



Punctuation Basics

This handout covers the correct usage of commonly used punctuation marks: colons, semicolons, and commas. Under each section there will be a number of grammar guidelines with examples to demonstrate the principles covered.

Colons

There are only two grammar guidelines that you need to know in order to be able to effectively use colons within sentences:

Grammar guideline 1

Colons usually signal a general-to-specific relationship.

Example: The café has three sizes of soft drink: small, medium, and large.

Grammar guideline 2

Within the context of a paragraph, a “complete thought” must come before the colon. Almost anything can follow a colon: a word, a phrase, a list (as in this sentence), a quoted passage, an equation, or another “complete thought.”

Example: In his work on agriculture management, Brown asserts the following: “Old MacDonald had a farm.”

Note: “a complete thought” is a string of words that could stand on its own as a sentence. The grammatical term for this is an “independent clause.” In both of the examples above, the clause before the colon could stand independently as a complete sentence.

Semicolons

There are two grammar guidelines that you need to know about semicolons.

Grammar guideline 1

Semicolons can act as “super commas” to separate items in a complex list. Semicolons are used to separate list items in instances where using commas alone would be confusing. One example of this is a list which includes commas internal to individual items within the list. This is demonstrated in the example below).

Example:

The conference featured three keynote speakers: Jane Wright, an expert in disability law; Jenson Okimo, a specialist in service delivery to ethnic minorities; and Arlene Giraudier, a researcher studying the impact of the internet on rehabilitation practitioners.

Grammar guideline 2

When using semicolons in other instances (i.e. when semicolons are not being used to separate items in a list), semicolons are used to connect two independent, but closely related clauses.

In this usage, semicolons function in the same way as a period would. Therefore, **clauses on either side of the semi colon must both be independent clauses which constitute “complete thoughts.”**

This rule applies even when you are using a **connector** between two “complete thoughts”. Connectors include the following: consequently, for example, furthermore, however, nevertheless, and therefore.

Example: Instructors need to adapt instruction to students’ learning styles; however, this adaptation can be a challenge, especially in large classes.

Commas

There are five grammar guidelines you need to know, regarding the use of commas, and two comma errors to avoid. Both guidelines and errors are outlined below.

Note: The examples in this section are taken from Sagan, C. (1980). *Cosmos*. New York: Random House

Grammar guideline 1

Use commas (or dashes or parentheses) to set off extra information that does not constitute an independent clause (“complete thought”).

Example 1:

Our month December, named after the Latin decem, means the tenth, not the twelfth, month (Sagan, 1980, p. 105).

Example 2:

Broca was a superb brain anatomist and made important investigations of the limbic region, earlier called the rhinencephalon (the “smell brain”), which we now know to be profoundly involved in human emotion (Sagan, 1980, p. 9)

Grammar guideline 2

Use a comma before conjunctions (i.e. and, but, for, or, nor, so, yet) only when joining independent clauses (“complete thoughts”).

Example:

The computer did not win the Chess Open, **but** this is the first time one has done well enough to enter such a competition (Sagan, 1980, p. 286).

Grammar guideline 3

Use a comma to set off introductory words or phrases from independent clauses (“complete thoughts”).

Example 1:

After leaving Germany, Einstein learned that the Nazis had placed a price of 20,000 marks on his head (Sagan, 1980, p. 32).

Example 2:

According to Ptolemy, the planets are affixed to immense crystalline spheres (Sagan, 1980, p. 272).

Grammar guideline 4

Use commas to separate items in a list, if the items in the list **do not** already contain commas.

Example:

The shopping list contains apples, oranges, bananas, and pears.

Note: The comma before “and” in a list is optional (but recommended). This is known as the “serial” or “Oxford” comma).

Grammar guideline 5

Use a comma to separate two adjectives if their order could be reversed or if the comma could be replaced by “and”.

Example:

This weekend we went to see a fast-paced, exciting film.

Two comma mistakes to avoid**Mistake 1:**

Do not let a comma interrupt your sentence flow and logic; use commas only when needed. For instance, you should never separate a subject from its verb with a comma.

Example of Incorrect Usage:

Over the past few decades voting participation in Canada, has declined among young people.

Mistake 2:

Do not use commas to join two independent clauses (“complete thoughts”). If you use a comma to join clauses that could be two separate sentences, you end up producing a grammar error called a “comma splice”.

One easy solution to this error is to replace the comma with a semicolon.

Example of comma splice: Once there was a magnificent princess, she had admirers from all around.

Correction using semicolon: Once there was a magnificent princess; she had admirers from all around.