

A Quick Guide to Punctuation

COMMAS

The comma is probably the most abused mark of punctuation. Not a small portion of the abuse is due to the high school teacher's maxim "If you pause when you read the sentence, put a comma in that place." The comma does not function, however, as a mark of elocution; the comma gives grammatical information, not elocution information. You must learn the function of the comma; we use it to separate grammatical units and to indicate interruptions of syntax. Here are four more specific functions of the comma:

I. Separates elements of a series:

A. Words, phrases, and clauses in a series

1. He should learn to talk to the soil, smell it, feel it, squeeze it, and taste it.
2. A police officer should be large, combative, swift, cool and crafty.

B. Coordinate adjectives

1. She was a frowsy, middle-aged woman with wispy, drab-brown hair.
2. It is a limp, silent, waiting room. (Coord. adj. + one word)
It is a limp, silent waiting room. (Coord. adj. + word group)

II. With a coordinating conjunction, the comma separates independent clauses. (Coord. conj.: and, but, or, nor, for, still, so, and yet)

1. Mr. Thomas let out an extremely loud yell. Nobody answered. Becomes:
Mr. Thomas let out an extremely loud yell, but nobody answered.
2. A woman cannot hope to find a man who is free of sexist attitudes.
She cannot make a man give up his privileges by arguing. Becomes:
A woman cannot hope to find a man who is free of sexist attitudes, nor can she make a man give up his privileges by arguing.

CAUTION: Do not confuse the compound sentence with a simple sentence containing a compound predicate:

3. Colonel Cathcart had courage, and he never hesitated to volunteer his men for any target available.
Colonel Cathcart had courage and never hesitated to volunteer his men for any target available.

- III. The comma indicates interrupted syntax; indicates the use of introductory elements such as adverb clauses, long phrases, transitional expressions, and interjections; indicates inverted syntax.
 - A. Introductory adverb clauses
 - 1. When Americans are not happy, they feel guilty.
 - 2. As almost everyone outside Texas understands, Alaska is a very big place.
 - B. Introductory transitional expressions and interjections
 - 1. Intelligent he was not. In fact, he veered in the opposite direction.
 - 2. Oh well, I guess that will have to do.
 - C. Introductory phrases
 - 1. Within this the richest of all countries, too many ghettos exist.
 - 2. With some surprise, Alice noticed that the pebbles were turning into little cakes as they lay on the floor.
 - D. Inverted sentence-level syntax
 - 1. Because he would not be able to find the castle at this hour, he went on to find quarters for the night.
 - 2. Though the innkeeper could not provide a room and was upset by such a late and unexpected arrival, he was willing to let Josef sleep on a bag of straw in the parlor.
- IV. Indicates a change in level of discourse for parenthetical elements and nonessential elements.
 - A. Parenthetical elements
 - 1. The best way to see a country, unless you are pressed for time, is to travel on foot.
 - 2. I, you will be pleased to hear, am now in perfect mental health, and I have a certificate-of-release to prove it.
 - B. Nonessential elements including adjective clauses, appositives or appositive phrases, and adjectival phrases
 - 1. The soiled book, which was priced cheap, was in fact a rare first edition.
 - 2. A book that gives its reader a good idea is worth many times its purchase price.

FOUR BASIC CLAUSE PATTERNS

COORDINATION

1. Independent Clause + Independent Clause: comma + coord. conj.

ex. Josef arrived late in the evening, and the village was deep in snow.

2. Independent Clause + Independent Clause: semicolon OR semicolon + conj. adverb + comma.

ex. The Castle hill was hidden; there was no glimmer of light to show that the Castle was there. Josef walked across the wooden bridge leading to town; then, he stood for a long time gazing into the illusory emptiness above him.

SUBORDINATION

3. Independent Clause + Dependent Clause: No Punctuation Required.

ex. He went on to find quarters for the night because he would not be able to find the Castle at this hour.

4. Dependent Clause + Independent Clause: comma.

ex. Though the innkeeper could not provide a room and was upset by such a late and unexpected arrival, he was willing to let Josef sleep on a bag of straw in the parlor.

TERMS

Coordinating Conjunctions: These words link two independent clauses and require a comma before them.

and but or for yet so

Subordinating Conjunctions: These words subordinate a clause to another independent clause.

although how until so
after if whereas so that
though since whatever whether
as when(ever) in order that provided
as if where(ever) unless provided that
because while before as long as

Conjunctive Adverbs: these words link two independent clauses and require a semicolon before them and a comma after them.

accordingly therefore thus so nevertheless
also likewise consequently still however
furthermore besides moreover otherwise then

PUNCTUATION MARKS: THE OTHER ONES

COLON (:)

- a. After an independent clause to announce material that follows:

ex. The following persons will serve on the committee: Alice Jones, Mark Ayers, Jim Green, and Jerry Garcia.

- b. Before a quote that is a complete sentence:

ex. Remember these words of wisdom: You can't get there from here, lady.

SEMICOLON (;)

- a. Between independent clauses not connected by a coordinating conjunction:

ex. The stage was set; the Band was ready to play.

- b. Between two independent clauses linked by a conjunctive adverb:

ex. It was agreed that the matter was settled; therefore, the case was closed.

- c. To separate items in a series when commas appear within an individual item in that series:

ex. Mary invited the following persons to her cabin for the weekend: Jane, her lonesome cousin; Georgie, the neighborhood jerk; Mark, the best equipped dentist in town; and Susan, the town thug.

PERIOD (.)

- a. At the end of all sentences (except questions and exclamations):

ex. Your memory serves you well.

- b. At the end of an indirect question:

ex. They asked the instructor if he always dressed so poorly.

QUESTION MARK (?)

- a. After a sentence that asks a direct question:

ex. Who is Robbe-Grillet?

- b. To indicate uncertainty about facts or dates:

Daniel Boone, born 1832 (?), wore Levi's 501's.

DASH (--)

- a. Before and after a parenthetical expression that clarifies a sentence:

ex. They went--those who loved him--to pay their final respects.

- b. To indicate doubt or hesitation:

ex. I'm going to pass this course--I hope.

HYPHEN (-)

- a. Between two word adjectives that function as a single adjective:

ex. Your ten-point plan for removal of the English instructor is lethal.

- b. Between the elements in compound words and numbers:

ex. Her sister-in-law finished medical school in June and performed fifty-three prefrontal labotomies on Valley Girls by August. All were unnecessary operations.

- c. After prefixes followed by nouns and after "ex• and "self•:

ex. Your behavior is un-American and illegal. She is an ex-college student. Self-doubt is your worst enemy.

PARENTHESIS ()

- a. Around material that explains but is not essential to the sentence:

ex. Cleveland (pop. 750,000) is the funniest city in the region.

- b. Around (1) numerical and (2) alphabetical points in a sentence.

BRACKETS []

- * Around material not part of a direct quotation but added for clarification:

ex. The Chairman added, "Our representative [Dr. John] has done a lousy job over the past two years."

APOSTROPHE (')

- a. To indicate possession:

ex. The dentist's drill of the alarm probed viciously into the diseased pulp of Georgie Cornell's dream.

- b. To form contractions:

ex. We're leaving at 7 o'clock in the morning.

- c. To form some irregular plurals:

ex. There were five yes's and ten no's.