

## Punctuation Pointers

### The Comma

The comma tells readers to pause briefly between words and groups of words, and it helps to clarify meaning.

- Use a comma to join 2 independent clauses. An independent clause has a subject and a verb, and it expresses a complete idea. Use a comma between 2 independent clauses joined by a coordinating conjunction – *and, but, or, nor, for, yet, or so*.
  - The hikers traveled for miles, *and* they arrived tired.
  - Jeff had not eaten, *so* I offered him a sandwich.
- Use a comma to set off introductory elements such as an introductory dependent clause, phrase, or a word from an independent clause.
  - *Because the state has budget problems*, many communities are faced with a loss of services.
  - *Attempting to balance the budget*, the governor asked that the sales tax be increased.
  - *However*, the legislature refused to go along with the increase.
- Use a comma to separate items in a series (words, phrases, clauses). NOTE: You may leave out the comma before the final item in a series if you are sure readers will not misread the sentence. Whichever method you choose, be consistent.
  - The menu for tonight's dinner includes possum stew, black-eyed peas, hot cornbread, and ice cold tea.
  - Western pioneers grew their own food, made their own clothing, and built their own homes.
  - My father listens to classical music, I like jazz and bluegrass, and my sister loves rock.
- Use a comma around nonessential elements – a word, phrase, or clause that adds information but is not essential to the meaning of a sentence. NOTE: If you can leave out the word, phrase, or clause without changing the meaning of the sentence, you can be sure you should use commas.
  - Chicago, *which is in Illinois*, was once destroyed by a fire.
- Use a comma around nonrestrictive modifiers. NOTE: If a modifier can be removed without changing the meaning of the sentence, you can be sure you should use commas.
  - Nonrestrictive: Students, *who use the library free of charge*, must show their IDs.
  - Restrictive: Students *who study hard* should pass.
- Use a comma to set off sentence interrupters including internal transitions, interjections, and words used in a direct address.
  - Interrupter: He has reading problems, *they believe*, because he needs glasses.
  - Interrupter: Most people, *claims my father*, are worth knowing.
  - Transition: For my family of seven, *on the other hand*, eating out is too expensive.
  - Interjection: We walked for, *oh*, about two miles.
  - Word in direct address: *Bob*, will this idea work?
- Use a comma to separate adjectives that describe the same noun. NOTE: If you can insert *and* between two adjectives naturally, the adjectives should be separated by a comma.
  - They slept under a warm, fluffy quilt.

### The Semicolon

The semicolon tells readers to pause a little longer; it is a stronger mark of punctuation than the comma.

Semicolons are primarily used to separate clauses and phrases that are related and that receive equal emphasis.

- Use a semicolon between independent clauses that are related and that are NOT connected by a coordinating conjunction.
  - The house was very old; it had been built in 1710.
  - The Scholastic Aptitude Test is widely used; each year more than a million students take it.
- Use a semicolon between independent clauses with a conjunction adverb or transitional phrase. A conjunctive adverb is used with a semicolon to connect two main (independent) ideas. It shows how the

main clauses it connects relate to each other. A transitional phrase is a group of words that, like a conjunctive adverb, is used with a semicolon to connect two main clauses.

- Conjunctive adverb: Don't come late; otherwise, you will miss dinner.
- Transitional phrase: In some schools, classes are small; as a result, teachers can give students individual attention.
- Use a semicolon to separate items in a series when one or more items contain a comma.
  - At a recent seminar, we heard Reginald Mack, a district attorney, speak on victim's rights; Maria Mendoza, a professor of law, speak on the court system; and Olaf Christian, a police officer, speak on gun control.

## The Colon

The colon is a mark of punctuation used inside a sentence to clarify meaning or create emphasis. The colon points to or introduces information that follows.

- Use a colon to separate independent clauses.
  - Thomas Jefferson had a distinguished career in public service: he was the principal author of the Declaration of Independence, served as the third president of the United States, and founded the University of Virginia.
- Use a colon to introduce information after an independent clause.
  - Goldie's Café serves my favorite dish: Hungarian goulash.
  - You will need two tools to assemble the wagon: a screwdriver and a wrench.
  - Please do the following: Write your name at the top, mark your answers in the left column, and complete all fifty questions.
- Use a colon to introduce a quotation.
  - The first amendment to the United States Constitution states: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof."
- Use a colon in the salutation of a business letter.
  - Dear Professor Johnson:

## The Apostrophe

Apostrophes show possession and are also used to create special relationships between words.

- Add 's if the noun does not end in s.
  - Robert's license was taken away after he was arrested.
  - The hospital's emergency room was crowded.
  - The children's shoes were expensive.
- Add 's if the noun is singular and ends in s.
  - The bus's door jammed.
  - James's book is missing.
- Add only an apostrophe if the noun is plural and ends in s.
  - The mountains' peaks were not visible.
  - The senior citizens' benefits were increased.
  - The Greeks' plan was to enter Troy by hiding in a large wooden horse.
- In a series of nouns, add 's only to the last noun to show joint possession. Add 's to each noun to show individual possession.
  - Joint: Groucho, Chico, and Harpo's films get high marks from movie fans.
  - Individual: Angela's and Michael's study habits are different.