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Punctuation Errors in Formal Letters by Seventh-Grade Students at MTs Baitul Amal, Pekanbaru: Qualitative Analysis

Nisha Nabillah[1*], Charlina[2], Elvrin Septyanti[3]
[123]Program Studi Pendidikan Bahasa dan Sastra Indonesia, Universitas Riau, Riau, Indonesia
*E-mail: nisha.nabillah4236@student.unri.ac.id

ABSTRACT
This study aims to describe punctuation errors in official letters written by Grade VII students of MTs Baitul Amal Pekanbaru and to identify factors contributing to those errors. The study was conducted at MTs Baitul Amal Pekanbaru in 2026. The research population consisted of 18 Grade VII students; 17 students participated in the data collection and provided official-letter documents. Data were obtained through documentation of students' letters and an open-ended questionnaire. The data were analyzed qualitatively through reduction, classification, presentation, interpretation, and conclusion drawing, with punctuation use examined against the Indonesian spelling guidelines (EYD). The analysis identified 106 punctuation errors: 60 periods, 34 commas, 3 colons, and 9 slashes. Period errors were the most frequent, particularly the omission of a period at the end of declarative sentences and the inappropriate use of periods after recipient addresses or dates. Comma errors mainly involved punctuation in official-letter salutations, address/date information, sentence structures, and introductory information. Slash errors occurred in the writing of letter numbers, while colon errors concerned the use of colons before explanations or particulars. The questionnaire indicated three contributing factors: limited understanding of punctuation functions, insufficient writing accuracy and revision habits, and limited practice in formal writing. The findings suggest that punctuation instruction should be reinforced through explicit explanation, repeated practice in writing official letters, and systematic proofreading.

Keywords: punctuation errors, official letters, qualitative analysis

Kesalahan Tanda Baca dalam Surat Resmi Siswa Kelas VII MTs Baitul Amal Pekanbaru: Analisis Kualitatif

ABSTRAK
Penelitian ini bertujuan mendeskripsikan kesalahan penggunaan tanda baca dalam surat resmi siswa kelas VII MTs Baitul Amal Pekanbaru serta mengidentifikasi faktor penyebabnya. Penelitian dilaksanakan di MTs Baitul Amal Pekanbaru pada 2026. Populasi penelitian berjumlah 18 siswa kelas VII. Sebanyak 17 siswa mengikuti pengumpulan data dan menyerahkan dokumen surat resmi. Data diperoleh melalui dokumentasi surat siswa dan angket terbuka. Data dianalisis secara kualitatif melalui reduksi, klasifikasi, penyajian, interpretasi, dan penarikan simpulan dengan mengacu pada kaidah Ejaan Bahasa Indonesia yang Disempurnakan (EYD). Hasil penelitian menunjukkan 106 kesalahan tanda baca, terdiri atas 60 kesalahan tanda titik, 34 kesalahan tanda koma, 3 kesalahan tanda titik dua, dan 9 kesalahan tanda garis miring. Kesalahan tanda titik paling dominan, terutama berkaitan dengan penggunaan tanda titik pada akhir kalimat pernyataan serta pemakaiannya setelah alamat penerima dan tanggal surat. Kesalahan tanda koma ditemukan pada struktur kalimat dan bagian-bagian surat resmi, terutama salam pembuka dan penutup. Kesalahan tanda garis miring terdapat pada penulisan nomor surat, sedangkan kesalahan tanda titik dua berkaitan dengan penggunaannya sebelum pemerian. Angket menunjukkan tiga faktor penyebab, yaitu kurangnya pemahaman terhadap fungsi tanda baca, ketidaktelitian dan kebiasaan memeriksa tulisan, serta kurangnya pembiasaan menulis formal. Hasil penelitian ini menunjukkan perlunya penguatan pembelajaran tanda baca melalui penjelasan kaidah, latihan menulis surat resmi secara berulang, dan pembiasaan penyuntingan.

Kata kunci: kesalahan tanda baca, surat resmi, analisis kualitatif

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INTRODUCTION

Indonesian language instruction requires students not only to be able to convey ideas but also to express those ideas through writing that is clear, coherent, and appropriate for the communicative context. One form of formal writing that students learn is the official letter. Official letters are used by institutions, agencies, or organizations to communicate information, notifications, invitations, or requests to specific parties. Given their formal communicative purpose, such letters must be composed using language that is clear, concise, logical, and polite (Afuri & Alber, 2024; Setiawati et al., 2025).

Spelling accuracy is a crucial element in writing official letters. Spelling encompasses the rules for writing letters, words, and punctuation marks. Punctuation helps readers identify sentence boundaries, the relationships between different parts of a text, and the author's intended meaning. Lubis et al. (2022) explain that punctuation in written language assists readers in understanding the author's intent and purpose. Consequently, the incorrect use of punctuation can hinder the clarity of information and diminish the precision of written communication.

Language errors can be understood as instances of language use that deviate from established rules. Error analysis involves collecting samples, identifying, explaining, classifying, and evaluating the errors discovered (Astuti et al., 2020). In the context of teaching writing, punctuation errors warrant attention because, while students may be familiar with the forms of punctuation marks, they may not necessarily understand the conditions under which they should be used. Hasrianti (2021) indicates that punctuation errors in students' compositions are linked to a lack of attention toward spelling and writing habits that do not include careful proofreading. Wardianti (2024) also examined punctuation errors in students' narrative writing, demonstrating that issues with punctuation can arise across various forms of written work.

Similar issues have been identified in a number of previous studies. Laia (2022) identified errors in the use of letters, words, periods, and commas in permission letters written by eighth-grade students at SMP Negeri 1 Amandraya. Bondar et al. (2023) discovered punctuation errors in persuasive essays by eighth-grade students, including mistakes involving commas, periods, and colons. Sari et al. (2023) examined the use of capital letters and punctuation in formal letters written by seventh-grade students at SMP Negeri 3 Banjar Margo; one of their findings concerned the omission of a comma in the date section of the letters. Putri and Sulastri (2023) also reported spelling errors—including those related to punctuation—in formal school correspondence. Meanwhile, Halawa (2024) found errors in the use of capital letters, periods, and commas in outgoing official letters from a village office. These studies indicate that the accurate use of punctuation remains a challenge in both letter writing and essay composition.

This study focuses on four types of punctuation marks—the period (.), the comma (,), the colon (:), and the slash (/)—as used in formal letters written by seventh-grade students at MTs Baitul Amal Pekanbaru. The selection of these four punctuation marks aligns with the study's analytical focus and instruments. The period is analyzed based on its function in marking the end of declarative sentences, its use in time notation, and instances where it should not be used. The comma is analyzed in terms of its role in separating sentence elements and parts of a letter. The colon is examined in contexts requiring the introduction of a list or details, while the slash is analyzed primarily in the context of letter numbering. The analysis is guided by the fifth edition of the Ejaan Yang Disempurnakan (EYD)—the Indonesian Perfected Spelling system—as published by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology (2022).

Although previous research has addressed punctuation errors in letters and compositions

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written by students, this study specifically focuses on formal letters authored by seventh-grade students at MTs Baitul Amal Pekanbaru. Data from the students' letters are integrated with responses from an open-ended questionnaire, allowing for a description of the errors in relation to the students' own writing experiences and habits. The use of an open-ended questionnaire also provides respondents the opportunity to explain the difficulties they encountered, rather than merely selecting from pre-provided options.

Based on this background, the research questions are formulated as follows: (1) what are the types of punctuation errors found in the formal letters written by seventh-grade students at MTs Baitul Amal Pekanbaru; and (2) what factors contribute to these punctuation errors?

This study aims to describe the errors involving the period, comma, colon, and slash, and to identify the underlying causes. The findings are expected to provide insights for Indonesian language instruction—specifically regarding the teaching of formal letter writing—and serve as a basis for teachers to evaluate and design language-related exercises and feedback.

Theoretically, punctuation marks are an integral part of the spelling system, governing the structure and meaning of written text. The EYD (Indonesian Spelling System) governs the function of each punctuation mark, including the use of a period at the end of a declarative sentence, a comma for specific elements, a colon before a list, and a slash in certain writing formats (Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology, 2022). These provisions serve as the basis for determining whether the use of punctuation in students' letters is correct. In this study, an error is defined as the use or omission of a punctuation mark in a manner inconsistent with the function being analyzed.

Previous research shares similarities in that it examines spelling or punctuation errors using a qualitative approach. The differences lie in the type of text, educational level, data source, and the specific punctuation marks covered. Laia (2022) focused on students' leave-of-absence letters; Bondar et al. (2023) on persuasive essays; Sari et al. (2023) on formal letters written by seventh-grade students; Putri and Sulastri (2023) on school-related formal correspondence; and Halawa (2024) on outgoing official letters. This study complements such research by analyzing four types of punctuation marks in formal letters written by students and investigating the underlying causes through an open-ended questionnaire.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative method with a descriptive approach. This approach was chosen because the research aims to describe the types of punctuation errors and the factors contributing to them, based on natural data—specifically, students' letters and responses to a questionnaire. Qualitative research emphasizes an understanding of the meanings and conditions under investigation, with the results presented in the form of a descriptive account (Sugiyono, 2018; Ultavia et al., 2023; Razak, 2017).

The research was conducted at MTs Baitul Amal, Pekanbaru, Riau, as part of a research project in 2026. The study population consisted of all 18 students in the seventh grade. A total sampling technique was employed, as the entire population was included in the study (Fraenkel et al., 2012; Abubakar, 2021; Afifuddin & Saebani, 2002; Sugiyono, 2019). However, during the data collection phase, 17 students were present and submitted their formal letters, while one student was absent. Consequently, the document analysis in this article is based on the 17 formal letters collected. An open-ended questionnaire was also used to gather information regarding the students' writing experiences and habits.

The research data comprised (1) instances of errors involving periods, commas, colons, and slashes in the students' formal letters; and (2) responses to an open-ended questionnaire concerning the students' understanding of

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punctuation functions, their level of precision, their habits regarding reviewing their own writing, and their experience with formal writing. The data sources consisted of the formal letters and the questionnaire responses provided by the seventh-grade students. The research instruments included a formal letter-writing task, a set of guidelines for identifying punctuation errors based on the EYD (Indonesian Spelling System) standards, a table for recording errors, and an open-ended questionnaire. Data collection was carried out through documentation and a questionnaire. The letters were thoroughly reviewed to identify any instances where punctuation was used incorrectly or omitted, contrary to the established guidelines. Each identified error was recorded, assigned a respondent code, categorized by the type of punctuation and its intended function, and then cross-referenced with the context of the specific section of the letter. The questionnaire was used to explore the reasons behind the students' errors, their level of understanding regarding punctuation rules, their attention to detail while writing, their habits regarding proofreading, and the frequency with which they practice writing formal letters.

Data analysis was conducted in several stages. First, the data were reduced by selecting portions of the letters and questionnaire responses that were relevant to the research focus. Second, the data were classified based on the type of punctuation and the corresponding functional standards. Third, the data were presented through descriptive accounts and a summary of the total number of errors. Fourth, interpretation is conducted by comparing the types of errors found in the documents with the students' explanations provided in the questionnaires. Fifth, conclusions are drawn regarding the types of errors and the factors that caused them. The analysis process follows the principles of qualitative analysis—namely data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing (Sugiyono, 2018). The validity of the data is verified through triangulation of sources and methods by comparing the students' written documents with their questionnaire responses.

RESULT

1. Types of Punctuation Errors

An analysis of 17 formal letters written by students revealed 106 instances of punctuation errors. These errors involve four types of punctuation marks, which are the focus of this study. A summary of the number of errors is presented in below (type of punctuation and number of errors):

1) Period (.) 60
2) Comma (,) 34
3) Colon (:) 3
4) Slash (/)9

1.1 Errors Involving the Period (.)

There were 60 instances of incorrect use of the period, occurring across three functions: F1, F7, and F11. Under F1, 32 errors were identified, consisting of the improper use of a period at the end of a declarative sentence. Under F7, 3 errors were found in the notation of time—for instance, the use of incorrect separators, such as colons or hyphens. Under F11, 25 errors were found involving the placement of a period after a recipient's address or a date, even though, according to the applicable guidelines, these elements should not end with a period. Other functions of the period included in the research instrument showed no errors in the analyzed documents.

1.2 Errors Involving the Comma (,)

There were 34 instances of incorrect use of the comma, occurring across four functions: F4, F9, F10, and F14. F4 accounted for 5 errors, primarily involving the improper use of a comma when a subordinate clause follows a main clause. F9 accounted for 5 errors related to the separation of elements such as names, addresses, locations,

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or dates. F10 accounted for 17 errors, occurring in the opening and closing salutations, as well as in the sections specifying names and titles within the formal letters. F14 accounted for 7 errors, consisting of the omission or improper placement of a comma following an introductory adverbial phrase or modifier at the beginning of a sentence. Other functions of the comma included in the research instrument showed no errors.

1.3 Errors Involving the Colon (:)

Three errors in the use of the colon (:) were identified. These errors occur in functions F2 and F3, where the colon is not used appropriately for introducing lists or details. Specifically, the errors include the omission of a colon in expressions that require an explanation—for instance, in sections detailing types of books or cost estimates.

1.4 Errors Involving the Slash (/)

Nine errors in the use of the slash were found, all of which fall under function F1. These errors relate to the formatting of document reference numbers (such as letter numbers) and the failure to use a slash to separate elements that require it. One example of a corrected document reference number, as shown in the analysis, is "Nomor: 001/ OSIS/MTsBA/II/2026." No errors were found in the other functions analyzed.

2. Factors Contributing to Punctuation Errors

2.1 Lack of a Precise Understanding of the Functions of Punctuation Marks

Student responses to sentence-correction exercises and open-ended questions indicate that some students remain confused about when to use—and when not to use—specific punctuation marks. This difficulty is particularly evident regarding the use of commas and colons. One student remarked, "I'm confused about when to use a colon; I often just place it anywhere." Another student noted that the comma is the most challenging mark, as they are frequently unsure when it should be applied. The research findings suggest that this lack of understanding is the most dominant factor.

2.2 Lack of Attention to Detail in Writing

Some students admitted that they do not pay close attention to punctuation and rarely review their work after finishing it. One student remarked, "I rarely check the punctuation I've used; I usually just submit the assignment immediately." Other students explained that they focus more on completing the content of the assignment than on checking punctuation. This tendency leads to errors—which could easily be identified through proofreading—persisting in their letters.

2.3 Unfamiliarity with Formal Writing

Most students stated that writing formal letters is an infrequent activity, typically occurring only when assigned by a teacher. Students also noted that practice in writing formal letters and discussions regarding punctuation errors are not conducted regularly. This lack of practice limits students' opportunities to apply spelling and punctuation rules within the context of formal correspondence.

DISCUSSION

The research findings indicate that errors involving the use of the period (full stop) are the most prevalent, accounting for 60 out of the 106 total errors. These errors primarily occur in the use of periods at the end of declarative sentences (32 cases) and after elements such as the recipient's address or the date of the letter (25 cases). These two types of errors highlight distinct issues. In the first instance, students fail to consistently mark the end of sentences that convey information or the purpose of the letter. In the second instance, students do not distinguish between declarative sentences and parts of a letter that serve as identifiers or specific details. Consequently, instruction on the use of the period should encompass both its function within sentences and its application in various sections of a formal letter.

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The high frequency of errors involving the period aligns with the findings of Laia (2022), who identified five such errors in permission letters written by eighth-grade students. This similarity suggests that the use of the period remains an aspect requiring attention in students' writing, regardless of the type of letter or the volume of data analyzed. Bondar et al. (2023) also identified 25 errors involving the period in persuasive essays. While this comparison is not intended to equate the severity of the errors—given that the research subjects and scopes differ—it demonstrates that issues with the use of the period persist across various genres of student writing.

Errors involving commas accounted for 34 instances, ranking second in frequency. The highest number of errors—17 cases—occurred within the F10 category, which pertains to opening and closing salutations, as well as names and job titles. This finding is significant because these elements follow a fixed pattern in official correspondence. Errors in categories F4, F9, and F14 indicate that students do not always align their use of commas with sentence structure or the logical relationships between pieces of information. For instance, a comma is unnecessary when separating the subject from the predicate in a construction such as "Kami dari OSIS mohon izin..." (We, from the Student Council, would like to request permission...). It appears that students often place commas based on perceived pauses during reading, rather than strictly adhering to syntactic structure and orthographic rules.

These findings regarding comma usage align with those of Laia (2022), who reported five instances of comma errors in permission letters, and Bondar et al. (2023), who identified 33 such errors in persuasive essays. Research by Sari et al. (2023) also noted the omission of commas in the date section of official letters written by seventh-grade students; this parallel is particularly relevant, as both studies examine correspondence produced by students at the seventh-grade level. Meanwhile, Putri & Sulastri (2023) demonstrated that orthographic errors in school-related official correspondence extend beyond punctuation to include issues with capitalization, the use of bold text, the application of standard vocabulary, and word choice.

There were 9 instances of errors involving the forward slash (/), all of which occurred in the writing of reference numbers (letter numbers). In official correspondence, the forward slash serves to separate components of a reference number according to a specific, established format. The students' errors in completing these reference numbers suggest that the rules for formatting the administrative components of a letter should be taught through concrete examples, rather than merely by introducing the punctuation marks themselves. Given that this study focuses on official correspondence, the findings regarding the forward slash are highly relevant, as the numbering system is a distinct and essential feature of formal documents. Previous research focusing on persuasive writing, such as that by Bondar et al. (2023), did not consider the numbering of items in a letter as a context for analysis.

Errors involving the use of a colon were the least frequent, occurring in only 3 instances. Although this number is small, it indicates that students are not yet consistent in placing a colon before a list or a set of details. The correct use of a colon is linked to the structure of the information being presented—for example, when an expression is followed by an explanation. Bondar et al. (2023) also identified three instances of colon-related errors in persuasive essays. While the identical count does not imply that the nature and context of these errors are the same, it does confirm that the use of a colon is an area in which students may lack proficiency.

Overall, these four types of errors demonstrate that students have yet to apply punctuation consistently according to the specific function of each mark. This aligns with the perspective that punctuation serves as a component of the spelling system, helping readers grasp the structure and

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intent of a text (Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology, 2022; Lubis et al., 2022). Addressing punctuation errors requires more than simply having students memorize the names and forms of punctuation marks; students need opportunities to compare correct and incorrect examples, explain the rationale behind the use of specific marks, and revise texts within the context of formal correspondence.

The questionnaire responses reveal three underlying factors. The most dominant factor is a lack of understanding regarding the functions of punctuation marks. This finding aligns with Hasrianti (2021), who emphasizes the importance of paying attention to spelling during the writing process, and Wardianti (2024), who examines punctuation errors within narrative paragraphs. Difficulty in grasping these rules may also be linked to a lack of sufficient practice. Therefore, teachers should explain the functions of punctuation marks within their specific contexts—particularly in parts of a formal letter where errors frequently occur, such as the salutation, closing, date, recipient's address, and reference number.

The second factor is a lack of carefulness. Students who do not proofread their work are more likely to leave behind errors that could have easily been corrected. Editing should be integrated into the writing process itself, rather than treated as an additional task to be performed only after an assignment is completed. Teachers can encourage students to use a simple checklist that covers the use of periods at the end of sentences, commas in various parts of a letter, colons before lists, and slashes in reference numbers. Such a habit helps students focus on the mechanical aspects of their writing, in addition to the content.

The third factor is a lack of experience in formal writing. Formal letters possess a structure and linguistic style that differ from personal messages or informal writing. If students are only occasionally tasked with writing formal letters, they have limited opportunities to apply the rules consistently. This finding underscores the value of a scaffolded approach to practice: identifying the components of a letter, adding correct punctuation to examples, drafting complete letters, peer-reviewing work, and revising based on established language guidelines (EYD). Through consistent practice, students can bridge the gap between their understanding of the rules and their actual writing performance.

The strength of this study lies in its use of two data sources: formal letters and open-ended questionnaires. The letters reveal the specific types of errors that actually appear in the students' writing, while the questionnaires provide insight into the students' experiences and habits. Combining these two sources allows the researcher to link the errors found in the writing to the factors identified by the respondents. Furthermore, all students within the target population were intended to be included via total sampling; however, documents were successfully collected from only 17 students.

This study has several limitations. First, the document data originated from a single class at one school, with only 17 letters collected; therefore, the findings are not intended to be generalized to all seventh-grade students. Second, the analysis is limited to four types of punctuation marks and thus does not encompass all aspects of spelling in formal letters. Third, the underlying causes were described based on responses to an open-ended questionnaire and have not been explored further through interviews or repeated classroom observations. Future research could expand the scope to include more locations and a larger number of documents, incorporate additional aspects of spelling, and utilize interviews to obtain more in-depth explanations.

CONCLUSION

An analysis of 17 formal letters written by seventh-grade students at MTs Baitul Amal Pekanbaru revealed 106 instances of punctuation errors. These consisted of 60 errors involving periods, 34 involving commas, 9 involving slashes,

and 3 involving colons. Consequently, errors involving periods were the most prevalent, occurring primarily at the end of declarative sentences, as well as within the recipient's address and the date of the letter. Errors involving commas were mainly found in the opening and closing salutations, the separation of informational elements, sentence structure, and introductory modifiers. Errors involving slashes were related to the formatting of letter reference numbers, while errors involving colons occurred in sections requiring the enumeration of items.

The underlying causes of these errors include a lack of student understanding regarding the functions of punctuation marks, a lack of diligence in writing and proofreading, and insufficient practice in formal writing. The most significant factor is the students' limited grasp of the functions and rules governing punctuation. These findings highlight the need for an instructional approach that integrates the explanation of grammatical rules, repeated practice in writing formal letters, and self-editing exercises.

LIMITATION

This study is limited to 17 formal letters from a single class at MTs Baitul Amal Pekanbaru and focuses on four types of punctuation marks. Data regarding the causes of these errors were collected via open-ended questionnaires, without the inclusion of in-depth interviews or repeated observations.

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DECLARATION OF GENERATIVE AI AND AI-ASSISTED TECHNOLOGIES

During the drafting of this article, artificial intelligence technology was utilized as an aid for structuring the content and refining the language, based on the author's original thesis manuscript and provided templates. Authors are responsible for verifying the accuracy of data, citations, interpretations, and the entire content of the manuscript before submission to the journal.

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