

# PUNCTUATION PRACTICE

## The Comma

The comma is a valuable, useful punctuation device because it separates the structural elements of sentences into manageable segments; i.e., it makes a sentence easier to understand!

Here are some rules to follow when using a comma:

1. Use commas to separate independent clauses when they are joined by any of these seven coordinating conjunctions: *for, and, not, but, or, yet, so* (*FAN BOYS*).  
*Example:* The game was over, but the crowd refused to leave.
2. Use commas after introductory a) clauses, b) phrases, or c) words that come before the main clause.
  - a. Common starter words for introductory clauses that should be followed by a comma include *after, although, as, because, if, since, when, while*.  
*Example:* While I was eating, the cat scratched at the door.
  - b. Common introductory phrases that should be followed by a comma include participial and infinitive phrases, absolute phrases, nonessential appositive phrases, and long prepositional phrases (over four words).  
*Example:* Having finished the test, he left the room.
  - c. Common introductory words that should be followed by a comma include: *yes, however, well*.  
*Example:* However, you may not be satisfied with the results.
3. Use a pair of commas in the middle of a sentence to set off clauses, phrases, and words that are not essential to the meaning of the sentence. Use one comma before the word group to indicate the beginning of the pause and one at the end to indicate the end of the pause.

Here are some clues to help you decide whether the sentence element is essential:

- If you leave out the clause, phrase, or word, does the sentence still make sense and be grammatically correct?
- Does the clause, phrase, or word interrupt the flow of words in the original sentence?
- If you move the element to a different position in the sentence, does the sentence still make sense?

If you answer "yes" to one or more of these questions, then the element in question is nonessential and should be set off with commas. *Example:*

**Clause:** That Tuesday, *which happens to be my birthday*, is the only day when I am available to meet.

**Phrase:** This restaurant has an exciting atmosphere. The food, *on the other hand*, is rather bland.

**Word:** I appreciate your hard work. In this case, *however*, you seem to have over-exerted yourself.

4. Use commas to separate three or more words, phrases, or clauses written in a series.  
*Example:* The Constitution establishes the legislative, executive, and judicial branches of government.  
*Note:* The comma before the "and" is not always used.
5. Use a comma near the end of a sentence to separate contrasted coordinate elements or to indicate a distinct pause or shift.  
*Example:* He was merely ignorant, not stupid.
6. Use a comma to shift between the main discourse and a quotation.  
*Example:* John said without emotion, "I'll see you tomorrow."
7. Use commas wherever necessary to prevent possible confusion or misreading.  
*Example:* To George, Harrison had been a sort of idol.

## The Semicolon

The semicolon is a simple piece of punctuation, much easier to work with than the comma because it follows fairly clear rules. You use it to connect two independent clauses together into one sentence, and you use it as a super-comma.

### 1. To Connect Two Independent Clauses:

Independent clauses are series of words that could stand alone as complete sentences. When you have two otherwise complete sentences that you want to connect to form one long sentence, use a semicolon between them.

*Example:* This could is complete sentence; this is another one.

If you put a comma where that semicolon is, you will have committed a "comma splice," which is a very nasty grammar error indeed. Sometimes, the second clause doesn't really look like a complete sentence, so you must watch closely.

*Example:* Twelve workers started the project; only five remain.

There is, however, one exception that can cause you a problem. You don't use a semicolon to connect two complete sentences if there's a conjunction between the clauses (and, but, etc.). In that case, use a comma.

*Example:* This could is complete sentence, and this is another one.

Adding that single word, the conjunction "and," means that you must change that semicolon into a comma.

### 2. To Serve as a Super-comma:

When you have a series of three or more items that normally would be separated by commas except that each individual item already has a comma in it, you use the semicolon between items.

*Example:* We visited Pago Pago, Western Samoa; Curitiba, Brazil; and St. George, Utah.

*Example:* The trio's birthdays are November 10, 1946; December 7, 1947; and October 31, 1950.

*Example:* Her favorite players are Steve Young, a quarterback; Jason Buck, a defensive end; and Ty Detmer, another quarterback.

As in the examples above, citing places, dates, and people's names with descriptions, are three very common situations where you'll see the super-comma usage.

## The Apostrophe

The following guidelines will help you use the apostrophe correctly:

1. Use the apostrophe to form the possessive of nouns and pronouns.

Rules for forming the possessive:

-If the noun is singular, add apostrophe "s".

*Example:* dog's bone woman's coat teacher's book

- If the noun is singular and ends in "s," you may form the possessive either by adding apostrophe "s" or by simply adding the apostrophe.

*Example:* James's novels the boss's car Dickens's heroine  
James' novels the boss' car Dickens' heroine

\*The exceptions to this flexible rule are Jesus, Moses, and Zeus, which traditionally form the possessive with just the apostrophe.

- If the noun is plural (and does not end in "s"), add apostrophe "s".

*Example:* women's coats people's court children's toys

-If the noun is plural and ends in "s," add an apostrophe only.

*Example:* students' books dogs' bones babies' clothes

Examples: someone else's coat anybody else's idea

\*In phrases using the pronoun "other," form the possessive by following the general rule for nouns. Form the singular possessive with apostrophe "s" and the plural with an apostrophe.

*Example:* each other's letters one another's houses

the others' reports [the reports of the others]

2. Use the apostrophe in phrases of time or measurement.

*Example:* seven o'clock a month's leave my money's worth

3. Use the apostrophe to indicate the omission of numbers in dates.

*Example:* the summer of '42 the '88 Olympics

4. Use the apostrophe to indicate the omission of letters in a contraction.

*Example:* I have read it I've read it  
He has gone He's gone

## The Question Mark

A question mark (or, less commonly known as, an interrogation point or eroteme) is a punctuation mark that replaces the period at the end of an interrogative sentence. It can also be used mid-sentence to mark a merely interrogative phrase, where it functions similarly to a comma, such as in the sentence "where shall we go? and what shall we do?," but this usage is increasingly rare. The question mark is not used for indirect questions.

Here are some of its uses:

1. A tag question is a device used to turn a statement into a question. It nearly always consists of a pronoun, a helping verb, and sometimes the word *not*. Although it begins as a statement, the tag question prevails when it comes to the end-mark: use a question mark. Notice that when the statement is positive, the tag question is expressed in the negative; when the statement is negative, the tag question is positive. (There are a few exceptions to this, frequently expressing an element of surprise or sarcasm: "So you've made your first million, have you?" "Oh, that's your plan, is it?") *Examples:*

- He shouldn't have quit his diet, should he?
- They're not doing very well, are they?
- She does a beautiful job, doesn't she?
- There were too many people on the dock, weren't there?  
(Be careful of this last one; it's not "weren't they?")

2. Be careful *not* to put a question mark at the end of an indirect question.

- I asked my sister if she had a date.
- I wonder if Cheney will run for vice president again.

Be careful to distinguish between an indirect question (above), and a question that is embedded within a statement which we *do* want to end with a question mark.

- We can get to Boston quicker, can't we, if we take the interstate?
- She ended her remarks with a resounding "why not?"

3. Put a question mark at the end of a sentence that is, in fact, a direct question. (Sometimes writers will simply forget.) Rhetorical questions (asked when an answer is not really expected), by the way, are questions and deserve to end with a question mark. *Examples:*

- How else should we end them, after all?
- What if I said to you, "You've got a real problem here"? (Notice that the question mark here comes *after* the quotation mark and there is no period at the end of the statement.)

4. If a question mark is part of an italicized or underlined title, make sure that the question mark is also italicized. *Example:* My favorite book is *Where Did He Go?*

(Do not add a period after such a sentence that ends with the title's question mark. The question mark will also suffice to end the sentence.) If the question mark is not part of a sentence-ending title, don't italicize the question mark:

Did he sing the French national anthem, *la Marseillaise*?

5. When a question ends with an abbreviation, end the abbreviation with a period and then add the question mark.

- Didn't he use to live in Washington, D.C.?

## Punctuation Practice

For each of the following exercises, add the appropriate punctuation marks to correct the sentences.

### The Comma:

Yesterday was her brother's birthday so she took him out to dinner.

When the snow stops falling we'll shovel the driveway.

To get a seat you'd better come early.

The prosecutor argued that the defendant who was at the scene of the crime who had a strong revenge motive and who had access to the murder weapon was guilty of homicide.

### The Semicolon:

Call me tomorrow I will give you my answer then.

I have paid my dues therefore I expect all the privileges listed in the contract.

This conference has people that have come from Boise Idaho Los Angeles California and Nashville Tennessee.

### The Apostrophe:

The boys paddling pool needs cleaning.

I cant go to the movies tonight.

Jess new puppy is only three weeks old.

### The Question Mark

He should quit smoking, shouldn't he

The instructor asked the students what they were doing

I wonder: will Cheney run for office again

Did you ever read the book *Where Am I*

## Punctuation Practice (Answer Key)

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### The Semicolon:

Call me tomorrow; I will give you my answer then.

I have paid my dues; therefore, I expect all the privileges listed in the contract.

This conference has people that have come from Boise, Idaho; Los Angeles, California; and Nashville, Tennessee.

### The Apostrophe:

The boy's paddling pool needs cleaning.

I can't go to the movies tonight.

Jess's (or Jess') new puppy is only three weeks old.

### The Question Mark

He should quit smoking, shouldn't he?

The instructor asked the students what they were doing.

I wonder: will Cheney run for office again?

Did you ever read the book *Where Am I?*