

## 10 Punctuation

9. A colon separates elements in page references, bibliographical and biblical citations, and fixed formulas used to express ratios and time.

*Journal of the American Medical Association* 48:356  
Springfield, Mass.: Merriam-Webster Inc.  
John 4:10  
8:30 a.m.  
a ratio of 3:5

10. A colon separates titles and subtitles (as of books).

*The Tragic Dynasty: A History of the Romanovs*

11. A colon is used to join terms that are being contrasted or compared.

Seventeenth-century rhymes include *prayer* : *afar* and *brass* : *was* : *ass*.

12. A colon follows the salutation in formal correspondence.

Dear General Smith:                      Dear Product Manager:  
Dear Mr. Jiménez:                      Ladies and Gentlemen:

13. A colon punctuates memorandum and government correspondence headings and subject lines in general business letters.

TO:    VIA:  
SUBJECT:                                      REFERENCE:

14. A colon separates writer/dictator/typist initials in the identification lines of business letters.

WAL:jml  
WAL:WEB:jml

15. A colon separates carbon-copy or blind carbon-copy abbreviations from the initials or names of copy recipients in business letters.

cc:RWP  
JES

bcc:MWK  
FCM

**With Other Marks of Punctuation**

16. A colon is placed outside quotation marks and parentheses.

There's only one thing wrong with "Harold's Indiscretion": it's not funny.  
I quote from the first edition of *Springtime in Savannah* (published in 1952):

**Spacing**

17. In typewritten material, two spaces follow a colon used in running text, bibliographical references, publication titles, and letter or memorandum headings. In typeset material, only one space follows.

The answer is simple: don't go.

SUBJECT: Project X

New York: Macmillan, 1980.

*Typewriting: A Guide*

18. When a colon is being used between two correlated terms (see paragraph 11), it is centered with equal spacing on each side.

The stature of the two sexes shows the same female : male proportions.

19. No space precedes or follows a colon when it is used between numerals.

9:30 a.m.                                      a ratio of 2:4

20. No space precedes or follows a colon in a business-letter identification line or in a carbon-copy notation that indicates a recipient designated by initials.

FCM:hg                                      cc:FCM

21. Two spaces follow a colon in a carbon-copy notation that indicates a recipient designated by a full name.

cc: Mr. Johnson

**Comma**

The comma is the most frequently used punctuation mark in the English writing system. Its most common uses are to separate items in a series and to set off syntactical elements within sentences. Within these two broad categories, there are a great many specific uses to which commas can be put. This section explains the most common aspects of the comma, listed under the following headings.

Between Main Clauses	With Compound Modifiers
With Compound Predicates	In Quotations, Questions, and
With Subordinate Clauses and	Indirect Discourse
Phrases	With Omitted Words
With Appositives	With Addresses, Dates, and Numbers
With Introductory and	With Names, Degrees, and Titles
Interrupting Elements	In Correspondence
With Contrasting Expressions	Other Uses
With Items in a Series	With Other Marks of Punctuation

**Between Main Clauses**

1. A comma separates main clauses joined by a coordinating conjunction (as *and*, *but*, *or*, *nor*, and *for*). For use of commas with clauses joined by correlative conjunctions, see paragraph 24 below.

She knew very little about him, and he volunteered nothing.

We will not respond to any more questions on that topic this afternoon, nor will we respond to similar questions at any time in the future.

His face showed disappointment, for he knew that he had failed.

NOTE: Some reference books still insist that *so* and *yet* are adverbs rather than conjunctions and that therefore they should be preceded by a semicolon when they join main clauses. However, our evidence indicates that the use of *so* and *yet* as conjunctions preceded by a comma is standard.

The acoustics in this hall are good, so every note is clear.

We have requested this information many times before, yet we have never gotten a satisfactory reply.

2. When one or both of the clauses are short or when they are closely related in meaning, the comma is often omitted.

The sun was shining and the birds were singing.

We didn't realize it at the time but the spot we had picked for our home was the same spot one of our ancestors had picked for his home.

Six thousand years ago, the top of the volcano blew off in a series of powerful eruptions and the sides collapsed into the middle.

Many people want to take their vacations in August so it may be difficult for some of them to find good accommodations.

NOTE: In punctuating sentences such as the ones illustrated above, writers have to use their own judgment regarding whether clauses are short enough or closely related enough to warrant omitting the comma. There are no clear-cut rules to follow; however, factors such as the rhythm, parallelism, or logic of the sentence often influence how clearly or smoothly it will read with or without the comma.

3. Commas are sometimes used to separate main clauses that are not joined by conjunctions. This styling is especially likely to be used if the clauses are short and feature obvious parallelism.

One day you are a successful corporate lawyer, the next day you are out of work.

The city has suffered terribly in the interim. Bombs have destroyed most of the buildings, disease has ravaged the population.

NOTE: Using a comma to join clauses that are neither short nor obviously parallel is usually called *comma fault* or *comma splice* and most writers and editors avoid such a construction. In general, clauses not joined by conjunctions are separated by semicolons.

4. If a sentence is composed of three or more clauses, the clauses may be separated by either commas or semicolons. Clauses that are short and relatively free of commas can be separated by commas even if they are not joined by a conjunction. If the clauses are long or heavily punctuated, they are separated with semicolons, except for the last

two clauses which may be separated by either a comma or a semicolon. Usually a comma will be used between the last two clauses only if those clauses are joined by a conjunction. For more examples of clauses separated with commas and semicolons, see paragraph 5 under Semicolon in this chapter.

The pace of change seems to have quickened, the economy is uncertain, the technology seems sometimes liberating and sometimes hostile.

Small fish fed among the marsh weed, ducks paddled along the surface, and a muskrat ate greens along the bank.

The policy is a complex one to explain; defending it against its critics is not easy, nor is it clear the defense is always necessary.

### With Compound Predicates

5. Commas are not usually used to separate the parts of a compound predicate.

The firefighter tried to enter the burning building but was turned back by the thick smoke.

NOTE: Despite the fact that most style manuals and composition handbooks warn against separating the parts of compound predicates with commas, many authors and editors use commas in just this way. They are particularly likely to do so if the predicate is especially long and complicated, if they want to stress one part of the predicate, or if the absence of a comma could cause even a momentary misreading of the sentence.

The board helps to develop the financing, new product planning, and marketing strategies for new corporate divisions, and issues periodic reports on expenditures, revenues, and personnel appointments.

This is an unworkable plan, and has been from the start.

I try to explain to him what I want him to do, and get nowhere.

### With Subordinate Clauses and Phrases

6. Adverbial clauses and phrases that precede a main clause are usually set off with commas.

As cars age, they depreciate.

Having made that decision, we turned our attention to other matters.

To understand the situation, you must be familiar with the background.

From the top of this rugged and isolated plateau, I could see the road stretching out for miles across the desert.

In 1919, his family left Russia and moved to this country.

In addition, staff members respond to queries, take new orders, and initiate billing.

7. If a sentence begins with an adverbial clause or phrase and can be easily read without a comma following it, writers will often omit the comma. In most cases where the comma is omitted, the phrase will be

short—four words or less. But some writers will omit the comma even after a longer phrase if the sentence can be easily read or seems more forceful that way.

In January the company will introduce a new line of entirely redesigned products.

On the map the town appeared as a small dot in the midst of vast emptiness.

If the project cannot be done profitably perhaps it should not be done at all.

8. Adverbial clauses and phrases that introduce a main clause other than the first main clause are usually set off with commas. However, if the adverbial clause or phrase follows a conjunction, style varies regarding how many commas are required to set it off. In most cases, two commas are used: one before the conjunction and one following the clause or phrase. Writers who prefer close punctuation usually use three commas: one before the conjunction and two more to enclose the clause or phrase. If the writer prefers open punctuation, the phrase may not be set off at all. In this case, only one comma that separates the main clauses is used. For more on open and close punctuation, see page 2.

His parents were against the match, and had the couple not eloped, their plans for marriage would have come to nothing.

They have redecorated the entire store, but, to the delight of their customers, the store retains much of its original flavor. [close]

We haven't left Springfield yet, but when we get to Boston we'll call you. [open]

9. A comma is not used after an introductory phrase if the phrase immediately precedes the main verb.

In the road lay a dead rabbit.

10. Subordinate clauses and phrases that follow a main clause or that fall within a main clause are usually not set off by commas if they are restrictive. A clause or phrase is considered restrictive if its removal from the sentence would alter the meaning of the main clause. If the meaning of the main clause would not be altered by removing the subordinate clause or phrase, the clause or phrase is considered nonrestrictive and usually is set off by commas.

We will be delighted if she decides to stay. [restrictive]

Anyone who wants his or her copy of the book autographed by the author should get in line. [restrictive]

Her new book, *Fortune's Passage*, was well received. [nonrestrictive]

That was a good meal, although I didn't particularly like the broccoli in cream sauce. [nonrestrictive]

11. Commas are used to set off an adverbial clause or phrase that falls between the subject and the verb.

The weather, fluctuating from very hot to downright chilly, necessitated a variety of clothing.

12. Commas enclose modifying phrases that do not immediately precede the word or phrase they modify.

Hungry and tired, the soldiers marched back to camp.

We could see the importance, both long-term and short-term, of her proposal.

The two children, equally happy with their lunches, set off for school.

13. Absolute phrases are set off with commas, whether they fall at the beginning, middle, or end of the sentence.

Our business being concluded, we adjourned for refreshments.

We headed southward, the wind freshening behind us, to meet the rest of the fleet in the morning.

I still remember my first car, its bumpers sagging, its tires worn, its body rusting.

#### With Appositives

14. Commas are used to set off a word, phrase, or clause that is in apposition to a noun and that is nonrestrictive.

My husband, Larry, is in charge of ticket sales for the fair.

The highboy, or tallboy, is a tall chest of drawers typically made between 1690 and 1780.

George Washington, first president of the United States, has been the subject of countless biographies.

We were most impressed by the third candidate, the one who brought a writing sample and asked so many questions.

NOTE: A nonrestrictive appositive sometimes precedes the word with which it is in apposition. It is set off by commas in this position also.

A cherished landmark in the city, the Hotel Sandburg has managed once again to escape the wrecking ball.

15. Restrictive appositives are not set off by commas.

My daughter Andrea had the lead in the school play.

Alfred Hitchcock's thriller "Psycho" will be screened tonight.

#### With Introductory and Interrupting Elements

16. Commas set off transitional words and phrases (as *finally*, *meanwhile*, and *after all*).

Indeed, close coordination between departments can minimize confusion during this period of expansion.



We are eager to begin construction; however, the necessary materials have not yet arrived.

The most recent report, on the other hand, makes clear why the management avoids such agreements.

NOTE: Adverbs that can serve as transitional words can often serve in other ways as well. When these adverbs are not used to make a transition, no comma is necessary.

The materials had finally arrived.

17. Commas set off parenthetical elements, such as authorial asides and supplementary information, that are closely related to the rest of the sentence.

All of us, to tell the truth, were completely amazed by his suggestion.

The headmaster, now in his sixth year at the school, was responsible for the changes in the curriculum.

NOTE: When the parenthetical element is digressive or otherwise not closely related to the rest of the sentence, it is often set off by dashes or parentheses. For contrasting examples, see paragraph 3 under Dash and paragraphs 1 and 9 under Parentheses in this chapter.

18. Commas are used to set off words or phrases that introduce examples or explanations.

He expects to visit three countries this summer, namely, France, Spain, and Germany.

I would like to develop a good, workable plan, i.e., one that would outline our goals and set a timetable for their accomplishment.

NOTE: Words and phrases such as *i.e.*, *e.g.*, *namely*, *for example*, and *that is* are often preceded by a dash, open parenthesis, or semicolon, depending on the magnitude of the break in continuity represented by the examples or explanations that they introduce; however, regardless of the punctuation that precedes the word or phrase, a comma always follows it. For contrasting examples of dashes, parentheses, and semicolons with these words and phrases, see paragraph 6 under Dash, paragraph 2 under Parentheses, and paragraph 6 under Semicolon in this chapter.

19. Commas are used to set off words in direct address.

We would like to discuss your account, Mrs. Reid.

The answer, my friends, lies within us.

20. Commas set off mild interjections or exclamations such as *ah* or *oh*.

Ah, summer—season of sunshine and goodwill.

Oh, what a beautiful baby.

NOTE: The vocative *O* is not set off by commas.

O Time! O Death!  
Have mercy, O Lord.

### With Contrasting Expressions

21. A comma is used to set off contrasting expressions within a sentence.

This project will take six months, not six weeks.

He has merely changed his style, not his ethics.

22. Style varies regarding use of the comma to set off two or more contrasting phrases used to describe a single word that follows immediately. In open punctuation, a comma follows the first modifier but is not used between the final modifier and the word modified. In close punctuation, the contrasting phrase is treated as a nonrestrictive modifier and is, therefore, both preceded and followed by a comma. For more on open and close punctuation, see page 2.

The harsh, although eminently realistic critique is not going to make you popular. [open]

The harsh, although eminently realistic, critique is not going to make you popular. [close]

This street takes you away from, not toward the capitol building. [open]

This street takes you away from, not toward, the capitol building. [close]

23. Adjectives and adverbs that modify the same word or phrase and that are joined by *but* or some other coordinating conjunction are not separated by a comma.

a bicycle with a light but sturdy frame

a multicolored but subdued rag rug

errors caused by working carelessly or too quickly

24. A comma does not usually separate elements that are contrasted through the use of a pair of correlative conjunctions (as *either . . . or*, *neither . . . nor*, and *not only . . . but also*).

The cost is either \$69.95 or \$79.95.

Neither my brother nor I noticed the mistake.

He was given the post not only because of his diplomatic connections but also because of his great tact and charm.

NOTE: Correlative conjunctions are sometimes used to join main clauses. If the clauses are short, a comma is not added; however, if the clauses are long, a comma usually separates them.

Either you do it my way or we don't do it at all.

Not only did she have to see three salesmen and a visiting reporter during the course of the day, but she also had to prepare for the next day's meeting with the president.

25. Long parallel contrasting and comparing clauses are separated by commas; short parallel phrases are not.

The more I heard about this new project, the greater was my desire to volunteer.

"The sooner the better," I said.

### With Items in a Series

26. Words, phrases, and clauses joined in a series are separated by commas. If main clauses are joined in a series, they may be separated by either semicolons or commas. For more on the use of commas and semicolons to separate main clauses, see paragraphs 1, 3, and 4 above and paragraph 5 under Semicolon in this chapter.

Men, women, and children crowded aboard the train.

Her job required her to pack quickly, to travel often, and to have no personal life.

He responded patiently while reporters shouted questions, flashbulbs popped, and the crowd pushed closer.

NOTE: Style varies regarding the use of the comma between the last two items in a series if those items are also joined by a conjunction. In some cases, as in the example below, omitting the final comma (often called the serial comma) can result in ambiguity. Some writers feel that in most sentences the use of the conjunction makes the comma superfluous, and they favor using the comma only when a misreading could result from omitting it. Others feel that it is easier to include the final comma routinely rather than try to consider each sentence separately to decide whether a misreading is possible without the comma. Most reference books, including this one, and most other book-length works of nonfiction use the serial comma. In all other categories of publishing, according to our evidence, usage is evenly or nearly evenly divided on the use or omission of this comma.

We are looking for a house with a big yard, a view of the harbor, and beach and docking privileges. [with serial comma]

We are looking for a house with a big yard, a view of the harbor and beach and docking privileges. [without serial comma]

27. A comma is not used to separate items in a series that are joined with conjunctions.
- I don't understand what this policy covers or doesn't cover or only partially covers.
- I have talked to the president and the vice president and three other executives.
28. When the elements in a series are long or complex or consist of clauses that themselves contain commas, the elements are usually separated by semicolons, not commas. For more on this use of the semicolon, see paragraphs 7 and 8 under Semicolon in this chapter.

### With Coordinate Modifiers

29. A comma is used to separate two or more adjectives, adverbs, or phrases that modify the same word or phrase. For the use of commas with contrasting modifiers, see paragraphs 22 and 23 above.

She spoke in a calm, reflective manner.

We watched the skier move smoothly, gracefully through the turns.

His story was too fantastic, too undersupported by facts for us to take seriously.

30. A comma is not used between two adjectives when the first modifies the combination of the second adjective plus the word or phrase it modifies.

a little brown jug

a modern concrete-and-glass building

31. A comma is not used to separate an adverb from the adjective or adverb that it modifies.

a truly distinctive manner

running very quickly down the street

### In Quotations, Questions, and Indirect Discourse

32. A comma separates a direct quotation from a phrase identifying its source or speaker. If the quotation is a question or an exclamation and the identifying phrase follows the quotation, the comma is replaced by a question mark or an exclamation point.

Mary said, "I am leaving."

"I am leaving," Mary said.

Mary asked, "Where are you going?"

"Where are you going?" Mary asked.

"I am leaving," Mary said, "even if you want me to stay."

"Don't do that!" Mary shouted.

NOTE: In some cases, a colon can replace a comma preceding a quotation. For more on this use of the colon, see paragraph 6 under Colon in this chapter.

33. A comma does not set off a quotation that is tightly incorporated into the sentence in which it appears.

Throughout the session his only responses were "No comment" and "I don't think so."

Just because he said he was "about to leave this minute" doesn't mean he actually left.

34. Style varies regarding the use of commas to set off shorter sentences that fall within longer sentences and that do not constitute actual dialogue. These shorter sentences may be mottoes or maxims, unspoken

or imaginary dialogue, or sentences referred to as sentences; and they may or may not be enclosed in quotation marks. (For more on the use of quotation marks with sentences like these, see paragraph 6 under Quotation Marks, Double, in this chapter.) Typically the shorter sentence functions as a subject, object, or complement within the larger sentence and does not require a comma. Sometimes the structure of the larger sentence will be styled like actual quoted dialogue, and in such cases a comma is used to separate the shorter sentence from the text that introduces or identifies it. In some cases, where an author decides not to use quotation marks, a comma may be inserted simply to mark the beginning of the shorter sentence clearly.

"The computer is down" was the response she dreaded.

Another confusing idiom is "How do you do?"

He spoke with a candor that seemed to insist, This actually happened to me and in just this way.

The first rule is, When in doubt, spell it out.

When the shorter sentence functions as an appositive in the larger sentence, it is set off with a comma when nonrestrictive and not when restrictive. (For more on restrictive modifiers and appositives, see paragraphs 10, 14, and 15 above.)

He was fond of the slogan "Every man a king, but no man wears a crown."

We had the club's motto, "We make waves," printed on our T-shirts.

35. A comma introduces a direct question regardless of whether it is enclosed in quotation marks or if its first word is capitalized.

I wondered, what is going on here?

The question is, How do we get out of here?

What bothered her was, who had eaten all of the cookies?

36. The comma is omitted before quotations that are very short exclamations or representations of sounds.

He jumped up suddenly and cried "Yow!"

When she was done, she let out a loud "Whew!"

37. A comma is not used to set off indirect discourse or indirect questions introduced by a conjunction (such as *that* or *what*).

Mary said that she was leaving.

I wondered what was going on there.

The clerk told me that the book I had ordered had just come in.

#### With Omitted Words

38. A comma indicates the omission of a word or phrase, especially in parallel constructions where the omitted word or phrase appears earlier in the sentence.

Common stocks are preferred by some investors; bonds, by others.

39. A comma often replaces the conjunction *that*.

The road was so steep and winding, we thought for sure that we would go over the edge.

The problem is, we don't know how to fix it.

#### With Addresses, Dates, and Numbers

40. A comma is used to set off the individual elements of an address except for zip codes. In current practice, no punctuation appears between a state name and the zip code that follows it. If prepositions are used between the elements of the address, commas are not needed.

Mrs. Bryant may be reached at 52 Kiowa Circle, Mesa, Arizona.

Mr. Briscoe was born in Liverpool, England.

The collection will be displayed at the Wilmington, Delaware, Museum of Art.

Write to the Bureau of the Census, Washington, DC 20233.

The White House is located at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue in Washington, D.C.

NOTE: Some writers omit the comma that follows the name of a state when no other element of an address follows it. This is most likely to happen when a city name and state name are being used in combination to modify a noun that follows; however, our evidence indicates that retaining this comma is still the more common practice.

We visited their Enid, Oklahoma plant.

*but more commonly*

We visited their Enid, Oklahoma, plant.

41. Commas are used to set off the year from the day of the month. When only the month and the year are given, the comma is usually omitted.

On October 26, 1947, the newly hired employees began work on the project.

In December 1903, the Wright brothers finally succeeded in keeping an airplane aloft for a few seconds.

42. A comma groups numerals into units of three to separate thousands, millions, and so on; however, this comma is generally not used in page numbers, street numbers, or numbers within dates. For more on the styling of numbers, see Chapter 5, "The Treatment of Numbers."

a population of 350,000

4509 South Pleasant Street

the year 1986

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#### With Names, Degrees, and Titles

43. A comma punctuates an inverted name.

Sagan, Deborah J.

44. A comma is used between a surname and *Junior*, *Senior*, or their abbreviations.

Morton A. Williams, Jr.  
Douglas Fairbanks, Senior

45. A comma is often used to set off the word *Incorporated* or the abbreviation *Inc.* from the rest of a corporate name; however, many companies elect to omit this comma from their names.

Leedy Manufacturing Company, Incorporated  
Tektronics, Inc.  
Merz-Fortunata Inc.

46. A comma separates a surname from a following academic, honorary, military, or religious degree or title.

Amelia P. Artandi, D.V.M.  
John L. Farber, Esq.  
Sister Mary Catherine, S.C.  
Robert Menard, M.A., Ph.D.  
Admiral Herman Washington, USN

### In Correspondence

47. The comma follows the salutation in informal correspondence and follows the complimentary close in both informal and formal correspondence. In formal correspondence, a colon follows the salutation. For examples of this use of the colon, see paragraph 12 under Colon in this chapter.

Dear Rachel,  
Affectionately,  
Very truly yours,

### Other Uses

48. The comma is used to avoid ambiguity when the juxtaposition of two words or expressions could cause confusion.

Whatever will be, will be.  
To John, Marshall was someone special.  
I repaired the lamp that my brother had broken, and replaced the bulb.

49. A comma often follows a direct object or a predicate nominative or predicate adjective when they precede the subject and verb in the sentence. If the meaning of the sentence is clear without this comma, it is often omitted.

That we would soon have to raise prices, no one disputed.  
Critical about the current state of affairs, we might have been.  
A disaster it certainly was.

### With Other Marks of Punctuation

50. Commas are used in conjunction with brackets, ellipsis points, parentheses, and quotation marks. Commas are not used in conjunction

with colons, dashes, exclamation points, question marks, or semi-colons. If one of these latter marks falls at the same point in a sentence at which a comma would fall, the comma is dropped and the other mark is retained. For more on the use of commas with other marks of punctuation, see the heading With Other Marks of Punctuation in the sections of this chapter covering those marks of punctuation.

## Dash

In many of its uses, the dash functions like a comma, a colon, or a pair of parentheses. Like commas and parentheses, dashes set off parenthetical material such as examples, supplemental facts, or appositional, explanatory, or descriptive phrases. Like colons, dashes introduce clauses that explain or expand upon some element of the material that precedes them. The dash is sometimes considered to be a less formal equivalent of the colon and parenthesis, and it does frequently take their place in advertising and other informal contexts. However, dashes are prevalent in all kinds of writing, including the most formal, and the choice of which mark to use is usually a matter of personal preference.

The dash exists in a number of different lengths. The dash in most general use is the em dash, which is approximately the width of an uppercase M in typeset material. In typewritten material, it is represented by two hyphens. The en dash and the two- and three-em dashes have more limited uses which are explained in paragraphs 15–18 below.

### Abrupt Change or Suspension

1. The dash marks an abrupt change in the flow of a writer's thought or in the structure of a sentence.

The mountain that we climbed is higher than—well, never mind how high it is.

The students seemed happy with the change, but the alumni—there was the problem.

2. Dashes mark a suspension in the writer's flow of thought or in the sentence structure. Such suspensions are frequently caused by an authorial aside.

He was—how shall we put it?—a controversial character to say the least.

If I had kept my notes—and I really wish that I had—I would be able to give you the exact date of the sale.

### Parenthetical and Amplifying Elements

3. Dashes are used in place of other punctuation (such as commas or parentheses) to emphasize parenthetical or amplifying material or to make such material stand out more clearly from the rest of the sentence.