PUNCTUATION AND APOSTROPHES

Grammar supplement for instructors and students using Short Fiction & Critical Contexts: A Compact Reader. *This reading, which includes many examples from student essays, discusses the rules for punctuating and for using apostrophes correctly.*

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Using Commas

Correct comma use aids the reader in understanding your essay or professional document, acting as a pattern of stitch work, threading the parts of the sentence into a complete whole. It is important to realize that, like other elements that are part of the system of English grammar, commas guide the reader semantically; that is, they help the reader understand the meaning of the message by clarifying and consolidating the relationships among the parts of the sentence. As readers, we expect commas to fulfil specific functions in a sentence; if they don't, the sentence can become hard to read. As writers, of course, we need to use commas and other forms of punctuation according to pre-established rules and conventions for the benefit of the reader.

The word “comma” comes from the Greek *komma*, meaning “cut” or “segment.” In general, commas *separate* (segment) the smaller or less important units in a sentence. However, one important use of commas is to work with coordinating conjunctions to separate very *large* units: independent clauses. The four rule categories below explain what commas separate in a sentence: 1) items in a series, 2) independent clauses, 3) parenthetical material, and 4) miscellaneous items, such as adjectives, dates, addresses, and titles.

1) *Use commas to separate items in a series. This rule applies to three or more grammatically parallel items, such as nouns, verbs, or adjectives—whether single words, phrases, or clauses*.

> Using symbols, metaphors, and carefully written dialogue, she is able to point out the struggles that many women today have against male domination. (the first two commas separate words)

> After her lover fails to reappear, Rose quits her teaching job, abandons her country farmhouse, and drives west. (the last two commas separate predicates)

The Serial Comma: The comma before the last item in a series of three or more is often omitted in informal and even sometimes in more formal writing. However, in formal academic writing, it’s probably best to follow rule 1). Then you don’t have to pause to consider whether it can be omitted in the particular instance. The final, or *serial,* comma should not be omitted when the final element or the one that precedes it is compound. Example*: For breakfast, she ordered a glass of orange juice, a three-egg omelette, and toast and jam*. (The last item in the list is compound, or comprised of two elements: “toast” *and* “jam.”)

The serial comma is also advisable in cases where the second-last or the last item is a phrase or is significant longer than the other items. The serial comma makes reading easier:

The two-year specialization includes 10 half-courses, two full courses that involve internships in health care facilities, and a research paper. The second item in the list is the longest, made up of a noun plus a relative clause. The last (serial) comma makes the sentence easier to follow, clearly separating the last and second-last items.

2) *Use commas to separate independent clauses*. This rule category applies to two independent clauses joined by a coordinating conjunction and introductions when an independent clause follows. It may also apply to instances in which an independent clause precedes the conclusion.

2a) *Use a comma after an independent clause when that clause is followed by another independent clause and joined by a coordinating conjunction*. Another way of putting this is that a comma should be used before the conjunction in a compound sentence. One way to explain this rule is to see the coordinating conjunction as the “connector” and the comma as the “separator,” the mark of punctuation that stresses the independence of the two clauses. In the examples below, the coordinating conjunction is underlined; a comma precedes it.

> He is very curious and unsure about religion, love and his future, and this contributes to his frustration.

> It is easy to pity a man who is as gullible as Fortunato, but he quickly loses our respect by being frivolous and arrogant.

2b) *Use a comma after an introductory word, phrase, or clause when an independent clause follows it*.

Although published in the 1870s, the story is still relevant to today's society. (introductory phrase underlined)

In the following instance, the introduction is one word, a sentence adverb:

Unfortunately, the bull moose came to a sad end at the hands of humans.

In complex sentences (consisting of one independent and at least one dependent clause), when you begin the sentence with the dependent clause, *a comma follows the dependent clause introduction*, underlined below:

Although he appears to be a man of nobility, we are given clues about his true character through his actions.

Compare with rule 2c), *below*.

2c) *Use a comma before a concluding word, phrase, or clause when an independent clause precedes it, unless the concluding phrase or clause gives essential information*. The concluding phrase is underlined.

The narrator is taken out of her element, living in "a colonial mansion" for the summer.

Rule 2c) will apply when a previous statement is attributed to an individual or group:

"Dominance occurs when societal structures block the power of female actualization," according to John F. Kanthak (11).

The rule may sometimes be used in complex sentences that end with a dependent clause, but, generally, a comma is not needed (compare with Rule 2b where the sentence *begins* with an independent clause). Subordinating conjunctions like "although," "though," "even though," and "whereas" suggest a break with the preceding independent clause, making a comma advisable, but when different conjunctions are used (such as "if," "as," "because," or "when"), the comma can be omitted.

In "The Yellow Wallpaper," Gilman reveals the misfortune of having an overbearing husband, whereas Mansfield explores the consequences of an over-controlling father in "The Daughters of the Late Colonel."

The narrator's inability to converse with others does not help her recovery as this further contributes to her depression.

3) *Use two commas to separate parenthetical information.*
What is parenthetical information? It is less important information. You may be familiar with the dramatic convention of placing stage directions in parentheses or square brackets. What is enclosed in parentheses isn't usually part of the dialogue; instead, it may convey the way something is said or the character's behaviour when saying it (angrily, crying, hesitating). You could consider parentheses overgrown commas: parenthetical insertions should be separated by commas.

The rules under category 3 involve the separation of less important or non-essential information (parenthetical information) from the more important information in the sentence. We will look specifically at three situations in which parenthetical information necessitates the use of commas: with non-restrictive phrases and clauses, with appositives, and with interrupters.

3a) *Use commas before and after non-restrictive (nonessential) phrases or clauses. The information in non-restrictive clauses is not essential to the meaning of the sentence.* Though this information may be important, it *can* be left out without changing a) the meaning of the sentence, or b) the grammar of the sentence (i.e., by making it ungrammatical). By contrast, restrictive material is *essential* to the meaning of the sentence; in this sense, it *restricts*, or limits, its meaning. If you left it out, the sentence would mean something different.

1) Fortunato, <u>who is dressed in a fool's cap</u>, is easily led to his destruction.

2) A man <u>who dresses in a fool's cap</u> will arouse a great deal of curiosity.

The main idea in sentence 1) is that Fortunato is easily led to his destruction. The fact he is dressed in a fool's cap is significant in the story, yet if the clause beginning with "who" were omitted, the main idea in the sentence would still be intact. "[W]ho is dressed in a fool's cap" should be treated as additional (nonessential) information.

In sentence 2), "who dresses in a fool's cap" identifies a particular man or kind of man. If you were to leave out "who dresses in a fool's cap," the sentence would say simply that "a man will arouse a great deal of curiosity," quite a different statement!

☞ Remember to use *two* commas when separating non-essential information from the rest of the sentence. Using a comma *only before* or *only after* "Fortunato" in sentence 1) is incorrect.

☞ Use "who" to refer to people in restrictive and non-restrictive clauses; use "which" to refer to non-humans in non-restrictive clauses and "that" to refer to non-humans in restrictive clauses.

3b) *Use commas to set off appositives.* These are words or phrases that share a grammatical function with a preceding noun or phrase. They may express in different words, name, or explain the noun or noun phrase that comes just before (see *Chart* showing parts of speech in "Preliminaries"). Appositives are underlined below; grammatically parallel preceding nouns are italicized.

> Katherine Mansfield's "The Daughters of the Late Colonel" is a story of two *women*, <u>Constantia and Josephine</u>, who are experiencing independence and authority for the first time after the death of their *father*, <u>Colonel Pinner</u>.

> The sense of this colonialism can be related to the way *John*, the narrator's physician husband, views his wife.

You need to ensure that you use two commas for true appositives and don't mistake a noun or noun phrase for an appositive when it is not one. If in doubt, take the second noun (noun phrase) out of the sentence and see if it is complete and makes grammatical sense. In the following sentence, the commas surrounding "The Cinnamon Peeler" are incorrect because the name of the poem is essential to the meaning of the sentence (the reader needs to know the name of the specific poem).

- ✗ Michael Ondaatje wrote the poem, "The Cinnamon Peeler," in 1982.
- ✓ Michael Ondaatje wrote the poem "The Cinnamon Peeler" in 1982.

3c) *Use commas to set off adverbs and adverbial phrases that interrupt the flow of the sentence* from subject to predicate or from verb to object. Some examples include brief words and phrases that emphasize or qualify. Examples of interrupters include the following: this list is reproduced later (p. 7), so only a few examples are given here:

> *indeed, after all, however, on the other hand, in fact, nevertheless, needless to say, no doubt, perhaps, undoubtedly, therefore.*

> When the story begins, however, their father has died, and we are shown how the two sisters struggle with their social inadequacy.

4) *Miscellaneous and "Comma Sense" Uses*
Convention more than grammar dictates that we use commas between coordinate adjectives before a noun, with dates, addresses, titles, and before and after direct quotations.

Adjectives modify nouns and usually precede them. When the adjectives are *coordinate,* or equal and interchangeable, you separate them by a comma. When the adjectives are *non-coordinate,* or unequal and not interchangeable, you do not use a comma.

Coordinate adjectives: big, friendly dog
tall, white tower
proud, condescending man

Non-coordinate adjectives:
white bull terrier
barren attic room;
incredible lucky break

Other conventional uses:

> *Quotations*: The sign says, "trespassers will be prosecuted." "I am not a crook," said Richard Nixon as he crossed his fingers behind his back.

> *Addresses*: 1313 Mockingbird Lane, Los Angeles, California

> *Dates*: November 18, 1985; November 1985; 18 November 1985

A comma is not used with the month and year alone, nor is it used if you begin with the date and follow with the month.

Names and Addresses: Satis House, London, England; Box 2020, Station "A," London, Ontario N7G 8X8

Degrees, Titles, and Similar Designations: Elyse Mitchell, B.A.

Numbers: Under the metric system, there is a space rather than a comma between every three digits in a number of more than four digits (the space is optional with four-digit numbers). You will sometimes see the non-metric format where a comma separates every three digits starting from the right.

In 2006, the population of Nunavut was 29 474, according to Statistics Canada.

Quotation Marks:
It is the convention in North America to place *commas and periods inside* quotation marks. Semicolons and colons are placed *outside* quotation marks.

Using Punctuation Other Than Commas

Semicolons

One of the major functions of commas is to separate independent clauses in a compound sentence. You will see that your understanding of independent clauses is also crucial in using semicolons correctly. In fact, two rules for semicolon use involve joining independent clauses; the third function is separating items in a series where it may be confusing to rely on commas alone to separate.

1) *Independent Clauses: You may use a semicolon rather than a comma and a coordinating conjunction to join independent clauses where there is a close relationship between the clauses.*

Using a semicolon to join two independent clauses, rather than a comma + a coordinating conjunction, signals to the reader the close connection between the ideas in the two clauses. For example, you can use a semicolon when you want to expand on or paraphrase the preceding statement:

> Like children, Josephine and Constantia are unable to care for themselves or make important decisions; they are utterly lost without their father.

Using a semicolon is often ideal if a contrast between two clauses is intended:

> In reading "The Fall of the House of Usher," one is constantly reminded of the dreary greyness of the gloomy mansion; in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, one can almost hear Jim speaking in a hearty, heavily accented voice.

The rules for independent clauses we have looked at so far demonstrate the many options for connecting important ideas. 1) you can simply begin a new sentence after you have expressed your first idea; 2) you can join the two clauses by using a comma + a coordinating conjunction; 3) you can use a semicolon in place of a period and a new sentence or a comma + a coordinating conjunction if you want to stress the closeness of the ideas in the independent clauses: the physical proximity of the two clauses visually reinforces this closeness.

One more option exists for writers, which is discussed under rule 2 *below*.

2) *Independent Clauses: You may use a semicolon and a conjunctive adverb or a transitional phrase when an independent clause follows.* Conjunctive adverbs and transitional phrases are too numerous to list in their entirety, but all can assist in linking two clauses. Here are some of the most common conjunctive adverbs and transitional phrases, words and phrases that are among the most versatile in the language. However, because they have more than one use (see p. 5), it's important to understand how you are using it before deciding on punctuation.

accordingly, afterward, also, as a result, besides, certainly, consequently, finally, for example, if not, in addition, in fact, in the meantime, further(more), hence, however, indeed, instead, later, likewise, meanwhile, moreover, namely, nevertheless, next, nonetheless, otherwise, similarly, on the contrary, on the other hand, still, subsequently, that is, then, therefore, thus, undoubtedly

Joining independent clauses: the underlined word is the conjunctive adverb; it is preceded by a semicolon.

> Edna's suicide at the end of the novel makes it quite clear that she is not prepared to live by the laws of society; however, the fact she takes her own life suggests that her desires are unrealistic.
>
> One can assume that the narrator in the poem is Dickinson herself; certainly, the speaker is an adult female writer.

One of the most common errors is to ignore the critical distinction between adverbs like "however" and "therefore" acting as ordinary adverbs (interrupters) and these same words acting as conjunctions (joiners).

Notice that if you move "however" or "certainly" in the sentences above so they no longer join independent clauses (completed thoughts), you would have to punctuate differently:

> Edna's suicide at the end of the novel makes it quite clear that she is not prepared to live by the laws of society; the fact that she takes her own life, however, suggests that her desires are unrealistic.

"However" now interrupts the second clause, so it must be surrounded by commas (see p. 5).

☞ Remember when you use "however," "therefore," or a similar word/phrase, to check on its function in the sentence: if it is an interrupter and can be taken out of the sentence, use two commas; if it is joining two independent clauses, use a semicolon before and a comma after the word/phrase.

3) *A semicolon should also be used between items in a series when one or more of the elements contain commas.* Without semicolons, this sentence might be confusing:

> International writers on the course include Julio Cortázar, Argentina; Haruki Murakami, Japan; Jose Dalisay, the Philippines; and Gao Xingjian, China.

You may also use semicolons to separate items in a list when each item is a long phrase or clause, especially where there is internal punctuation. The following sentence would be difficult to read if the items in a series were not separated by semicolons.

> The role of the vice-president will be to enhance the university's external relations; strengthen its relationship with alumni, donors, business and community leaders; implement a fundraising program; and increase the university's involvement in the community.

Colons

It is often said that while a semicolon brings the reader to a brief stop or a rhetorical pause, the colon leads the reader on. The colon has three main uses:

1) *You may use a colon to formally introduce quoted material*:

> The Oxford English Dictionary defines the word "rhetoric" this way: "The art of using language so as to persuade or influence others."
>
> Edna's determination to become a self-sufficient, modern woman is revolutionary: "She had resolved never to take another step backward."

Direct Quotations: When you use direct quotations in your essays, you can often set them up less formally by using a comma or no punctuation if you follow the rules of grammar in doing so:

> 1) When the Grim Reaper figure invades the masquerade, the Prince demands, "Who dares insult us with this blasphemous mockery?"
>
> 2) In the first stanza, Dickinson tells us clearly that "'Tis not that Dying hurts us so - /'Tis living – hurts us more."

In sentence 1), it is one of the conventional uses of commas to set off direct quotations when preceded or followed by phrases like "he said," "she wrote," and the like (see "other conventional uses," p. 5). In sentence 2), you do not put a comma after a subordinating conjunction when an independent clause follows; therefore, no punctuation is used.

2) *You may use a colon to set up or introduce a list or series*:

> Naturalism includes a belief that the fate and condition of characters are based on two things: their circumstances and their environment.

☞ Don't use a colon to introduce a list in the middle of a sentence or if doing so sounds unnatural. Avoid the temptation to stick in a colon just before you start a list unless what precedes is completely expressed. Normally, you would *not* use a colon after words like "including" or "such as," or right after a linking verb like "is" or "are," though these words are often used to set up a list or series.

> ✗ The writer conveys a suspenseful tone through several devices, such as: diction, imagery, and use of a naïve narrator.
> ✗ One of the questions my essay will attempt to answer is: who is the narrator in "Masque of the Red Death"?

3) *The colon can also be used to answer or explain what is asked or implied in the preceding independent clause*. Like the comma and semicolon, then, the colon can be used to separate independent clauses. However, its use is restricted to places in which the second clause clearly *completes something implied or stated* in the previous clause—for example, if it answers a question:

> 1) She is expected by everyone around her to be the perfect Victorian wife: sweet, complacent, proper, and utterly devoted to the comforts and whims of her husband and children.
>
> 2) Later in the novel, he expands upon his explanation of Hester's morality: he describes her long years of solitude and ostracism from society.

In sentence 1), what follows the colon completes the idea of "the perfect Victorian housewife." In sentence 2), the independent clause that follows the colon how "he" (the narrator) expands on his explanation; it answers the implied question "how did he do this?"

☞ It may help you avoid errors in using semicolons and colons to remember that unless you are using semicolons to separate items in a series (rule 3), what *precedes and follows a semicolon* should be an independent clause. What *precedes a colon* should be an independent clause that makes a complete statement; what follows it *may* be an independent clause.

Dashes and Parentheses

Dashes set something off and can convey a break in thought. You can use dashes sparingly to emphasize a word or phrase; two dashes (one dash if it's at the end of a sentence) will set off the text and draw the reader's attention to what is between the dashes. You can use two hyphens to indicate a dash--if you don't leave a space after the second hyphen, your computer may automatically convert the hyphens to an "em" dash—like this.

Use parentheses sparingly to include a word or phrase, even occasionally a sentence, that isn't important enough to be included as part of the main text; where dashes emphasize, parentheses de-emphasize.

> Those who work for the narrator (Nippers, Turkey, Ginger Nut) have nicknames resembling an aspect about them—except Bartleby.

You will also use parentheses to reference a source after a quotation if you use a parenthetical method for documenting sources.

> The critic argues convincingly that *Women in Love* is D.H. Lawrence's most mature novel (McKeogh 109).

Deciding how to punctuate material enclosed by parentheses can be tricky. If the parentheses enclose *a complete sentence*, the period should be placed *inside* the second parenthesis, as it would apply only to what is between parentheses. If the material within parentheses is part of the sentence, the punctuation mark (such as a question mark or exclamation point!) should also be *inside if it applies to the enclosed material*.

If there should be a mark of punctuation following the parentheses, it will be placed *outside*. (In other words, punctuate the entire sentence just as you would if there were no parentheses there.) The previous sentence affords an example of terminal punctuation of a complete sentence enclosed by parentheses. The following sentence illustrates punctuation that has nothing to do with the parenthetical insertion, but is required to separate independent clauses. Notice the absence of a capital letter:

> Cassandra wanted to be an actress (her mother had been an actress), but she always trembled violently as soon as she stepped on a stage.

Use both dashes and parentheses sparingly.

Apostrophes

Technically, the apostrophe isn't a mark of punctuation; it is an internal change that indicates the possessive case of nouns and indefinite pronouns. It is also used to show the omission of one or more letters. The apostrophe, then, has two main uses: 1) *to indicate the possessive* and 2) *to show where letters have been omitted*, as in contractions.

Apostrophes for Possession in Nouns: The possessive case in nouns and pronouns indicates ownership and similar relationships, such as association, authorship, duration, description, and source of origin. So, the possessive form is a short form indicating that the first noun owns or is associated with the second noun. When a noun adds an apostrophe (see below) to express the possessive, it is then functioning adjectively.

> the landlord's apartment (ownership)
> the tenant's rights (association)
> Dvorak's New World Symphony (authorship)

If you're unsure whether to use the possessive form and you have written two nouns in succession with the first noun ending in "s," try to place the second noun in front of the first noun and put "of the" in between:

> *the computers hard drive……the hard drive **of the*** computer =
> the computer's hard drive
> BUT…

The computers and printers will be on sale for one week. (The nouns are simple plurals—more than one computer and more than one printer)

Singular Nouns: The usual rule with *singular* nouns, including proper nouns (nouns that begin with a capital letter) ending in "s" "ss," or the "s" sound, is to *add 's*.

> the attorney's portfolio, Mr. Price's car, the week's lesson, the reader's perception

☞ There are a few plural nouns not ending in "s" that are treated as singular nouns because of their ending: "children," "women," "men," "people."
> the popular children's book, the women's group

Plural Nouns: With *plural* nouns, including plural proper nouns ending in "s," *an apostrophe alone is added*:

the companies' profits, the islands' inhabitants, the Hansons' children,
the Gibbses' marriage certificate, two weeks' lessons, the readers' perceptions

The reader would know that there is more than one company and more than one island, but in the following examples, the reader would know by the placement of the apostrophe and the letter "s" that there is only one company and one island:

the company's profits, the island's inhabitants, Gregory Hanson's children,
Graham Gibbs's marriage certificate

In the sentence below, we know that there are at least two sisters because the apostrophe is after the "s"; the noun is plural:

Immediately we get a sense of the Pinner sisters' indecision and disorientation that they experience after the death of their father.

Proper nouns ending in "s": Because it may look and sound awkward to add an apostrophe + an "s" to a proper noun ending in "s," some authorities have special rules for these kinds of nouns. This is why you may see, for example, Tracy Jarvis' book, though, since "Jarvis" is a singular proper noun, the rule for forming the possessive in singular nouns states that you add an apostrophe + an "s" = Tracy Jarvis's book. Neither is wrong, but it seems simplest to follow the rule for singular nouns whether they end in "s" or not. An exception may be made for instances where the name is extremely hard to pronounce by adding "s".

Euripedes' play *Electra*, Ann Landers' advice, Moses' prophecy

Whichever rule you follow, it's important to be consistent in applying the possessive to proper nouns ending in "s".

Joint Ownership: In the case of *joint ownership*, where both nouns share, or are equal parties in, something, only the last noun should show the possessive; make sure that both nouns reflect a truly equal, shared relationship. The context should be the indicator:

Rodgers and Hammerstein's last collaboration was *The Sound of Music*.

Contractions: The second main use of the apostrophe is to denote missing letters. Be especially careful with the contraction *it's (it is)*, which is often confused with the possessive form of the pronoun *its* (as in *I gave the dog its bone*); the contraction *who's (who is)* is sometimes confused with the possessive form of *who (the man whose house I'm renting)*. Ensure that you can tell the difference between the contraction *it is (it's)* and the possessive pronoun *its*, and between the contract *who is (who's)* and the possessive pronoun *whose*.

Note: Contractions are not generally used in formal writing. You should check with your instructor to see if they can be used or if they can be used in specific kinds of essays, such as personal essays.

☞ Remember that the apostrophe is **not** used to indicate the *plural of nouns*; it is also **not** used to indicate the possessive of *pronouns* (except for indefinite pronouns, such as *one's opinion*, *nobody's baby*).

Exception: Apostrophes can be used for clarity with numbers, letters, or symbols to indicate the plural: Adrian got two A's and three B's on his transcript.