

Commas, Semicolons, and Colons

How to use commas:

Commas are the most often (mis)used punctuation in the English language. Commas' main purpose is to separate elements in sentences. They are also used for things like dates, greetings, and citations.

The main uses of commas:

- To separate the main clause of a sentence from another main clause as linked together by a coordinating conjunction other than and.
 - I like to go to the beach, but I don't enjoy the sand.
- To set off an introductory element from the rest of a sentence.
 - During my teen years, I read everything I could find.
- To link restrictive elements, most often parentheticals and appositives, to the sentence's main clause.
 - The doctor, an expert in epidemiology, is on the 6 o'clock news.
- To separate items on a list or in a series.
 - I had to buy eggs, butter, and flour to make the cake.
- To separate adjectives modifying the same noun.
 - The ride was bumpy, rough, and a lot of fun!
- To set off nouns of direct address, the words yes and no, interrogative tags, and mild interjections.
 - Yes, I will write the information down.
- To set off direct quotations.
 - She explained, "writers gain all kinds of knowledge about their writing" (Harris, 1995, p. 27).

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| <i>Common Coordinating Conjunctions:</i> | | And | But |
| For | Nor | Or | Yet |

How to use semicolons:

Writers should use semicolons to connect independent, related clauses that are of equal importance. They are also useful when listing many points in a sentence that already use commas.

The main uses of semicolons:

- To connect independent clauses not joined by a coordinating conjunction. (To connect independent clauses joined by a coordinating conjunction, use a comma; see above.)
 - The dog was running around in circles on the lawn; it was a good thing she was on a leash.
- To link independent clauses joined by a conjunctive adverb, a transitional phrase, or an explanatory expression. (Examples of some in the next section)
 - I enjoy watching movies; however, TV is more fun. ◦ I enjoy watching movies; on the other hand, I also enjoy TV shows.
- To clarify a sentence's meaning when several commas are present.
 - We read the book by Alice Childress, *Like One of the Family*; the novel by Abraham Verghese, *Cutting for Stone*; the short story by Chinua Achebe, "The Sacrificial Egg;" and the short story by Leila Aboulela, "The Doctor on the Nile."

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| <i>Transitional Phrases:</i> | After all | As a matter of fact | As a result |
| At any rate | At the same time | Even so | For example |
| For instance | In addition | In conclusion | In fact |
| In other words | In the first place | On the contrary | On the other hand |

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| <i>Conjunctive Adverbs:</i> | | Accordingly | Also | Anyway |
| Besides | Certainly | Consequently | Conversely | Finally |
| Furthermore | Hence | However | Incidentally | Indeed |
| Instead | Likewise | Meanwhile | Moreover | Nevertheless |
| Next | Nonetheless | Otherwise | Similarly | Specifically |
| Still | Subsequently | Then | Therefore | Thus |

How to use colons:

Colons are most often used to introduce an explanatory phrase, a statement, or a list of items that completes a sentence. In other words, colons are used as a means of calling attention to the words which follow the colon.

The main uses of colons:

- To direct attention to a list, an appositive, or a quotation following the colon.
 - Exports from Ohio include many foodstuffs: wine, corn, peaches, and maple syrup.
- To link independent clauses if the first is summarized or explained by the second (often useful in titles of papers).
 - One student was particularly appreciative of his tutor: “Thank you so much for your input.”
- Following a salutation in formal or business letter.
 - Hello Dr. McCoy:
- To indicate hours and minutes.
 - The clock read 12:34 so we made a wish.
- To show proportions (ratios).
 - The number of men to women in attendance was 2:4.
- In some bibliographic entries and citations.
 - Genesis 43:2-10

A Recap of **Commas**, **Semicolons**, and **Colons**:

- The comma’s main use is to separate both equal and unequal sentence elements.
 - It separates main clauses when they are linked by coordinating conjunctions.
 - It separates information that is part of, or attached to, a main clause.
- The semicolon’s main use is to separate equal and balanced sentence elements.
 - It separates complementary main clauses not linked by a coordinating conjunction. (Commas separate clauses linked by coordinating conjunctions).
 - It separates complementary main clauses related by conjunctive adverbs (see list on page two).
- The colon’s main use is to separate unequal sentence elements (making it the opposite of the semicolon).
 - It separates a main clause from a following explanation or a summary.

Resources for further information:

- Cole Brown, A., Nilson, J., Weber Shaw, F., & Weldon, R.A. (1984) *Grammar and Composition*. Houghton Mifflin English.
- Hacker, D. (2003) *A Writer’s Reference* (5th edition). Bedford St. Martin’s Press.
- Schwegler, R. A. (1989) *The Little, Brown Handbook* (4th edition). Scott, Foresman and Company.
- Your writing center tutors! Stop by and see us or make an appointment online at iwu.mywconline.com. We’d be more than happy to help!