**[Using Commas, Semicolons, and Colons within Sentences](http://data.grammarbook.com/blog/commas/how-to-punctuate-between-sentences-using-commas-semicolons-and-colons/)**

Punctuation within sentences can be tricky; however, if you know just a few of the following rules, you will be well on your way to becoming a ***polished*** writer and proofreader.

**Comma (,) - Think of a slight pause (like a yellow light).**

**Rule:** Use a comma between two long, independent clauses when conjunctions (**or connecting words** such as *and, or, but, for, nor*) are used to connect them.

**Examples:**

* I have painted the entire house, *but* she is still working on sanding the floors.
* I am going home, *and* I intend to stay there.
* It rained heavily during the afternoon, *but* we managed to have our picnic anyway.
* They couldn't make it to the summit and back before dark, *so* they decided to camp for the night.

**Rule:** If you have only one clause (one subject and verb pair), do not use a comma in front of the conjunction.

**Example:** I have painted the house but still need to sand the floors.

(This sentence has two verbs but only one subject, so it has only one clause.)

**Other rules for commas: Use commas…**

**In a series of three or more** – **Ex: *“****I like white chocolate, milk chocolate, and dark chocolate.”*

* The comma stands for an omitted and / or.

W**ith nonrestrictive Elements** - ***Ex:*** *“My best friend, who I met at college, moved to England.”*

* Whatever is in between the commas describes the subject.
* Check if it can easily be removed and the sentence still makes sense
* They are just like all parenthetical elements.

**Ex:** *“Bob, my best friend, moved to England) are always set off with commas”*

W**ith two coordinate adjectives** – ***Ex:*** *“She loves the cute, fuzzy kittens.”*

* When you can’t insert the word and between the [adjectives](http://learningnerd.wordpress.com/2006/09/02/english-parts-of-speech-adjectives-determiners-and-adverbs/), don’t use a comma (“She is a nice old lady”, not “She is a nice and old lady”).

**To set off elements that aren’t part of the main clause** – ***Ex:*** *“Of course, I agree.”*

* If you can remove the extra element and still have a complete sentence with a complete meaning, then you should surround the extra words with commas.

**With Introductory Phrases** – ***Ex:*** *“Somewhere in my messy closet, my old clothes are gathering dust.”*

* With adverbial [phrases](http://learningnerd.wordpress.com/2006/09/06/english-grammar-types-of-phrases/) (like prepositional and infinitive phrases), only use a comma if the phrase begins the sentence; if it follows the independent clause, don’t use a comma: “My old clothes are gathering dust somewhere in my messy closet.”

**Dependent Clauses** – ***Ex:*** *“If you help me, I’ll help you.”*

* As with introductory phrases, if the [dependent clause](http://learningnerd.wordpress.com/2006/09/08/english-grammar-types-of-clauses/) follows the independent clause, don’t use a comma: “I’ll help you if you help me.”

**Other Conventional Uses** – Used for clarity and convenience, commas also appear in names, addresses, [numbers](http://learningnerd.wordpress.com/2006/09/24/english-punctuation-italics-capitalization-and-other-odds-and-ends/#numbers), and more:

* **Places** – “Austin, Texas.”
* **Dates** – “March 3rd, 2007.” See
* **Titles** – “Martin Luther King, Jr.”
* **Addresses** – “Post Office Box 555, Austin, Texas 55555.”
* **Greetings and Closings** – “Dear President, [...]“
* **Numbers** – “1,000,000 feet”
* **Quotations** – “She said, ‘Hello.’” See [Commas with Quotations](http://englishplus.com/grammar/00000089.htm). For more on using punctuation marks with quotations, see [Quotation Marks](http://learningnerd.wordpress.com/2006/09/22/english-punctuation-dashes-parentheses-quotation-marks-and-ellipses/#quotes).

**Semicolon (;) The semicolon is sort of like a cross between a comma and a** [**period**](http://learningnerd.wordpress.com/2006/09/18/english-punctuation-periods-question-marks-and-exclamation-marks/)**. It is a longer pause than a yellow light (comma) but not a full stop like a red light (period) - it is like a stop sign.**

\*\*\*\*\*\*\* When your sentences sound too long, they usually are!!! So either put a period and start a new sentence or use a semicolon!

**Rule:** Use a semicolon when you link two independent clauses with no connecting words. **Examples:**

* I am going home; I intend to stay there.
* It rained heavily during the afternoon; we managed to have our picnic anyway.
* They couldn't make it to the summit and back before dark; they decided to camp for the night.
* You can also use a semicolon when you join two independent clauses together with one of the following conjunctive adverbs or **transitional words:** *however, moreover, therefore, consequently, otherwise, nevertheless, thus,* etc. For example:
* I am going home; moreover, I intend to stay there.
* It rained heavily during the afternoon; however, we managed to have our picnic anyway.
* They couldn't make it to the summit and back before dark; therefore, they decided to camp for the night.

**Rule:** Also use the semicolon when you already have commas within a sentence for smaller separations, and you need the semicolon to show bigger separations.

**Example:**

* We had a reunion with family from Salt Lake City, Utah; Los Angeles, California; and Albany, New York.

**Em Dash ( - ) An em dash is the width of an m. Use an em dash sparingly in formal writing. In informal writing, em dashes may replace commas, semicolons, colons, and parentheses to indicate added emphasis, an interruption, or an abrupt change of thought. (Think of it as an afterthought).**

**Examples:**

* Never have I met such a lovely person—before you.
* I pay the bills—she has all the fun.  (*A semicolon would be used here in formal writing.)*
* I need three items at the store—dog food, vegetarian chili, and cheddar cheese.  (*Remember, a colon would be used here in formal writing.)*
* My agreement with Fiona is clear—she teaches me French and I teach her German.  (*Again, a colon would work here in formal writing.)*
* Please call my agent—Jessica Cohen—about hiring me. (P*arentheses or commas would work just fine here instead of the dashes.)*
* I wish you would—oh, never mind. *This shows an abrupt change in thought and warrants an em dash.*

**Colon (:) The colon introduces or restates something.**

**Rule:** A **colon** is used to introduce a second sentence that clarifies the first sentence.

**Example:** We have set this restriction: do your homework before watching television.

Notice that the first word of the second sentence is not capitalized. If, however, you have additional sentences following the sentence with the colon and they explain the sentence prior to the colon, capitalize the first word of all the sentences following the colon.

**Rule:** Use a colon to introduce a list when no introductory words like *namely, for instance, i.e., e.g.* precede the list.

**Example:**

* I need four paint colors: blue, gray, green, and red.

**Commas vs. Semicolons in Compound Sentences**

**Summary:** This resource offers a number of pages about comma use.

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For more information on semicolons, please see the "[90-Second Semicolon](http://youtu.be/F8uQESW76to)" vidcast series on the [Purdue OWL YouTube Channel](http://www.youtube.com/user/OWLPurdue).

A group of words containing a subject and a verb and expressing a complete thought is called a sentence or an independent clause. Sometimes, an independent clause stands alone as a sentence, and sometimes two independent clauses are linked together into what is called a compound sentence. Depending on the circumstances, one of two different punctuation marks can be used between the independent clauses in a compound sentence: a comma or a semicolon. The choice is yours.

**Comma (,)**

Use a comma after the first independent clause when you link two independent clauses with one of the following coordinating conjunctions: *and, but, for, or, nor, so, yet*. For example:

I am going home, and I intend to stay there.

It rained heavily during the afternoon, but we managed to have our picnic anyway.

They couldn't make it to the summit and back before dark, so they decided to camp for the night.

**Semicolon (;)**

Use a semicolon when you link two independent clauses with no connecting words. *For example:*

I am going home; I intend to stay there.

It rained heavily during the afternoon; we managed to have our picnic anyway.

They couldn't make it to the summit and back before dark; they decided to camp for the night.

You can also use a semicolon when you join two independent clauses together with one of the following conjunctive adverbs (adverbs that join independent clauses): however, moreover, therefore, consequently, otherwise, nevertheless, thus, etc. For example:

I am going home; moreover, I intend to stay there.

It rained heavily during the afternoon; however, we managed to have our picnic anyway.

They couldn't make it to the summit and back before dark; therefore, they decided to camp for the night.

English Punctuation: Commas, Semicolons, and Colons September 20, 2006

Posted by LearningNerd in [English](http://learningnerd.wordpress.com/category/language/english/), [Language](http://learningnerd.wordpress.com/category/language/), [Punctuation](http://learningnerd.wordpress.com/category/language/english/punctuation/).

[trackback](http://learningnerd.wordpress.com/2006/09/20/english-punctuation-commas-semicolons-and-colons/trackback/)

Series index: [English Punctuation Overview](http://learningnerd.wordpress.com/2006/09/14/english-punctuation-overview/).

Commas

Commas separate words, phrases and clauses to clarify meaning. They often indicate pauses in speech, but not always. This [Guide to Using Commas](http://lilt.ilstu.edu/golson/punctuation/comma.html) covers the basics, and this guide to [The Comma](http://grammar.uoregon.edu/punctuation/comma.html) refers to AP style guidelines. Here’s a more detailed look at comma usage:

**To join two independent clauses** – “I spent all day cooking this dinner, and the family ate it in three seconds.” Always use the comma before the coordinating [conjunction](http://learningnerd.wordpress.com/2006/09/04/english-parts-of-speech-prepositions-conjunctions-and-interjections/) (like and), but only use a comma if both [clauses](http://learningnerd.wordpress.com/2006/09/08/english-grammar-types-of-clauses/) are independent. If the second clause doesn’t have its own [subject](http://learningnerd.wordpress.com/2006/09/10/english-grammar-basic-sentence-elements/), don’t use a comma (as in “I made dinner and set the table”). See [The Joining Comma](http://www.cogs.susx.ac.uk/doc/punctuation/node11.html) for more. Note: many find it acceptable to leave out the comma if both independent clauses are short (“I made dinner and they ate it”).

**To show omitted words** – “I like white chocolate; Bob, dark chocolate.” See [The Gapping Comma](http://www.cogs.susx.ac.uk/doc/punctuation/node12.html). This applies to more specific uses as well (see also [The Listing Comma](http://www.cogs.susx.ac.uk/doc/punctuation/node10.html)), where the comma could be replaced with a word like and or or:

* **In a series of three or more** – “I like white chocolate, milk chocolate, and dark chocolate.” The comma stands for an omitted and or or. Many writers prefer not to use a comma before the conjunction: “I like white chocolate, milk chocolate and dark chocolate.” This optional comma, often called the serial comma or Oxford comma, has inspired lots of debate. See Wikipedia’s entry on the [Serial Comma](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Serial_comma) for more.
* **With two coordinate adjectives** – “She loves the cute, fuzzy kittens.” When you can’t insert the word and between the [adjectives](http://learningnerd.wordpress.com/2006/09/02/english-parts-of-speech-adjectives-determiners-and-adverbs/), don’t use a comma (“She is a nice old lady”, not “She is a nice and old lady”). See [Commas with Paired Adjectives](http://englishplus.com/grammar/00000072.htm) for more on the difference between coordinate and cumulative adjectives.
* **With contrasting statements** – “I like apples, not oranges.” I remember this rule by thinking of the comma as a replacement for and, as in “I like apples and not oranges.”

**To set off elements that aren’t part of the main clause** – “Of course, I agree.” If you can remove the extra element and still have a complete sentence with a complete meaning, then you should surround the extra words with commas. See [Bracketing Commas](http://www.cogs.susx.ac.uk/doc/punctuation/node13.html) for an overview. These extra elements include:

* **Interrupting Words and Parenthetical Elements** – “Commas are important, as you know.” Forms of [direct address](http://englishplus.com/grammar/00000330.htm), weak [interjections](http://learningnerd.wordpress.com/2006/09/04/english-parts-of-speech-prepositions-conjunctions-and-interjections/), [disjuncts, conjuncts](http://learningnerd.wordpress.com/2006/09/02/english-parts-of-speech-adjectives-determiners-and-adverbs/#adverbials), and many common expressions are always set off with commas. See [Commas and Introductory Words or Phrases](http://englishplus.com/grammar/00000073.htm).
* **Nonrestrictive Elements** - “My best friend, who I met at college, moved to England.” [Nonrestrictive clauses](http://learningnerd.wordpress.com/2006/09/08/english-grammar-types-of-clauses/) and nonrestrictive [appositives](http://community-2.webtv.net/solis-boo/Grammar3/page7.html) (Bob, my best friend, moved to England) are always set off with commas, just like all parenthetical elements.
* **Introductory Phrases** – “Somewhere in my messy closet, my old clothes are gathering dust.” With adverbial [phrases](http://learningnerd.wordpress.com/2006/09/06/english-grammar-types-of-phrases/) (like prepositional and infinitive phrases), only use a comma if the phrase begins the sentence; if it follows the independent clause, don’t use a comma: “My old clothes are gathering dust somewhere in my messy closet.” See [Commas After Introductory Phrases](http://englishplus.com/grammar/00000074.htm) for more. Short prepositional phrases (and some other adverbial phrases) don’t require a comma — unless, of course, the meaning would be unclear (see [Adding Commas for Clarity](http://englishplus.com/grammar/00000090.htm)).
* **Participial and Absolute Phrases** – “Happily munching on popcorn, I watched my favorite movie.” When acting as adjectives, adverbs, or disjuncts, these [types of phrases](http://learningnerd.wordpress.com/2006/09/06/english-grammar-types-of-phrases/) always require a comma, even if they follow the independent clause: “I watched my favorite movie, happily munching on popcorn.”
* **Dependent Clauses** – “If you help me, I’ll help you.” As with introductory phrases, if the [dependent clause](http://learningnerd.wordpress.com/2006/09/08/english-grammar-types-of-clauses/) follows the independent clause, don’t use a comma: “I’ll help you if you help me.”

**Other Conventional Uses** – Used for clarity and convenience, commas also appear in names, addresses, [numbers](http://learningnerd.wordpress.com/2006/09/24/english-punctuation-italics-capitalization-and-other-odds-and-ends/#numbers), and more:

* **Places** – “Austin, Texas.” See [Commas with Geographical Names](http://englishplus.com/grammar/00000082.htm).
* **Dates** – “March 3rd, 2007.” See [Commas with Dates](http://englishplus.com/grammar/00000083.htm).
* **Titles** – “Martin Luther King, Jr.” See [Commas with Titles that Follow Names](http://englishplus.com/grammar/00000084.htm).
* **Addresses** – “Post Office Box 555, Austin, Texas 55555.” See [Commas in Addresses](http://englishplus.com/grammar/00000085.htm).
* **Greetings and Closings** – “Dear President, [...]“ See [Commas in Letter Writing](http://englishplus.com/grammar/00000086.htm).
* **Numbers** – “1,000,000 feet” [See Commas in Numbers](http://englishplus.com/grammar/00000087.htm).
* **Quotations** – “She said, ‘Hello.’” See [Commas with Quotations](http://englishplus.com/grammar/00000089.htm). For more on using punctuation marks with quotations, see [Quotation Marks](http://learningnerd.wordpress.com/2006/09/22/english-punctuation-dashes-parentheses-quotation-marks-and-ellipses/#quotes).

Semicolons

The semicolon is sort of like a cross between a comma and a [period](http://learningnerd.wordpress.com/2006/09/18/english-punctuation-periods-question-marks-and-exclamation-marks/). Its main function is to connect two independent clauses that are closely related. It also prevents confusion in sentences (especially lists) with lots of commas. These websites explain everything you need to know:

* [The Blue Book of Grammar and Punctuation](http://www.grammarbook.com/punctuation/semicolons.asp) – a short list of rules.
* [UW-Madison Writing Center](http://www.wisc.edu/writing/Handbook/Semicolons.html) - another list of rules, along with some common errors.
* [The Semicolon](http://www.cogs.susx.ac.uk/doc/punctuation/node17.html) – an excellent overview, complete with lots of examples.

Colons

The colon introduces or restates something. Unlike the semicolon, the colon can connect an independent clause to a word or phrase.

* [Armchair Punctuator](http://community-2.webtv.net/solis-boo/Grammar2/page6.html) – a complete overview with examples and usage notes.
* [The Colon](http://www.cogs.susx.ac.uk/doc/punctuation/node16.html) – another great overview.
* [Sentence-Level Punctuation](http://www.phon.ucl.ac.uk/home/dick/tta/sentpunc/sentpunc.htm#colon+) – a summary of the four ways a colon makes a restatement.
* [The Colon](http://grammar.ccc.commnet.edu/grammar/marks/colon.htm) – includes some usage guidelines, a discussion on when to capitalize the independent clause after a colon, and even a powerpoint presentation and a quiz at the bottom.

[Colons in Special Cases](http://englishplus.com/grammar/00000101.htm) - a look at the colon’s minor uses.