



Punctuation in the Digital Age: A Comparative Study of Punctuation Use in Handwritten vs. Typed Essays among Undergraduate Students

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<p>Abstract: This study examines the use of punctuation in handwritten and typed essays among 400-level students of Federal University Gusau, aiming to provide a comparative analysis of their punctuation proficiency across both formats. The data was collected from an assignment submitted in Microsoft Word format via email to the course lecturer of English for Specific Purposes during the 2023/2024 academic session. Additionally, in-class test scripts on punctuation usage from students at Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, served as supplementary data. The research employs Error Analysis, following the four-stage framework outlined by Ellis (1994): (1) collection of learner language samples, (2) identification of errors, (3) description of errors, and (4) explanation of errors. Findings indicate that students make more punctuation errors in handwritten essays compared to typed ones. The study emphasizes the need to enhance undergraduate students' proficiency in punctuation use and suggests that educators should tailor their teaching strategies to address this weakness. Furthermore, both handwritten and typed assignments play a crucial role in students' academic development and should be given equal importance.</p> <p>Keywords: Digital, Written Essays, Typed Essays, Punctuation, Undergraduates.</p>	<p>Review Paper</p> <p>*Corresponding Author: <i>Isah Abdulmumini</i> Department of English and Literature, Federal University Gusau, Zamfara State, Nigeria</p> <p>Article History: Submit: 09.12.2024 Accepted: 08.01.2025 Published: 10.01.2025 </p>
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INTRODUCTION

In this age, when graduates and the general public seek means of survival through various avenues such as telecom services and computer-related fields, it is important that university students are exposed to writing and presenting their assignments using computers. This is the current practice in most developed and developing countries worldwide. University students in Nigeria should not be an exception. This initiative is supported by the Joint Admissions and Matriculation Board and other external examination bodies by making it mandatory for every candidate to use the internet when applying for admission and writing their examinations. After graduation, all successful candidates from Nigerian universities must also use the internet to apply for the one-year mandatory national service in order to serve their fatherland. The same applies to almost all business organizations, companies, and institutions seeking employees, as they create online portals through which applicants can apply for available job vacancies. All these processes are made possible by using computers.

The manual approach to tasks is gradually becoming a thing of the past. The researchers believe that these and many other reasons make it necessary to compel university students to learn how to use computers to prepare them for life's challenges after graduation.

On the other hand, essay writing requires certain mechanics to meet academic standards and effectively convey meaning to the target audience. This is where punctuation marks play an important role in ensuring clarity and eliminating ambiguity. The significance of this study is to improve proficiency in using English punctuation in writing and to make teachers aware of areas of difficulty so they can design their lessons based on students' needs. Additionally, the present study also intends to recommend that learners use appropriate English punctuation to organize their ideas systematically.

In view of the foregoing, the researchers administered an assignment to 400-level students of Federal University Gusau, which was required to be

typed in Microsoft Word format and submitted via email to the course lecturer handling English for Specific Purposes in the English Department of the university. Meanwhile, the same students and their counterparts from Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, had already written an in-class test on the use of punctuation marks for graduating students. Their responses serve as the data for this research. This article, therefore, analyzes the essays written by these students to conduct a comparative analysis of handwritten and typed essays in the use of punctuation marks.

It should be noted that the students' essays contain numerous errors; however, it is not the intention of this article to conduct a discourse analysis of the essays. Therefore, the sentences used as data for this research are presented exactly as they appear in the students' essays, regardless of grammatical and spelling errors.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Many scholars across the globe have written extensively on punctuation marks and their usage in writing. Punctuation has existed since the invention of writing. Researchers have presented different perspectives on the emergence of punctuation marks and their initial purposes. Saenger (1997) argued that punctuation marks were originally used to indicate points where the reader needed to pause. Avcı (2006), in a study investigating punctuation mistakes made by 8th-grade students, reported that students made several errors in punctuation. Karagul (2010) examined students' use of punctuation marks and found that they did not achieve the desired proficiency level outlined in the curriculum. Arı and Keray (2012), in their study involving 8th-grade students, found that students made fewer mistakes in multiple-choice questions but more errors in the dictation method. Ozkar and Izci (2013) explored the relationship between 5th-grade students' reading attitudes and punctuation usage, revealing a significant correlation between the two. More recently, Abdulmumini and Musa (2024) published *An Appraisal of the Usage of Punctuation Marks by 400-Level English Students in Selected Nigerian Universities*, in which they analyzed the extent of correct and incorrect punctuation usage among graduating English students from two prominent Nigerian universities.

In addition to the above studies, research has also extended to the influence of language and medium on punctuation usage. Sani and Bakura (2023) examined the use of the Hausa language in the 21st-century internet environment, which highlighted a shift in linguistic practices on the internet. Although their work focused on Hausa, it bears a relationship to punctuation use in digital communication, as their study emphasized the evolving

ways in which language, including punctuation, is adapted in online spaces.

Further research on education and punctuation highlights the importance of foundational skills. Sani, Amina, Aishatu, and Abubakar (2017) explored the teaching of reading skills in Nigerian secondary schools, emphasizing that effective reading instruction can support students in learning punctuation rules. This is particularly important as punctuation usage is often tied to comprehension and sentence structure, both of which are reinforced by strong reading skills.

Lastly, Tsaure and Sani (2024) explored the role of indigenous languages as mediums of instruction in Nigerian primary schools. While their primary focus was on language acquisition and educational outcomes, the study suggested that the influence of indigenous languages on English-language learning could affect how students use punctuation. This insight contributes to understanding the broader socio-linguistic factors that may influence punctuation habits among Nigerian students.

Importance of Punctuation

Carey (1978, p. 15) states that the primary purpose of punctuation is to eliminate vagueness and clarify relationships between words. Accordingly, ambiguity can arise from the improper use of punctuation marks (Connelly, 2009). Scholars have defined the term punctuation in various ways. Among them, Crystal (1999) describes punctuation as an integral part of a language system that provides clues to the organization of a text. Say (1998) highlights the advantages of punctuation, stating that "punctuation marks, the symbols that assist the understanding of written text, have usually been regarded as conventions, thus as being outside the domain of pure linguistics... they have a singular function such as helping reading aloud" (p. 1). Punctuation marks play a crucial role in ensuring the comprehension of written expressions. Therefore, they should be effectively taught, and students must learn to use them correctly.

Statement of the Problem

Scholars and researchers regard writing as an essential skill and one of the most challenging to master. This is primarily because it plays a central role in completing theses, dissertations, essays, tests, and other academic activities. Nigerian university students face numerous difficulties in writing their tests and assignments. One of the most common yet often overlooked issues by both learners and instructors is the proper application of punctuation. This challenge is evident in nearly all student writings. Mann (2003) asserts that learning punctuation marks poses significant difficulties. This article aims to examine the frequency

and accuracy of punctuation usage in handwritten and typed essays among final-year English students at a Nigerian university and to offer practical recommendations for improvement.

METHODOLOGY

The subjects of this study comprise fifty (50) randomly selected 400-level graduating students from the English Department of Federal University Gusau, North-Western Nigeria, during the 2023/2024 academic year. To achieve the study's objectives, the researchers administered an assignment that required students to type their responses in Microsoft Word format and submit them via email to the course lecturer handling English for Specific Purposes. Additionally, the same students and their counterparts from Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, had previously written an in-class test on the use of punctuation marks among graduating students. Their test scripts provided another set of data for this research. This article analyzes the essays written by these students to conduct a comparative study of punctuation usage in handwritten versus typed essays.

For the analysis, students' use of punctuation marks was categorized into different groups based on the nature of punctuation marks used or misused. The study adopted the Error Analysis approach, which follows four consecutive stages as outlined by Ellis (1994): (1) collection of a sample of learner language, (2) identification of errors, (3) description of errors, and (4) explanation of errors. This approach was deemed suitable for the study.

Theoretical Framework

This research adopts Error Analysis (EA) as the theoretical framework for analyzing the data. According to Mahmoodzadeh (2012), "EA could be defined as a procedure used to identify, categorise, and explain the errors committed by L2 learners. It is considered the most appropriate tool for analyzing learners' errors." EA is conducted in four consecutive stages, as outlined by Ellis (1994, p. 48): (1) collection of a sample of learner language, (2) identification of errors, (3) description of errors, and (4) explanation of errors.

Collection of a Sample of Learner Language

At this stage, learners' errors are influenced by several key factors. Ellis (1994, p. 49) asserts that these factors are crucial in "collecting a well-defined sample of learner language so that clear statements can be made regarding what kinds of errors the learners produce and under what conditions." The factors are explained below:

Identification of Errors

There are specific ways to distinguish between an error and a mistake. The first involves assessing the

consistency of the L2 learner's performance. If a learner sometimes uses a correct form but later produces an incorrect one, it is considered a mistake and can be self-corrected. However, if the learner consistently uses the incorrect form, it qualifies as an error.

Description of Errors

This stage follows the identification step, as no description can be made without first identifying the errors. A thorough description of L2 learners' errors serves as a prerequisite for an accurate explanation of their mistakes.

Explanation of Errors

The ultimate goal of *Error Analysis* (EA) is to explain errors, making this stage the most critical in EA research. To develop effective remedial measures, Sanal (2007) argues that analysts must understand the underlying mechanisms that trigger each type of error. Understanding the nature of errors is fundamental to second language acquisition (SLA). Ellis and Barkhuizen (2005, p. 62) assert that "explaining errors involves determining their sources in order to account for why they were made."

Data Presentation

The data extracted from students' essays regarding punctuation usage is categorized into two sections: typed and handwritten. The first section focuses on typed assignments.

Errors in Typed Essays

Several errors have been identified in the students' typed essays, as outlined below:

Misuse of the Full Stop

This issue is observed in numerous instances, as demonstrated in the following sentences:

1. Write an essay on the uses of punctuation marks to an English graduate in Nigeria.
2. Write an essay on how you will survive after National Service, considering the level of unemployment in your country.
3. Department of English and Literature.
4. Course Title: English for Specific Purposes.
5. Indeed. Proper punctuation is not just about following strict rules, but also about understanding how...
6. Punctuation marks are often overlooked ...
7. A very serious evaluation should be done to ensure that universities are not producing unqualified teachers...

A total of 19 students, representing 38% of the fifty participants, committed this error in their essays.

Improper Use of Capital Letters in Proper Nouns

This issue is demonstrated in the following examples:

8. Federal university gusau
9. Department of English and literature
10. Course title: English for specific purposes
11. punctuation can be defined as the part of...
12. Firstly, My expertise in various crafts provides a unique advantage.
13. Lastly, Breaking Stereotypes...

A total of 26 students, representing 52% of the participants, were found to have committed this error in their essays.

Misuse of the Colon

This error is demonstrated when a candidate attempts to explain the functions of punctuation, as seen in the following example:

14. Indicating Pauses and Intonation. Punctuation is used to indicate...

A total of 19 students, representing 36% of the participants, committed this error in their essays.

Misuse of the Comma

This error is evident in the following sentences:

15. Financial discipline is crucial when starting a business, and this saving strategy will provide me with...
16. In a country like Nigeria, where job competition is high, and effective communication...
17. Surviving in Nigeria after National Service can be challenging to many young people, especially those who...
18. Also, business loans and grants should also be easily accessible to individuals who are...
19. An essay on the uses of punctuation marks to an English graduate in Nigeria,

A total of 20 students, representing 40% of the participants, were found to have committed this error in their essays.

Mistakes in Handwritten Essays

In the handwritten essays submitted by final-year students, the following errors were identified:

Misuse of the Full Stop

This error is evident in the following examples:

20. It is very important university students should learn how to use punctuation marks in their writing
21. It will be congested and join thereby not giving the writing nice and understanding

A total of 25 students, representing 50% of the participants, committed this error in their handwritten essays.

Misuse of Capital Letters

This error is demonstrated in the following sentences:

22. federal university gusau
23. punctuation marks help us to identify...
24. the graduates should learn how to use punctuation because...
25. Using punctuation marks is very Important to all university students.
 - To make grammatical writing.
 - To avoid being ambiguous in writing.
 - To separate items in a list.

A total of 26 students, representing 52% of the participants, committed this error in their handwritten essays.

Misuse of the Colon

This issue is seen in the following sentence:

26. The following are the reasons why a university student should learn how to use punctuation marks.

The colon is also misused in the following cases:

27. Punctuation mark is an anonymous standardized mark used to make meaningful writing as follow
 - To clarify relationships between words
 - To show the writer's tone
 - To show emphasis

A total of 21 students, representing 42% of the participants, committed this error in their handwritten essays.

Misuse of the Comma

This issue is evident in the following cases:

28. Firstly punctuation marks in writing make your writing...
29. For a writing to be self-explanatory and coherent punctuation is one of the major priority of a writer.
30. Therefore university students should know how to use...

A total of 21 students, representing 42% of the participants, committed this error in their handwritten essays.

Incorrect Use of the Hyphen

This error is demonstrated in the following sentences:

31. Punctuation marks are very useful and important in- writing.
32. A student must not identify a paragraph starting - with a capital letter.
33. All these make our writing beautiful and meaningful.

Additional cases include: wh-en, writin-g, corr-ection, etc.

A total of 17 students, representing 34% of the participants, committed this error in their handwritten essays.

Misuse of the Apostrophe

This error is demonstrated in the following sentence:

34. Punctuation is very crucial to any university student because it is important cannot be over-emphasised.

A total of 11 students, representing 22% of the participants, committed this error in their written essays.

Omission of the Semicolon

This error is demonstrated in the following sentences:

- To make grammatical writing
- To avoid being ambiguous in writing
- To separate items in a list

A total of 15 students, representing 30% of the participants, committed this error in their written essays.

Incorrect Use of the Dash

This error is demonstrated in the following sentence:

36. University students should learn how to use—punctuation marks in their writing.

A total of 7 students, representing 14% of the participants, committed this error in their written essays.

Analysis and Discussion

This section analyzes the data derived from the students' essays. As explained in the introduction, the aim of the research is to compare the use of punctuation in the written and typed essays of students.

The frequency of errors for each punctuation mark is presented in the table below:

Table 1: Frequency of Punctuation Errors

Punctuation	Typed	Hand-written	Difference
Full Stop	19 (38%)	25 (50%)	6
Capital letter	26 (52%)	26 (52%)	-
Colon	18 (36%)	21 (42%)	3
Comma	20 (40%)	21 (42%)	1
Hyphen	2 (4%)	17 (34%)	15
Apostrophe	Nil	8 (16%)	8
Semicolon	Nil	15 (30%)	15
Dash	Nil	7 (14%)	7

Source: Field work, 2024

From the data presented above, it is clear that the hand-written essays contain more frequent punctuation errors compared to the typed essays. These errors will be explained in the following paragraphs, and the correct versions of the sentences will be provided.

Use of the Full Stop

Several errors, including omission and incorrect usage, were recorded for this important punctuation mark. Consider the following sentences:

1. Write an essay on the uses of punctuation marks to an English graduate in Nigeria.
2. Write an essay on how you will survive after National service, considering the level of unemployment in your country.

These sentences serve as titles for the students' essays, but they mistakenly include full stops at the end. Students need to understand that titles of articles do not require a full stop, as they are meant to represent an issue to be discussed, not full sentences. Moreover, when dealing with titles of books, novels, articles, or essays, even if they resemble a phrase or sentence, they should never end with a full stop (Michael, 2014, p.15).

The third sentence below displays the same error, where students incorrectly place a full stop after the name of their department. In research writing, particularly for articles, the name of a department is not a sentence and should not end with a full stop:

3. Department of English and Literature.

Similarly, sentence 4 below reveals another error, where many students mistakenly use a full stop after writing the course title:

4. Course title: English for Specific Purposes.

Sentence 5 demonstrates another strange error, where a single word is followed by a full stop. The word "Indeed" cannot stand alone as a sentence and should not be followed by a full stop:

5. Indeed. Proper punctuation is not just about following strict rules, but also about understanding how...

Abusing the Capital Letter

Sentences 8, 9, and 10 illustrate the second category of errors found in the students' typed essays, where capital letters are incorrectly used:

8. Federal university gusau
9. Department of English and literature
10. Course title: English for specific purposes

All of these are proper nouns, which, according to writing norms, should begin with capital letters. Unfortunately, some of these words are written in lowercase. This error is especially surprising given the students' academic level and their field of study. Over twenty students have exhibited this issue.

Sentences 11 and 12 present another case where the capital letter is abused. In these instances, a comma is followed by a capital letter, and the words following the comma are not proper nouns:

11. Firstly, My expertise in various crafts provides a unique advantage.
12. Lastly, Breaking Stereotypes...

Abusing the Full Stop (Again)

In sentence 14, the full stop is wrongly used instead of a colon:

14. Indicating Pauses and Intonation. Punctuation is used to indicate...

In this case, a colon should have been used because its role is to provide an explanation rather than terminate the sentence.

Abusing the Comma

Sentences 15 and 16 below demonstrate another error in the incorrect use of the comma:

15. Financial discipline is crucial when starting a business, and this saving strategy will provide me with...
16. In a country like Nigeria, where job competition is high, and effective communication...

In the students' hand-written essays, the misuse of the comma is also common. Consider sentences 17 and 18:

17. Firstly, punctuation marks in writing make your writing...
18. For writing to be self-explanatory and coherent, punctuation is...

The comma should not be used in any of these contexts, as the conjunction following the comma makes its usage unnecessary. Commas are used to separate ideas or elements within a sentence, making comprehension easier by indicating a brief pause. Generally, commas show that the words before it are grammatically and meaningfully linked to those that follow. Despite being the most frequently used punctuation mark, the comma is the most problematic because it serves multiple functions (Partridge, 2005, p.13).

HAND-WRITTEN ERRORS

This section of the research addresses the errors found in the students' hand-written essays. The first category involves errors related to the use of the full stop. Consider the following sentences:

19. It is very important university students should learn how to use punctuation marks in their writing
20. It will be congested and join, thereby not giving the writing clarity and understanding.

Both sentences are missing full stops at the end, which is a serious error. In academic writing, even at the secondary school level, the omission of the full stop is considered an unpardonable offense.

Capital Letter Errors

The second category involves the incorrect use of capital letters. For instance:

21. Federal university Gusau
22. Punctuation marks help us to identify...

These errors occur because proper nouns, such as "Federal University Gusau," should begin with capital letters, as per standard writing rules. Similarly, the first word in a sentence, such as "Punctuation," should also begin with a capital letter.

Colon Usage Errors

The third category involves errors related to the incorrect use of the colon. Consider the following sentences:

23. The following are the reasons why a university student should learn how to use punctuation marks:
24. Punctuation marks are anonymous standardized marks used to make meaningful writing as follows:

In both examples, the colon is misused. A colon is typically applied to introduce a list or explanation, not following an introductory phrase that already serves that purpose. Moreover, there would be no use of a colon following introductory words like "for instance," "namely," or "such as," as they already function similarly to a colon (Straus, 2008).

Hyphenation Errors

Next, hyphenation errors are common in the students' hand-written essays. For example:

25. Punctuation marks are very useful and important in- writing.
26. A student must not identify a paragraph starting - with a capital letter.
27. All these make our writing beautiful and meaningful.

In these examples, hyphens are incorrectly inserted where they are not needed. A hyphen is used to

join words together, particularly in compound adjectives (e.g., "well-known"), but it is unnecessary in these contexts.

Apostrophe and Semicolon Errors

Another error category involves the apostrophe and semicolon usage. Consider the following sentences:

28. Punctuation is very crucial to any university student because it is important, and this cannot be over-emphasized.
29. -to make grammatical writing
- to avoid ambiguity in writing
- to separate items in a list

In the second example, semicolons should be used instead of commas to separate items in a list of equal importance or strength. Unfortunately, many students fail to apply the semicolon, which is a serious error. According to Stilman (1997), "one of the uses of the semicolon is to separate items in a list. Normally, a

comma detaches elements within a list, but there are some lists that are complicated. In such cases, using a semicolon makes the list much easier to read and understand."

Dash Errors

Finally, the use of the dash is often misunderstood by students. For instance:

30. University students should learn how to use—punctuation marks in their writing.

In this sentence, the dash is misused. It is important to recognize that a dash is slightly longer than a hyphen and serves to make an interrupting statement or provide emphasis. A hyphen, on the other hand, is used to form compound words and should not be confused with the dash. In this case, a full stop (period) is the appropriate punctuation mark, as the sentence ends here. Additionally, when a parenthetical sentence is included, it should be enclosed in dashes.

Punctuation	Wrong	Correct
Full stop	Punctuation marks are often overlooked ...	Punctuation marks are often overlooked.
	A very serious evaluation should be done to ensure that Universities are not producing unqualified teachers...	A very serious evaluation should be done to ensure that universities are not producing unqualified teachers.
Capital letter	Federal university gusau	Federal University Gusau
	Course title: English for specific purposes	Course title: English for Specific Purposes
Colon	The following are the reasons why a university student should learn how to use punctuation marks.	The following are the reasons why a university student should learn how to use punctuation marks:
Comma	Financial discipline is crucial when starting a business, and this saving strategy will provide me with...	Financial discipline is crucial when starting a business and this saving strategy will provide me with...
	In a country like Nigeria, where job competition is high, and effective communication...	In a country like Nigeria, where job competition is high and effective communication...
Hyphen	Punctuation marks are very useful and important in- writing.	Punctuation marks are very useful and important in writing.
	A student must not identify a paragraph starting - with a capital letter.	A student must not identify a paragraph starting with a capital letter.

CONCLUSION

The research has found that students tend to make more punctuation errors in their written essays than in their typed essays. This can be attributed to carelessness and a lack of basic understanding of certain punctuation marks. The article emphasizes the need for immediate action to address these errors, especially since essays are typically written by hand before being typed. In some areas, particularly rural regions, teachers may not have access to computers, and where computers are available, unreliable electricity can make them difficult to use. Both written and typed assignments play a vital role in students' academic success, and neither should be regarded as secondary. Both are necessary for academic

progress, and their significance extends even beyond graduation.

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