



ELA Honor Society

WRITING GUIDE
FOR STUDENT MEMBERS

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CAPITAL LETTERS

Using capital letters seems really obvious, but there's more to them than you might think . . .

Use **capitals** at the **start of sentences**

Every sentence **starts** with a **capital letter**.

The novel is about Black history. **It** was set in the 1930s, but **I** think it's still relevant.

- Both of these sentences need capital letters at the beginning.
- "I" has a capital letter wherever you use it.

Some words always start with a capital letter

Some words start with a capital letter, even in the **middle of a sentence**:

1. **People's names and titles:**

Professor **A**lbert **E**instein was a famous scientist.

Christopher **L**ockwood enjoys reading.

2. Names of **organizations**:

National **E**nglish **H**onor **S**ociety

Sigma **T**au **D**elta

3. Titles of **books** and **plays**:

***D**ear **M**artin* by Nic Stone

***R**omeo and **J**uliet* by William Shakespeare

4. **Towns** and names of **places**:

DeKalb, Illinois

Washington DC

5. **Countries, nationalities, and languages**:

I am **American**. I come from the **United States** and speak **English**.

6. **Religions, the names of gods, and religious believers**:

Judaism is a religion.

Muslims worship **Allah**.

7. Names of **days** and **months**:

Saturday, January 16

8. **Public holidays** and **religious festivals**:

Christmas, Diwali, Eid

- Short words like “of,” “the,” and “upon” don’t usually have capital letters, unless they are the first word in a new sentence

Capitalizing some words can be **tricky**

Some nouns are capitalized **sometimes**, but **not** always.

Sometimes a queen wears a crown.

- If you’re talking about queens in **general**, you **don’t need a capital letter**.

The Queen wore her crown.

- If you’re talking about a **particular** queen, **you need a capital letter**.

ENDING SENTENCES

Use punctuation to finish sentences correctly.

Periods end sentences

- Periods are used to **end statements**.
- When you're **writing**, you'll finish **most** of your sentences with a **period**.

The children portray Boo Radley as a monster. This reflects the adults' prejudices.

This is correct—each sentence finishes with a period.

Question marks show the end of a question

- Question marks show that you're **asking a question**:

Why did Nic Stone write her book *Dear Martin* in 2017?

- Some sentences tell you **about** a question, but **don't** actually **ask one**:

Chris asked Katie why she was busy.

This isn't actually asking a question, so there's no question mark. It's a statement about what Chris does—it just needs a period.

Exclamation marks show strong emotions

- **Exclamation marks** are used to show **strong emotions**, or to **emphasize** something.
- You **shouldn't** need to use many exclamation marks in your writing.
- You **will probably** use more exclamation marks in **creative writing** than in essay writing.

Elfi shouted, "Let's go!"

- If you use exclamation marks in your writing, **never** use **more than one** to end a sentence.

Elfi shouted, "Let's go!"—YES

Elfi shouted, “Let’s go!!!!”—NO

Don’t use exclamation marks too often—they will lose their impact.

COMMAS

Without commas, lists would be a mess and long sentences wouldn't make any sense.

Commas separate items in a list

- A list that doesn't contain commas is very **hard to understand**.

Namon coaches basketball goes to the gym and eats healthily.—NO

- Add a comma after **each item** to make your list clear.
- Put **“and”** or **“or”** between the last two items in the list.

Remember: you need to use a comma before the final “and” or “or.”

*You only need to use commas in lists of **three or more items**.*

Namon coaches basketball,₂ goes to the gym,₂ **and** eats healthily.

- Use commas to **separate** two **adjectives** next to each other that could be separated by **“and.”**

Jeannine is a happy,₂ fun person.

You could put “and” here, so you need a comma.

Jeannine's favorite color is light blue.

You couldn't put “and” here, so you don't need a comma.

A comma combines **two points**

- Two sentences can be joined using a **connective**, and sometimes with a **comma** as well.
- The most common **short connectives** are:

and but while yet so or

Connectives are linking words that join sentences or parts of the sentences together.

- When these words are used to **connect two sentences**, the comma shows where the **next point begins**:

I am happy, so I am doing better in my schoolwork.

The **comma** and “**so**” join the two sentences.

My writing has improved, but there are still some things to work on.

- Longer linking words, like “however,” “therefore,” and “nevertheless,” are also followed by a comma when they’re at the start of a sentence.

However, my grades are slowly improving.

Commas can also separate **extra information**

- Use a **pair of commas** to separate extra information in the **middle** of a sentence:

The team, led by Matt, was very successful.

These commas **enclose** the **extra information**—“led by Matt.”

The National English Honor Society, founded in 2005, was created by Dave Wendelin and Bil Johnson.

“Founded in 2005” is the extra information.

Remove the extra information to **check** the commas are correct

You can check you’ve used commas **correctly** by **removing** the information **inside** the pair of commas. If the sentence still **makes sense** then you have used them correctly.

Dear Martin, which is a great book, is this year’s Big Read text.

The commas suggest that “which is a great book” is **extra information**.

Dear Martin is this year’s Big Read text.

If you remove the words between the commas, the sentence **makes sense**. This means the commas have been used **correctly**.

The **extra information** can also **begin** a sentence

- If the extra information is at the **beginning** of a sentence, you still usually need to use a **comma**.
- In this case, you only need to use a **single comma**, rather than a pair.

When they had all read the book, the team began organizing the writing contest.

The part in **bold** is the **extra information**, so it's followed by a comma.

Despite technical issues, the webinar was very successful.

The **extra information** is in **bold** because the **main point** is in the rest of the sentence.

Remove the extra information to check you're using **commas** correctly

- You can check that you've put the comma in the right place by **removing** the extra part:

Although he was rejected by many publishers, J. R. R. Tolkien became a very famous author.

J. R. R. Tolkien became a very famous author.

If you **take away** the **extra information** and the sentence still makes sense, you've used the comma correctly.

COLONS AND SEMICOLONS

Colons and semicolons have several uses, for example introducing lists or joining sentences. Be careful when you use them, though—getting them confused causes lots of problems!

Colons introduce **lists**

You can use a **colon** to show that what **follows** gives you **more information**. This can sometimes take the form of a **list**:

These are the main themes of the novel: racial prejudice, discrimination, and
friendship.

The colon goes just **before** the **information** about the themes.

Semicolons **separate** things in a **list**

Semicolons **break up** lists of **long phrases**:

In your introduction, outline the main argument of your essay; use separate paragraphs to explain each point clearly; in your conclusion, bring your argument together.

You **don't need** to use a **capital letter** after a **semicolon**.

You need a semicolon **before** **"in"** even though it's the last item in the list.

Both **colons** and **semicolons** **join** two **sentences**

- **Colons** join two sentences when the second sentence acts as an **explanation**:

Tropical rainforests are facing a serious problem. **That problem is**
deforestation on a large scale.

You can use a colon to **join** these two sentences.

The colon can **replace the bold part** because it introduces **further information** about the **problem**.

- When using colons, the second sentence **does not** have to be a **full sentence**:

Tropical rainforests are facing a serious problem: deforestation on a large scale.

The colon tells you that the next part is going to be **an explanation**.

In this case, the bit after the colon is **not a full sentence**. When the text following a colon is a full sentence, however, the first word after the colon must be capitalized.

- **Semicolons** can join two sentences when the sentences are about the **same topic**, and they have **equal importance**. Both sentences must be **full sentences**:

J. R. R. Tolkien wrote *Lord of the Rings* in the 1930s and 40s; it was difficult for him to find a publisher.

Unlike a period, the semicolon shows the **sentences are related**.

The part **after the semicolon** could be read as a **full sentence** on its own.

Colons and semicolons are used differently

Putting a **colon** or **semicolon** into a sentence can **change** its **meaning**. A colon **introduces an explanation** of what comes before it, but a semicolon just **links** the **two sentences**.

Dawn was happy; Chris was thinking about work.

The semicolon shows that the two parts are **related** but **doesn't explain why** Dawn is happy.

Dawn was happy: Chris was thinking about work.

The colon shows that Chris 'thinking about work' is **the reason** for Dawn's happiness.

PARENTHESES

Parentheses are useful for adding extra information to a sentence.

Parentheses enclose **extra information** in a sentence

They can also separate an **explanation** or **definition**.

J. R. R. Tolkien (1892-1973) was the author of *The Lord of the Rings* series.

The **definition** goes **inside the parentheses**.

You must reference any quotes in your work (so the authors get credit).

If the information in parentheses is at the **end** of the **sentence**, the period goes **outside** the second).

Parentheses can be used like a pair of **commas**

Parentheses can be used to separate extra information in a **similar way** to a **pair of commas** (see “Commas”). There are a couple of things that might make you choose either parentheses or commas.

- **Commas** make extra information fit more **naturally** into a sentence. **Parentheses** make it look **more separate**.

“Surrender,” which is a verb, means “to give up.”

“Surrender” (a verb) means “to give up.”

- If there are **already commas** in the main sentence or the extra information, then it’s normally **clearer to use parentheses**.

In this scene, Act V, Scene VIII, Macbeth is killed.

In this scene (Act V, Scene VIII) Macbeth is killed.

HYPHENS

Hyphens are small dashes that join up words. Using them correctly can completely change the meaning of a word or a sentence, so you need to understand them.

There are **four** main places you can use a **hyphen**

1. If the **prefix ends** with the **same letter** the **word starts with**.

- When you add a prefix, which **ends** with the **same letter** that the root word **starts** with, check if you need a hyphen:

Re-enter Semi-interested Co-operate

- There are **exceptions** to this rule, so make sure you learn the main ones:

Misspell Unnecessary Immaterial Irrelevant

2. If you add a **prefix** to a word starting with a **capital**.

- If the root word starts with a **capital letter**, use a hyphen to attach the prefix.

pro-American anti-French post-Victorian

3. To make the **meaning of a word clear**.

- Use a **hyphen** if the word could be **mixed up** with another word that means something **different**.

I re-covered the couch. I recovered the couch.

The first means “I **covered** the couch **again**.” The second means “I **got** the couch **back**.”

4. To make the **meaning** of a **phrase clear**.

- If it is **unclear** which word an **adjective applies to**, use a **hyphen** to make sure that the meaning is clear.

new car salesperson

new-car salesperson new car-salesperson

The first phrase is **unclear**. You need to use a **hyphen**.

The second phrase uses a hyphen that shows that '**new**' applies to '**car**'. This means the salesperson only sells **new cars**.

The third phrase uses a hyphen that shows that '**new**' applies to '**car salesperson**'.

This means the **car salesperson is new** at their job.

APOSTROPHES

When you use a shortened form, like “we’ve” instead of “we have,” you need to use an apostrophe to show that some letters are missing. You can also use them for ownership.

Apostrophes replace missing letters

Shortened words or **phrases** like “you’ve” or “doesn’t” use apostrophes to show where **letters** have been **removed**.

We are citizens of the USA. → **We’re** citizens of the USA.

When you write “**we’re**” instead of “**we are**,” the apostrophe shows that the “a” of “are” has been **taken out**.

Vegetarians do not eat meat → Vegetarians **don’t** eat meat.

The apostrophe shows that the “o” in “not” has been **removed**.

These forms **always** have an **apostrophe**

- If any letters have been **removed** when a **shortened word** is made, you’ll definitely need an **apostrophe**.
- Here’s a list of **common ones**—they are useful to know:

Long Form	Short form
I am	I’m
I would	I’d
I had	I’d
I have	I’ve
They are	They’re

Long form	Short form
Who is	Who’s
Will not	Won’t
Do not	Don’t
Does not	Doesn’t
Cannot	Can’t

Use an **apostrophe** and “**-s**” to show **ownership**

- Add an **apostrophe** and “-s” to **nouns** to show possession.

The shop’s potato chips ran out.

The apostrophe shows that the potato chips **belonged** to the shop.

- You can test that you’re using apostrophes **correctly** by **reordering** the sentence to say, “the X belonging to Y”.

Jeanette’s dream

You can reorder this phrase to say, “the dream belonging to Jeanette.” The apostrophe is used **correctly**.

Three dog’s

If you reorder the phrase to say “the three belonging to the dog” **it doesn’t make sense**. This means the apostrophe is used **incorrectly**.

- If the word is **singular** and **ends in “s,”** you have two options: just add the apostrophe or add an apostrophe and “-s”.

Chris’ garden is full of flowers.

Chris’s garden is full of flowers.

The first option is preferred—it looks better on the page.

Add an **apostrophe** to most **plural nouns** to show **ownership**

- If the noun is **plural** and **doesn’t end in “s,”** follow the normal rule and add an **apostrophe and “-s”**:

Many people feel strongly about women’s rights.

The rights belong to **more than one** woman, and the noun **doesn’t end in “s,”** so this is the **correct** ending.

- But if a **plural noun** already **ends in “s,”** just add an **apostrophe** to the end:

The plants’ ecosystem

The students’ reputation

The first apostrophe shows that you are talking about **more than one plant**. The second apostrophe shows that you are talking about **more than one student**.

Be **careful** when using **apostrophes**

- The **position** of the apostrophe is important because it can **change** the **meaning** of the sentence:

The town's schools were flooded.

This sentence describes what happened to the schools of **one town**.

The towns' schools were flooded.

This sentence describes what happened to the schools of **more than one town**. The **apostrophe's position** tells you whether the word is **singular** or **plural**.

- Make sure the apostrophe goes with **the correct word** in each sentence. If there are **two plurals**, it can be difficult to work out which word needs the apostrophe.

The schools plans

You want this phrase to mean **"the plans belonging to the schools."**

The schools plan's—NO

If you put the apostrophe here, when you **reorder the phrase** it means "the schools belonging to the plan," which **doesn't make sense**.

The school's plans—NO

If you put the apostrophe here, the phrase means "the plans belonging to the school." This **makes sense**, but it is **not what you want to say**.

The schools' plans—YES

This means "the plans belonging to the schools" when you **reorder** it. The apostrophe is in the **correct place**.

Never use apostrophes to show there's **more than one**

- Because words with **possessive apostrophes** end in "s" they can easily get **confused with plurals**.

Jeannine and her sisters NOT Jeannine and her sister's

- If you get this wrong, you could **lose points** as the meaning is lost.
- If you want to say there's **more than one** of something, you usually just add an "s" on the end. If a word ends with "s," you add "es" to the end. You **don't** need an apostrophe as well.

ITS AND IT'S

These words look similar, but they mean very different things.

It's means "it is" or "it has"

- The word "it's" with an **apostrophe** is always short for "it is" or "it has."
- The **apostrophe** shows that letters have been **missed out**.

It is a wonderful book. → It's a wonderful book.

It has become a classic. → It's become a classic.

Its shows that something **belongs** to it

"Its" without an **apostrophe** shows **possession**—something **belongs** to it.

This is an exception to the possessive apostrophe rule.

The wolf turned to show its face.

After publishing its first collection, the publishing house became famous.

The face **belongs** to the wolf; the collection **belongs** to the publishing house.

Check that you've used "**Its**" and "**It's**" correctly

If you're **not sure** whether to use "its" or "it's," try **replacing the word** with "it is" or "it has" to see if the sentence still makes sense.

Never use its'—it doesn't mean anything.

Overall, it's been a successful year.

Check if "**it's**" is correct by replacing it with "**it is**" or "**it has**."

Overall, it has been a successful year.

This **makes sense**, so you know “it’s” is the **correct option** for this sentence.

Its windows reflected the light.

“Its” **doesn’t need** an apostrophe in this sentence because it **cannot** be replaced with “it is” or “it has.”

It is windows reflected the light.—NO

It has windows reflected the light.—NO

QUOTATION MARKS

You cannot quote in your essays until you understand how quotation marks work. It's pretty easy to understand.

Quotation marks show that someone is **speaking**

- Quotation marks go around the **actual words** that **someone says**.

“What should we do about the rumors?” asked Monica.

This is **direct speech**—it actually tells you what Monica says.

Quotation marks go at the **start** and **end** of the speech.

- You may need to use **several pairs** of quotation marks in **one sentence**.

“The beast had teeth,” said Joseph, “and big scary eyes.”

The speech is **broken up** by “said Joseph.” This means you need to use **two sets** of quotation marks.

Only use quotation marks for **direct speech**

- You should **only** use quotation marks if you quote **exactly** what someone has said (**direct speech**).
- If you're just telling the reader **what someone said**, you **don't need** quotation marks.

Monica asked what they should do about the rumors.

This is called **indirect** or **reported speech**—you don't know exactly what was said.

No one is actually saying anything in this sentence, so you **don't need** any speech marks.

Speech always starts with a **capital letter**

- Speech always begins with a **capital letter**, even if it starts in the **middle of a sentence**.

The principal said, “Just tell us what happened.”

- If speech is **broken up**, the second part **does not need a capital letter** unless it is a new sentence.

“He’ll go to the chair,” said Atticus, “unless the Governor commutes his sentence.”

The **start** of the speech **needs a capital**, but **the second part doesn’t**. This is because it is **part of the same sentence** spoken by Atticus.

Speech always ends with a **punctuation mark**

- Speech can end with a **comma, period, exclamation mark, or question mark**.

He said that the play was “Alan Bennett’s best!”

- Here are the **four main** pieces of punctuation that you’ll come across:

1. Most speech ends with a **period**.

Use a **period** if the sentence ends when the speech ends.

The General promised, “We’ll send backup.”

A comma is needed to **introduce** the speech, and a period **completes** it.

2. Use **commas** if the sentence **isn’t finished**.
 - Use a **comma** if the sentence continues after the speech ends.
 - If the speech is **split into two parts**, you also need a **comma**.

“Tell me more,” said the Police Officer.

“Forgive them,” he said, “for they know not what they do.”

3. Use **exclamation marks** for **strong emotions**.

Use an **exclamation mark** if the speech shows strong feelings.

“Let’s protest!” shouted the students.

The exclamation mark means you **don't need a comma** to separate the speech from the rest of the sentence.

4. If the speech is asking a question, use a **question mark**.

The principal asked, "What is going on here?"

QUOTING

Quoting from texts or sources is a great way to support your arguments in essays—as long as you do it properly.

Quoting is all about **supporting** your **points**

- Sometimes you'll need to **choose** a **small part** of a text to **support** an argument or give **evidence** in an essay.
- It is best to keep your quotes **short and clear**—just include the **most important bits**.
- A quote **on its own won't** get you any points—you need to explain **why** or **how** it supports the argument you are making.

Make sure your **quotes** are **accurate**

- Copy out your quotes **carefully**. Don't forget to use **exactly the same** words as the original text and copy any **punctuation** or **capital letters**.
- For example, you don't have to start your quote with a capital letter if it **doesn't have one in the original text**.

Boo Radley is described as a monster: “he dined on raw squirrels.”

Quoting from **novels** or **articles**

- Quotes from any text need to be put **inside quotation marks**.
- If you are just quoting a **few words**, try to **include** them in your sentence:

According to the article, the rainforest is being cut down “at an alarming rate.”

The quote **doesn't interrupt** the **flow** of the sentence.

- **Introduce longer quotes** with a colon:

Harper Lee compares Bob Ewell to a chicken: “a little bantam cock of a man rose and strutted to the stand.”

The colon **separates** the quote from the rest of the sentence.

Quoting from poems

- Write **short quotes** from poems as part of your sentence.

In “Quickdraw,” the words ““trigger of my tongue” sound aggressive.

- Show where the **line endings** are for longer quotes:

“The Farmer’s Bride” uses rhyming couplets to give a song-like effect, such as: “We caught her, fetches her home at last / And turned the key upon her, fast.”

The **colon** introduces the **quote**.

Use a “/” to show where a **new line** in the poem begins.

- Keep the **punctuation** the same. If the quote comes from the **beginning of a line**, it usually has a **capital letter**; if it’s from the end of a line, you will have to include any **commas** or **periods**.

Quoting from plays

- If you are quoting from a play that is in **verse** (Shakespeare, for example) and your quote is **longer** than the line, you need to show where the **new line** starts.

Capulet thinks that Juliet will be “rul’d / in all respects” by him.

- If the play **isn’t in verse**, you **don’t** need to show the **line endings** when you quote.

Charley gets frustrated with Willy: “When the are you going to grow up?”

- If you’re quoting **more than a couple of lines** or a **conversation**, you will need to copy it out exactly as it is written in the play:

Romeo and Juliet use religious imagery to talk about love:

Juliet: Saints do not move, though grant for prayers’ sake.

Romeo: Then move not while my prayer’s effect I take.

Thus from my lips, by thine my sin is purg’d.

1. Add a little explanation to put the quote in context.
2. Write the characters' names on the left.

Use **ellipsis** to make your quotes **shorter**

- Sometimes you might want to use a quote that's **too long**.

Gerald tries to excuse Sheila from the Inspector's questions: "She's had a long, exciting, and tiring day—**we were celebrating our engagement, you know—and now** she's obviously had about as much as she can stand."

The quote is **too long**. The bolded part **doesn't add any useful information**.

- You can use an **ellipsis** (. . .) here to cut out any part of the quote that you **don't need**.

Gerald tries to excuse Sheila from the Inspector's questions: "She's had a long, exciting, and tiring day . . . and now she's obviously had about as much as she can stand."

The **ellipsis** shows that you've left some of the quote out. The quote is much shorter and **supports the point better**.

You need to show **where** the quote **comes from**

- You need to copy the title of the text **exactly** as it's written and put it in *italics* if it is a book title, and in **quotation marks** if it is a **poem, chapter, or article**.

Of Mice and Men was published in 1937.

In "The Raven" by Edgar Allan Poe, there is lots of vivid imagery.

- When you are writing essays, you must be **specific** about where in the text the quote comes from.

In **chapter 3**, Darcy insults Elizabeth Bennet.

Lady Macbeth compares herself to men in **Act 1, Scene 5**.

For novels, write the **chapter** (if the novel has chapters).

For plays, write the **Act** and **Scene**.

- **Directly after** the quote you should **add certain information**:

Macbeth grasps for the invisible dagger, saying “Is this a dagger which I see before me?...” (II.i.33)–act, scene, line for plays

As Orwell carefully notes, “Who controls the past controls the future . . .” (4)–page number for texts in other forms

If you **don’t mention the name** of the text or its author in the sentence, you should **add the name of author in the parentheses before the page number**.

Principles of Inclusive Language

Pronouns

- Use singular “they” to refer to a specific person whose gender is unknown or not relevant to the context.
- Always use an individual’s personal pronoun when an individual’s pronouns are known.

Identity

- Make references to identity relevant. Consider whether terms that specify a subject’s ethnicity, religion, gender, sexual orientation, disability, age, or economic or social status are meaningful to the context.
- Reword Gender-specific terms for gender neutrality. Avoid using “man” to mean human: use “beings,” “humankind,” “humanity,” or “people.”
- Avoid negatively judging other’s experiences. When writing about a person who has a disability or health condition or who has experienced trauma, avoid descriptions like “suffers from,” “afflicted with,” “prisoner of,” or “victim of.”