is difficult to follow. X
- B: The procedure is flawed. It is difficult to follow. ✓
- A: Her condition improved, this was not expected. X
- B: Her condition improved. This was not expected. ✓
- A: Smoking is harmful, there is evidence for this. X
- B: Smoking is harmful. There is evidence for this. ✓

4: Spotting Sentence Boundaries

When sentences are short, it is easier to see where one ends and the next one begins:

- The methodology is flawed. There are mistakes in the data.
- The methodology is flawed. It should be reviewed.

However, if we want to add more descriptive or explanatory detail to either of our sentences, the challenge becomes greater:

- The methodology used by the research team in the experiment is flawed. There are mistakes in the data.

Although our first sentence is now longer and more detailed, we still have the same subject ('The methodology'), and we are still making the same statement about it (it was 'flawed'). This is separate from the subject 'mistakes in the data', and what we want to say about that. Let's try another example:

- Changing attitudes provoked the search for an alternative medication. This proved challenging.

Let's now add some descriptive and explanatory detail to our first sentence:

- Changing attitudes about the invasive and undignified nature of this treatment provoked the search for an alternative rescue medication that was both effective and acceptable. This proved challenging.

We have not moved away from our subject ('Changing attitudes'), and we are still making the same statement about that subject (they 'provoked the search'). However, this is different from the idea that the search 'proved challenging'.

5: Recognising Sentence Fragments

A sentence must make complete sense, or express a complete idea:

The theory as presented lacks credibility. ✓

However, an incorrectly used full stop can result in sentence fragments:

➤ The theory as presented lacks credibility. In several respects. X

In this example, the incorrect positioning of a full stop has resulted in the phrase 'In several respects' appearing as an incomplete fragment, isolated from the sentence of which it should be a part. What the writer means is:

➤ The theory as presented lacks credibility in several respects. ✓

Learning to spot fragmentary or incomplete sentences in our writing is an effective way of identifying incorrectly used full stops:

➤ The experiment was declared a failure. When the expected result did not occur. X

What the writer means is:

➤ The experiment was declared a failure when the expected result did not occur. ✓

PAUSE

For more detailed guidance on the grammatical rules surrounding sentence fragments, please consult **Section 9 of [A Guide to Writing Sentences](#)**.

6: Consolidation: Sentence Analysis

This guide will conclude with an analysis of the exemplar sentences provided in Section 1. In each case, the analysis will explain why the writer used a full stop to divide their text into two sentences.

- A decision to buy a house is important. Seeking professional advice can be helpful.

1. The writer makes a statement about 'A decision to buy a house' (it is important).
2. The writer makes a separate statement about 'Seeking professional advice' (it can be helpful).

- Caring for patients with vascular disease has always been challenging. There is now a clearer understanding of the need to provide specialist nursing.

1. The writer makes a statement about 'Caring for patients with vascular disease' (it has always been challenging).
2. The writer makes a separate statement, claiming there is a need for 'a clearer understanding of the need to provide specialist nursing'.

- Small business organisations are usually managed by their owners. This is generally the situation for sole traders.
 1. The writer makes a statement about 'Small business organisations' (they are usually managed by their owners).
 2. The writer makes a separate statement that 'This' (the situation outlined in the first sentence) is generally the situation for sole traders.

- Sociologists have taken a variety of approaches to studying the lives of athletes. They have generally used the concept of subculture to describe the cultural system of sports.
 1. The writer makes a statement about 'Sociologists' (they have taken a variety of approaches to studying the lives of athletes).
 2. The writer makes a separate statement about the sociologists ('They'), stating that they have used the concept of subculture to describe the cultural system of sports.

- Personal development for professional working is crucial to the person-centred approach. It cannot be left to the vagaries of individual therapy.
 1. The writer makes a statement about 'Personal development for professional working' (it is crucial to the person-centred approach).
 2. The writer makes a separate statement about personal development for professional working' ('It'), stating that it cannot be left to the vagaries of individual therapy.

7: Further Steps to Improve Your Punctuation

. In addition to studying this guide, we recommend the following steps:

Enrol on the English Support Pages on Blackboard	The English Support site on Blackboard contains resources to help you with all aspects of language development, including punctuation. If you have activated your university account, you can click on the English Language Support tile via the Student Hub.
Consult books and other resources	The Students' Guide to Writing is a useful resource if you want to improve your confidence with punctuation.
Do some analytical reading specifically to develop your awareness of punctuation.	One of the best ways to master full stops is to encounter and study them in their natural setting—in books, journals and online articles. Set some time aside to study passages of English academic writing, and observe how writers divide their writing up into sentences using full stops.
Proof-read	Check and proof-read your work, and try to make sure you are using full stops where they are needed.