

Punctuation Rules

The Comma

When to use:

- Before coordinating conjunctions (for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so) that link independent clauses.

The weeds in my garden are flourishing, but the rest of the garden is dying.
Computers can perform millions of operations, yet they can't take the place of human contact.

Not...

- Before a coordinating conjunction that links only two words, phrases, or dependent clauses.

My sister wanted to go to the movies but then decided to stay home.
I love scrambled eggs and bacon for breakfast.

- After a coordinating conjunction that links independent clauses.
Several people waited in line for hours and they still weren't able to get tickets to the concert.

- Use commas to set off introductory words, phrases, or clauses.
After last night's fiasco at the disco, she couldn't bear to look at him again.
- Use commas between coordinate adjectives (adjectives that modify the noun equally and that are not joined by *and*). Do not use commas between cumulative adjectives (adjectives that do not modify the noun equally).

Coordinate: Erin is a gentle, affectionate mother.
Mark ordered a luscious, rich piece of cake for dessert.
Cumulative: The large gray whale swam fifty miles to find food.

- Use commas between three or more items in a series.
Tomatoes, peppers, and cilantro are essential for good salsa.
The newscaster predicted rain, sleet, and hail for the rest of the week.

- Use commas to set off nonrestrictive elements.

If the phrase or clause is necessary in understanding the meaning of the sentence, it is *restrictive*, meaning it restricts the meaning of the sentence by providing needed identification or information.

Restrictive: *For the cookout we needed food that didn't have to be refrigerated.*

However, if the phrase or clause is *nonrestrictive*, it requires commas. The commas indicate that the phrase or clause can be removed from the sentence without affecting its meaning.

Nonrestrictive: *For the cookout we needed five pounds of meat, which was expensive.*

- Use commas to set off direct quotations from the rest of the sentence.

"To thine own self be true," said Polonius.

Note: Place the comma inside the quotation marks.

- Use commas to set off transitional and parenthetical expressions, absolute phrases, and contrasted elements.

Fat-free cookies are not always low in calories; for example, a fat-free cookie has as many calories as a small hamburger.

As a matter of fact, I don't even like fat-free cookies!

The truth, however, is that I can't resist a hamburger.

Vegetables, not meat, should be a big part of a healthful diet.

The Semicolon

When to use:

- To replace a period between sentences that are closely related in meaning.

My favorite subject is math; I plan to major in it in college.

The Internet is a useful tool to find information; many people use it to shop, write friends, or research a paper.

- Between independent clauses joined by a conjunctive adverb or a transitional phrase.

Desert areas get little rain throughout the year; nevertheless, beautiful plants live and thrive in that climate.

I wrote my research paper the night before it was due; as a result, it was incomplete and full of errors.

Not...

- Between a subordinate clause and the rest of the sentence.

Because I go to the dentist every six months, my teeth are in excellent health.

- Between an appositive and the word it refers to.

Sue's favorite dish is seafood spaghetti, a delicious meal made with shrimp and a rich tomato sauce.

- To introduce a list.

To make seafood spaghetti, you'll need the following ingredients; pasta, shrimp, and tomatoes.

The Colon

When to use:

- The colon is used mainly to call attention to the words that follow it.

- After an independent clause that introduces a list, appositive, or a quotation.

By the end of this class, a successful student should be able to do the following: think clearly, read efficiently, and write effectively.

Of the seven deadly sins, two are the most deadly: avarice and gluttony.

Analyze the following quote by Shakespeare: "Lord! What fools these mortals be!"

- Between independent clauses if the second summarizes or explains the first.

After much indecision, Darth Vader knew what to do: Luke Skywalker must die.

- After the following:

After the greeting in a formal letter: **To Whom It May Concern:**

To indicate hours and minutes: **12:30 p.m.**

To show proportions: **In Alaska the ratio of men to women is 2:1.**

Between title and subtitle: ***Growing Ideas: A Reader for Writers***

Between city and publisher: **New York: Houghton Mifflin**

Not...

- Between a verb and its object.
One of the biggest benefits of exercise is weight loss.
- Between a preposition and its object.
I got a postcard from my cousin in Wyoming.
- After *such as*, *including*, or *for example*.
A college education is necessary for careers such as education, law, or medicine.