

## Punctuation Marks in English Language Written Essay among Senior Secondary School Students in Nigeria.

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**ABSTRACT:** Punctuation marks are the tools that allow the users of the English language to organize his thoughts and make it easier to review and share out ideas. The Standard English punctuation marks are as follows: period, comma, apostrophe, quotation, exclamation, brackets, braces, parenthesis, dash, hyphen, ellipsis, colon, semicolon. Thus, study assesses punctuation marks errors in English language written essay by senior Secondary School Students. Errors in English punctuation in this study were categorized as mechanical errors in essay writing with particular emphasis on punctuation marks and spelling. This paper adopts a descriptive research design of ex-post-facto type. It was indicated that students made more errors in punctuation marks than in spellings. This could be attributed to lack of knowledge and understanding of common mistakes made in English. Part of the recommendations made was that; teachers should concentrate on areas of difficulties such as comma, colon and semi-colon for students and conclusion on this paper was drawn based on the variables discussed therein.

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### I. INTRODUCTION

Letters and symbols are very important in writing. While letters are alphabets symbols are punctuations. Punctuations (or sometimes inter-punctuation) is the use of spacing, conventional signs (called punctuation marks), and certain typographical devices as aids to the understanding and correct reading of written text, whether read silently or aloud. According to Azubuike (2018), punctuation is the use of symbols such as full stops or periods, commas, or question marks to divide written words into sentences and clauses. Nwankwo and Nwigbo (2019) opined that punctuation refers to the practice or system of using certain conventional marks or characters in writing or printing in order to separate elements and make the meaning clear, as in ending a sentence or separating clauses. In the context of this study, punctuation is the practice, action, or system of inserting points or other small marks into texts in order to aid interpretation: division of text into sentences, clauses among others, by means of such marks.

In written English, punctuation is vital to disambiguate, or remove uncertainty from the meaning of sentences. For example: ‘woman, without her man, is nothing’ (emphasizing the importance of men to women), and ‘woman, without her, man is nothing’ (emphasizing the importance of woman to men) have very different meanings; as do ‘eats shoots and leaves’ (which means the subject consumes plant growths) and ‘eats, shoots, and leaves’ (which means the subject eats first, then fires a weapon, and then leaves the scene) (Offor, 2018). The sharp differences in meaning are produced by the simple differences in punctuation within the example pairs, especially the latter. The rules of punctuation vary with language, location, register, and time and are constantly evolving. Certain aspects of punctuation are stylistic and are thus the author’s (or editor’s) choice, or tachygraphic (shorthand) language forms, such as those used in online chat and text messages. Lack of proper use and application of punctuation marks would be equated to a new car without an effective brake system. That is, the knowledge of the other elements of the language, without the ability to skillfully use the punctuation marks will not enable an individual to write meaningfully and effectively in the language. Certain problems of ambiguity cannot be solved in English but only through the use of punctuation marks.

Adekunle (2015), states that it is hard, if not impossible, for one to write an essay appropriately in English or understand the same without properly applying these punctuation marks. It is unanimously agreed, by linguistics across the world that structure in English is complex because it is composed of many interrelated and interdependent ideas that need to be marked before they would be understood by readers. As such, the need is reinforced for the use and application of punctuation marks, in the process of writing and reading such structures. Murthy (2017), believes that punctuation plays an important role in developing writing skills. Here, it is clear that the use of punctuation marks is necessary in writing an essay meaningfully and getting what is written understood. It could also be understood from the above that, not even at the secondary school level, but at whatever level one must use punctuation marks in order to write meaningfully and in order to put the next

through. Manser (2016), asserts that ‘the purpose of punctuation mark is to make the meaning of the sentences and text’. This statement shows that to avoid writing meaninglessly, punctuation marks should be used: so that, the meaning of the text could be understood by the reader and subsequently got the text appreciated. Pryse (2013), submits that ‘what might be a good writing is so often spoiled by lack or bad punctuation’. Hence, one can safely say that to avoid spoliation of any writing proper use of punctuation marks should be ensured. And, it could also be said that in order to avoid misinterpretation of what one writes one should make sure that, one’s writing is properly punctuated. The researcher is inspired to take up the study on the effect of use of punctuation marks on the performance of SS2 students in some selected schools in Ebonyi State by the statistical data provided by unpublished thesis written by Usman (2012), that evaluated the impact of information technology on the spelling of students, which indicated that 52.8% did not use punctuation at all, while 48% over used it. The researcher is also inspired by the growing tendency in modern usage of omitting some punctuation in the process of writing e.g. when my father said to me I will go to Mecca with you this year I am very happy and never forget that day, (Usman, 2012:45).

- Pre-eminent or preeminent
- Non-functional or functional
- Non-pollutant or non pollutant

The above are examples of how the old and young generations of writers affect punctuation with those with dash written by old generation and those without by new generation respectively, Kirpatrick (2017), laments the lack of punctuating writing by younger generation thus: ‘Modern writers tend to punctuate much more lightly than their older counter parts this goes hand with the modern tendency to use less formal language and a plainer style (Kirkpatrick, 2017:210)’. The researcher is equally inspired by the variation in the use of punctuation among writers, for some use it heavily while others use it lightly. Thus, the paper examines the effect of punctuation errors in essay writing among secondary school students in Onicha Local Government Area of Ebonyi State.

## **II. PUNCTUATION MARKS IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE WRITTEN ESSAY :**

Ataman (2012:76), states that ‘punctuation marks aid clarity and understanding of written communication. This is the art of indicating pauses and stopping points in writing. When we talk, we always pause to breathe or rest, and when we finish, we stop. This is what punctuation marks do in writing. If for example, a paragraph or sentence is written without these pauses or they are wrongly placed, reading it will be very difficult’. This means, for effective spoken or written communication, punctuation mark should be used accordingly. Misusing then by students will result to poor performance in written English. Punctuation marks could be classified into two main types namely; terminal markers (fullstop, question mark, exclamation mark) which indicate end of sentence or utterance and the internal markers (comma, Colon, semi-colon) denote the interruption of thought in a sentence. Ataman (2012:76), itemized different types of punctuation marks which include: fullstop or period (.), the question or interrogative mark (?), the exclamation mark (!), the comma (,), the semi-colon (;), the colon (:), apostrophe (“), the interred comma (-), the dash, the bracket (()).

The full stop or period

A lady answered my question.

The question mark

Did you miss the test?

The exclamation mark.

Yes, you!

The Comma

The accident occurred yesterday, Monday, June 9, 2011.

The semi-colon.

I invited John, Yusif. Abdul and Isa to the concert; but Bola Chukwa and Asobie also

followed us.

The Colon.

The lecturer asked her: "Are you with us?"

The apostrophe

'96. won't, her's.

The interred comma

..come, let us reason together'. They said.

The dash

Mary - for all I know - never loved Okon.

**The Bracket:** A bracket, as used in British English, is either of two tall fore- or back-

facing punctuation marks commonly used to isolate a segment of text or data from its surroundings. Soccer (my favourite game) is the most popular game all over the world.

The full stop or period (.); the fullstop is used to mark the end of a declarative sentence, an imperative sentence or an indirect quotation as shown i) A lady answered my question (dec) ii) Answer my question lady (imperative) iii) I asked whether the lady could answer the question (as indirect question). The above indicates that the misuse or non-use of a full stop would definitely affect the performance of students in essay writing. This is because if he does not use the full stop inappropriately, he would have his sentences running out of control until their meaning is lost. The full stop is used for shortened forms of words (Gen. Ref. for 'general' and reference'). It is also used in triflats to indicate the omission of words within a quoted sentences, and three periods plus a terminal period to indicate omission at the end of a quoted sentence e.g. When I got home I ate the meal prepared by my daughter.

... I ate the meal...

These three dots are called ellipsis or omission marks.

The other uses of the full stop above show that the non-application or misuse of the period would affect the performance of students writing an essay, if they do not use them appropriately they would not be able to abbreviate or ellipse quoted sentences. The researcher views Atman's point (2017) on the use of full stop or period as incomplete because he failed to include other uses of full stop in relation to email and website addresses e.g.

- Sample, name@metro.ne
- Info @sampleaddress.co.uk

And in website address, such as www.sample-url.com (Kirkpatric, 2017:181)

In the same vein, the researcher also is dissatisfied with the use of fullstop postulated by Atman (2017) as he has not made mention of the use of fullstop.

i. At the end of a group of words, which although not a sentence, is complete in itself, such as an address e.g. Dockyard Road. Apapa

ii. When money is written in figure: N13.45, E2.30 (Namme& Smith, (2011)

In addition, Ahmad. Jowitt. Abdu & Ahmad (2019:45) assert that 'punctuation are the main signs other than letters that divide up written language into units of meaning. Based on the above statement, it would be understood that the use of punctuation marks affects the performance of an essay writer. This is because, if the writer does not divide up the language into units of meaning, he is likely to develop and present ideas in his

essay that may not convey his message to the readers. And if this happens, his performance at writing the essay may be rated poor.

The comma (,) is the most commonly required and used symbol. However, it is also the less understood and so most misused punctuation. The comma (,) is used;

i. to mark subordinate components of a sentence when such components are not logically necessary to complete the sentence e.g. He came here earlier, looking tired and haggard.

ii. to enclose appositives in the form of noun or noun-phrases that explain a preceding noun or pronoun: e.g. Mohammad Bashir, the only male child in the family so far, is expected to read medicine.

iii. to mark noun phrase in direct speech: e.g. Good friend, repeat that good news.

iv. In dates to separate the name of month or day of month from the year: e.g. The election of June 12, 2013 plunged Nigeria into crises. The election of 12 June, 2013 plunged Nigeria into crises.

v. to mark adjectives or adverbial modifiers e.g. Musa is a pleasant person, quick witted, always entertaining his friends..

vi. to separate dependent clause for the purpose of avoiding ambivalence or confusion in meaning: Ambivalent: While I wrote, the women kept on reading. Better: While I wrote, the woman kept on reading.

vii. to indicate parenthetical expressions that have no direct grammatical function except to improve general meaning in a sentence: e.g. The students, on their own part, have not been involved in acts of hooliganism.

viii. for absolute phrases: e.g.

My lesson over, I left the class immediately..

Dinner having been served, we went a head to eat.

ix. for interjections not strong to require an exclamation mark: e.g.

Oh friend, why did you not tell me.

X. for complete enclosure when used in pairs: c.g.

My words, which were addressed to students in the class only, were hash.

(Ahmad et al. 2019)

Other uses of commas

A parenthetical expression must be completely set off from the rest of the sentence. If parenthetical expression occurs at the beginning of a sentence, it is followed by a comma, if the parenthetical expression is at the end of a sentence, it is preceded by a comma and if the parenthetical expression is at the middle of the sentence it is both preceded and followed by a comma. E.g.

i. No. I don't know where they keep their knives

ii. The winner of the contest was Judy, not Jili.

iii. Some seafood, especially swordfish and tilefish, may contain harmful amounts of mercury. (Choy and Clark, 2011). Though, the explanation on the use of comma seems comprehensive, but still the researcher feels that, Ahmad, Jowitt, Abdu & Ahmad's (2019), study on the use of comma, is incomplete because they have failed to make an inclusion of other uses of comma such as:

i. After the person addressed at the beginning of a letter Dear John,

ii. After the expression which is used immediately before the signature at the end of a letter: Yours Sincerely.  
Frances.

iii. At the end of lines (apart from the last) in addresses:

St mark's high school,

P.O.B box, 2010,

Ibadan.

iv. To close a word or words addressed directly to some persons: e.g.

Please, Sir, tell me the answer (Namme and Smith: 2011:166)

Jowitz & Nnamonu (2015) assert that 'punctuation means the use of printed signs other than letters namely: full stops. Colon, semi-colon, commas, inverted commas, apostrophes, question and exclamation marks, hyphens, dashes and brackets. They are essential for dividing up written language into units that convey meaning. The wrong use of them, or failure to use them, will easily lead to misunderstanding'.

Namme & Smith (2011:165) view 'punctuation isa device used by a writer to help his readers understand the meaning of his words, by conveying in print or writing, the tones, inflexions and pauses of spoken, words, punctuation marks are signposts that should help the readers to find his way over the printed or written page' e.g.

i. When the thief shot. Ashlay James called the police.

ii. When the thief shot Ashlay. James called the police.

In view of the afore-mentioned statement and the examples cited above, it is understandable that the performance of students in essay writing would be affected by the use of punctuation marks. This is because, if we look at the two sentences quoted, we would find that they have the same wordings but different meanings as a result of the placement of the punctuation marks, for the first sentence shows that the thief shot only and subsequently Ashlay James called the police. While sentence two shows that the thief shot Ashlay and subsequently, James called the police. So, based on these wordings but different meanings, we can see the effect of the use of punctuation marks on the performance of a writer in general and students in essay writing in particular. This is because, if the comma is misused or used wrongly the writer could not have helped his reader understand the meaning of either of the sentences.

According to Namme& Smith (2011) the semicolon (;) is used

- i) To separate items in a list when the items have several words and often need the use of commas within themselves as in: 'You should remember these things when you go camping: check that all your gear is in order; see that you are equipped for emergencies: if you are trekking over uninhabited country, take a good supply of food; take a first aid kit-you never know when it might be needed and as far as possible, plan your route'.
- ii) To indicate that the writer wants the reader to pause and consider for a slightly longer time than he would for a comma. e.g. 'It is often better to tackle the difficult question rather than the easy one; because the difficult question is likely to draw the best out of you'.
- iii) To divide a sentence which consists of two balanced statements: e.g. I. A man who evades paying his taxes is a bad citizen; but one who pays without thinking why he is paying is equally bad. The researcher feels dissatisfied with the postulation given on the use of semi-colon as incomplete having not included, the use of semi- colon as a separation device before certain adverbs e.g. however; nevertheless; hence; moreover etc. A paragraph is a division in writing set off by an indentation of the first sentence as a sign for the reader of what constitutes a unit of thought (Brooks & Warren, 1949 cited in Kamal, 2011).

Paragraphing affects the performance of students in essay writing, because when writing an essay each idea is expected to be developed into a comprehensive paragraph, the idea would be understood as an entity before it merges to form the overall meaning of the essay. For this reason, if paragraphing is misused or used wrongly, the essay will be distorted, and the performance of writer negatively affected.

Patience, Cythia, Joy & Muhammad (2017) asserts that 'punctuation involves the use of signs or marks to divide writing in sentences, clauses, phrases or into minimum unit of meaning in order to convey ideas or information clearly and accurately. E.g. I. The ugly man, standing outside, who stammers is our teacher.

II. In order to secure a seat. he arrived early at the stadium.

III. We bought the book which he recommended, because it is well written.

(Ogunsanwo, Duruaku. Ezechukwao & Nwachukwa 2010) I. Still water must be transported to dry areas.

The effect of the use of punctuation could be seen in this sentence because without a comma after still the water could not be transported to the dry areas. This is because still water means water that does not move.

II. Politicians sometimes make controversial remarks bureaucrats never

This sentence also shows the effect of punctuation because without a comma after bureaucrats the sentence is meaningless.

III. Those who can pay and forgo consumption of other essential goods. This sentence also clearly shows the effect of punctuation. This is because without the placement of a comma after can the sentence is confusing.

iv. Its motor is small and its a small motor

Lack of punctuation here shows meaninglessness of the two sentences. This is because without an apostrophe after s in its to show possession the sentence is meaningless while without an apostrophe before s in its in second sentence the subject is not properly used.

The above description of punctuation and the sentences cited clearly show how the effect of the use of punctuation marks affects the performance of a writer, particularly an essay writer. This is because unless the sentences are punctuated, their meaning would not have been brought to the surface for the reader to understand. And being the components of an essay, the misunderstanding of the meaning would eventually affect the understanding of the essay written by an essay writer.

### **The Question Mark (?)**

The question mark is used after direct (but not after an indirect question) e.g.

The question mark is used: i. After direction question

Who started the rumor? (direct question)

She asked who had started the rumor (Indirect question)

iii. after direct question within a direct question followed by one question mark inside the quotation mark. E.g. Pilate asked, 'What is Truth?'

iv. after a series of quotations having the same subject and verb may be treated as elliptical: that is, only the first item includes both subject and verb. E.g.

Did they clean the attic? The basement? The whole house?

i. within parenthesis used to express the writer's uncertainty about the correctness of the proceeding word. figure. or date:

Chaucer was born in 1340? And died in 1400.

(Hodges, Whitten & Horner 2010:167).

Murthy (2017:318) asserts punctuation plays an important role in developing writing skills. It is very often proved that punctuation may alter the meaning of a sentence' e.g.

I. The principal, says the student, should be expelled from the college.

II. The principal says that the student should be expelled from the college.

The explanation that, the punctuation may alter the meaning of a sentence indicates how lack of punctuation marks could also alter the meaning of an essay. It also shows how the effect of the use of punctuation marks affects the performance of an essay writer. for, if he does not carefully and appropriately use the punctuation marks, he may end up writing an essay that does not convey any message, which would eventually affect his general performance.

To buttress this point, one should study the above two sentences and see how the use of punctuation marks changes the meaning of the two sentences even though, they have the same wording.

The first sentence shows that it is the student who suggested the principal should be expelled, while the second sentence indicates that it is the principal who suggested the student should be expelled.

### The Capital Letter

Capital letters are used in the following cases:

at the beginning of a sentence e.g.

Prevention is better than cure.

Necessity is the mother of invention.

at the beginning of each line in poetry e.g.

My days among the dead are past.

When I am dead, my dearest,

Sing no sad song for me:

Sunset and evening star,

And one clear call for me.

at the beginning of name of people, places, mountains, rivers e.g.

Azikiwe. Abuja, River Niger, The Himalayas etc.

formation and adjective indicating nationality.

Nigeria, Nigerian, America, American, Canada, Canadian.

at the beginning of names of days, months, festivals and historical eras. e.g. Monday,

New Yam Festival, the Middle Ages, November, the Independent Day etc.

at the beginning of names of books, plays and works of art. e.g.

The Qur'an, The Bible, the Dictionary, King Lear, The Tempest etc.

for titles of people and names of things when we refer to unique examples e.g. The king of England. The President of Nigeria, The Emperor of China, The Golden Fleece.

for all adjectives derived from proper nouns, e.g.

Muslim, Christian. Himalayan. Nigerian, Herculean. for all nouns and proper nouns standing for God.

The Lord. The pronoun I and the interjection O

(Murthy: 2017)

Pryse (2013:57) views 'So much of what might otherwise be good writing is so often spoiled by lack of or bad punctuation' e.g.

When an adverb occurs between two verbs with which it should be meaningfully associated, in the absence of correct punctuation. the following type of ambiguous statements will result e.g.

Those who returned safely travelled to their village.

Here we do not know what was done safely the returning or the travelling to the village, which is largely due to the effect of non use of correct punctuation mark. But, if the correct punctuation marks are used, the meaning of the sentence and what was done safely could be established, thus we have.

- i. Those who returned, safely travelled to their village.
- ii. Those who returned safely, travelled to their village.

The effect of punctuation could be seen in the following pair of sentences that is, if comma is placed after returned then it indicates that it is traveling that is done safely. While if the comma is placed after safely, it indicates that, it is the returning that is done safely.

Another example is.

- i. People who shout, loudly complain of headaches.
- ii. People who shout loudly, complain of headaches

In the second pair of sentence, the effect of punctuation could also be seen for, if the comma is put after shout then it is the complaint of a headache that is made loudly. However if a comma is placed after loudly then it is the shouting that is done loudly.

This is also the same as the first example, that it would only be understood what was done loudly through the effect of the use of punctuation mark.

Based on the description of what punctuation is capable of doing and the ambiguity of the sentences when written without any punctuation, one can safely conclude that the effect of the use of punctuation mark, could seriously affect the performance of an essay writer. This is because if in writing sentences, one could come up with such a level of ambiguity, due to lack of punctuation marks what more of when writing a whole essay.

### **The Colon (:)**

A colon is used

- i. When the first part of a sentence is complete in sense, though followed by another remark arising from it and depending on it for sense, but in construction e.g.  
Try to be honest at all times: nothing is so important in business life.
- ii. for introducing a saying, speech, example. question and so on. e.g.

We all know the famous quotation from Shakespear:

All the world's stage.

(Pryse, 2013)

The researcher feels the use of colon as postulated by the writer is incomplete having not included other uses of the punctuation mark, such as using it for two independent ideas contained in an utterance, the second of which is an explanation or a restatement of the first and the use of colon in numerals such as 7:30, 22:11:72 and a ratio 7:3.



Adekunle (2017:129) says 'these punctuation marks help us know the various ideas contained in an utterance so that we may not confuse one with any other in context. They make it easy for us to see the correct relationship - among the words and expressions which make up an utterance'.

The statement is suggestive and indicative that; the success or failure of the performance of an essay writer depends largely on the effect of the use of punctuation marks. This is because, it is the ideas contained in an essay and the correct relationship that makes up the totality of the essay. It is also the correlation of the ideas contained in the essay that conveys the message of the passage and makes it sensible and meaningful to the reader.

E.g.

I. A man usually makes a scene if he finds his wife looking at another man; if he doesn't, he usually has a reason of his own for keeping quite.

II. It was a very good party and we had excellent food, soup, Jollof rice, salad and fried chicken.

### **Quotation Marks ('')**

This punctuation mark is used to set off the exact words of a speaker, specific concept or term, an expression for which the author does not want to take responsibility, and so identify slangs. E.g.

i. Exact words used

The chairman of the board frowned and said, 'cheat the workers? Count me out'.

ii. Specific concept or term

The word 'Stagflation is the appropriate term for the present economic situation.

iii. Borrowed Expression

The Yorubas in Serra Leone are referred to as 'ekus'

iv. Slangs

He was so ill after drinking three bottles of gogoro that he rarely 'quenched' (Adekunle:

2017)

Manser (2016:348) asserts the purpose of punctuation is to make clear the meaning of sentences and texts. This is achieved by controlling the shape of sentences, through the use of periods, commas, semicolons, and so on, thereby breaking up texts into manageable pieces. Punctuation enables connections to be made between clauses and sentences so that they combine to form an intelligible narrative' e.g.

i. The foreign ambassador who arrived today said the president is to be trusted. Without any punctuation beyond the initial capital letter and the final period, this sentence appears to suggest that the foreign ambassador was one of the several ambassadors arriving on different days and that it is he or she who said the president was to be trusted.

The same sentence has a different meaning however, when two commas are inserted.

E.g.

i. The foreign ambassador, who arrived today, said the president was to be trusted.

Here, it is clear only one foreign ambassador, who just arrived, is under discussion and as before, that he or she was the person who believed the president was to be trusted.

Yet, another interpretation is possible when quotation marks are inserted. e.g. 'The foreign ambassador, who arrived today,' said the president 'is to be trusted'. Here, it is the president who speaks and declares that the foreign ambassador who just arrived is to be trusted.

Note that, with the exception of the punctuation marks all the three examples are identically worded.

So based on the description of what punctuation involves and the changes identified with the sentences wherever a different punctuation mark is used, we can safely say the use of punctuation marks on the performance of an essay writer cannot be over emphasized. This is because, if we look at how phrases, clauses and sentences combine to form an intelligible narrative and how through the effect of the use of punctuation marks the three sentences are made to have different meaning, we can definitely say the above without any fear of contradiction.

### **Apostrophe (,')**

An apostrophe (,') denotes possession of something or a possessive relationship with another person (mother's room. my brother's house, the book's cover, my friend's sister). In the case of names or singular nouns ending in s, x, or z, the apostrophe may or may not be followed by S. The general rule is that possessive nouns are formed by adding..s to a singular noun (the girl's dog, the people's choice). In the case of plural nouns that end in S the possessive noun is formed by adding a final apostrophe (a bees nest, the solders' barracks; five years' experience). Apostrophe is used in contraction (can't, shouldn't they..re. they..ve). Apostrophes are not generally employed to make singular nouns plural, but there are a very few circumstances in which they may fulfil this function (she cannot pronounce her r's, this part of cards has no 5's). (Manser:2016)

Pink& Thomes (1970:117) view in order to assist, the reader to grasp readily the meaning of a written sentence, certain stops or marks of punctuation are inserted to indicate where pauses would naturally be made in reading the sentence'.

The statement quoted above indicates how the performance of an essay writer is affected by the use of punctuation marks. This is because, the aim and objective of any body writing an essay is to make the meaning of his sentences understood by his reader which would eventually culminate to the total understanding of the meaning of the passage.

The inverted commas (\*\*') are used to indicate direct speech

- i. A strange house is this', said I to Antonio.
- ii. 'Mary I said solemnly. 'you must not laugh at me now'

They are also used to indicate quotation from or the titles, novels, plays, essays etc.

Blakesmoor in H - Shire

### **Dash**

- i. The Dash (--) is used to mark a parenthesis or an abrupt change of though e.g.

i. At last - to cut a long story short - we reach the harbor.

ii. Proceeding to our next point - but I fear I bore you.

iii. It is used before repeated word.

iv. It is also inserted before the demonstrative pronoun these, those, such, when they are used at the beginning of the main statement to sum up a number of items previously mentioned. (Source: pink & Thomas 1970). Aloba (2018) asserts 'punctuation is an aspect of the mechanical skill of writing, any write up that is not properly punctuated is a write off Any write-up that is not properly punctuated is a write off. This posits the effect of punctuation marks on the essay performance of a writer. This is because, if an essay is not properly punctuated, no matter how well written, it is going to be a writer off which would eventually fault the essay in particular and the performance of the writer in general and which would also affect the communication between the writer and the reader.

### **The round brackets ()**

The round bracket is used to mark off a strong parenthesis when the writer feels that a stronger mark than a pair of commas is needed. E.g. Caesar's ambition (so skillfully denied by Mark Anthony) was feared by Brutus.

### **The square brackets | |**

The square is used to indicate that the words enclosed within quoted matter are not part of the original material e.g. The critical passage is: „I do not deny that it [the treasure] played a part in my plans. (Alobo, 2018). Quirt & Green Baum (1973), assert that 'punctuation serves two main functions: separation of successive unit, included units and specification of language'.

The above assertion shows how the effect of the use of punctuation marks can affect the performance of an essay writer. This is because unless separation of successive units, included units is affected the whole write-up in bound to be distorted, for nobody could make sense out of it. And unless specification of language function is established. there is likely going to be a misinterpretation of sentences, which will definitely affect the general performance of the essay writer e.g.

- i. John has gone already?
- ii. Isn't she beautiful!

Without considering the specification signs, the grammatical form would otherwise suggest that the first is a statement, and the second a question.

Odiaka (1974) posits that punctuation is the correct use of the capital letter, fullstop

(.) Comma (.) question mark (?) quotation marks (,) apostrophe (..) hyphen (--) and the exclamation mark (!): they make what we read or write much clearer'.

The above postulation indicates the effect of the use of punctuation marks on the performance an essay writer. This is because, it is only when punctuation marks are employed that a writer writes and a reader reads much more clearly.

Though it shows how punctuation marks affect the performance of a writer, the researcher still feels that the postulation is incomplete and incomprehensive, having ignored other punctuation marks which are necessary for making writing much more clearer.

Punctuation is described as the ..traffic of written words, as well as reading which a good writer must employ, and a good reader must obey. Faulty punctuation always slows up reading, and may lead to the misinterpretation of the meaning and consequently a breakdown in communication (Burton & Humphries: 2011)

The above assertion clearly shows the effect of the use of punctuation marks on the performance of SS2 students writing an essay. This is because, when an essay is written, it is written to establish an effective communication with a reader, who interprets the essay in line with the writer. But, when the reader misinterprets the meaning of the essay due to lack or bad punctuation, the communication breaks down which eventually affects the performance of the writer.

Kirkpatrick (2017), submits that punctuation is the use of certain established marks or symbols within a piece of written text. Punctuation prevents a piece of text from being just a string of words by breaking up the string of words into meaningful units and by making the text more fluent. Basically, punctuation marks can be seen as symbols which are used to separate and join units of language into cohesive text.

The last sentence of the above statement indicates the effect of the use of punctuation marks on the performance of an essay writer. This is because, it is only when units are separated or joined that a text is made cohesive. And it is only when the text or essay is cohesive, that the message gets to the receiver as correctly and accurately as intended by the writer.

### **Hyphen**

A hyphen, written as a small stroke - is used to join two words together or indicate that a word has been broken at the end of a line because of lack of space. It is used in a variety of situations. A hyphen is used

- i. as the prefixed element in proper noun as: Pre-Christian, post-renaissance. anti-British pro-American etc.
- ii. before dates or numbers. as in: Pre-1914. pre-1066. post-1920. post-1745.
- iii. before abbreviations as pro-BBC, anti-Eu and anti-True.
- iv. Sometime for clarification and to avoid confusion. Some words are ambiguous without the presence of a hyphen e.g. re-cover as in re-cover a chair is spelled with a hyphen to differentiate it from recover, as in the accident victim is likely to recover. Similarly, it is used in re-form, meaning to form again as in, they have decided to re-form the society which closed last year to differentiate the word from reform meaning to improve, to become better in behavior.
- v. Sometimes the hyphen is used in some compounds formed from phrasal verbs though as a matter of choice. E.g. take-over or takeover run-up or run-up.
- vi. for compound adjectives consisting of two elements, the second of which ends in ed can be formed using a hyphen such as heavy-hearted, fairhaired, fair-minded and long-legged.
- vii. in compound adjectives when they are used before nouns, such as gasfired, central-heating, oil-based paints, solar-heated building and chocolate - wafted biscuits. (Kirkpatrick: 2017)

With the prefix ex-in the sense of former as in ex-wife, ex-president, when self-is prefixed to word such as self-styled self-starter, self-evident. Some fixed components of two or three or more such as son-in-law, good-for nothing, devil-may-care can be formed by using a hyphen. The explanation offered on the uses of hyphen in English by the writer seemed to have exhausted all the occasions on which the mark is used.

Punctuation is a system capable of conveying force, intonation, urgency, tension, doubt, rhythm and passion, while never abandoning its duty to consistency and clarity of meaning (King 2010)

(Adeyi & Mohammad 2012)

The above submission made by King clearly shows how the use of punctuation marks affects the performance of an essay writer. This is because when an essay is written, it is written to convey all that. King has said using consistency and clarity of meaning of what the writer intends to talk on.

### **Asterisk (\*)**

An asterisk is a punctuation mark that is used to draw attention to an additional note or

a footnote. The titles of books are underlined or italicized. It is also used to show wrong sentence construction I will follow you (correct version, I will accompany you) The slash, oblique or virgule. This is usually used to show alternatives, usually representing the words or and/or e.g. His/her, Dear Sir/Madam 2019/2010 session (Adeyi & Mohammad: (2010).

The researcher feels that the information provided above is incomplete having not included the use of asterisk for substituting letter e.g. I cannot open the s\*\* d tin The researcher also feels the same in the case of oblique where only one of its uses is provided while other uses such as. using it in some abbreviation, e.g. c/o smith (meaning care of smith) and its use instead of the word per, as 60km/h (60kilometres per hour).

Olukpe (2011) submits that 'the main purpose of punctuation is to help you to present your ideas clearly and effectively. To achieve this, punctuation marks must be used only when they are necessary.

The effect of the use of punctuation on the performance of an essay writer is seen here. when we look at the last sentence, which suggests that; punctuation should only be used when necessary. That is, only when the need arises for punctuation, for unnecessary punctuation may spoil communication which a writer wishes to establish.

Based on the above statement; we can see how punctuation can make or unmake written communication effective. Punctuation marks are essential for dividing up written language into units that convey meaning. The wrong use of them, or failure to use them, will easily lead to misunderstanding. (Jowitt&Nnamonu: 2015)

The last sentence of the above statement clearly shows how the use of punctuation marks affects the performance of an essay writer. This is simply because, if punctuation marks are wrongly or are not used at all, it will easily lead to the misunderstanding of the passage. which would eventually lead to spoliation of the whole passage. And this would also affect the performance of the writer, for his objective is to put across the message to his readers.

Ngwaba, in Oluikpe (2011:125) stresses that 'punctuation consists of a series of marks inserted to mark off words one from another either to show their grammatical relationship or to give emphasis to them. This assertion made by the writers also shows the effect of the use of punctuation marks on the performance of a writer in general and an essay writer in particular. This is so, because unless the relationship of words and sentences in a write-up is established or unless emphasis is given to such relationships, there is no way that the string of such words or sentences will make meaning to the reader, talk more of understanding the whole passage. Cullup (2015:56) submits 'if we want to communicate chaos, then unpunctuated nonsense will do very well. But if we are concerned-as should be about communication effectively, then we need to know what punctuation marks are available to use and what conventions there are to use.

The effect of the use of punctuation marks on the performance of a writer is seen here.

For a writer to write and convey his message, get it understood and accepted, he needs to punctuate his writing or else he does nothing other than creating chaos, which would totally defeat the essence of essay writing.

Brooks & Warren (1949) in Kamal (2010) stress 'a paragraph is a division in writing set off by an indentation of the first sentence as a sign for the reader of what constitutes a unit of thought. Here, the effect of the use of punctuation marks on the performance of an essay writer. can be seen and this is because, by using an indentation of the first sentence to show to a reader what constitutes a unit of thought, we are more or less making it simple for the reader to understand what the essay is all about, which should be the overall objective of a writer. The review indicates to the researcher that reading and making meaning of what is read is only possible through proper use of punctuation marks. It also shows that mechanical skills, if not used properly makes a good essay an understandable one. The review also clearly indicates that separation of successive units and specifications of language is necessary and could only be achieved by the use of punctuation marks. The semi-colon alerts the reader that you want to make a connection between two independent clauses, and you want the connection to be more intimate than the period. E.g. Injustice is relatively easy to bear; what strings is injustice (2014:University of Arizona).

Content, expression and organization cannot be established in written English without the use of clauses. And clauses cannot be used to give content, expression and organization without being connected to one another and the connection is not possible without the use of some punctuation marks. So, this clearly shows the effect of punctuation on content, expression and organization of written English. 'In the following examples, the reader may get confused as to which group checks in with which A. B. C and D may be falsely perceived as a series.' E.g. Confusing:

For this flight group, A checks in with B, C and D check in with E and F checks in with G.

Expression is only possible. if types of sentences are properly controlled and used, and if punctuation plays a significant role in shaping and creating those types of sentences.

This is because, normally, expression is made through the use of sentence types, and the sentence types through the use of proper punctuation so that, the meanings are made clear and the message they convey easily transmitted. It is when this is done that content and organization can be achieved in written English. So this clearly shows the effect of punctuation on effect content and organization.

'Punctuation is a series of marks which can be used to separate words and groups of words to make intended meaning clear and easy to follow. It can be used to emphasize certain words and phrases, and to distinguish between major and minor ideas. Skilful punctuation is the key to good sentences construction and therefore to clear expression.' (Lamb: 2018)

Organization of the written work in English could only be possible, if punctuation is used properly. This is because, if we look at part of what the above quotation says, we can see that written English cannot be organized if major ideas are not distinguished from minor ideas, through the use of punctuation, and if certain words and phrases are not emphasized for better understanding of the reader, the content and the organization would be seriously affected.

We could also see the role played by punctuation on expression, if we look at another part of the quotation, that is, the issue of separating words or group of words to make intended meaning clear and easy to follow. 'You can use semi-colon to string together many independent clauses, thus purposely creating short sentences which could stand independently with a period between them, but which are closely connected in sense. E.g.. people do not only read because they seek information; they also read for pleasure,' (Robertson: 2012)

The above statement also shows the effect of punctuation on the content, organization and expression. This is because if, connection is not made between or among clauses. it would be impossible for content, organization and expression to be established in written English. This is because it is normally these clauses that make up sentences and sentences make up paragraphs, and paragraphs make up what is written in the language. So this, shows the effect of punctuation on the content organization and expression of written English.

'The trick with comma is to use just the right number of them. If you use too many, your sentences become jerky. If you use them too springly, your sentences tend to produce confusion and incomprehension.' (Robertson: 2012). The effect of the use of punctuation on content, expression and organization could also be seen in the above statement, that is, if one of the punctuation marks (The comma) is not used properly, confusion and incomprehension will set in, which would eventually effect the organization, the content and the expression of what was written in English.

Adedokum (2018) submits that 'we use punctuation in writing to put our words phrases, clauses or sentences in order and to express what we actually want to say.' The role of punctuation on content, organization and expression could be observed, if we look at the above submission. This is because it is only when words, phrases, clauses and sentences are put in order that the content would be conveying the meaning intended, the organization smooth and the expression meaning making. And this could only be achieved when punctuation is used aright in ordering of the words phrases clauses and sentences. Spelling and punctuation perform the function of the notes and bolts in a piece of writing. Amis- spelt word or wrongly punctuated sentence can alter the meaning intended by the writer (NTI/DLS:2010).

When meaning is altered expression is lost, when expression is lost, content is lost and when content is lost, organization is not feasible. So this clearly shows the effect of punctuation on content, organization and expression. The researcher also learned from the review that to avoid making a piece of text from becoming a string of words, punctuation marks should be adequately used. The researcher also observes that punctuation marks are only used when necessary.

### **III. CONCLUSION:**

Reading and writing skills play very vital roles in the literacy level of the English language learners in Nigeria. People who cannot read are illiterates. The paper found that wrong use of punctuation marks can change the context of a sentence as well as its meaning leading to ambiguity in some instances. Based on the findings it is concluded that the use of full stop, comma, colon and semi-colon on the English language written of senior secondary school students in Nigeria is problematic. However, it could be said that the use of colon and semi-colon is more problematic than the use of full stop and comma. Thus, there was a need to emphasise on the proper use of punctuation marks as a means of reducing errors of students in their reading and writing skills in English language in Nigeria.

### **IV. RECOMMENDATIONS:**

To remediate this situation, the following recommendations should be taken into consideration:

1. Teachers should concentrate more on the use of comma, colon and semi colon that seem to be the major problematic areas of the punctuation marks.
2. Efforts should be made to revitalize use of punctuation marks in reading and writing skills
3. Greater attention should be paid to reading and writing comprehension as well as punctuation marks in the English Language curriculum at all levels of education.

4. Reading and writing as well as punctuation marks should be taught as a separate and compulsory course beginning from the primary to the tertiary institutions.

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