

Commas, Colons, & Semi-colons; Apostrophes too

Punctuation marks are written **symbols** that act like **signposts**, signaling what's to come. They indicate where **one thought ends** and **the next begins**. They even signal what **type** of thought is coming—whether it's a **major** one or a **minor** one (independent or dependent clause).

When punctuation's used incorrectly, individual units of thought get **jumbled together**; they're no longer clearly separated, causing readers to **misunderstand** meaning—or not understand it at all!

Commas

THREE basic rules for comma use

1. Use Commas to separate two or more items **listed** in sequence:

- **Two** or more **descriptive** words (adjectives/ adverbs)
- **Three** or more **naming words** (nouns or noun phrases)

- It was an **inspired, innovative** change. (**two adverbs**)
- The design had a **clean, elegant** quality to it. (**two adjectives**)
- Required subjects are **English, Math, and Business Studies**. (**three nouns**)
- Bring **book, paper, and pencil**. (**three nouns**)

2. Use Commas to set off **subordinate clauses**—any word or group of words that is **grammatically non-essential** (much like a parenthetical aside)—from the rest of the sentence.

“Non-essential” means **grammatically non-essential**: if you were to take out the information enclosed by commas, the sentence would lose information, but *it would still make grammatical sense*. If it does **NOT** make sense grammatically without the clause, then it's not a *subordinate* clause, and you don't need the commas!

Subordinate or non-essential clauses can appear at the **beginning, middle, or end** of a sentence. Here's one at the beginning:

- **In my opinion**, a weekly test helps students retain more information.

In the sentence above, the comma signals **the end of introductory “non-essential” words** (the side-step into less important matters) and the beginning of the sentence’s main point (signaled by the appearance of the sentence’s **subject and verb**, “a weekly test *helps* . . .”).

In the sentence following, the non-essential words appear in the **middle** of the sentence, enclosed in commas:

- William Sanford, *author of Technically Write*, is speaking at UVic tonight.

When a grammatically non-essential clause appears in the **middle of a sentence**, place commas before *and* after to mark off where the “extra,” “non-essential” information begins and ends.

Non-essential phrases may also appear at the **end** of a sentence, marked off by a comma:

- Asterix and Obelix write a weekly column for *The Globe and Mail*, *“Technology for Today.”*

3. Use a comma between two independent clauses (groups of words that could be punctuated as separate sentences) when they’re joined by the following conjunctions: and, but, or, so, nor, yet, for.

Only use a comma **with a conjunction** when the **second** part of the sentence presents **its own grammatical subject** (“actor” or “doer”), not just a compound verb

- *The other team* worked hard, but *we* finally won the design challenge.
- *They* did not arrive on time, so *we* missed the show.

In the examples above, there are **TWO grammatical subjects**, one before and one after the conjunction. The comma tells us to expect a new independent clause!

If the reader sees an **“and” or other conjunction** with **NO comma**, as in the sentence below, the message is different: it tells the reader to expect additional information referring back to the **same grammatical subject**—*NOT* a new one!

- *They* worked hard to create innovative changes and finally won the design competition.

To ensure appropriate use of commas when using conjunctions, check that the group of words **on each side of the conjunction** contains **its own grammatical subject: two subjects** per sentence, NOT a single subject and compound verb as in the example above. If there *is* a new grammatical subject, then add a comma before the conjunction!

Colons (:) & Semi-Colons (;)

Colons and semi-colons have **CONTRASTING** functions

The Colon

The Colon's ONE primary function is **INTRODUCTORY**, as here: it signals the presence of important information to follow. This important follow-up information could be any of the following:

- an explanation
- a list of items
- a summary
- a long quotation

A Colon's main effect is to create **a dramatic break (pause)** between a statement and what follows the colon: use it when you want to place **emphasis** on what's to come

- The storm lashed the coastal community: within two hours, every tree on the waterfront had been blown down.
- The history course focuses on the achievements of three great nineteenth-century engineers:
 - ◇ Thomas Macadam
 - ◇ Robert Stephenson
 - ◇ Isambard Kingdom Brunel.
- Today we examined two geographical areas: the Nile and the Amazon.

When initiating a list (as in the two examples above), use a colon only when the **introductory lead-in is grammatically complete**: that is, when it can stand on its own as an independent clause (**complete sentence**). If the introductory lead-in is only a **partial sentence**, **DON'T** use a colon.

The Semi-Colon

The semi-colon has **TWO** key functions

1. A semi-colon **connects two sentences** (ie. independent clauses or a complete unit of thought) that are **closely related**.

It indicates that two statements which are *grammatically independent*—two separate sentences—are nevertheless *logically* dependent on one another.

- The reporter asked three questions; the Prime Minister answered one.
- A semi-colon should only be used where a period could be used; each side of a semi-colon should be able to stand by itself as a complete sentence.
- It was the blade, the bludgeon, and the bullet that were plied in the destruction of the Beothuk, until the tribe was no more; whatever their wisdom or whatever their institutions, the whole of the Beothuk heritage was destroyed. (Basil Johnson)

2. A Semi-Colon also **separates items in lengthy lists** that already contain **internal commas**. When presenting elaborate, detailed lists, the addition of semi-colons prevents ambiguity or confusion about where one list ends and the next begins.

Consider how confusing the following list appears when only commas are used; it's hard to make out where one list ends and the next begins:

- I'm taking Classics, a course on the drama of Sophocles, Seneca, Euripides, Fine Arts, a course on Impressionism, Expressionism, Modernism, Literature, a course on Satire, Pastiche, Burlesque, and Science, a new course for Arts students.

Now read the list properly punctuated with semi-colons. Isn't it much clearer?

- I'm taking Classics, a course on the drama of Sophocles, Seneca, Euripides; Fine Arts, a course on Impressionism, Expressionism, Modernism; Literature, a course on Satire, Pastiche, Burlesque; and Science, a new course for Arts students.

Apostrophes

The apostrophe has **THREE** main functions

1. To indicate **possession**: *Liam's book; the dog's bone.*

- With **plural nouns**, the apostrophe falls **after the final "s"**: the teachers' association; the dogs' leashes; the students' rally.
- With joint possession, the apostrophe comes only after the second (or third) person's name: Hilder and Ali's article; Pat, Wei, and Malala's proposed design solution.

2. To indicate **missing letters** in contracted forms: it's missing; I don't know; there's one; the class of '99
3. To form **plurals** of **letters**, **numbers** and **short words** being referred to as words: there are no if's or but's about it; to be at 6's and 7's means to be confused about something; there were lots of Jenny's in the class; I heard many no's voiced at the meeting.