ENGLISH GRAMMAR (PUNCTUATION)

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Punctuation (Notes)

Comma

Commas and **periods** are the most frequently used punctuation marks. Commas customarily indicate a brief pause; they're not as final as 'full stop'.

Rule 1. Use commas to separate words and word groups in a simple series of three or more items.

> ***Example:*** *My estate goes to my husband, son, daughter-in-law, and nephew.*

Note: When the last comma in a series comes before *and* or *or* (after *daughter-in-law* in the above example), it is known as the **Oxford comma**. Most newspapers and magazines drop the Oxford comma in a simple series, apparently feeling it's unnecessary. However, omission of the Oxford comma can sometimes lead to misunderstandings.

> ***Example:*** *We had coffee, cheese and crackers and grapes.*

Adding a comma after *crackers* makes it clear that *cheese and crackers* represents one dish. In cases like this, clarity demands the Oxford comma.

> *We had coffee, cheese and crackers, and grapes.*

Fiction and nonfiction books generally prefer the Oxford comma. Writers must decide Oxford or no Oxford and not switch back and forth, except when omitting the Oxford comma could cause confusion as in the *cheese and crackers* example.

Rule 2. Use a comma to separate two adjectives when the order of the adjectives is interchangeable.

> ***Example:*** *He is a strong, healthy man.*
>
> We could also say *healthy, strong man.*

> ***Example:*** *We stayed at an expensive summer resort.*
>
> We would not say *summer expensive resort,* so no comma.

Another way to determine if a comma is needed is to mentally put *and* between the two adjectives. If the result still makes sense, add the comma. In the examples above, *a strong **and** healthy man* makes sense, but *an expensive **and** summer resort* does not.

Rule 3a. Many inexperienced writers run two independent clauses together by using a comma instead of a period. This results in the dreaded **run-on sentence** or, more technically, a **comma splice.**

Incorrect: *He walked all the way home, he shut the door.*

There are several simple remedies:

Correct: *He walked all the way home. He shut the door.*

Correct: *After he walked all the way home, he shut the door.*

Correct: *He walked all the way home, and he shut the door.*

Rule 3b. In sentences where two independent clauses are joined by connectors such as *and, or, but,* etc., put a comma at the end of the first clause.

Incorrect: *He walked all the way home and he shut the door.*

Correct: *He walked all the way home, and he shut the door.*

Some writers omit the comma if the clauses are both quite short:

Example: *I paint and he writes.*

Rule 3c. If the subject does not appear in front of the second verb, a comma is generally unnecessary.

Example: *He thought quickly but still did not answer correctly.*

But sometimes a comma in this situation is necessary to avoid confusion.

Confusing: *I saw that she was busy and prepared to leave.*

Clearer with comma: *I saw that she was busy, and prepared to leave.*

Without a comma, the reader is liable to think that "she" was the one who was prepared to leave.

Rule 4a. When starting a sentence with a dependent clause, use a comma after it.

Example: *If you are not sure about this, let me know now.*

Follow the same policy with introductory phrases.

Example: *Having finally arrived in town, we went shopping.*

However, if the introductory phrase is clear and brief (three or four words), the comma is optional.

Example: *When in town we go shopping.*

But always add a comma if it would avoid confusion.

Example: *Last Sunday, evening classes were canceled.* (The comma prevents a misreading.)

When an introductory phrase begins with a preposition, a comma may not be necessary even if the phrase contains more than three or four words.

Example: *Into the sparkling crystal ball he gazed.*

If such a phrase contains more than one preposition, a comma may be used **unless** a verb immediately follows the phrase.

Examples:

Between your house on Main Street and my house on Grand Avenue, the mayor's mansion stands proudly.

Between your house on Main Street and my house on Grand Avenue is the mayor's mansion.

Rule 4b. A comma is usually unnecessary when the sentence starts with an independent clause followed by a dependent clause.

Example: *Let me know now if you are not sure about this.*

Rule 5. Use commas to set off nonessential words, clauses, and phrases (see Who, That, Which, Rule 2b).

Incorrect: *Jill who is my sister shut the door.*

Correct: *Jill, who is my sister, shut the door.*

Incorrect: *The man knowing it was late hurried home.*

Correct: *The man, knowing it was late, hurried home.*

In the preceding examples, note the comma after *sister* and *late*. Nonessential words, clauses, and phrases that occur midsentence must be enclosed by commas. The closing comma is called an **appositive comma**. Many writers forget to add this important comma. Following are two instances of the need for an appositive comma with one or more nouns.

Incorrect: *My best friend, Joe arrived.*

Correct: *My best friend, Joe, arrived.*

Incorrect: *The three items, a book, a pen, and paper were on the table.*

Correct: *The three items, a book, a pen, and paper, were on the table.*

Rule 6. If something or someone is sufficiently identified, the description that follows is considered nonessential and should be surrounded by commas.

Examples:

Freddy, who has a limp, was in an auto accident.

If we already know which Freddy is meant, the description is not essential.

The boy who has a limp was in an auto accident.

We do not know which boy is meant without further description; therefore, no commas are used.

This leads to a persistent problem. Look at the following sentence:

Example: *My brother Bill is here.*

Now, see how adding two commas changes that sentence's meaning:

Example: *My brother, Bill, is here.*

Careful writers and readers understand that the first sentence means I have more than one brother. The commas in the second sentence mean that Bill is my only brother.

Why? In the first sentence, *Bill* is essential information: it identifies which of my two (or more) brothers I'm speaking of. This is why no commas enclose *Bill.*

In the second sentence, *Bill* is nonessential information—whom else but Bill could I mean?—hence the commas.

Comma misuse is nothing to take lightly. It can lead to a train wreck like this:

Example: *Mark Twain's book,* Tom Sawyer, *is a delight.*

Because of the commas, that sentence states that Twain wrote only one book. In fact, he wrote more than two dozen of them.

Rule 7a. Use a comma after certain words that introduce a sentence, such as *well, yes, why, hello, hey,* etc.

Examples:

Why, I can't believe this!

No, you can't have a dollar.

Rule 7b. Use commas to set off expressions that interrupt the sentence flow (*nevertheless, after all, by the way, on the other hand, however,* etc.).

Example: *I am, by the way, very nervous about this.*

Rule 8. Use commas to set off the name, nickname, term of endearment, or title of a person directly addressed.

Examples:

Will you, Aisha, do that assignment for me?

Yes, old friend, I will.

Good day, Captain.

Rule 9. Use a comma to separate the day of the month from the year, and—what most people forget!—always put one after the year, also.

Example: *It was in the Sun's June 5, 2003, edition.*

No comma is necessary for just the month and year.

Example: *It was in a June 2003 article.*

Rule 10. Use a comma to separate a city from its state, and remember to put one after the state, also.

Example: *I'm from the Akron, Ohio, area.*

Rule 11. Traditionally, if a person's name is followed by *Sr.* or *Jr.*, a comma follows the last name: *Martin Luther King, Jr.* This comma is no longer considered mandatory. However, if a comma does precede *Sr.* or *Jr.,* another comma must follow the entire name when it appears midsentence.

Correct: *Al Mooney Sr. is here.*

Correct: *Al Mooney, Sr., is here.*

Incorrect: *Al Mooney, Sr. is here.*

Rule 12. Similarly, use commas to enclose degrees or titles used with names.

Example: *Al Mooney, M.D., is here.*

Rule 13a. Use commas to introduce or interrupt direct quotations.

Examples:

He said, "I don't care."

"Why," I asked, "don't you care?"

This rule is optional with one-word quotations.

Example: *He said "Stop."*

Rule 13b. If the quotation comes before *he said, she wrote, they reported, Dana insisted,* or a similar attribution, end the quoted material with a comma, even if it is only one word.

Examples:

"I don't care," he said.

"Stop," he said.

Rule 13c. If a quotation functions as a subject or object in a sentence, it might not need a comma.

Examples:

Is "I don't care" all you can say to me?

Saying "Stop the car" was a mistake.

Rule 13d. If a quoted question ends in midsentence, the question mark replaces a comma.

Example: *"Will you still be my friend?" she asked.*

Rule 14. Use a comma to separate a statement from a question.

Example: *I can go, can't I?*

Rule 15. Use a comma to separate contrasting parts of a sentence.

Example: *That is my money, not yours.*

Rule 16a. Use a comma before and after certain introductory words or terms, such as *namely, that is, i.e., e.g.,* and *for instance*, when they are followed by a series of items.

Example: *You may be required to bring many items, e.g., sleeping bags, pans, and warm clothing.*

Rule 16b. A comma should precede the term *etc.* Many authorities also recommend a comma after *etc*. when it is placed midsentence.

Example: *Sleeping bags, pans, warm clothing, etc., are in the tent.*

The abbreviation i.e. means "that is"; e.g. means "for example".

Colons

A **colon** means "that is to say" or "here's what I mean." Colons and semicolons should never be used interchangeably.

Rule 1a. Use a colon to introduce an item or a series of items. Do not capitalize the first item after the colon (unless it's a proper noun).

Examples:

You know what to do: practice.

You may be required to bring many things: sleeping bags, pans, utensils, and warm clothing.

I want the following items: butter, sugar, and flour.

I need an assistant who can do the following: input data, write reports, and complete tax forms.

Rule 1b. A capital letter generally does not introduce a word, phrase, or incomplete sentence following a colon.

Examples:

He got what he worked for: a promotion

He got what he worked for: a promotion that paid a higher wage.

Rule 2. Avoid using a colon before a list if it directly follows a verb or preposition that would ordinarily need no punctuation in that sentence.

Not recommended: *I want: butter, sugar, and flour.*

Recommended: *I want butter, sugar, and flour.*

OR

Here is what I want: butter, sugar, and flour.

Not recommended: *I've seen the greats, including: Barrymore, Guinness, and Streep.*

Recommended: *I've seen the greats, including Barrymore, Guinness, and Streep.*

Rule 3. When listing items one by one, one per line, following a colon, capitalization and ending punctuation are optional when using single words or phrases preceded by letters, numbers, or bullet points. If each point is a complete sentence, capitalize the first word and end the sentence with appropriate ending punctuation. Otherwise, there are no hard and fast rules, except be consistent.

Examples:

I want an assistant who can do the following:

a. input data
b. write reports
c. complete tax forms

The following are requested:

- Wool sweaters for possible cold weather.
- Wet suits for snorkeling.
- Introductions to the local dignitaries.

These are the pool rules:

1. Do not run.
2. If you see unsafe behavior, report it to the lifeguard.
3. Did you remember your towel?
4. Have fun!

Rule 4. A colon instead of a semicolon may be used between independent clauses when the second sentence explains, illustrates, paraphrases, or expands on the first sentence.

Example: *He got what he worked for: he really earned that promotion.*

If a complete sentence follows a colon, as in the previous example, authorities are divided over whether to capitalize the first word. Some writers and editors feel that capitalizing a complete sentence after a colon is always advisable. Others advise against it. Still others regard it as a judgment call: If what follows the colon is closely related to what precedes it, there is no need for a capital. But if what follows is a general or formal statement, many writers and editors capitalize the first word.

Example: *Remember the old saying: Be careful what you wish for.*

Rule 5. Capitalize the first word of a complete or full-sentence quotation that follows a colon.

Example: *The host made an announcement: "You are all staying for dinner."*

Rule 6. Capitalize the first word after a colon if the information following the colon requires two or more complete sentences.

Example: *Dad gave us these rules to live by: Work hard. Be honest. Always show up on time.*

Rule 7. If a quotation contains two or more sentences, many writers and editors introduce it with a colon rather than a comma.

Example: *Dad often said to me: "Work hard. Be honest. Always show up on time."*

Rule 8. For extended quotations introduced by a colon, some style manuals say to indent one-half inch on both the left and right margins; others say to indent only on the left margin. Quotation marks are not used.

Example: *The author of* Touched, *Jane Straus, wrote in the first chapter:*

> *Georgia went back to her bed and stared at the intricate patterns of burned moth wings in the translucent glass of the overhead light. Her father was in "hyper mode" again where nothing could calm him down.*

Rule 9. Use a colon rather than a comma to follow the salutation in a business letter, even when addressing someone by his or her first name. (Never use a semicolon after a salutation.) A comma is used after the salutation in more informal correspondence.

Examples:

Dear Ms. Rodriguez:

Dear Dave

Semicolons

It's no accident that a **semicolon** is a period atop a comma. Like commas, semicolons indicate an audible pause—slightly longer than a comma's, but short of a period's full stop.

Semicolons have other functions, too. But first, a caveat: avoid the common mistake of using a semicolon to replace a colon (see the "Colons" section).

Incorrect: *I have one goal; to find her.*

Correct: *I have one goal: to find her.*

Rule 1a. A semicolon can replace a period if the writer wishes to narrow the gap between two closely linked sentences.

Examples:

Call me tomorrow; you can give me an answer then.

We have paid our dues; we expect all the privileges listed in the contract.

Rule 1b. Avoid a semicolon when a dependent clause comes before an independent clause.

Incorrect: *Although they tried; they failed.*

Correct: *Although they tried, they failed.*

Rule 2. Use a semicolon before such words and terms as *namely, however, therefore, that is, i.e., for example, e.g., for instance,* etc., when they introduce a complete sentence. It is also preferable to use a comma after these words and terms.

Example: *Bring any two items; however, sleeping bags and tents are in short supply.*

Rule 3. Use a semicolon to separate units of a series when one or more of the units contain commas.

Incorrect: *The conference has people who have come from Moscow, Idaho, Springfield, California, Alamo, Tennessee, and other places as well.*

Note that with only commas, that sentence is hopeless.

Correct: *The conference has people who have come from Moscow, Idaho; Springfield, California; Alamo, Tennessee; and other places as well.* (Note the final semicolon, rather than a comma, after *Tennessee*.)

Rule 4. A semicolon may be used between independent clauses joined by a connector, such as *and, but, or, nor,* etc., when one or more commas appear in the first clause.

Example: *When I finish here, and I will soon, I'll be glad to help you; and that is a promise I will keep.*

Rule 5. Do not capitalize ordinary words after a semicolon.

Incorrect: *I am here; You are over there.*

Correct: *I am here; you are over there.*

Dashes

Dashes, like commas, semicolons, colons, ellipses, and parentheses, indicate added emphasis, an interruption, or an abrupt change of thought. Experienced writers know that these marks are not interchangeable. Note how dashes subtly change the tone of the following sentences:

Examples:

You are the friend, the only friend, who offered to help me.

You are the friend—the only friend—who offered to help me.

I pay the bills; she has all the fun.

I pay the bills—she has all the fun.

I wish you would … oh, never mind.

I wish you would—oh, never mind.

Rule 1. Words and phrases between dashes are not generally part of the subject.

Example: Joe*—and his trusty mutt—****was*** *always welcome.*

Rule 2. Dashes replace otherwise mandatory punctuation, such as the commas after *Iowa* and *2013* in the following examples:

Without dash: *The man from Ames, Iowa, arrived.*

With dash: *The man—he was from Ames, Iowa—arrived.*

Without dash: *The May 1, 2013, edition of the* Ames Sentinel *arrived in June.*

With dash: *The* Ames Sentinel*—dated May 1, 2013—arrived in June.*

Rule 3. Some writers and publishers prefer spaces around dashes.

Example: *Joe — and his trusty mutt — was always welcome.*

Hyphens

There are two commandments about this misunderstood punctuation mark. First, **hyphens** must never be used interchangeably with dashes (see the Dashes section), which are noticeably longer. Second, there should not be spaces around hyphens.

Incorrect: *300—325 people*

Incorrect: *300 - 325 people*

Correct: *300-325 people*

Hyphens' main purpose is to glue words together. They notify the reader that two or more elements in a sentence are linked. Although there are rules and customs governing hyphens, there are also situations when writers must decide whether to add them for clarity.

Hyphens Between Words

Rule 1. Generally, hyphenate two or more words when they come before a noun they modify and act as a single idea. This is called a **compound adjective**.

Examples:

an off-campus apartment

state-of-the-art design

When a compound adjective follows a noun, a hyphen is usually not necessary.

Example: *The apartment is off campus.*

However, some established compound adjectives are always hyphenated. Double-check with a dictionary or online.

Example: *The design is state-of-the-art.*

See also ***Rule 2b*** in Writing Numbers

Rule 2a. A hyphen is frequently required when forming original compound verbs for vivid writing, humor, or special situations.

Examples:

The slacker video-gamed his way through life.

Queen Victoria throne-sat for six decades.

Rule 2b. When writing out new, original, or unusual compound nouns, writers should hyphenate whenever doing so avoids confusion.

Examples:

I changed my diet and became a no-meater.

No-meater is too confusing without the hyphen.

The slacker was a video gamer.

Video gamer is clear without a hyphen, although some writers might prefer to hyphenate it.

Writers using familiar compound verbs and nouns should consult a dictionary or look online to decide if these verbs and nouns should be hyphenated.

Rule 3. An often overlooked rule for hyphens: The adverb *very* and adverbs ending in *ly* are not hyphenated.

> ***Incorrect:*** *the very-elegant watch*
>
> ***Incorrect:*** *the finely-tuned watch*

This rule applies only to adverbs. The following two examples are correct because the *ly* words are not adverbs:

> ***Correct:*** *the friendly-looking dog*
>
> ***Correct:*** *a family-owned cafe*

Rule 4. Hyphens are often used to tell the ages of people and things. A handy rule, whether writing about years, months, or any other period of time, is to use hyphens unless the period of time (years, months, weeks, days) is written in plural form:

> ***With hyphens:***
>
> *We have a two-year-old child.*
>
> *We have a two-year-old.*

> ***No hyphens:*** *The child is two years old.* (Because *years* is plural.)

> ***Exception:*** *The child is one year old.* (Or *day, week, month*, etc.)

Note that when hyphens are involved in expressing ages, two hyphens are required. Many writers forget the second hyphen:

> ***Incorrect:*** *We have a two-year old child.*

Without the second hyphen, the sentence is about an "old child."

Rule 5. Never hesitate to add a hyphen if it solves a possible problem. Following are two examples of well-advised hyphens:

Confusing: Springfield has little town charm.

With hyphen: Springfield has little-town charm.

Without the hyphen, the sentence seems to say that Springfield is a dreary place. With the hyphen, *little-town* becomes a compound adjective, making the writer's intention clear: Springfield is a charming small town.

Confusing: She had a concealed weapons permit.

With hyphen: *She had a concealed-weapons permit.*

With no hyphen, we can only guess: Was the *weapons permit* hidden from sight, or was it a permit for concealed weapons? The hyphen makes *concealed-weapons* a compound adjective, so the reader knows that the writer meant *a permit for concealed weapons*.

Rule 6. When using numbers, hyphenate spans or estimates of time, distance, or other quantities. Remember not to use spaces around hyphens.

Examples:

3:15-3:45 p.m.

1999-2016

300-325 people

Note: Most publishers use the slightly longer **en dash** instead of a hyphen in this situation.

Examples:

3:15–3:45 p.m.

1999–2016

300–325 people

Here is how to type an en dash: On a PC, hold down the ALT key and type **0150** on the numeric keypad located on the far right of the keyboard. On a Mac, hold down the Option key and type the minus sign located at the top of the keyboard.

Rule 7. Hyphenate all compound numbers from *twenty-one* through *ninety-nine*.

Examples:

thirty-two children

one thousand two hundred twenty-one dollars

Rule 8a. Hyphenate all spelled-out fractions. But do not hyphenate fractions introduced with *a* or *an*.

Examples:

More than one-third of registered voters oppose the measure.

More than a third of registered voters oppose the measure.

Rule 8b. When writing out numbers with fractions, hyphenate only the fractions *unless* the construction is a compound adjective.

Correct: *The sign is five and one-half feet long.*

Correct: *A five-and-one-half-foot-long sign.*

Incorrect: *The sign is five-and-one-half feet long.*

Rule 9a. Do not hyphenate proper nouns of more than one word when they are used as compound adjectives.

Incorrect: *She is an Academy-Award nominee.*

Correct: *She is an Academy Award nominee.*

Rule 9b. However, hyphenate most double last names.

Example: *Sir Winthrop Heinz-Eakins will attend.*

Rule 10. Many editors do not hyphenate certain well-known expressions. They believe that set phrases, because of their familiarity (e.g., *high school*, *ice cream*, *twentieth century*), can go before a noun without risk of confusing the reader.

Examples:

a high school senior

an ice cream cone

a twentieth century throwback

However, other editors prefer hyphenating all compound modifiers, even those with low risk of ambiguity.

Examples:

a high-school senior

an ice-cream cone

a twentieth-century throwback

Rule 11. When in doubt, look it up. Some familiar phrases may require hyphens. For instance, is a book *up to date* or *up-to-date*? Don't guess; have a dictionary close by, or look it up online.

Hyphens with Prefixes and Suffixes

A **prefix** (*a, un, de, ab, sub, post, anti*, etc.) is a letter or set of letters placed before a **root** word. The word *prefix* itself contains the prefix *pre*. Prefixes expand or change a word's meaning, sometimes radically: the prefixes *a, un*, and *dis*, for example, change words into their opposites (e.g., *political, **a**political; friendly, **un**friendly; honor, **dis**honor*).

Rule 1. Hyphenate prefixes when they come before proper nouns or proper adjectives.

Examples:

trans-American

mid-July

Rule 2. In describing family relations, *great* requires a hyphen, but *grand* becomes part of the word without a hyphen.

Examples:

My grandson and my granduncle never met.

My great-great-grandfather fought in the Civil War.

Do not hyphenate *half brother* or *half sister*.

Rule 3. For clarity, many writers hyphenate prefixes ending in a vowel when the root word begins with the same letter.

Example:

ultra-ambitious

semi-invalid

re-elect

Rule 4. Hyphenate all words beginning with the prefixes *self-, ex-* (i.e., *former*), and *all-*.

Examples:

self-assured

ex-mayor

all-knowing

Rule 5. Use a hyphen with the prefix *re* when omitting the hyphen would cause confusion with another word.

Examples:

Will she recover from her illness?

I have re-covered the sofa twice.

Omitting the hyphen would cause confusion with *recover*.

I must re-press the shirt.

Omitting the hyphen would cause confusion with *repress*.

The stamps have been reissued.

A hyphen after *re-* is not needed because there is no confusion with another word.

Rule 6. Writers often hyphenate prefixes when they feel a word might be distracting or confusing without the hyphen.

Examples:

de-ice

With no hyphen we get *deice*, which might stump readers.

co-worker

With no hyphen we get *coworker*, which could be distracting because it starts with *cow*.

A **suffix** (*y, er, ism, able*, etc.) is a letter or set of letters that follows a root word. Suffixes form new words or alter the original word to perform a different task. For example, the noun *scandal* can be made into the adjective *scandalous* by adding the suffix *ous*. It becomes the verb *scandalize* by adding the suffix *ize*.

Rule 1. Suffixes are not usually hyphenated. Some exceptions: *-style, -elect, -free, -based.*

Examples:

Modernist-style paintings

Mayor-elect Smith

sugar-free soda

oil-based sludge

Rule 2. For clarity, writers often hyphenate when the last letter in the root word is the same as the first letter in the suffix.

Examples:

graffiti-ism

wiretap-proof

Rule 3. Use discretion—and sometimes a dictionary—before deciding to place a hyphen before a suffix. But do not hesitate to hyphenate a rare usage if it avoids confusion.

Examples:

the annual dance-athon

an eel-esque sea creature

Although the preceding hyphens help clarify unusual terms, they are optional and might not be every writer's choice. Still, many readers would scratch their heads for a moment over *danceathon* and *eelesque*.