

WRITING

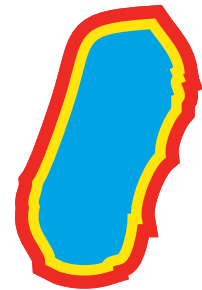
Topic Notes — Punctuation

Many writers feel uncertain about what punctuation to use and when to use it.

These notes concentrate on a few basic rules for each piece of punctuation, starting with the comma, probably the most commonly used piece of punctuation.

The Comma

There is no one perfect complete set of rules on which everyone agrees. However, if you learn these basics, your common sense will help you figure out what to do in other cases. Two points to remember are that the tendency now in English is to use fewer commas than in the past, and a comma usually signifies a pause in a sentence.



1. Use commas to separate three or more words, phrases, and clauses written in a series.

Tip: Are the last two items in the series connected with either AND or OR?

She enjoyed writing, reading and teaching.

His favorite fruits are apples, bananas and cantaloupe

(Note: Whether a comma is used before the last item depends on the style being used: Associated Press Style uses no comma; Modern Language Association uses a comma there.)

2. Use commas along with a coordinating conjunction to combine two independent clauses joined by a coordinating conjunction:

and, but, for, so, yet, or, nor

The sale was made in only a few minutes, but the sales rep kept talking.

3. Use commas after introductory clauses, phrases, or words that come BEFORE the main clause and interrupt the flow of the sentence.

After completing the test, the class was allowed to leave

When you leave the house, you must look at the garden.

Running home from work, he saw a beautiful sunset

To enter the stadium, you must have a ticket.

Tips:

—Some common beginning words for clauses are:

After, Although, As, Because, If, Since, When, While

While I was eating, the cat scratched at the door.

—Some common beginning words for phrases are:

verb + ing and to + verb:

—Some common introductory words:

For example, Yes, However, Well

For example, we have no car to drive.

Well, this is another fine mess you've gotten us into.

4. Use a pair of commas in the middle of the sentence to set off phrases, clauses, and words that interrupt the flow of the sentence and are not essential to the meaning.

Tips: Can you leave out the clause, phrase, or word and still have the sentence make sense?

Does the non-essential clause, phrase, or word interrupt the flow of words in the original sentence?

Can you move the non-essential element around in the sentence?

NON-ESSENTIAL: (A pair of commas)

Apples, which are my favorite fruit, are usually harvested in autumn.

Fred, who often cheats, is just harming himself.

Professor Benson, grinning from ear to ear, announced that the exam will be tomorrow.

Tom, the captain of the team, was injured in the game.

It is up to you, Jane, to finish.

She was, however, too tired to make the trip.

Two hundred dollars, I think, is sufficient.

ESSENTIAL: (no comma)

Tip: Does the clause begin with THAT? THAT clauses after nouns are almost always essential. “THAT” clauses which follow a verb expressing mental action are always essential. No comma is needed in these cases.

—THAT after nouns:

The book that I borrowed from you is excellent.

Apples that are green are usually called Granny Smith apples.

—THAT clauses which follow a verb expressing mental action:

She believes that she will be able to earn an A.

He dreams that he can fly.

I contend that it was wrong to mislead her.

They wish that warm weather would finally arrive.

Other essential:

A student who cheats only harms himself.

The girl wearing the tight sweater is attracting a lot of attention.

5. Use commas to separate two or more adjectives that describe the same noun.

Tips: Can the adjectives be written in reverse order? (If your answer is yes, add a comma.)

Can you add an AND between the adjectives? (If your answer is yes, add a comma.) (*a greedy, stubborn child*) (*a white, frame house*) (*a purple, wool shawl*) (*an easy, happy smile*)

6. Use commas near the end of the sentence to separate sharply contrasted elements in the sentence or to indicate a distinct voice pause.

He was merely ignorant, not stupid.

You're one of the senator's right-hand men, aren't you?

7. Use commas to set off all geographical names, items in dates (except the months and day), addresses (except the street name and number), and titles in names.

Birmingham, Alabama, gets its name from Birmingham, England.

July 22, 1959, was a momentous day in his life.

Who lives at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, Washington, D.C.?

Donald B. Lake, MD., will be the principal speaker.

8. Use commas to separate the exact words spoken in dialogue (or the exact words taken from a written source) from everything else in the sentence.

John said, "I'll see you tomorrow."

I was able," she answered, "to complete the assignment.

9. Use a comma in numbers of one thousand or larger.

1, 999

1,999,999,999

10. Use commas anywhere in the sentence to prevent possible confusion or misreading.

To John, George had been a sort of idol.

Comma Abuse

Commas in the wrong places can chop ideas into wrong pieces or confuse the reader with unnecessary pauses.

Commas shouldn't be used to separate a subject from its verb.

The 18-year old in California, is now considered an adult. (INCORRECT)

The most important attribute of a ball player, is quick reflex actions. (INCORRECT)

Commas shouldn't be used between 2 verbs!

We laid out our music and snacks, and began to study. (INCORRECT)

I turned the corner, and ran smack into a patrol car. (INCORRECT)

Commas shouldn't be used before a dependent (or subordinate) clause when it comes after the main clause (except for extreme contrast.)

She was late for class, because her alarm clock was broken. (INCORRECT)

You ought to see a doctor, if you are ill. (INCORRECT)
(If the order of the clauses in these sentences is reversed, a comma is necessary)

She was still quite upset, although she won the Oscar.
(CORRECT - EXTREME CONTRAST)



Quotation Marks

Use quotation marks as follows.

1. For a direct quotation:

“Please,” I begged, “don’t go away.”

Not for an indirect quotation:

He said the report was correctly done.

2. For material copied word for word from a source:

According to *Science* magazine, “In an academic achievement test given 600 sixth-graders in eight countries, U.S. kids scored last in mathematics, sixth in science, and fourth in geography.”

3. For titles of shorter works such as short stories, one-act plays, poems, articles in magazines and newspapers, songs, essays, and chapters of books:

“A Modest Proposal,” an essay by Jonathan Swift, is a masterpiece of satire.

“The Lottery,” a short story by Shirley Jackson, created a sensation when it first appeared in the *New Yorker*.

(Note: Titles of longer works such as novels, full-length plays and names of magazines or newspapers are italicized in print. However, many publications follow the Associated Press Stylebook which suggests only capitalizing titles.)

4. For words used in a special way:

“Duckie” is a term of affection used by the British the way we would use the word “honey.”

(Note: Commas and periods used in conjunction with quotation marks, always go inside the quotation marks.)



The Semicolon

Use the colon in these situations:

1. **To join two independent clauses whose ideas and sentence structure are related:**

He decided to consult the map; she elected to ask the next pedestrian she saw.

2. **To combine two sentences using a transition word (adverbial conjunction):**

He decided to consult the map; however, she elected to ask the next pedestrian she saw.

3. **To separate items in a series when the items themselves contain commas:**

I had lunch with Linda, my best friend; George, my neighbor; and Jan, my sister-in-law.



The Colon

Use the colon as follows:

1. **After a complete sentence when the material that follows is a list, an illustration, or an explanation:**

—A list:

Please order the following items: five dozen pencils, 20 rulers and five rolls of tape.

(Note: No colon is used when there is not a complete sentence before the colon.)

2. **An explanation or illustration:**

She was an exceptional child: At seven she was performing on the concern stage.

3. **For the salutation of a business letter:**

To whom it may concern:

Dear Madam President:

4. **In telling time:**

We will eat at 5:15.



5. Between the title and subtitle of a book:

Writing and Reporting News: A Coaching Method

The Dash and Parentheses

The comma, dash and parentheses can all be used to show an interruption of the main idea. The particular form you choose depends on the degree of interruption.



Use the dash for a less formal and more emphatic, even dramatic, interruption of the main idea.

He came — I thought — by car.

She arrived — and I know this for a fact — in a pink Cadillac.

Use the parentheses to insert extra information that some of your readers might want to know but that is not at all essential for the main idea. Such information is not emphasized.



Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750) composed the “Preludes and Fugues.”



Plea bargaining (see page 28) was developed to speed court verdicts.

The Hyphen

Use a hyphen in the following ways:



1. With two or more words that act as a single unit (compound modifier) describing a noun.

The society ladies nibbled at the platter of deep-fried food.

A white-gloved waiter then put some steamed vegetables on their table.

2. To divide a word at the end of a line of writing or typing.

It had begun to drizzle, but the teams decided to play the champion-ship game that day.

