

IELTS GENERAL TRAINING

Punctuation

The errors examiners penalise, and how to stop making them

Ronacker Solutions · LaunchPad Career Toolkit

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1. Why punctuation is worth marks

Punctuation is assessed under Grammatical Range and Accuracy in Writing, and it is also marked in Listening — where a misplaced apostrophe or a missing capital in a proper noun can cost you the answer outright.

The good news is that punctuation is a small, closed set of rules. Unlike vocabulary, you can fix it completely in an afternoon and never lose those marks again.

The three that cost the most

Comma splices, apostrophe errors and missing capitals. Between them they account for the large majority of punctuation penalties in IELTS scripts. Everything else in this guide is secondary.

2. The comma splice

Joining two complete sentences with only a comma. It is the most common punctuation error in the test, and most candidates do not know they are making it.

THE ERROR

The training was excellent, it prepared me well for the assessment.

Both halves are complete sentences. A comma cannot hold them together.

Four ways to fix it

Fix	Result
Full stop	The training was excellent. It prepared me well for the assessment.
Semicolon	The training was excellent; it prepared me well for the assessment.
Comma + conjunction	The training was excellent, and it prepared me well for the assessment.
Subordinate one half	Because the training was excellent, I was well prepared for the assessment.

Words that cause splices

However, therefore, moreover, furthermore, nevertheless and consequently are **not** conjunctions. They cannot join two sentences with a comma.

Wrong: *The cost was high, however the quality was good.*

Right: *The cost was high. However, the quality was good.*

Right: *The cost was high; however, the quality was good.*

Only seven words can join two sentences after a comma — **for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so**. If your joining word is not one of those seven, you need a full stop or a semicolon.

3. Commas

Where commas belong

Rule	Example
After an introductory phrase or clause	<i>In my view</i> , the policy has failed.
Before a conjunction joining two sentences	The wages were low, <i>but</i> the training was valuable.
Around non-essential information	My supervisor, <i>who trained me personally</i> , wrote the reference.
Between items in a list	welding, fitting, machining and fabrication
After a linking word starting a sentence	<i>However</i> , the situation has changed.

Where commas do not belong

DO	DON'T
• Employers value candidates who have practical experience. • I believe that training should be funded. • The report showed that costs had risen. • Candidates with certificates are prioritised.	• Employers value candidates, who have practical experience. (changes the meaning) • I believe, that training should be funded. • The report showed, that costs had risen. • Candidates with certificates, are prioritised. (never between subject and verb)

The defining comma changes meaning

Candidates who hold certificates are prioritised means only those with certificates.

Candidates, who hold certificates, are prioritised means all candidates — and, incidentally, they all have certificates.

If removing the phrase would change who or what you mean, use no commas.

4. Apostrophes

Two jobs only: possession and contraction. Nothing else. Apostrophes never make anything plural.

Situation	Form	Example
Singular possession	's	the <i>employer's</i> requirements
Plural ending in -s	s'	the <i>employers'</i> requirements (several)
Irregular plural	's	the <i>children's</i> education
Contraction	'	<i>don't, it's, I've</i>
Plain plural	no apostrophe	three <i>certificates</i>

its versus it's

its = belonging to it. *The company raised its standards.*

it's = it is or it has. *It's a demanding role.*

The test: if you can expand it to *it is*, use the apostrophe. If you cannot, do not. Note that **its** follows the same logic as *his* and *hers*, which take no apostrophe either.

The apostrophes that should not exist

- CV's for more than one CV — write **CVs**.
- 1990's for the decade — write **1990s**.
- *The Smith's* for the family — write **the Smiths**.
- *Your's, her's, their's* — none of these exist.

In formal Writing Task 2, avoid contractions entirely. That removes half the apostrophe risk at a stroke.

5. Capitals, full stops and the rest

Capital letters

Capitalise	Examples
The first word of every sentence	<i>The</i> policy was introduced.
Names of people, places, organisations	Ronald, Johannesburg, Engineers Australia
Nationalities and languages	Zimbabwean, Shona, English
Days, months, holidays	Monday, August, Christmas
Titles before names	Dr Moyo, Mr Ndlovu
The pronoun I	always, everywhere

Do **not** capitalise seasons (*winter*), general subjects (*engineering* unless part of a course title), job titles standing alone (*the manager*), or random words for emphasis.

In Listening, use capitals throughout

Answers written entirely in capital letters are never penalised, and they remove any doubt about proper nouns and any argument about your handwriting. It is a free safeguard — use it.

Full stops and sentence length

Long sentences are not sophisticated; controlled ones are. If a sentence has run past about 25 words, read it aloud in your head — if you lose the thread, so will the examiner. Split it.

Semicolons and colons

Mark	Use	Example
Semicolon ;	Joins two closely related complete sentences	The training was thorough; the assessment was straightforward.
Colon :	Introduces a list or an explanation	Three documents are required: a passport, a certificate and a reference.

Neither is compulsory. One well-placed semicolon in an essay shows range; five look like a tic. If you are not confident with them, full stops cost you nothing.

What to avoid entirely in formal writing

DO	DON'T
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- Full stops, commas, apostrophes used correctly
- One semicolon or colon where it genuinely fits
- Capitals for the pronoun I and all proper nouns
- Paragraph breaks with a blank line between

- Exclamation marks — never in Task 2
- Question marks, unless you are using a rhetorical question deliberately
- Dashes and ellipses — they read as informal
- Brackets — rewrite the sentence instead
- *etc.*, *e.g.*, & — write the words out
- ALL CAPS for emphasis

The one-minute punctuation check

1. Find every comma. Are the two halves either side both complete sentences? If so, you have a splice — fix it.
2. Find every apostrophe. Is it possession or contraction? If neither, delete it.
3. Check every proper noun has a capital, and every sentence starts with one.
4. Find any sentence over 25 words and consider splitting it.

How to practise

Take a paragraph you have already written and rewrite it three ways: once using only full stops, once using commas with conjunctions, once using subordination. Doing this five or six times builds the instinct for which punctuation each join actually needs.

Ready to practise properly?

Reading a guide tells you what to do. Marked practice tells you whether you are doing it. The Ronacker LaunchPad gives you full timed IELTS practice with band feedback on every answer — Writing marked against all four criteria, Speaking with a live examiner-style roleplay, and Reading and Listening scored instantly.

Start free: launch.ronackersolutions.co.za

WhatsApp: +27 68 522 8197

Email: ronald@ronackersolutions.co.za