

ENGR 240

Style Matters: Punctuation

Achieving Clarity and Accuracy



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The Writing Process: 40:20:40

In Engr. 120, you'll learn how **clear communication** works

Use each **step** of the **writing process** in a conscious, self-reflective way, budgeting a chunk of time to carefully revise, edit, and **correct** your writing so it can clearly communicate your ideas to readers, allowing them to easily follow your train of thought

The more effectively you communicate your message, the better your reader can grasp what you're saying, give you credit for your ideas, and be convinced by your argument

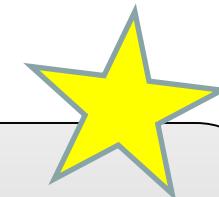
Learning Outcomes

After reviewing my Punctuation Guide, going through these slides, and completing today's activities, you should be able to

- Recognize the **value engineers place** on using punctuation correctly as a means of achieving **precision and accuracy**
- Use a **basic grammatical vocabulary** to describe the functions of punctuation in a sentence
- Describe and apply the rules for **commas, colons, and semi-colons**
- Attend to this **“micro” level of style** when **reviewing** your own and others' writing

Engineers Require Engineers to Write Clearly

The world-renowned IEEE journal,
*Transactions on Professional
Communication* (est. 1957) states:



“Engineers are key players in establishing, supporting, and advocating for clear, transparent, objective communication”

Writing Clearly and Correctly is a Program Outcome

**Accredited engineering programs
must contain not only adequate
mathematics, science, and
engineering curriculum content
but must also develop
communication skills . . .**

[Canadian Engineering Accreditation Board](#)

From: Roel Hurkens

To: Monika Smith

Subject: ENGR 240 question/issue?

Hi Monika,

I understand that you are teaching ENGR 240 this term. I often review the results of the writing efforts of the engineering students, through work term reports and ENGR 446 technical reports.

With this in mind, I want to ask a question: has the use of the colon been supplanted by that of the semi-colon? I am seeing far more examples recently where say the writer wants to initiate a list, but uses a semi-colon to do so.

I am not sure where they are picking up this habit, but I wonder if you might mention it in class. (at least half of the reports I'm reading this term seem to provide an example of this misuse.)

Thank you!

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Clear Writing = Focus on Revision (40:20:40)

You don't want leave yourself open to errors that could confuse or, more seriously, mislead your audience. . .



Use Punctuation to Clarify Thought . . .

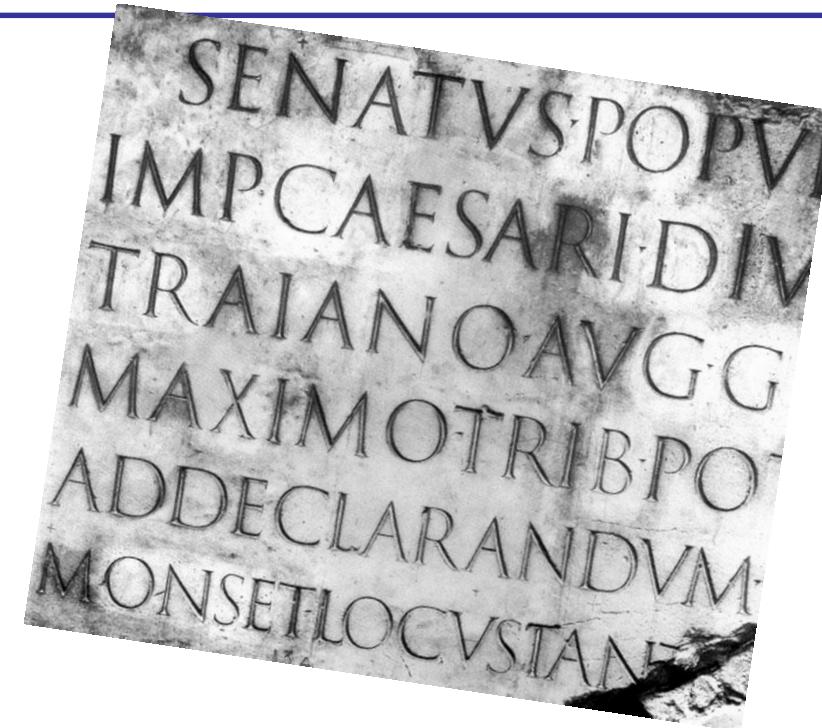
Punctuation marks are **symbols** that act like **traffic lights**, signaling when it's time to **stop** (a thought has now ended!) and **start** (a new thought is now beginning!)

Punctuation “marks off” distinct units of thought, so ideas doesn’t get jumbled up: they show where one thought ends and the next begins. This is incredibly helpful for readers



Like Spaces between Words, Punctuation Helps Readers

INTHEROMANTIMESTHEREW
ERENOSPACESBETWEENWO
RDSUNTILSOMEONEFIGURE
DOUTITWOULDBEHELPFUL
OLEAVEASPACEBETWEENEACH
WORDSORREADERSWOULD
KNOWWHEREONEWORDE
NDEDANDTHENEXTBEGANAL
LETTERSWEREWRITTENINC
APSSOREADINGWASTRICKY



Other Inventions Followed . . .

In the early middle ages, European scribes evolved another way of helping readers: marking out not just individual words, but individual units of thought

They did this by introducing

- A mix of upper and lower case letters
- Small dots, dashes, squiggles, and other marks—namely punctuation!

These small but significant marks helped readers figure out where one thought stopped and the next began

Each sentence— each new unit of thought—was now clearly signaled!



Punctuation: Achieving Clarity and Accuracy

First rule of academic and technical writing:

Accuracy

Say What you Mean . . .

For Example . . .

Woman, without her man, is nothing.



Woman: without her, man is nothing!

For Example . . .

- 1. Let's eat Grandma.**
- 2. After he had eaten my brother, John got sick.**
- 3. Charles the First walked and talked good naturedly half an hour after his head was cut off.**

CAUTION: CHILDREN DRIVE SLOWLY

CAUTION: CHILDREN, DRIVE SLOWLY

Same Sentences, now Properly Punctuated!

- 1. Let's eat, Grandma.**

- 2. After he had eaten, my brother John got sick.**

- 3. Charles the First walked and talked good
naturedly; half an hour after, his head was cut off.**

CAUTION: DRIVE SLOWLY.

CHILDREN IN AREA

Punctuation Helps Readers Determine what you Mean

1. The President of the college says professor Tufte is misinformed.

Notice the crucial difference the placement of punctuation: in the first sentence, Tufte is misinformed; in the second sentence, the President is misinformed

2. The President of the college, says professor Tufte, is misinformed.

3. In the past decade, small stocks returned 13% above their 12% annual gain since 1926.

Depending on how the sentence is punctuated, stocks rose for a total of either 25% or 1%

4. In the past decade, small stocks returned 13%, above their 12% annual gain since 1926.

Which statement do you think is likely to be more accurate?

Apply the Oxford Comma

The Oxford Comma (the final comma in a list) helps avoid confusion*:

- This book is dedicated to my parents, Margaret Atwood and God.
- Among those interviewed were Bob Hoskins' two ex-wives, Kanye West and Justin Timberlake

*With credit to Captain Grammpants

Humour aside, click on these two newspaper articles to read how the Oxford comma, or its absence, has practical impact in the real world: "Oxford comma helps drivers win dispute about overtime pay," [The Guardian](#), Mar 20, 2017 and "Oxford Comma Dispute Is Settled as Maine Drivers Get \$5 Million," [The New York Times](#), Feb 9, 2018.

PAIR ACTIVITY: Mastering Commas, Colons, and Semi-Colons

Working in pairs you will

Discuss Punctuation

STEP 1: Pull up my Punctuation Guide (Resources Book; or under Wk 2)

STEP 2 Using the Guide, rationalize the use of punctuation in the given sentences. Your task is to identify the rules that have determined the use of each piece of punctuation

On the premise that the best way to learn something is to talk about it, this activity involves you in discussing the rules of punctuation using the provided grammatical vocabulary

Thanks for Going Through These Slides!