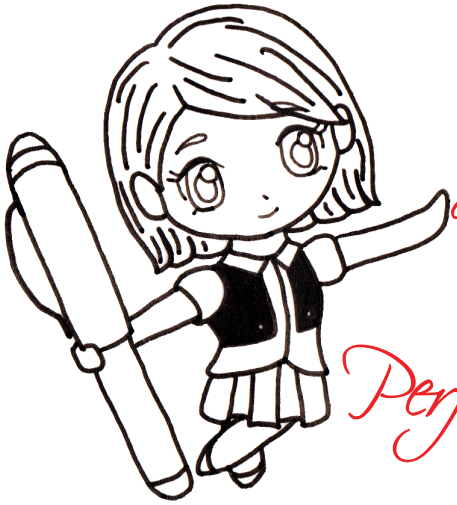


Write Right's Perfect Punctuation

Punctuation. Commas, semicolons, colons, dashes, ellipses…on and on the list of punctuation marks goes. A writer can spend a lifetime studying and learning the art of punctuation. It's enough to drive any writer batty, but it remains a thing worth studying. Every writer needs to know the basic mechanics of writing, and that includes the dastardly comma and its equally malevolent cousin the semicolon. Why? Because in order to write a more compelling piece, the writer has to know the effect of a dash versus an ellipsis. A writer has to first know the rules before she can break them.

Erin Feldman

Comma, comma, comma.

While almost every one complains about the semicolon, the real malignancy is the comma. When is it to be used? Why must it be so damnably confounding and confusing when used in a series? Wouldn't the world be a safer and happier place without the thing? Maybe, but maybe not.

The comma helps prose move along. It's a slight pause rather than the full one afforded by the period. It gives a person a chance to take a breath and to glance about the room before heading into the next three lines of prose.

The comma also provides clarity. The panda bear now eats shoots and leaves rather than eats, shoots, and leaves. Similarly, the comma keeps Grandma off the dinner table: Let's eat, Grandma.

Commas, unfortunately, have a number of rules, and many of them are dependent on the field of study. Any English major will follow the MLA style guide regarding the comma; someone studying journalism will use AP; and someone in the history department might use Chicago or Turabian.

Even so, there is some agreement among the different styles.

Rule 1. Use a comma before coordinating conjunctions that link main clauses.

Some explanations may be in order:

A **coordinating conjunction** is one of the following words: *and*, *but*, *or*, *nor*, *for*, *so*, and *yet*.

A **main clause** has both a subject and a predicate and makes a complete thought or statement.

A **predicate** makes an assertion about the subject. It must contain a verb and may contain adjectives and adverbs and direct and indirect objects.

Examples:

A man has to eat, so he must work.

Not everyone likes coffee, and not everyone likes tea.

The examples above each consist of two main clauses; that is, each clause can stand on its own two feet. The clauses could be separated with a period, but the writer has chosen to join them with a comma and coordinating conjunction.

Exceptions to the rule: If the main clauses are very long or grammatically complicated, they should be separated with a semicolon and coordinating conjunction. If the main clauses are very short and closely related in meaning, the comma can be omitted as long as the resulting sentence is clear.

Rule 2. Use a comma to separate items in a series. This particular rule is according to the Oxford or serial use and is therefore suspect to anyone who does not follow it.

Examples:

Robert eats green eggs, ham, and toast for breakfast every day.

Felicia puts cream, sugar, and a dash of cinnamon in her coffee.

Non-Oxford devotees would say the comma after *ham* and *sugar* is unnecessary. Be that as it may, using a final comma in a series of items is never wrong, and it helps readers to see the last two items as separate ones.

Exceptions to the rule: As with long or complicated main clauses, any lengthy items in a series or grammatically complicated ones may be separated by semicolons. If the items in the series contain commas, they must be separated by semicolons.

Rule 3. Use a comma to separate coordinate adjectives.

Coordinate adjectives are two or more adjectives that modify the same word. Like items in a series, they need to be separated with a comma.

Examples:

Little Anne was a faithful, patient dog.

Mittens was an evil, beastly cat.

In the examples above, the two adjectives could be placed in reverse order and separated with *and* without changing the meaning of the sentence: Little Anne was a patient and faithful dog. If the adjectives cannot be reversed without altering the sentence's meaning and an *and* cannot be inserted between the two words, no comma is to be used: Melina and Max are dedicated medical students.

In the example, *medical students* is a singular unit modified by *dedicated*. If another adjective were to modify the unit, a comma would need to be placed between the word and *dedicated*: Melina and Max are joyful, dedicated medical students.

Rule 4. Use a comma to set off most introductory elements and all nonessential ones.

An introductory element is just that: it is an element that introduces the main clause and is set off by a comma. The introductory element isn't attached to the entire clause; it typically modifies a word or words found within the clause.

Examples:

Because he was in a hurry, Greg forgot to grab Persephone's present on his way out of the house.

Leaning too far to the right, Alicia crashed her bike and managed to take out five construction cones before coming to a complete stop.

Exception to the rule: Short introductory elements do not require commas, but the comma should be used if it aids in clarity.

Nonessential elements are what their name suggests. They provide additional information but are mostly unnecessary to the subject at hand.

Examples:

The managers, who are all from Boston, have good reputations.

Anne, who emigrated from Poland, makes the best kolaches in the neighborhood.

It's helpful to think of nonessential elements as nonrestrictive. They do not *restrict* the word being modified. They only offer extra information about that word.

Enough, comma. Onto the semicolon.

Alas, semicolon.

The semicolon is considered elitist by some, namely Kurt Vonnegut, but it has its uses. It is typically found in three instances.

Rule 1. Use the semicolon to separate equal and balanced sentence elements, usually main clauses, that are not joined by a coordinating conjunction.

To review: Main clauses contain a subject and predicate. A coordinating conjunction is *and*, *but*, *or*, *nor*, *for*, *so*, and *yet*.

Examples:

Jazz and rock change rapidly; they encourage experimentation and improvisation.

The facial cleanser advertisement only highlighted its benefits; its drawbacks were hidden in the fine print.

Exception to the rule: Some writers use a comma when the main clauses are very short and closely parallel, but a semicolon is the safer punctuation mark and is always correct.

Rule 2. Use a semicolon to separate main clauses connected with either conjunctive adverbs or other transitional expressions.

Some more definitions:

Conjunctive adverbs include words such as *consequently*, *hence*, *however*, *indeed*, and *thus*.

Transitional expressions are words like *even so*, *for example*, and *of course*.

The italicized words above are not the only conjunctive adverbs and transitional expressions; they simply are some of the more common ones.

Examples:

Semicolons are purported to be difficult; however, commas may be more so.

Semicolons are not always much loved; for example, Kurt Vonnegut calls them “transvestite hermaphrodites representing absolutely nothing.”

Rule 3. Use a semicolon to separate main clauses when they contain commas even if they are accompanied by coordinating conjunctions or when they are grammatically complicated.

This rule is not contradictory to the comma one. The goal, again, is clarity of expression, and it sometimes is better achieved with the semicolon.

Examples:

After graduation, Micah debated whether to settle in San Diego, which was temperate but far from his parents; Chicago, which was appealing but much too windy; or Boston, which was close to home but already familiar.

Maria was hesitant about taking a three-week cruise and not having ready access to a tele phone; her father was elderly and had recently fallen, so she wasn't sure she should leave him on his own for an extended period of time.

A word of caution: Semicolons should be used sparingly. Too many of them in a passage, even when required by the rules, points to repetitive sentence structure. The solution is not as simple as removing the semicolons; the sentences themselves need to be restructured. This word of caution also applies to passages that contain an abundance of commas.

So long, semicolon; hello, colon.

Colon, it's been a while.

The colon is beset by trouble but perhaps not quite as much as the semicolon. The semicolon falls victim to comma confusion. The colon is recognizably different from the comma, but the recognition does little to garner it more attention. It instead is pushed to the back of the punctuation closet in hopes that it will be content with a quiet life.

Rule 1. Use the colon to separate a main clause and its explanation or amplification.

The phrase that precedes the colon must contain a subject and predicate and not begin with a subordinating word such as although, when, and because. Unlike the semicolon, the phrase that follows the colon always is of unequal importance and may or may not be a complete clause. Its duty, as stated above, is to explain or amplify. It is not meant to stand on its own.

Examples:

Sarah ordered five kinds of cookies for the work party: sugar, snickerdoodle, white chocolate and macadamia, oatmeal raisin, and chocolate chip.

The work party has one goal: to give employees an opportunity to meet the new operations manager.

Note: A complete sentence that follows the colon may begin with a capital letter or a small one. The choice is the writer's. The key is consistency with both punctuation and capitalization.

Rule 2. Use the colon to introduce a long or formal quotation, to separate titles and subtitles, and to express time.

As with the semicolon, the colon should be used rarely and only when needed.

It's time to introduce the next punctuation mark: the apostrophe.

Apostrophe: Who or what does it belong to?

The apostrophe has two primary uses. It either shows ownership, or it indicates an omission of letters in a contraction.

Rule 1. The apostrophe indicates the possessive case for nouns and indefinite pronouns.

Examples:

Ms. Park's children were often found at the principal's office.

The girls' laughter echoed in the empty amphitheatre.

The game was hers.

Note: When the noun is plural and ends with an *s* (*girls*), the apostrophe follows the plural (*girls'*). The mark always is an addition when used to show ownership, so the original noun must not change spelling (*girl's*).

Rule 2. Use an apostrophe to indicate an omitted letter or letters in a standard contraction.

Examples:

They're going to the movies.

It's his turn.

Note: Contractions can be confused with possessive personal pronouns as in the case of *it's* and *its*. Grammar and spell check won't catch the misspelling, so careful proofreading is required.

Rule 3. The apostrophe can be used to form the plurals of abbreviations, dates, and words or letters used as words. The rule isn't set in stone, so the final choice is the writer's.

It's time to leave the apostrophe for the quotation mark.

The quotation mark says, “It’s nice to meet you.”

The quotation mark - single or double - really only has one use: it encloses direct quotations from speech or writing.

Rule 1. Use double quotation marks for a direct quotation.

Example:

G.K. Chesterton often wrote about storytelling. He once said, “I had always felt life first as a story: and if there is a story there is a story-teller.”

Rule 2. Use single quotation marks to indicate a quotation within a quotation.

Example:

Sheri said, “It’s useless to resist his sales pitch. As Ben said yesterday, ‘I’m charming.’”

Rule 3. Commas and periods go inside the closing quotation mark; semicolons and colons go outside it; and question marks, exclamation points, and dashes only go inside the mark if they are part of the original quotation.

Examples:

“Life is too short to worry so much,” Lucas said to Martha.

“Could someone tell me which of Shakespeare’s plays features the line ‘all the world’s a stage’?” the teacher asked.

One of Robert Frost’s better-known poems is “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening”; another is “Fire and Ice.”

Rule 4. Put quotation marks around the titles of works that are parts of other works, such as songs, poems, and essays.

Examples:

“Can You Feel the Love Tonight?” is an Elton John song featured in The Lion King.

“The Art of the Lathe” is a B.H. Fairchild poem found within a collection by the same name.

Rule 5. Quotation marks may be used to enclose words used in a special sense.

Example:

She swatted the offending mosquito with as much “compassion” as she could muster.

Note: Quotation marks used for an ironic effect quickly becomes wearisome to the reader, so it should be done sparingly.

The quotation mark says, “Good night, all, good night.”

The dash breaks -

The master of the dash - mistress, if preferred - is Emily Dickinson. A writer should turn to her if wishing to learn what the dash is meant for. In general, the punctuation mark interrupts and signals an insertion or a break.

Rule 1. Use a dash or dashes to indicate a sudden change in thought or tone or to emphasize nonessential elements.

Examples:

"I couldn't - " Bridget trailed off.

"What is the meaning - this is an outrage, an outrage! - of this?" Huberts demanded.

Note: The dash should only be used where needed and is not a suitable replacement for commas, semicolons, and periods. Too many dashes - like this one - make for stilted, jumpy reading.

Oh, dash, I knew you -

The parentheses is (for all intents and purposes) an aside.

Rule 1. Parentheses always come in pairs and enclose parenthetical expressions.

Another definition:

Parenthetical expressions are explanations, digressions, and examples that may be helpful or interesting but not essential to meaning.

Examples:

Roberta purchased several pieces of furniture (an end table, two lamps, and an outdoor dining set), some china, and a handbag at her neighbor's garage sale.

Mary knits hats in a variety of colors. (Red and blue are the most requested.) She makes them for a local charity involved with the hospital.

Note: Commas, semicolons, and periods that follow parenthetical expressions should be placed outside the closing parenthesis. If the parenthetical expression falls between other complete sentences, the parenthetical requires capitalization and end punctuation.

(By the way, did the parentheses tell you the news about the ellipsis?)

The ellipsis trails off…

While the ellipsis is commonly used to indicate when a conversation fades into nothingness, its more formal use is to signal omissions from quotations.

Rule 1. Use the ellipsis to show an omission within a quotation.

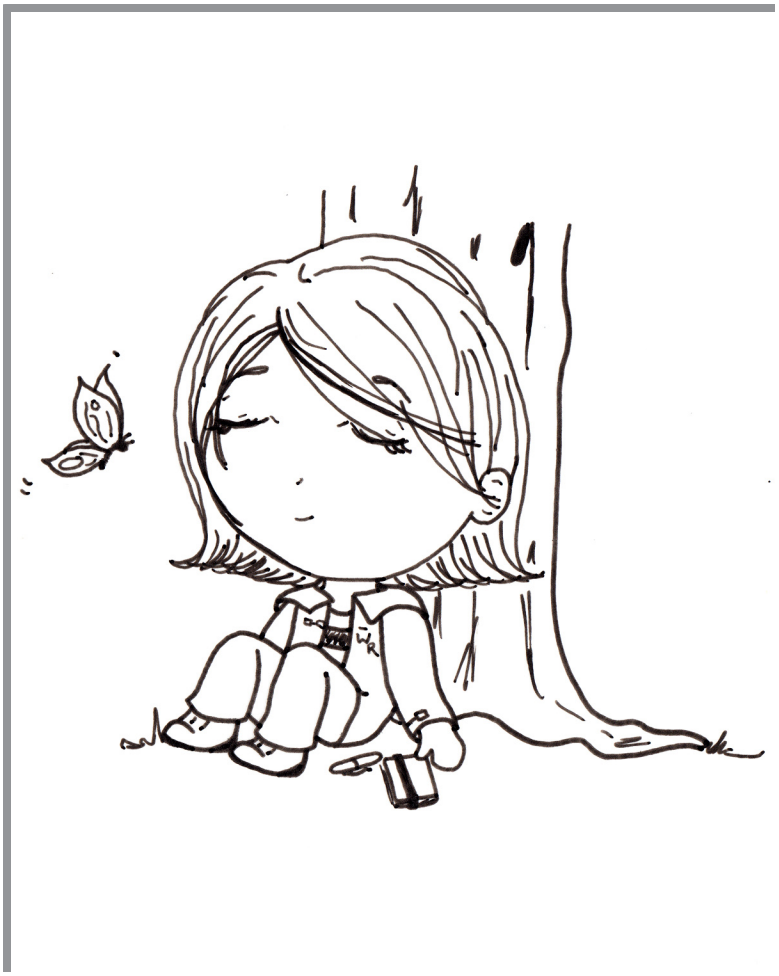
Rule 2. Use the ellipsis to indicate pauses or unfinished statements.

Examples:

"I wish…" she murmured.

"I couldn't believe the news…It's awful, just awful." Mrs. Peabody wept.

Goodbye, ellipsis, goodbye…



Oh! Exclamation point.

Rule 1. The exclamation point follows an emphatic statement, interjection, or command.

Examples:

"Come here, Tyler David Paulson!" his mother yelled.

"No! We will not lose this game!" Coach Ryan roared.

Note: While many a punctuation manual will state that the exclamation point should never be combined with other punctuation marks, modern usage dictates differently. The *interrobang*, a combination of the exclamation point and the question mark, is quite popular.

The exclamation point, like the semicolon and colon, should be used sparingly. If used too often, it loses its power to impress at best and makes for a case of histrionics at worst.

Remember to be spartan with the exclamation point!

Is that you, question mark?

Rule 1. Use the question mark - to state the obvious - when asking a question.

Examples:

"Where are you going, Edward?" Jim asked.

"Have you seen my doll?" Jennie asked.

Note: For indirect questions, the period is used.

Example:

His mother asked why he was late getting home from school.

Will we meet again, question mark?

The period is the end.

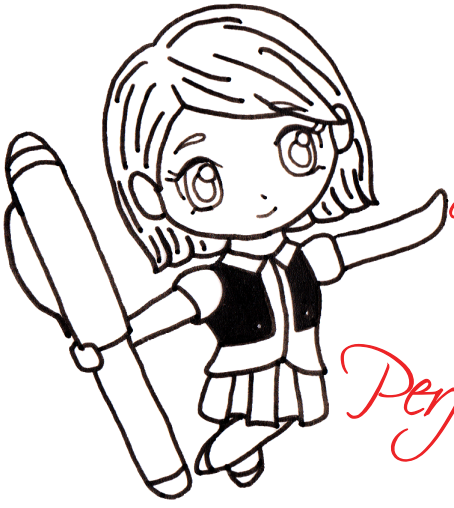
Rule 1. The period is used with abbreviations, but its primary use is to end a statement, a mild command, or an indirect question.

Examples:

Please do not smoke inside the hospital.

It's better to ask questions now rather than later.

The end. The end.



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