

Technical English, Lecture 4: Elementary rules of usage

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1. Form the possessive singular of nouns with 's.
2. In a series of three or more terms with a single conjunction, use a comma after each term except the last.
3. Enclose parenthetic expressions between commas.
4. Place a comma before 'and' or 'but' introducing an independent clause.
5. Do not join independent clauses by a comma.
6. Do not break sentences in two.
7. A participial phrase at the beginning of a sentence refers to the grammatical subject.
8. Divide words at line-ends according to their formation and pronunciation.

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Possessive

Follow this rule whatever the final consonant. Thus write,

- Charles's friend
- Burns's poems
- the witch's malice

Exceptions

Exceptions are the possessives of ancient proper names in -es and -is, the possessive Jesus', and such forms as for conscience' sake, for righteousness' sake. But such forms as Achilles' heel, Moses' laws, Isis' temple are commonly replaced by

- the heel of Achilles
- the laws of Moses
- the temple of Isis

The pronominal possessives hers, its, theirs, yours, and oneself have no apostrophe.

Commas

We use them

- in a series of three or more items,
- in parenthetical expressions, or
- before 'and' or 'but' according to the fourth rule.

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Independent clauses

It is nearly half past five, and we cannot reach town before dark.

It is nearly half past five; we cannot reach town before dark.

It is nearly half past five. We cannot reach town before dark.

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Parenthetical expressions

- The best way to see a country, unless you are pressed for time, is to travel on foot.
- The audience, which had at first been indifferent, became more and more interested.

The second example may be written as:

The audience was at first indifferent. Later it became more and more interested.

What about "The candidate who best meets these requirements will obtain the place."?

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Breaking sentences

"I met them on a ship several years ago. Coming home from Jiddah to Suez."

Do not use periods instead of commas!

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Walking slowly down the road, he saw a woman accompanied by two children.

Who is walking?

What about "On arriving to the train station, his friends met him."?

- A good dictionary helps!
- It is sometimes possible to reword the paragraph and avoid all hyphenations.
- If you are setting your paragraph
 - by hand then follow the rules given in the book regarding formation and pronunciation,
 - otherwise use a good computer program.