

4 PUNCTUATION

COMMAS

In general, omitting a comma is better than using a comma that is not needed, so use a comma only if you can quote a rule for why you are using it. Though many people think there are dozens of comma rules (or NO rules and commas just go in where they “feel” right), you only really need to remember these six.

Commas are used:

1. To separate items in a series.

Ex: Bring your assignment, text, paper, and pen when you come to the Learning Commons.

Special Note: The final comma in a series (after “paper” above) is often called an **Oxford comma** or a **serial comma**. This tiny punctuation mark is a matter of huge debate in language circles with some style guides recommending that it be omitted. However, The MLA guide still uses the final comma, and you are never wrong to use it. If you have any questions, ask your professor.

2. To combine two independent clauses with a coordinating conjunction. (See handout 1 “Sentence Structure” for more help on clauses.)

Ex: The day was very nasty, but the forecaster said sunshine was on the way.

3. To separate coordinate adjectives.

Ex. The sweet, shy boy asked Carla out on her first date.

4. To set off introductory words, phrases, or clauses.

Ex: Yes, I would love to be a snail in the spring play.
(introductory word)

Ex: For the thousandth time, I did not take your pink blouse! (introductory phrase)

Ex: Although the weather was cold and rainy, Alice enjoyed her day of reading and sipping tea.
(introductory clause)

5. To set off interrupters: appositives, words used in direct address, words of direct quotation, parenthetical expressions, contrasting elements, and nonessential phrases and clauses (those that can be omitted without changing the meaning of the sentence).

Ex: Claudette, our waitress, spilled soup all over my new dress. (appositive)

Ex: I understand, Sam, that you’ve been spreading rumors about me. (direct address)

Ex: “In less than five minutes,” Austin announced, “the semester will be over.” (direct quotation)



Ex: Brianna is, of course, thrilled about the wedding and would, incidentally, love for you to be there. (parenthetical expression)

Ex: I always eat olives, never mushrooms, on my pizza. (contrasting elements)

Ex: Hugh Jackman, known to many as Wolverine of The X-Men franchise, sang as Jean Valjean in 2012's *Les Miserables*. (nonessential phrase)

Ex: Mrs. Beauchamp, who was my second grade teacher, won \$900 million playing the Powerball and was never heard from again. (nonessential clause)

6. To set off certain conventional material such as dates, addresses, titles, or letter parts.
Ex: On Monday, February 17, 2014, Jimmy Fallon hosted *The Tonight Show* in New York, New York, for the first time.

Note the commas following 2014 and New York.

Ex: Dear Elsbeth,

I thoroughly enjoyed the weekend.

Thanks for being such a good friend.

Love,

Hannah

Ex: Raphael Garcia, M.A. teaches freshman English.

SEMICOLONS

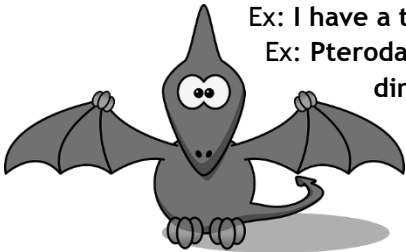
Semicolons have three main uses.

1. Use a semicolon between two independent clauses not connected by a coordinating conjunction (*and, but, or, nor, for, so, yet*). The second independent clause is often introduced by a transitional expression: *however, therefore, moreover, then, in fact, consequently, in the first place, for example, on the other hand*.

Ex: I have a terrible headache; I think I'll take an aspirin and lie down.

Ex: Pterodactyls are a favorite prehistoric creature; however, they are not technically dinosaurs.

Ex: That is an excellent point, Alonzo; in fact, if you look at page 465 of the text, the author makes a similar argument.



2. Use a semicolon to separate independent clauses which are complex in structure or which have internal punctuation.
Ex: Taylor Moore, valedictorian of the senior class, had many scholarship offers to out-of-state schools; but, because her mother was not well, she chose to attend the college closest to her home.
3. Use semicolons in a series between items which have internal punctuation.
Ex: Matthew had three big problems in life: Ginny, his fifteen-year old sister; Sarah, his thirteen-year-old sister; and Elizabeth, his ten-year-old sister.

COLONS

Colons are commonly used between hours and minutes (8:30) and in bibliographic entries (New York: Prentice-Hall). A colon can also be used in the following ways:

1. Before quotations, statements, lists, and series which are introduced formally.
Ex: Olivia's favorite saying comes from *Anne of Green Gables*: "Isn't it nice to think that tomorrow is a new day with no mistakes in it yet?"
Ex: Theatre TCC just announced their 2015-2016 lineup: *Laundry and Bourbon, A Christmas Story, and Young Frankenstein*.
2. Before an example, an explanation, or an independent clause that elaborates, explains, or exemplifies the preceding statement.
Ex: Spending more than you earn every month will lead to only one thing: disaster.
Ex: Mother was right: I have to study in order to make good grades.
3. Between a title and subtitle of a cited work.
Ex: *The Swerve: How the World Became Modern*
Ex: *The Devil in the White City: A Saga of Magic and Murder at the Fair that Changed America*
4. After the salutation in a business letter.
Ex: Dear Professor Ecclestone:
Ex: To Whom It May Concern:

A colon should generally not be used in the middle of a sentence, even if the sentence ends with a list. However, a colon can be used for bullet pointed lists, such as in the sections of this document.

Incorrect: She is: beautiful, wonderful, glorious, the girl of my dreams!
Correct: She is beautiful, wonderful, glorious—the girl of my dreams!

Incorrect: Jacob ate: turkey, roast, mashed potatoes and gravy, peas, carrots, stuffing, olives, boiled eggs, squash, sweet potato casserole and two kinds of pie.
Correct: Jacob ate turkey, roast, mashed potatoes and gravy, peas, carrots, stuffing, olives, boiled eggs, squash, sweet potato casserole, and two kinds of pie.



QUOTATION MARKS

Quotation marks are used:

1. To enclose a person's spoken words or to enclose direct quotations from printed material.
Ex: "My favorite red dress has been ruined!" Joanie wailed.
Ex: George Orwell wrote, "In a time of universal deceit, telling the truth is a revolutionary act."

Note: Use single quotation marks to enclose a quotation within a quotation.

Ex: "My favorite quote," Julian replied, "is, 'Not all who wander are lost.'"

Note that in these examples, the sentence punctuation goes *inside* the quotation marks.

APOSTROPHES

Use apostrophes to:

1. Indicate that a noun is possessive (shows ownership).
 - a. If the noun does not end in -s, add -'s.
Ex: **Alexandra's haircut was so bad that she wore a scarf for a month.**
 - b. If the noun is plural and ends in -s, add only the apostrophe.
Ex: **All students' papers must be double spaced in Times New Roman font.**
 - c. If a singular noun ends in -s, add -'s, unless the pronunciation would be awkward. If in doubt, ask your professor.
Ex: **The bus's window was shattered when the rock struck it.**
Ex: **I gave Lois's blouse back to her; I hope she doesn't notice the snag.**
Ex: **I love to study Sophocles' plays.**

Never use an apostrophe to make a noun plural.

Ex: Singular=girl plural=girls (not girls' or girl's)

This rule holds true for letters, numbers, initialisms, and acronyms; do not add apostrophes to make them plural. **Ds, 6s, RADARs, and RPGs**, *not* **D's, 6's, RADAR's, or RPG's**.

2. Indicate a contraction.
Ex: **Where's the purple dragon's secret lair?**
Ex: **With the score at 150-0, it's obvious that the Hufflepuff quidditch team is losing its final game.** (Notice that the possessive pronoun before "final" does not take an apostrophe.)
3. Indicate omissions (as in slang or dialect).
Ex: **Alex groaned, "I'm fixin' to go get a san'wich. I'm starvin' to death!"**
Note: This use of apostrophes should be reserved for dialogue and kept to a bare minimum.

