

# Punctuation Rules

Using correct punctuation is important because punctuation conveys meaning just as words do. Consider these two sentences:

Eat children.

Eat, children.

Both sentences are commands, but the first sentence would be correct only in a society of cannibals!<sup>1</sup> Learn and practice the rules of punctuation until you are confident about using them correctly.

## Commas<sup>2</sup>

**Commas** are sometimes troublesome to learners of English because they are used differently in other languages. There are many comma rules in English, but you may remember them more easily if you realize that they can be organized into just four main groups: **introducers**, **coordinators**, **inserters**, and **tags**. Each group of commas relates to independent clauses in a particular way, except the coordinator group. Coordinator commas link not just independent clauses but *any* coordinate (equal) elements in a sentence.

Study the examples for each comma group, and notice the kinds of elements that can be introducers, coordinators, inserters, and tags.

### Introducer Commas

An introducer comma follows any element that comes in front of the first independent clause in a sentence.

WORDS

**Therefore**, I plan to quit smoking.  
**Nervously**, I threw away my cigarettes.

PHRASES

**As a result**, I feel terrible right now.  
**After 16 years of smoking**, it is not easy to quit.  
**Having smoked for 16 years**, I find it difficult to quit.

DEPENDENT CLAUSES

**Because I have a chronic cough**, my doctor recommended that I quit immediately.

DIRECT QUOTATIONS

**“Stop smoking today,”** she advised.

<sup>1</sup>cannibals: people who eat human flesh

<sup>2</sup>Thanks to Anne Katz of ARC Associates, Oakland, California, for permission to adapt her presentation of comma rules.

### Coordinator Commas

Together with a coordinating conjunction, a comma links coordinate (equal) elements in a sentence.

COMPOUND SENTENCE WITH  
2 INDEPENDENT CLAUSES:

**She has a good job, yet she is always broke.**  
**They were tired, so they went home early.**

SERIES OF 3 OR MORE  
WORDS

He does not enjoy **skiing, ice-skating, or sledding.**  
Cecille speaks **English, Spanish, French, and Creole.**

*(No comma with only two items: Chen speaks Mandarin and Taiwanese.)*

SERIES OF 3 OR MORE  
PHRASES

A nurse has to work **at night, on weekends, and on holidays.**  
**We ran into the airport, checked our luggage, raced to the boarding gate, gave the attendant our boarding passes, and collapsed in our seats.**

### Insertor Commas

An insertor comma is used before and after any element that is inserted into the middle of an independent clause.

WORDS

My uncle, **however,** refuses to quit smoking.

PHRASES

My father, **on the other hand,** has never smoked.  
There is no point in living, **according to my uncle,** if you do not do what you enjoy.

NONRESTRICTIVE PHRASES  
AND CLAUSES

My aunt, **his wife,** died of lung cancer.  
My cousins, **grieving over their mother's death,** resolved never to smoke.  
My mother, **who just celebrated her fiftieth birthday,** enjoys an occasional cigarette.

REPORTING VERBS IN  
DIRECT QUOTATIONS:

"I have tried to quit dozens of times," **she says,** "but I can't."

### Tag Commas

A tag comma is used when adding certain elements to the end of a sentence.

WORDS

My uncle believes in drinking a daily glass of wine, **too.**<sup>3</sup>  
He appears to be in good health, **however.**

PHRASES

He swims for an hour every day, **for example.**  
He also plays tennis, **beating me most of the time.**

TAG QUESTIONS

It is not logical, **is it?**

DIRECT QUOTATIONS

He laughs as he says, **"I will outlive all of you."**

## PRACTICE 1

### Using Commas

**Step 1** Add commas wherever they are necessary. (Not all sentences need them, and some sentences need more than one.)

**Step 2** Name the function of each comma (introducer, coordinator, inserter, or tag) on the line.

<sup>3</sup>Many writers do not use a comma before *too*.



- \_\_\_\_\_ 17. Many people opposed the law but it finally passed.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 18. Smoking is now prohibited in hospitals airports stores offices and restaurants.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 19. In many other countries however smoking is still allowed.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 20. Antismoking groups want to ban smoking in those countries too.

## Semicolons

Using **semicolons** is not difficult if you remember that a semicolon (;) is more like a period than a comma. It is a very strong punctuation mark. Semicolons are used in three places:

1. Between two sentences that are closely connected in idea
2. Before conjunctive adverbs and some transition phrases when they are followed by an independent clause
3. Between items in a series when the items themselves contain commas

### Between Sentences

Use a semicolon at the end of a sentence when the following sentence is closely connected in meaning. You could also use a period, but when the sentences are connected in meaning, a semicolon indicates the connection.

#### Independent clause; independent clause.

Andrew did not accept the job offer; he wants to go to graduate school.  
 Computer use is increasing; computer crime is, too.  
 The meeting ended at dawn; nothing had been decided.

### Before Connectors

Use a semicolon before conjunctive adverbs such as *however, therefore, nevertheless, moreover, and furthermore*. Also use a semicolon before transition phrases such as *for example, as a result, that is, or in fact* when they are followed by an independent clause.

Independent clause;	conjunctive adverb, OR transition phrase,	independent clause.
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Skiing is dangerous; nevertheless, millions of people ski.  
 I have never been to Asia; in fact, I have never been outside the country.

**Between Items in a Series**

Semicolons are used to separate items in a series when some of the items already contain commas.

I cannot decide which car I like best: the Ferrari, with its quick acceleration and sporty look; the midsize Ford Taurus, with its comfortable seats and ease of handling; or the compact Geo, with its economical fuel consumption.

**PRACTICE 2***Using Semicolons and Commas*

**A. Step 1** The following sentences need semicolons; some also need commas. Add the correct punctuation in the appropriate places.

**Step 2** On the line at the left, indicate whether the semicolon is

1. before two closely connected sentences.
2. before a conjunctive adverb or a transition phrase.
3. between items in a series if the items already contain commas.

The first one is done for you as an example.

- 2   1. Professor Smith is at a conference; however, Dr. Jones, who is the department chairman, will be glad to see you.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. Grace works for a prestigious law firm she is their top criminal lawyer.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. My favorite leisure-time activities are going to movies especially musicals reading novels especially stories of love and adventure listening to music both rock and classical and participating in sports particularly tennis and volleyball.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 4. The future of our wild animals is uncertain for example illegal shooting and chemical poisoning threaten many birds.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 5. Homework is boring therefore I never do it.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 6. The freeways are always crowded during the busy rush hours nevertheless people refuse to take public transportation.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 7. The Smiths' marriage should succeed they share the same interests.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 8. Hoping that he would pass the course he stayed up all night studying for the final exam unfortunately he overslept and missed the test.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 9. In general I enjoy my English class the amount of homework our teacher assigns is definitely not enjoyable however.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 10. If you are a college student, an average day is filled with challenges: you have to avoid running into Professor Jones whose class you missed because you overslept you have to race across the campus at high speed to reach your next class which is always at the other side of the campus and you have to secretly prepare your homework assignment during class hoping all the time that the teacher will not catch you.

**B.** Punctuate the following sentences by adding semicolons and commas. Use semicolons wherever possible.

1. My bus was late therefore I missed my first class.
2. The politician was discovered accepting bribes as a result his political career was ruined.
3. My father never cries in fact he never shows any emotion at all,
4. The restaurant was closed consequently we went home to eat.
5. Some people feel that grades are unnecessary on the other hand some people feel that grades motivate students.
6. Technology is changing our lives in harmful ways for example the computer is replacing human contact.
7. The computer dehumanizes business nevertheless it has some real advantages,
8. Writing essays is easy it just takes a little practice.
9. North Americans love pets every family seems to have at least one dog or cat.
10. The life expectancy of North Americans is increasing for example the life expectancy of a person born in 2000 was 77.2 years which is an increase of almost 30 years since 1900.
11. Your proposal is a good one however I do not completely agree with your final suggestion.
12. Efficiency is a highly prized quality among North Americans it has almost attained the status of a moral attribute.

**C.** Write one original sentence for each of the three rules for using semicolons.

1. Between closely connected sentences

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2. Before conjunctive adverbs and some transition phrases

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3. Between items in a series

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## Colons

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Using a **colon** at the end of an independent clause focuses attention on the words following the colon. After a colon, we often write lists, appositives, and direct quotations.

### Before Lists

Use a colon to introduce a list.

Libraries have two kinds of periodicals: bound periodicals and current periodicals.

I need the following groceries: eggs, milk, and coffee.

The causes of the U.S. Civil War were as follows: the economic domination of the North, the slavery issue, and the issue of states' rights versus federal intervention.

**Caution**

1. Do not use a colon to introduce a list after the verb *to be* unless you add *the following* or *as follows*.

**INCORRECT** To me, the most important things in life are: good health, a happy home life, and a satisfying occupation.

**CORRECT** To me, the most important things in life **are** good health, a happy home life, and a satisfying occupation.

**CORRECT** To me, the most important things in life **are the following:** good health, a happy home life, and a satisfying occupation.

2. Do not use a colon after a preposition. Use a colon only at the end of an independent clause.

**INCORRECT** After a long day at work, I look forward to: enjoying a quiet dinner at home, playing with my children, and watching a little TV.

**CORRECT** After a long day at work, I look forward to enjoying a quiet dinner at home, playing with my children, and watching a little TV.

**Before Appositives**

Use a colon after an independent clause to direct attention to an appositive (a word or word group that renames another word or word group).

He had one great love in his life: himself.

A doctor has two important abilities: the ability to listen and the ability to analyze.

**Before Long Quotations**

Use a colon to introduce a quotation longer than three lines. This type of quote is indented on both sides, and no quotation marks are used.

As Albert C. Baugh and Thomas Cable state in their book *The History of the English Language*:

There is no such thing as uniformity in language. Not only does the speech of one community differ from that of another, but the speech of different individuals of a single community, even different members of the same family, is marked by individual peculiarities.

**Before Subtitles**

Use a colon between the main title and the subtitle of a book, article, or play.

A popular book on nonverbal communication is Samovar and Porter's *Intercultural Communication: A Reader*.

The title of an article from the *New York Times* is "Man on Mars: Dream or Reality?"

**In Expressions of Time or Day**

Use a colon between the numbers for hours and minutes when indicating the time of day.

Helen left the class at 12:30.

Their plane arrived at 1:40 a.m., six hours late.

**After Formal Salutations**

Use a colon after the salutation of a formal letter.

Dear Professor Einstein:

Dear Customer Relations:

Dear Ms. Smith:

To Whom It May Concern:

In informal letters, use a comma.

Dear Mom,

Dear Mark,

**PRACTICE 3****Using  
Punctuation  
Marks**

A. Add commas, semicolons, and colons to the following.

1. The library offers many special services the Student Learning Center where students can receive individual tutoring special classes where they can improve their math reading writing and computer skills and group study rooms where they can meet with classmates to discuss assignments.
2. Dear Dr. Patterson  
Dear Jacob  
Dear Mr. Carter
3. To check a book out of the library you should follow this procedure Write down the call number of the book find the book take it to the circulation desk fill out the card and show your student I.D.
4. The principal sources of air pollution in our cities are factories airplanes and automobiles.
5. I have a dental appointment at 330 today. Please pick me up at 300.

B. Write a sentence in which you list two pieces of advice that you have received from someone older, such as your parents or a teacher. Use a colon to direct attention to them.

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

C. Write the title and subtitle of the following book correctly. Remember to underline the full title.

TITLE	SUBTITLE
Paris	A Visitor's Guide to Restaurants

## Quotation Marks

**Quotation marks** (“ . . .”) have three basic uses: to enclose direct quotations, to enclose unusual words, and to enclose titles of short works.

### Around Direct Quotations

Use quotation marks around a direct quotation that is shorter than three lines. A direct quotation states the *exact* words of a speaker and is usually introduced by a reporting phrase such as *he said* or *as the report stated*.

Punctuation with quotation marks can be a little tricky. Here are some rules to follow:

1. Separate a quoted sentence from a reporting phrase with a comma.

The receptionist said, “The doctor is unavailable right now. Please wait.”

“We have already been waiting for an hour,” we answered.

2. Periods and commas go inside the second quotation mark of a pair.

“I thought he was responsible,” he said, “but he isn’t.”

3. Colons and semicolons go outside quotation marks.

“Give me liberty or give me death”: these are famous words.

4. Exclamation points (!) and question marks (?) go inside quotation marks if they are a part of the quotation; otherwise, they go outside.

“Is it eight o’clock?” she asked.

Did she say, “It is eight o’clock”?

5. Begin each quoted sentence with a capital letter. When a quoted sentence is divided into two parts, the second part begins with a lowercase letter unless it is a new sentence.

“I thought he was responsible,” he said, “but he isn’t.”

“I think he is responsible,” he said. “**L**ook at his fine work.”

6. Use single quotation marks (‘ . . .’) to enclose a quotation within a quotation.

As John F. Kennedy reminded us, “We should never forget the words of Martin Luther King, Jr., who said, ‘I have a dream.’”

### Around Unusual Words

Use quotation marks around words with an unusual, especially ironic, meanings.

The “banquet” consisted of hot dogs and soft drinks.

The little girl proudly showed her “masterpiece”: a crayon drawing of a flower.

### Around Titles of Short Works

Use quotation marks around the titles of articles from periodical journals, magazines, and newspapers; chapters of books; short stories; poems; and songs.

In the article "The Future of Manned Space Travel," published in the July 19, 2004, issue of *Space*, the authors explore the problems of a manned flight to Mars.

The *Times* of London recently published an article entitled "Who Needs the Monarchy?" in which the relevancy of the English monarchy was discussed.

*Note:* Underline or *italicize* titles of books, journals, magazines, newspapers, and movies.

#### **PRACTICE 4** Using Quotation Marks

Write five sentences about any article in a newspaper or magazine that you enjoy reading. Include a quotation, the name of the newspaper or magazine, and the title of the article in each sentence. (For practice in using quotation marks, see Chapter 3, Practice 2, page 46.)

## Editing Practice

Add punctuation to the following paragraphs.

### Aging

<sup>1</sup> People are more likely to live long enough to get old in wealthy countries than in poor countries. <sup>2</sup> In rich countries people have nutritious food modern medical care good sanitation and clean drinking water but poor countries lack these things. <sup>3</sup> As a result the mortality rate especially infant mortality is very high. <sup>4</sup> Citizens of Ethiopia and Yemen which are two of the world's poorest countries have an average life expectancy of 35–39 years. <sup>5</sup> Citizens of Japan Hong Kong Singapore Australia Iceland and Sweden in contrast have an average life span of more than 80 years. <sup>6</sup> Japan has the highest Yemen has the lowest. <sup>7</sup> One exception is Saudi Arabia one of the world's wealthiest nations. <sup>8</sup> Having an average life expectancy of 45–49 years Saudi Arabians live about as long as Bangladeshis and Cambodians. <sup>9</sup> Surprisingly the United States is not among the highest rated nations having an average life expectancy of only 77 years.

<sup>2</sup> <sup>10</sup> Compared to other mammals humans have a relatively long life span. <sup>11</sup> The average life span of elephants is 70 years of dogs 18 years of cats 14 years and of horses 20 years. <sup>12</sup> The life spans of other species are as follows eagles parrots and owls 60 years parakeets 12 years guppies 5 years and box tortoises 100 years. <sup>13</sup> Some plants such as trees live much longer than animals. <sup>14</sup> Redwood trees for example live more than 3,000 years and bristlecone pine trees can live over 4,000 years.

3     <sup>15</sup>The life expectancy of people who live in industrialized societies is increasing rapidly in fact it has doubled in the past hundred years. <sup>16</sup>When comparing males and females one finds that women generally live longer than men. <sup>17</sup>The oldest person in the world until recently was a French woman Jeanne Calment. <sup>18</sup>At her death Madame Calment was both blind and deaf but had not lost her sharp wit for which she had become quite famous. <sup>19</sup>Asked what kind of future she expected she replied A very short one. <sup>20</sup>Bragging about her smooth skin she said I've only had one wrinkle in my life and I'm sitting on it.