

How to

... use commas

As a general rule, you should write short, clear sentences that won't need many commas. It's easy to make a mistake by putting a comma where you really need a full stop.

Write short, clear sentences

A misplaced comma can alter the whole meaning of a sentence, as you can see from the article on the right.

Try this!

Read the article and answer these questions:

- Was the comma necessary?
- Rewrite the sentence 'I have come to the opinion...give in my notice' so that the meaning Mrs Penny intended is clear.

COMMA COST NURSE'S JOB

A comma cost a nurse, Mrs Angela Penny, her job, an industrial tribunal ruled yesterday.

Mrs Penny, aged 50, wrote to her health authority in Torbay, Devon to complain about her senior nurse at a health centre in Beanly.

She said in her letter: "I have come to the opinion Mrs Pepper is out to make my life hell, so I give in my notice." Because of the unintended comma, the health authority took the letter to be her resignation.

When the authority later refused to allow Mrs Penny to withdraw the letter, it was effectively sacking her, the tribunal ruled.

Mrs Penny, who agreed that the letter was worded badly, said: "I cannot write letters, and I did not word it right. I never intended to resign. I meant that she was trying to get me to hand in my notice."

After deciding that Mrs Penny, of Fore Street, Beanly, did not mean to resign, the tribunal adjourned a hearing of unfair dismissal.

Commas can cause confusion

Use commas in a list

You can use a comma to separate items in a series or list. These items may be composed of one word or a group of words. There is not usually a comma before the final 'and'. For example:

- The client bought some shoes, a hat, a jersey and a scarf.
- He went to college on Tuesday, visited three clients on Wednesday and caught up with some paperwork on Thursday.
- We aim to provide a safe, caring and efficient service.

Commas can separate items in a list

Try this!

Insert commas into the following sentences about mental health.

- 1 The campaign is backed by the Commission for Racial Equality Age Concern Stonewall mental health charities and celebrities.
- 2 The psychiatrists community psychiatric nurses and primary care specialists said that ageism and racism affected mental health.
- 3 You will be able to obtain videos leaflets and booklets on understanding mental health from the website.
- 4 The experience of our patients is that discriminatory attitudes are widespread within the general public the medical profession employers, banks insurance companies and many other organisations.

Mark off introductory words

You can also use commas to mark off introductory words at the beginning of a sentence. For example:

- At the same time, we need to remind ourselves that some form of mental health problem affects every family in the UK.
- Having washed the client, Jane found some clean underclothes.
- However we consider this matter, it is bound to cause hardship to some.
- However, we consider that this matter should be dealt with right away.

Commas can mark off introductory words at the start of a sentence

Try this!

Insert commas where necessary in the following sentences.

- 1 Although the fire engines arrived immediately the fire was not put out till the early hours of the morning.
- 2 No matter how difficult the conditions they were determined to make it as comfortable for the clients as possible.
- 3 Being tired when he got home he went straight to bed.

Use commas instead of brackets

You can use a comma in the same way as brackets. For example:

- Jimmy Lawton, **the team manager**, has a great deal of experience of care work.
- Helen, **the new supervisor**, was unexpectedly popular.
- Helen helped the client book a holiday via the Internet. She chose to go to Home Farm, **a place that offers riding for the disabled**.

The phrase 'the team manager' describes 'Jimmy Lawton' and is separated from the rest of the sentence by commas. The phrase could be omitted and the sentence would still make sense.

Commas can be used in the same way as brackets

Try this!

Insert commas where necessary in the following sentences.

- 1 He said his name was Charlie Hood the team leader.
- 2 I the undersigned agree to abide by the conditions of the contract.
- 3 Mary decided as she had the 'flu to stay in bed.