

Syntactical Structures, Units of Meaning, and hints for Punctuation

WORDS
<p>nouns. Words that name.</p> <p>Punctuating a series of nouns – a list – involves placing commas within the list and, depending on sentence structure, a colon to introduce the list. The comma before a conjunction that signals the conclusion of a list is optional (usage having varied depending on era and geographical location).</p> <p>Spuds was pleased to hunt hairbrushes, rubber bands, paint brushes{,} and small toys.</p> <p>His favorite foods include biscuits, rice milk, popcorn, pizza dough{,} and chowder.</p> <p>His favorite foods make an diverse list: biscuits, rice milk, popcorn, pizza dough{,} and chowder.</p>
<p>pronouns. Words that take the place of nouns, standing in general for an unnamed noun.</p> <p>When formed into a list, pronouns act the same way as nouns. They are, however, less likely to be place into lists.</p> <p>The cattle were distributed to him, her, them{,} and us.</p> <p>She, he, they{,} and I skated across Lake Fred.</p>
<p>adjectives. Words that modify nouns or pronouns.</p> <p>As with nouns and pronouns, adjectives can be formed into lists.</p> <p>The dogs were fast, hyper, noisome{,} and fat.</p> <p>Consecutive adjectives that come before nouns need special attention. Use a comma between consecutive coordinate adjectives. Don't use a comma between cumulative adjectives.</p> <p>The old, withered, papery onions tasted delectable.</p> <p>Light red colors remind me of pliable bubble gum.</p> <p>If two adjectives equally modify the same noun (and neither makes sense without the other), use a hyphen to join the adjectives.</p> <p>The swan sang an eighteenth-century song.</p> <p>The awkward-headed man struggled with the hat.</p>
<p>verbs. Words that show or describe action or existence.</p> <p>When formed into a list, verbs are punctuated the same way as other parts of speech.</p> <p>Janey alternately swam, danced, skipped{,} and jumped toward her goals in life.</p>

adverbs. Words that modify verbs, adjectives, other adverbs (and sometimes larger units of meaning such as phrases, clauses, and sentences).

When formed into a list, adverbs act the same way as other parts of speech. *They do not seem to differentiate in ways that are similar to adjectives.*

The duck quickly, deftly{,} and splendidly ran through the shotgun apartment.

conjunctions. Words that join other words, phrases, and clauses.

It is an unusual sentence that contains a list of conjunctions, presumably a sentence that is discussing conjunctions themselves.

The most grammatically-minded ghost explained the use of and, but, or, nor, for, so{,} and yet.

Note, as described above under **nouns** that the comma before a conjunction at the conclusion of a list is optional, but most often recommended in contemporary usage.

When considering conjunctions that join independent clauses, the admissible punctuation is relatively complex. Coordinating conjunctions that join independent clauses (*and, but, or, nor, for, so, yet*) are normally preceded by a comma, but an argument can be made for the use of a semicolon. Conjunctive adverbs, such as *however, nevertheless, unfortunately, and apparently*, are normally preceded by a semicolon and followed by comma when they join independent clauses.

The pool table in the rec room had blue felt, so the miscreants named it the blue billiard bench.

A rallying cry arose among the professorate; but their inability to refrain from individual pontificating doomed the cause.

They thought that the name sounded witty; unfortunately, they were very wrong.

prepositions. Small ditzzy words that join a noun or pronoun with another word in a sentence and that add meaning.

There is little, if anything, to say about the punctuation of prepositions on their own. Taken as a unit, though, prepositional phrases present opportunities for various and meaningful punctuation. See below.

interjections. Words that describe emotion or interruption and that are grammatically unrelated to the remainder of the sentence.

Sentences with a series of exclamations might be composed. Most often, though, a single exclamation appears at the start of a sentence and is set apart with a comma or exclamation point. One could conceive of questions marks and periods serving in interesting ways as well.

Darn, I forgot to take out the recycling again.

Darn, dagnabit, and fuddely-dud! I don't want to write that paper.

What? You are leaving without the cat?

No. I simply will not eat in G-wing again. {Do you see the last two examples as interjections or separate thoughts, and therefore sentence-like?}

PHRASES

prepositional phrases. Groups of grammatically related words that contain, at the very least, a preposition and its object (a noun or pronoun); there may also be modifiers. At the phrase level, virtually all prepositional phrases function as units of meaning that modify one or more words in the sentence; in other words, they function adjectivally or adverbially.

Many prepositional phrases will receive no special punctuation. Others, especially introductory prepositional phrases, may be followed by a comma. Phrases may have appropriate internal punctuation.

The toy (on the throne) spoke (to the commoners) (with a measured cadence).

(After the crazy dance fest), the young couple sat (for their portrait).

The wounded star traced a celestial path (in great, lazy, unpredictable loops).

verbal phrases. Verbals are verb forms that do not function as main verbs; instead, they mimic the function of other parts of speech.

Verbals may operate alone or within phrases. Verbal phrases are made up of a verbal with objects, complements, and/or modifiers.

Gerunds are verb forms that end in –ing and act as nouns; **participles** are verb forms that end in –ing, –ed, or in irregular past-tense forms and act as adjectives; **infinitives** are normally introduced by the marker “to” and act as either a noun, adjective, or adverb.

Brewing was a favorite pastime of my grandmother. {GERUND ACTING AS NOUN; SUBJECT.}

Gum fields derive from an overabundance of chewing gum and a lack of respect.
{PARTICIPLE ACTING AS ADJECTIVE.}

Spuds hoped to sleep. {INFINITIVE ACTING AS NOUN; DIRECT OBJECT.}

gerund phrases. Phrases that contain a gerund with its objects, complements, and/or modifiers. Taken in its entirety, the gerund phrase functions as a unit of meaning, specifically as a noun.

Gerund phrases may have appropriate internal punctuation.

Drinking grandma’s brew was a favorite pastime for grandpa.

Grandpa also enjoyed pickling large batches (of cucumbers).

participial phrases. Phrases that contain a participle with its objects, complements, and/or modifiers. Taken in its entirety, the participial phrase functions as a unit of meaning, specifically as an adjective.

Participial phrases often serve as introductory phrases and as such are normally set apart with a comma. When they follow the noun that they modify, they are most often set apart with two commas. They may also have appropriate internal punctuation.

Reading way too much into the bird’s slight, the druid pronounced the end of the world.

The skittish kitten, sniffing the warm bag of corn bread, began to calm down.

The worried Scotsman, leaning heavily upon the worn, stiff bag, could not get the pipes to sound. {Note that “worried” is a lone participle modifying “Scotsman.”}

infinitive phrases. Phrases that contain an infinitive with its objects, complements, and/or modifiers. Grammatically, the infinitive phrase is the most complex of the verbal phrases. It usually opens with the infinitive marker “to,” but it may be omitted; infinitives may have pseudo subjects (nouns or pronouns that act like subjects to the infinitive); taken in its entirety, an infinitive phrase functions as a unit of meaning but in a range of ways, as a noun, adjective, or adverb.

Infinitive phrases may also have appropriate internal punctuation.

To walk in the paths of glory was the young duck’s goal. {Functioning as a noun; subject.}

Jakey was trying to solve the geometry theorem. {Functioning as a noun; direct object.}

The directions to use the electric toothbrush suggested that the brush touch no wet surface. {Functioning as an adjective modifying “directions.”}

Spuds was yowling to get more food. {Functioning as an adverb modifying the verb; telling why Spuds was yowling.}

Hoping to read a good bedtime story, the old man perused his granddaughter’s bookcase. {This is an interesting example. It functions as a noun, the object of the participle “hoping,” and is thus a part of the larger participial phrase that modifies “man.”}

Introductory vs. imbedded phrases. Traditional punctuation has normally set apart nearly all introductory phrases with a final comma, although this is not always done, especially with shorter phrases. Imbedded phrases are set apart from the rest of the sentence, or not, depending on their function. Much more on this later.

CLAUSES

independent clauses. Complete thoughts, with both subject and predicate, that can stand on their own as sentences.

dependent clauses. Units of meaning that contain both subject and predicate, but that do not stand on their own. Dependent clauses combine with other sentence elements to create sentences.

relative clauses. A dependent clause that most frequently opens with a relative pronoun such as *who/whom, what, that, which, who/mever, whatever, and whichever.*

Taken in its entirety, a relative clause functions as a unit of meaning, specifically as a noun or adjective.

Relative clauses that are needed for a sound understanding of a sentence are called restrictive and are usually not set apart with punctuation. Clauses that are non-restrictive, that are not integral to the meaning of the sentence, are set apart with commas.

The bench, which cost little money, was a gift to the hallway. {Functioning as an adjective modifying “bench”; non-restrictive.}

The cinematographer who designed the shot was roundly criticized. {Functioning as an adjective modifying “cinematographer”; restrictive.}

The bird that you saw was an albino osprey. {Functioning as an adjective modifying “bird”; restrictive.}

Whichever looks the best is the one he will want to purchase. {The first relative clause functions as a noun; it is the subject of the sentence. The second is fun; it has dropped the relative pronoun “that” and functions as an adjective modifying “one.”}

subordinate clauses. A dependent clause that opens with a subordinate conjunction such as *although, because, since, when, unless, if, until*. Note that there are many more subordinate conjunctions than I have listed here.

Taken in its entirety, a subordinate clause functions as a unit of meaning, specifically as a noun, adverb, or adjective.

Introductory subordinate clauses, usually adverbial, are most often separated from the remainder of the sentence with a comma.

Because his fingers are long and really reactive, Peter Frampton enjoys a good game of thumb wrestling. {Functioning adverbially modifying the sentence.}

Since the accident occurred in snow, Janey was forbidden to ride her bike between Halloween and St. Patrick’s day. {Functioning adverbially modifying the sentence.}

The two lovers trekked through the woods as though they didn’t notice the waist-deep snow. {Functioning adverbially modifying the sentence.}

They were making for the cabin because beans and a welcoming fire would be found there. {Functioning adverbially modifying the sentence.}

Because beans and a welcoming fire would be found there, the two were making for the cabin. {Functioning adverbially modifying the sentence.}

The wee ones asked why Santa had not arrived. {Functioning as a noun; direct object.}

SENTENCES. Sentences, of course, have internal punctuation where appropriate. They conclude with a full stop of some sort: a *period, question mark, or exclamation point*.

simple sentences. Made from one independent clause. Punctuate appropriately.

Johnny Boy the dog fox was one terrific animal.

compound sentences. Made from two or more independent clauses.

Fifty generations of breeding for placidity should have produced a docile creature, but Johnny Boy was not docile at all.

complex sentences. Made from an independent clause and a dependent clause.

Whenever he saw an authority figure, Johnny Boy went through the roof.

One day Soupy, who was in charge of the dog foxes, found Johnny Boy on the roof of the cage complex.

compound-complex sentences. Made from at least two independent clauses and at least one dependent clause.

Johnny Boy walked the street with a swagger that dog vixen found irresistible and that other dog foxes hoped to imitate, but none could equal Johnny Boy, dog fox extraordinaire.

PARAGRAPHS. A distinct portion of a text that develops a group of related thoughts. Paragraphs are visually distinguished from each other in a variety of ways, although indentation of the first line or additional spacing between paragraphs are the most common methods. A reasonably consistent system of punctuation should be maintained within a paragraph.

LARGER UNITS OF MEANING. Larger units of meaning such as sections of chapters, chapters, essays, articles, blog posts, etc. generally call for a consistent system of punctuation to be maintained throughout. On occasion, however, patterns of punctuation may shift within these larger units. Changes in the speakers of dialogue, shift in narrative technique (for example from description to interior monologue or stream of consciousness), even changes in narrators may be mirrored by shifts in the style of punctuation.

POETRY. The history of punctuation in verse is rich and has not always paralleled its use in prose. We will touch on some of the complexities of this topic, but it is likely that we will leave many unexplored.