

A Brief Guide to Punctuation

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A Brief Guide to Punctuation

for Writers and Readers



by Thomas E. Kinsella

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INTRODUCTION

Punctuation expresses meaning

Experience is the most important component in any study of punctuation—experience reading and analyzing well-punctuated texts and experience writing well-punctuated texts.

This guide is no substitute for that experience. Still, it offers insights that should help writers better understand the potential of punctuation. As a component of effective writing, punctuation may be less important than word choice, phrasing or logical organization, but it *is* important. Strip punctuation from a well-written paragraph and the result is a mass of words, difficult to understand. In the hands of skillful writers, it supports and enhances meaning. Good writers use punctuation in purposeful ways.

Punctuation over time

The norms of English punctuation have changed over time. Throughout the hand-press period of English printing, from the sixteenth century through the eighteenth, punctuation styles varied from author to author, from one printing house to the next. Commas, semicolons and colons were not used consistently to clarify relationships between syntactic elements—words, phrases and clauses. Early punctuation often represented rhetorical pauses and was quantitative in nature: a semicolon signaled a lighter pause than a colon, and a comma, a lighter pause than both.

During the second half of the nineteenth century, conventions began to take on recognizably modern form, although even a casual reading of poetry and novels from the period uncovers unfamiliar practices. Throughout the twentieth century, most stylists advocated increasingly lighter punctuation. Texts from the early decades are far more heavily punctuated than texts that date from the end of the century.

One legacy of these shifting norms is the broad range of acceptable usage available to practiced writers today. When a more traditional and perhaps more authoritative effect is desired, writers can use heavier, rhetorical punctuation. When a simpler, speedier or more casual effect is needed, they can employ lighter punctuation. Skillful writers use either approach, or some mixture of the two, as dictated by their needs. Regardless of desired effect, all sentences need to be thoughtfully punctuated. Understanding and applying appropriate punctuation is an acquired skill that involves calculated decisions. These pages attempt to help you make those decisions.

Reading punctuation

I have subtitled this guide “for Writers and Readers.” Just as it is important that authors punctuate in meaningful ways, it is valuable for readers to understand the meanings conveyed through punctuation. Usage and interpretation are circular acts. If readers ask authors to punctuate with care, then authors will expect readers to understand. So this is not solely a guide for writers, but for readers, too.

Guide to punctuation

Speech conveys meaning through words, gestures, voice modulation and pauses. Writing conveys meaning through words and punctuation alone. Punctuation, accordingly, must be versatile and flexible.

Commas in a list; the serial comma

Disagreement exists over the need for a comma between the last two items in a series when joined by a conjunction.

The backyard garden contained potatoes, snap peas[,] and catnip.

This comma is known as the serial, terminal, Oxford, or *New Yorker* comma. Although the *Oxford Styleguide* recommended against its use in 2011 and other influential style guides agree, acceptance of the serial comma is well established and its use is permissible; at times, necessary.

The grammarians were on the lookout for prepositional phrases, verbals, a whiteboard and markers.

Here it is not used. Are the grammarians on the lookout for *prepositional phrases*, *verbals*, *a whiteboard*, and *markers* or for *prepositional phrases and verbals* and also *a whiteboard with markers*? The decision is yours. If use of the serial comma adds clarity, employ it.

Used consistently, the serial comma is considered heavy punctuation. When employed with other varieties of heavy pointing, the resulting style may be considered conservative, deliberate—even affected—certainly a tad stuffy. If you do not employ a serial comma, achieving a more fluid but less emphatic style, make sure there can be no confusion about your meaning.

Commas with adjectives

Use a comma between consecutive coordinate adjectives. Don't use a comma between cumulative adjectives. *Coordinate adjectives* modify the same noun equally and separately.

Literature students favor long, difficult, page-turning books.

When coordinate, the word *and* could join each adjective. Coordinate adjectives also make sense if rearranged.

Literature students favor long *and* difficult *and* page-turning books.

Literature students favor page-turning, difficult, long books.

It was a playful, colorful noise.

It was a colorful, playful noise.

She smiled at the thought of the desperate, dark acts ahead.

She smiled at the thought of the dark, desperate acts ahead.

Some adjectives are *cumulative* and should not be separated with commas.

Janey smelled the earthy Brazilian coffee.

She then plunged fork into sweet cherry pie.

Did you see the five small brown rats taking a swim?

The room had that pungent old book smell.

not: The room had that pungent book old smell.

possibly: The room had that old pungent book smell.

The modification power of cumulative adjectives is suggested by their name. One adjective modifies a noun, and a second adjective (or a third, or more) modifies the noun and the other adjective(s).

Sometimes the determination that adjectives are coordinate or cumulative, and thus to use commas or not, is a matter of interpretation. Below is an example of heavier, but acceptable punctuation that views *pungent* and *old* as part coordinate and part cumulative.

The room had that pungent, old book smell.

Note the change in meaning when *pungent* and *old* are reversed.

The room had that old, pungent book smell.

When determining the punctuation of multiple adjectives, carefully consider the effects of different comma placements and choose the one that corresponds to your intended meaning.

Commas between independent clauses

When joining independent clauses with coordinating conjunctions—*and*, *but*, *or*, *nor*, *for*, *so*, *yet*—it has long been standard to place a comma before the conjunction.

Wild April winds blew hard, and spring seemed stuck somewhere in the Carolinas.

The journey to the cafeteria took time, but time was a luxury that Janey could ill afford.

It seemed a perfect morning for a canoe ride, so he chose his favorite paddle and walked toward the dock.

The aurors would not surrender, nor would the dementors concede.

The comma is dropped when coordinating conjunctions join short independent clauses.

It was cold but it felt swell.

Janey ran and Dylan followed.

In modern practice, coordinating conjunctions join even lengthy clauses without punctuation. Take care to introduce no confusion when employing such light punctuation.

I would like to study English grammar with greater regularity[,] but the need to work for a living limits this pleasure.

Circumnavigating Lake Fred is one treat[,] and communing with nature at the cedar bog bridge is another.

Thoughtfully placed, punctuation before such conjunctions can be useful, emphasizing the second clause or differentiating it from the first.

Those grammarians were still studying, and they were studying very well.

The street was quiet, but through a curtained window Dylan could be heard.

Commas setting apart wording

Use commas to set apart words, phrases and clauses. Isolating wording from other parts of a sentence affects meaning in a variety of ways. Skillful writers manipulate these separations expressively.

Yes, I believe we ought to have a pool.

You, Timothy, need to take a swim.

She did not, she said, understand the complexity of the request.

She did not understand the complexity, she said.

Zoey, an aging poodle, often sleeps on the couch.

The day after Christmas, I believe it was a Monday, the turkey returned to the woods.

These sentences have moved beyond simple subjects and predicates. Commas set off wording in order to expand upon, interrupt, or redirect the overall meaning of a sentence.

Commas with introductory phrases and clauses

Use a comma to set off substantial introductory phrases and clauses.

In the wake of the oatmeal scandal, the children gave up cooking in the root cellar.

Near the cut through the rock face, they found an old Model-T wreck.

Realizing that the end was near, he turned his face to the ground and wept quietly.

Whenever I make it back home, I drive to the lake and remember.

Introductory wording normally modifies some portion, or all of the remainder of a sentence. Placement at the opening, set apart by a comma, conveys emphasis.

Commas are often omitted after short introductory phrases, especially prepositional phrases. Light punctuators may omit commas even after lengthy passages. Be sure that meaning is clear.

After dinner[,] the children returned to play.

Before long[,] their attention turned back to oatmeal.

At the end of the day[,] they cleaned up their mess.

At times, even in short sentences, brief introductory phrases may be set apart from the main clause creating interesting effects.

Just then, the lights snapped on.

In the end, nothing was resolved.

In the first example, the comma suggests a pause that mimics action; in the second, it conveys anticipation. Below, no such interruption occurs.

In the end nothing was resolved.

Nonrestrictive and restrictive wording

When modifying nouns, writers sometimes add wording that is nonessential, although useful; it could be dropped. Such wording is called *nonrestrictive*. At other times, writers add wording that is necessary to the fundamental meaning of the sentence. Such wording is called *restrictive*; it must remain. Commas allow writers and readers to differentiate between nonrestrictive and restrictive wording. This is perhaps the most important convention in modern punctuation. Decide what parts of a sentence to de-emphasize or to emphasize; then use commas, or the lack thereof, to mark the decision.

Nonrestrictive wording is set off by commas; restrictive is *not* set off by commas.

Shakespeare's tragedy *Hamlet* is often revived in London and New York.

Macbeth, a tragedy by Shakespeare, is often dramatized on All-Hallows Eve.

King Lear, a tragedy in five acts, is one of the great triumphs of literature.

In the first example, the title *Hamlet* is restrictive. If it were dropped, the meaning of the sentence would no longer be clear. Shakespeare wrote many tragedies; which one is this? Wording that is integral to the overall meaning should not be set apart with commas.

In the second example, *a tragedy by Shakespeare* is nonrestrictive and should be set apart. It is expected that readers know *Macbeth* is a tragedy and that Shakespeare wrote it. The same holds true for the third example.

not. Any reader, who reads too quickly, will miss the major points of the work.

not. George Eliot's novel, *Middlemarch*, is a long and perturbing book.

If *who reads too quickly* were dropped from the first sentence and *Middlemarch* from the second, neither would make sense.

Tristram Shandy by Laurence Sterne is a work that should be read slowly.

The intended audience determines punctuation. If in the previous example they *should* know Sterne is the author, it may be punctuated as nonrestrictive.

Tristram Shandy, by Laurence Sterne, is a work that should be read slowly.

Which hunt

That and *which* are pronouns used at the opening of adjectival clauses: *that the boys looked into* or *which she threw*. When *that* is used in this way, the resulting clause is considered to be restrictive—it is needed in order to understand the core meaning of the sentence. When *which* opens an adjectival, or relative clause, the resulting clause may be treated as either restrictive or nonrestrictive.

In common practice, *that* emphasizes and *which* de-emphasizes.

The coffee, which was old, sat in the pot.

The coffee which was old sat in the pot.

The coffee that was old sat in the pot.

In the first sentence, the relative clause is de-emphasized for two reasons: first, the clause is set apart by nonrestrictive commas; second, the clause opens with *which*. The major point of the sentence is simply that the coffee sat in the pot. In the third sentence the relative clause is emphasized. The use of *that* and the choice not to set it apart with commas suggests a sentence with two main points: the coffee was old and it sat in the pot. Both points are important. The second sentence presents an author's middle ground. The use of *which* de-emphasizes, but the failure to use nonrestrictive commas adds weight to the idea conveyed by the clause.

We might, of course, reword the last example to achieve a less wordy and more effective sentence.

The old coffee sat in the pot.

The sentence below is working at cross purposes and is thus incorrectly punctuated.

not. The marble, that the cat hid away, was round.

Be aware that a minority of stylists recognize no difference between *that* and *which* and use them interchangeably.

Appositives

An *appositive* is a noun or noun phrase that immediately follows another noun and renames it—the nouns are in apposition. Appositives are often nonrestrictive, although not always.

Janey, class president, called for a protraction of the college term.

CB's eldest son, Daniel, loved to read comic books and sci-fi thrillers.

The novel *No Pockets in a Shroud* didn't make a big splash.

The final example would not be clear if the title were punctuated as nonrestrictive.

Commas with parenthetical wording

Wording that is clearly an aside, explanation or afterthought is often described as *parenthetical*. Such wording may be integral to the overall meaning of the sentence but should be punctuated as though nonrestrictive. When parenthetical wording appears at the beginning or end of a sentence use one comma to set it apart; when it appears in the middle use two.

The train, as far as I saw, was not moving.

The number of the house, he thought he remembered, was 2846.

He usually arrived on time, give or take a few minutes.

Determining whether phrasing is parenthetical can involve delicate judgment. If it breaks the logical flow of a sentence, consider setting it apart with commas.

Commas with concluding phrases and clauses

When concluding phrases or clauses are necessary to the meaning of the sentence, they are restrictive and should be punctuated accordingly.

I saw the garage door unhinged and ajar.

not. I saw the garage door, unhinged and ajar.

He found a great many books in his grandmother's trunk.

not. They all wanted to see her, on the show.

Lanni had a broke down engine that wasn't going anywhere.

not. Lightning strikes surrounded the house, during the height of the storm.

Add sugar to the water that Delia asked for.

In the following sentences, the concluding phrases may be read as nonrestrictive or parenthetical. Reading them as nonrestrictive suggests they are expendable; reading them as parenthetical suggests emphasis or a necessary aside. It's a judgment call. In either reading, the commas are appropriate.

He sat in the puddle, waiting for his love to return.

She clapped her hands, thinking all was over.

I'm going to leave here running, walking is most too slow. *

The sentences below employ concluding parenthetical phrases: they are asides, explanations or afterthoughts.

The pie was evenly divided, along with the mashed potatoes.

Janey found the answer, having looked in every book on every shelf.

In the example below, restrictive, nonrestrictive and parenthetical readings are all reasonable. It is your decision whether to place a comma after *jailhouse*.

Cutty was in the jailhouse drinking from an old tin cup.

Commas and contrasting wording

Words and phrases that provide contrasting details should be set apart from the rest of the sentence by commas.

The musician's first concern was for her instrument, not herself.

It made sense not to repair the leak, but rather to convert the structure.

The water was deep, yet clear.

Commas and omitted material

Use a comma whenever something is clearly omitted from a sentence.

Janey wanted dancing lessons; Dylan, more time to read.

Implied vs. actual subjects

The logic of a sentence must be considered when crafting introductory phrases. Remember that the implied subject of such phrases should match the actual subject of the sentence.

not. Hatching a nefarious plan, the papers were plagiarized by the bad man.

not. A bread of moist and tasty texture, they devoured the loaf in seconds.

These sentences should be reworded.

Hatching a nefarious plan, the bad man plagiarized the papers.

A bread of moist and tasty texture, the loaf was devoured in seconds.

Comma don'ts

Do not use a comma to separate a verb from its subject or object.

not. Looking through the text for imagery, would be a useful thing to do.

not. Josephine shouted loudly, that she could not long endure without Napoleon.

Do not use a comma before the first or after the last item in a series.

not. Members of the finny tribe[,] glistened, swerved and flashed as they swam under the kissing bridge.

not. The administration responded rapidly, intelligently, and justly[,] to the casino acquisition.

Do not use a comma after a coordinating conjunction, after *such as* or *like*, after *although*, or before *than*.

not. Eowyn was a beautiful woman of Rohan and, a hard-handed swordsman in battle.

not. Dwarves and elves have disagreed in the past such as, when both claimed the gold of Khazad-dûm.

not. They resigned themselves to an uneasy truce like, that held with the dark beasts of Mirkwood.

not. Life in the middle earth was changing rapidly although, not all cared.

not. Frodo supposed it would be safer to travel with Sam Gamgee, than with the Gaffer.

If parentheses are situated within a sentence, any necessary punctuation comes after not before.

not. There are many difficult questions, (and a few easy ones) on any comprehensive examination.

not. The orange juice was splendid, (as it so often is) but the milk had gone sour.

Take your seats (if you please), and we will commence with the examination.

In the first example, no comma is needed. In the second, the comma should follow the second parenthesis, if at all. The third example is correct, although authors striving for fluency will not use the comma.

Semicolons

In modern usage, semicolons show grammatical equivalence. Most often they join two independent clauses with no coordinating conjunction.

Queen Elizabeth was strong willed and shrewd; her half-sister Mary boasted neither trait.

The narrator in Chaucer's *Book of the Duchess* is either a genius or a fool; close attention to the text supports either reading.

not. Whether this ability to read the text in multiple ways is a sign of expertise or its lack; is a question that twentieth-century critics long debated.

Comma Splices

You should not join two independent clauses with a comma unless you also employ a coordinating conjunction.

not. Tom Paine was a failed stay-maker in England, in America he was a successful revolutionary.

The example above is a *comma splice*, the result of joining, or splicing, two independent clauses with a comma but no conjunction. Employ a comma and conjunction or use a semicolon.

Tom Paine was a failed stay-maker in England, but in America he was a successful revolutionary.

Tom Paine was a failed stay-maker in England; in America he was a successful revolutionary.

Semicolons and conjunctive adverbs

Use a semicolon between independent clauses that are joined by conjunctive adverbs or transitional phrases. Common examples include *however*, *therefore*, *nevertheless*, *for example*, *for instance*. A comma follows the conjunctive adverb.

J. M. Barrie is most famous as the author of *Peter Pan*; however, I prefer his ghost story *Farewell Miss Julie Logan*.

Spelling bees were her specialty; nevertheless, she failed to spell “urbiculture” correctly.

They browsed carefully through reference; however, no clear answer appeared.

not. Heroes have fallen on hard times; for instance, the men of Dale.

The dream of the Black Knight appears fundamental to Chaucer's plan to console John of Gaunt; however, it also can be understood to deepen characterization of the narrator. After all, the narrator is the one dreaming; doesn't it make sense that the dream illustrate his needs?

Life is long; the work of a scholar, however, is never done.

In the final example, the conjunctive adverb does not open the independent clause; it does not, therefore, require a preliminary semicolon. Instead, it is punctuated as though parenthetical.

Semicolons in complex series

Use semicolons between items in a series that contain internal punctuation.

The voyagers sat contentedly: JB had swum the length of the lake; Jimmy Craig, stuck in the swamp, had extricated himself; Cappy, our leader, had caught three pike; and Cueball, always looking for fun, had had his head shaved.

The coffee exhibited complexities strange to the Canadian: a rough, but pleasing taste; a cindery, almost smoky scent; a thick, slippery, oil-like viscosity; and a color straight out of Alabama soil.

Note in the first example that semicolons separate a series of independent clauses. In the second example, they separate phrases with internal punctuation that otherwise might be confusing.

Colons

Your sixth-grade teacher probably taught you that colons introduce lists: dogs, cats, frogs and lizards. That's what Mrs. Williams, my sixth-grade teacher, taught me. But remember that "Willy" had a room full of unruly children. She was going for a quick, relatively truthful constant. A more complete definition states that colons introduce information that expands upon or further explains the initial assertion. The information may be in the form of a list, but it does not have to be so.

Cappy enjoyed a full range of aromas: peeled oranges, rose blossoms, gasoline, fish.

The day was strange: flowers drooped in healthy sunshine and paint buckets would not empty.

The party came to a halt: Janey had swung for the piñata but mistakenly shattered the chandelier.

Colons, semicolons and periods

Consider the subtly different meanings suggested by the use of colons, semicolons and periods in the following sentences.

The town grammarian grew increasingly distressed: verbs had gone into hiding and phrases were vanishing, too.

The town grammarian grew increasingly distressed; verbs had gone into hiding and phrases were vanishing, too.

The town grammarian grew increasingly distressed. Verbs had gone into hiding and phrases were vanishing, too.

In the first example, the colon promises that the second clause will explain or expand upon the first. In the second, the semicolon simply suggests that the two clauses, along with the ideas they

convey, are closely related. In the final example, the period also suggests a close relationship between the sentences (one *does* follow the other), but the relationship is not as close as that suggested by the semicolon. Of course, these clauses might also be joined by a coordinating conjunction.

The town grammarian grew increasingly distressed, for verbs had gone into hiding and phrases were vanishing, too.

Here is a further example.

Wild April winds blew hard: spring seemed stuck somewhere in the Carolinas.

Wild April winds blew hard; spring seemed stuck somewhere in the Carolinas.

Wild April winds blew hard. Spring seemed stuck somewhere in the Carolinas.

A common mistake

A common mistake places a colon after words or phrases that themselves introduce a series.

not. Literary scholars have disagreed in the past over issues *such as*[:] first-tier author status, whether intention can be interpreted, and spacing after periods.

not. Benny has many attractions *including*[:] a curly coat, floppy ears and a bobbed tail.

Benny has many attractions: a curly coat, floppy ears, and that bobbed tail.

The colons in the first two examples are incorrect. *Such as* and *including* perform the function of a colon and need no further punctuation.

Dashes and parentheses

Dashes and parentheses set apart phrases and clauses more aggressively than nonrestrictive or parenthetical commas.

Use dashes, whether singly or in pairs, to indicate any sudden break in thought or construction.

The book that slid from the shelf—that very book in your hand—holds the secrets of a good life.

I would like to purchase that book—how much did you say it cost?

The commotion in the classroom—commotion is a polite way to describe it—caused the professor to utter “ahem.”

Use dashes in place of commas to set off some part of a sentence more forcefully.

Take a look at the difficulties—take a really good look—before you decide to follow your heart.

I have always needed most what constantly eludes me—peace and quiet.

Don't use dashes where they are not required or in place of some other more appropriate punctuation. Dashes produce a special effect—make sure you need that effect.

Use parentheses to enclose wording that is useful, but introduced obliquely within sentences. Such wording can often be omitted without affecting the overall sense. It may help to regard parentheses as lessening the importance of the enclosed wording (although that is not always so).

She sang (if you could call it singing) at the annual Garlic festival.

Tom Paine's *Common Sense* (originally to be titled *Plain Truth*) is a masterpiece of political propaganda.

Do not punctuate around parentheses unless the punctuation would be required without the parentheses. When punctuation is needed, it follows the second parenthesis.

The oatmeal had congealed into a cold, gloppy mess (it was the consistency of white paste), but the elderly man eagerly consumed bowl after bowl.

As a general rule, only use dashes and parentheses in constructions where lighter punctuation, such as commas, *could* be substituted.

The em-dash, en-dash and hyphen

An em-dash is the longest standard dash; it is the width of the capital letter “M.” Use em-dashes to separate wording as described above. Typically, no space precedes or follows this dash, although this is a typographic choice, not a matter of correct punctuation. The en-dash, the width of the capital letter “N,” is normally used to separate numerals, such as in a range of years or page numbers. Modern texts often substitute en-dashes, with space on either side, for em-dashes.

The pumpkin eaters, who thrived from 1926–1947, liked to eat pumpkins. For more information, see pages 118–52.

The road to hell – a well-paved road – should be avoided.

Do not use a single hyphen as a dash. Hyphens join two words that together modify a third, such as in *twentieth-century comedy*.

em-dash —

en-dash –

hyphen -

Apostrophes

Use apostrophes in conjunction with a final -s to show possession for all nouns except plural nouns that end with -s.

Why Austen's works are read today, but Alexander Pope's are not is a mystery to few.

not. Why the works of Austen are read today, but Alexander Popes [works] are not is a mystery to few.

Plural nouns ending with -s place the apostrophe after the final letter.

The two cats' toys appeared to be catnip-stuffed poodles.

Within the haunted forest, the trees' limbs moved violently.

For most singular nouns that end in -s, it is traditional to show possession by adding a final -s.

Agnes's predilection for grammar is well known.

The jackass's braying was beginning to bother the city folk.

Modern usage, however, allows deletion of the final -s, especially when the apostrophe and final -s create an awkward pronunciation. It is your call; be consistent in usage.

Fergus' distaste for beef was no shameful secret.

Jesus' sermons were rousing.

James' diction was flawless.

When two or more nouns exhibit joint possession, only the final noun is marked with the apostrophe.

Abigail and Deirdre's dinner was late.

English has not always employed apostrophes to show possession. Texts from the seventeenth century and earlier (and some from the eighteenth) demonstrate that apostrophes were often neglected. But we live in the twenty-first century, not the seventeenth; apostrophes are expected.

Use apostrophes to form contractions. Be aware that the tendency to employ contractions has caused unfamiliarity with some verb forms. Consider the sentences below.

The students could have walked to classes but drove instead.

The verb phrases *could have* and *should have* are so frequently contracted, at least in speech, that incorrect constructions are often seen.

not. The professors should of walked to classes, but they drove as well.

Possessive pronouns

Possessive pronouns in their adjectival form do not use apostrophes to show possession; they are possessive by their very nature.

His, her, their, its, our, your, my

Not all pronouns are possessive. Consider the following sentence.

not. Ones best effort needs to be put into revision.

Here *one's* is an indefinite pronoun and needs an apostrophe. Also, remember that *it's* is not possessive but the contraction for *it is*.

Punctuating quotations

American typographic convention, used throughout the American system of higher education, calls for commas and periods to come before the final, closing quotation mark, not after.

not. Asked what short story she had read most frequently, she chose “A Rose for Emily”.

not. I’d like to rework the spelling of the word “squirrel”.

not. Don’t ask, “What can my nation do for me”?

Asked what short story she had read most frequently, she chose “A Rose for Emily.”

I’d like to rework the spelling of the word “squirrel.”

Ask, “What can I do for my nation?”

When quoting another text, the simplest form of *MLA* citation places the author’s name and an appropriate page number inside a parenthetical citation. Punctuation follows the citation. When quoting poetry, slashes identify line endings; when citing poetry, line numbers are used instead of page numbers.

Miss Julie Logan, near the climax of J. M. Barrie’s ghost story, speaks to Adam: “Kiss me first, Adam, in case you have to drop me” (Barrie 89). Soon after that she lands in the burn.

The song “Blind Willie McTell” begins with the following lines: “Seen the arrow on the door post / Sayin’ this land is condemned, / All the way from New Orleans / To Jerusalem” (Dylan 1-4).

When placing quotations within the body of your text, final punctuation follows the citation. Exceptions to this rule are quota-

tions that end with exclamation points or question marks. In those cases, double punctuate, as follows:

The elephants snorted through their trunks, “like jazzmen on their favorite horns!” (Smythe 77).

The underlying question seems obvious: “Should papers written and transmitted electronically be called papers?” (Jonyse 2).

When quoting more than three lines of poetry or prose, modern practice extracts the quotation from the body of the text. The quotation is indented approximately 10 spaces (it is not centered). If it is verse, use the natural line endings; slashes are not necessary. If it is prose, let it format naturally. Note that quotation marks are not used in extracted quotations; *the indentation performs the function of quotation marks*. Also note that concluding punctuation comes after the final sentence, but before the citation.

The poem opens inauspiciously with the following lines:

My verses in Your path I lay,
And do not deem me indiscreet,
If I should say that surely they
Could find no haven half so sweet
As at Your feet. (Graham 1-5)

Not all scholars agree that the nineteenth century was the zenith of English bookbinding:

The forty years following the Restoration of King Charles II to his throne in 1660 were the golden age of English Bookbinding. The binders of London, Oxford and Cambridge were not content—as so often at other times, to imitate the latest Paris models—but were prepared to develop their own styles with newly designed tools. (Nixon 7)

Punctuation used to introduce quotations

In the example below, the quotation is introduced by an independent clause; a colon is appropriate punctuation.

Richard Tottel opens his *Miscellany* with a positive assertion:
“That to haue wel written in verse, yea and in small parcelles,
deserueth great praise, the workes of diuers Latines, Italians, and
other, doe proue sufficiently.”

Introductions to quotations of dialogue that end with verbs, for example *she said*, *they remarked*, etc., normally conclude with commas.

Shirley said, “Please pass the toast.”

Samuel Johnson replied, “No man but a blockhead ever wrote,
except for money.”

Shirley spoke to Sam, “Go home to your mother, mama’s boy.”

In the previous example, *to Sam* is a prepositional phrase that modifies the verb *spoke*; because it is part of the verb phrase, the concluding comma is standard.

When quotations or dialogue merge with the sentence itself (other than following verbs as described above), they are punctuated as needed.

The earth-day organizers described the day as “a success beyond
all measure.”

He planted the garden in order to live “closer to the land.”

The townsfolk asked themselves “Who ate the apples off the apple
tree?”

Hyphens

Hyphens should be used to connect two or more words that together modify a noun.

Eighteenth-century poetry celebrated conventional forms.

Writers in twentieth-century America began to avoid the semicolon.

The large-tongued dog licked the cat.

not. In the nineteenth-century, paint manufacture was a crude business.

In the last example *nineteenth* is modifying *century*, but the two words are not modifying a third (they act as the object of the preposition *in*). No hyphen is warranted.

The Use of Ellipses

Our word ellipsis derives from the Greek ἔλλειψις: *falling short* or *a defect*. In punctuation it represents wording that has been dropped from a quotation. The mark is a single unit made up of three dots, . . . It indicates material that you have dropped, presumably considering it unimportant to the logic of your essay. When choosing passages to excise, be careful not to change the core meaning.

As with much punctuation, there is no definitive guide to proper usage. Some will view this section as hopelessly permissive; others will consider it ridiculously specific.

Read the following intriguing passage; then review the uses of ellipses that follow. (*Ellipses* is the plural form of *ellipsis*.)

Way back in the mists of Stockton's protohistory, sometime after the Mayflower but before invention of the Gussman circle, conscientious Literature & Language faculty first met the challenge of student engagement by throwing a party. This inaugural party, whose date is lost to the murky haze of forgetfulness, was called *the party*. In subsequent semesters it was sensibly redesignated as the *end-of-term party*. But the appellation, like the essay title *Class Assignment # 1*, was lame, so a secretive committee was empowered to develop a more effective designation. From those deliberations came *The Really, Really Big LITT/LANG Holiday Workshop Bash*. The moniker made great sense back in the early 1990s when an administrative edict proclaimed that no parties would be thrown for students. No problem the committee reasoned; this is a workshop (at which Ken Tompkins sometimes read stories). It is a Bash! This fine and swanky title has since been shortened to *The Really, Really Big LITT Bash*. It is usually held late in April, on the second last Friday of the spring term.

Remember the ellipsis is a unit; when you delete material, replace it with three dots. Modern usage adds a space between each dot, thus DOT SPACE DOT SPACE DOT. If the ellipsis breaks at the end of the line, use a non-breaking space (Ctrl+Shift+Space on *Windows*; Option+Space on a *Mac*).

Every example of quoted text suggests that it is drawn from a larger work: something is always missing. Yet when quoting a full sentence (or sentences), ellipses are not required at the opening or close of the excerpted wording. The sentence below is fine.

“It is a Bash!”

The situation changes when you drop a section from within a sentence or sentences. Use an ellipsis to indicate what you have dropped.

“Way back . . . Literature & Language faculty first met the challenge of student engagement by throwing a party.”

In the example above, a large portion of the first sentence has been dropped; the deletion is indicated by the ellipsis. It is understood that this passage is part of a larger unit, yet no ellipsis is needed at the start or conclusion.

“Way back . . . Literature & Language faculty first met the challenge of student engagement by throwing . . . *The Really, Really Big LITT Bash*.”

This example is more ambitious. A portion of the first sentence has been deleted, designated by an ellipsis, but a larger portion including parts of four sentences has also been dropped, indicated by the second ellipsis.

ELLIPSIS AT OPENING OF SENTENCE

If you drop the opening wording of a sentence, don't use an initial ellipsis.

not. “. . . it was sensibly redesignated the *end-of-term party*.”

“It was sensibly redesignated the *end-of-term party*.”

One or two generations ago you would have been asked to use brackets to show that you had introduced capitalization—“[I]t was sensibly . . .”—but in modern usage there is no need to bracket this change.

ELLIPSIS AT END OF SENTENCE

Consider the following example that excerpts wording at the end of a sentence.

The moniker made great sense back in the early 1990s . . .

Here we have an ellipsis following “1990s,” but we also have a concluding period, showing that the deletion was the final portion of the quoted sentence.

ELLIPSIS AT WORK WITH OTHER PUNCTUATION

Sophisticated use of ellipses attends to the punctuation of the original. If you are deleting words that do not begin or end with punctuation, then simply replace those words with an ellipsis. But, and this is an important point, if your excerpt begins or ends with punctuation, show it.

“This inaugural party, . . . is lost to the murky haze . . .”

“No problem . . . ; this is a workshop . . .”

Skillful use of ellipses and original punctuation reveals a good deal about the excerpted material.

“In subsequent semesters it was sensibly redesignated . . .”

“From those deliberations came *The Really, Really Big LITT/LANG Holiday Workshop Bash*. . . This fine and swanky title has since been shortened to *The Really, Really Big LITT Bash*.”

The first example above shows that the missing portion came before the end of the sentence, signalled by the final period. In the second example, the first sentence is complete and the ellipsis stands in for three intervening sentences. Note the careful spacing of the periods: in the second example the ellipsis begins *after* the first sentence is completed with a period. There are no four dot ellipses, only ellipses working in tandem with initial or terminal periods.

Consider the examples below which show the logical extension of this practice.

“Way back in the mists of Stockton’s protohistory, . . . , conscientious Literature & Language faculty first met the challenge of student engagement by throwing a party.”

“The committee reasoned; . . . It was a Bash!”

“The date of this year’s Bash is April 16th, . . . , in the TRLC.”

“The new appellation, like the essay title . . . , was lame, . . .”

This is very detailed and aggressive usage. It is correct. And sometimes this level of punctuation is necessary to make the meaning of a quotation clear. But many authorities are willing to accept less explicit deletion that does not include localized punctuation. Consider the same examples in simplified form (check with your professor to see which style is advisable).

“The committee reasoned . . . It was a Bash!”

“The date of this year’s Bash is April 16th . . . in the TRLC.”

“The new appellation, like the essay title . . . was lame . . .”

ELLIPSIS WITH PARENTHETICAL CITATION

Finally, consider parenthetical citation. Let’s say that the sample quotation appeared on page 5 of *A History of the Bash* (2012) written by T. F. Committee.

“Way back . . . Literature & Language faculty first met the challenge of student engagement by throwing a party” (Committee 5).

“This inaugural party . . . is lost to the murky haze . . .” (Committee 5).

“No problem the committee reasoned . . .” (Committee 5).

Note in these examples that, following American typographic convention, the period comes outside of the citation. This is true unless the quotation is extracted and set apart from the main body of the essay.

Then vs. than

Then is an adverb denoting time; *than* is a conjunction used in comparisons.

In the middle of the night the young woman awoke and then saw that the fire had gone out.

The previous day more firewood than ever had been carried inside, but still it ran out.

She struggled from her sleeping bag, fully clothed except for shoes; then she peered at the thermometer.

It read 34-degrees below zero, Fahrenheit, which was lower than she had ever noted.

She thought about the woodpile thirty feet away, then opened the cabin door.

Her nostrils froze, then her eyes tingled more than normal. †

She decided against the wood, closed the door, then crawled back into her sleeping bag.

Incomplete sentences

Avoid incomplete sentences (often described as sentence fragments).

not. You were asking me something, but couldn't tell you my answer.

not. The water clear and chilling as I swam stroke after stroke underwater.

Sometimes authors purposely use sentence fragments. The example below is from George Orwell's *Homage to Catalonia*. Orwell uses the incomplete sentence to produce an effect of immediacy or informality. Be sparing in such use.

"In the Lenin Barracks in Barcelona, the day before I joined the militia, saw an Italian militiaman standing in front of the officers' table."



Weighting punctuation

The following brief passages make use of different levels of punctuation. The first is a lighter, more modern style. It uses no semicolons or colons. Clauses that might have been joined together stand as separate sentences. The few commas that remain are necessary to guide the reader through each sentence. The second is a more traditional, heavier style. Both semicolons and colons are used, and commas delimit more phrases and clauses than in the previous version.

Both levels of punctuation are acceptable and defensible, and they direct the prose toward subtly different ends. Consider the effects produced by these different levels of punctuation.

Lighter punctuation

Whenever he spotted paperclips on the ground he could not walk past. He stopped and stooped and picked up those lonely metal clips. At least they were metal in the old days. Now they were plastic as well. He picked them up, and he wondered what had become of the papers they had once secured.

The school pool which had developed a severe leak was drained one final time. According to the highly paid planning team it made sense not to repair the leak, but rather to convert the structure to a dance hall. The conversion would cost about two million dollars. Repair of the pool would have cost about half that amount. The cost of an entirely new pool was closer to twenty million dollars. With jaded resignation the swimmers on campus considered the aerobic benefits of dance.

Heavier punctuation

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Lighter punctuation

One day Pop decided to take Florence and her three siblings for an automobile ride. Climbing into the family car, a canvas-topped Studebaker, they drove out to route 96, through Five Points, and on till Phelps. At Clark's station they pulled in and Pop turned to the children, "You kids go inside and ask Alice for an ice cream cone. One a piece." As they ran to the shop Pop called after them, "I'll be out here with Jakey."

Inside the shop Florence, being the oldest, took charge of the transaction. "Hello, Mrs. Clark," she said. "Pop said that we could have one ice cream cone a piece." Mrs. Clark nodded and asked what flavors.

Outside on the front steps Mary, Jack and little Bob devoured their ice cream. They finished the last remnants of their cones with sticky fingers and sloppy mouths. Florence however would not be hurried. Employing dainty licks she circled the scoop that sat elegantly atop her cone. "My this is most delicious," she said. "I am so pleased by the flavor."

Little Bob and Mary continued to lick their fingers but Jack scooted over to Florence. "Let me have a lick, Florence. Just one," he said. "O no, none for you," she responded. "You've already had yours, but oh this is so very tasty!"

Just then Pop walked over taking in the scene. "Enjoying your cone, Florence?" The young girl nodded vigorously and took a particularly satisfied bite, a small one, from her cone.

"That's great," said Pop. "Now you other three. Why don't you go in and get another cone a piece? Then we'll sit here with Florence while she finishes hers."

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Lighter punctuation

The Pursuit of Diarmuid and Grainne is often described as a love story and certainly important parts of the tale focus on the relationship between the heroic Diarmuid and the impetuous Grainne. At the core of this Fenian tale however is the struggle for power, not love, and the love that is portrayed is intriguingly conflicted.

The tale opens with Fionn mac Cumhaill the great fianna leader wistful for a dead wife. When informed of an admirable beauty who could take her place, his first concern is for his honor not for love. He fears that the father of this woman, the *Ard Ri* of Ireland, will rebuff his proposal. Consequently he sends his son and nephew to solicit the match, stating that he “could better endure a refusal of marriage given to you than to myself.” From the outset Fionn is no romantic lover.

When Grainne, the object of Fionn’s proposal, is asked whether she consents to the marriage, she cryptically replies to her father, “If he be a fitting son-in-law for you, why should he not be a fitting husband and mate for me?” Her father and Fionn’s representatives understand this as consent, though subsequent events prove them wrong.

As the tale progresses Grainne reveals great persuasive powers, but it is not clear she is in love. Her selection of Diarmuid over Fionn seems more calculating than starry-eyed, and her appetite for manipulation is striking. For his part Diarmuid remains conflicted throughout much of the story, struggling to reconcile the requirements of duty and honor to Fionn with his obligation and eventual love for Grainne.

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Essay checklist

Turning in a finished essay opens a subtle psychological transaction. You hope to impress your professor with clarity of mind and well-written prose. He or she is looking for something to mark in red. A professional-looking essay will help to highlight your skill.

Always provide a thoughtful and original title

Use page numbers

If applicable, use em-dashes, not hyphens, to separate words and phrases

Provide a works-cited page or bibliography

Revise thoroughly, with at least one read-through devoted to punctuation

Proofread one more time

Use a decent printer with sufficient ink

Staple your essay

Glossary

Appositive. An appositive is a noun or noun phrase that immediately follows another noun and renames it.

Clause. A clause is a group of grammatically related words that has both subject and predicate. Independent clauses can stand alone as sentences. They form compound and complex sentences by joining with other independent and dependent clauses.

Comma splice. A comma splice is introduced when two independent clauses are joined with a comma but no conjunction. Standard punctuation calls for a *comma and conjunction*, or a semicolon.

Conjunctive adverb. Conjunctive adverbs include words such as *however*, *apparently* and *nevertheless*. When used to connect independent clauses, they are preceded by a semicolon and followed by a comma.

Coordinate adjective. Coordinate adjectives modify a noun equally and separately.

Coordinating conjunction. A coordinating conjunction—*and*, *but*, *or*, *nor*, *for*, *so*, *yet*—joins grammatically equivalent elements, that is words, phrases or clauses.

Cumulative adjective. Cumulative adjectives work together to modify nouns. One adjective modifies a noun and a second adjective (or more) modifies the noun and the other adjective(s).

Nonrestrictive. Phrases or clauses that modify or rename nouns but are *not* necessary parts of a sentence are described as nonrestrictive. If they were deleted, the basic meaning of a sentence would still be understood. Such wording is set apart by commas.

Object. An object is a noun or pronoun with a specialized function within the grammar of a sentence. Objects of verbs include direct objects, indirect objects and object complements. Prepositions join with objects to form prepositional phrases. Verbals may also have objects.

Phrase. A phrase is a group of grammatically related words that does not have both subject and predicate. Considered as a whole, a phrase functions as a conceptual unit and acts like one of the principal parts of speech.

Predicate. The predicate is that part of a sentence that contains the verb and its objects or complements along with associated modifiers. The predicate makes a statement about the subject of the sentence.

Restrictive. Phrases or clauses that modify or rename nouns and are necessary parts of a sentence are described as restrictive. Without them the basic meaning is lost. Such wording is *not* set apart by commas.

Subject. The subject of a sentence is a noun or pronoun, or any group of words that functions as a noun, about which some statement is made.

Which Hunt. Why a “Which hunt”? As a graduate student I took a very difficult course in deconstructionist theory (difficult for me). I seldom had a clue what Wendy Steiner, the professor, was talking about. At one point she handed back an essay and remarked, “You need to go on a witch hunt.” That, at least, is what I heard. Knowing how lost I was, and fearing that I had missed a significant point of theory, I plucked up my courage and asked what she meant by that assertion. She replied, “You do not know the difference between *that* and *which*.” She was right. I’ve been hunting ever since.

A life with punctuation, briefly

Tom Kinsella has been learning about punctuation most of his life. In fourth grade Mr. Michaels told him that he had no sense of punctuation—none at all—and the comment didn't bother that much. During high school Tom began to think he might need to know something about punctuation, but his teachers showed little inclination to teach him. In college he took courses with several punctuation sticklers, in particular Bob Gross. Professor Gross sat him down one day and said, "Look, it's easy; I'll explain it." He then described the proper use of semicolons in seventeen seconds. Tom never forgot that lesson nor the good professor's insistence that he give thoughtful consideration to all levels of punctuation.

In graduate school Tom began to fixate on the issue. The focus of his dissertation was the textual representation of speech. This topic allowed him to carefully analyze the many and varied ways that dialogue was punctuated in the eighteenth century. Tom saw that styles of punctuation changed and evolved, and he learned that widely accepted conventions are of a fairly recent vintage. For the last thirty years or so he has continued to think and teach about the nature of modern punctuation. He tries to understand and to explain that punctuation is bound by a small number of conventions that, used skillfully, add significant meaning to anyone's writing.

On page 18 the following sentence is marked with an asterisk:

I'm going to leave here running, walking is most too slow.

It's a line from the blues standard "Key to the Highway," recorded by many artists. As written, it can be read as two closely related independent clauses, and as such it should be joined with a semicolon, not a comma. In many versions, however, the line runs as follows:

I'm gonna leave here runnin', cause walkin' is most too slow.

In this instance, the sentence ends with a subordinate clause that operates parenthetically, thus punctuation with a comma is appropriate. I read the intended meaning of the first sentence similarly, so I think it is adequately punctuated. But it is a judgment call.

On page 38 the following sentence is marked with a dagger:

Her nostrils froze, then her eyes tingled more than normal.

Standard punctuation calls for a semicolon to connect the two independent clauses:

Her nostrils froze; then her eyes tingled more than normal.

The comma might be defended by noting an elliptical grammatical structure (the missing [*and*] below).

Her nostrils froze, [and] then her eyes tingled more than normal.

More to the point, the unusual construction suggests proximity: the cold froze her nostrils and tingled her eyes *that fast*. If you break the accepted rules of punctuation, do so with reason.

Case (for editors)

Skilled editors understand grammatical case. Today's casual writers, particularly those practiced in digital texting and social media, seldom master enough grammar to employ case consistently and correctly. Many experienced writers don't seem to understand case either; they certainly don't take care to get it right. So it is up to you, the editor.

Defined simply, grammatical case is that property of a noun or pronoun that indicates its relation to other words in the sentence. Case is identified by the function of the noun or pronoun: is it a subject, an object, or is it in the possessive form?

Three cases

- **Subject case** (previously identified as the subjective case and prior to that, the nominative case). All nouns and pronouns that function as subjects within sentences or clauses are in the subject case. Subject complements following linking verbs are also in the subject case (more on that later).
- **Object case** (previously identified as the objective case). All nouns and pronouns that function as direct objects, indirect objects, object complements, objects of prepositions or objects within verbal phrases are in the object case.
- **Possessive case.** Generally, the possessive case is straightforward. Nouns in the possessive case are marked with apostrophes. Pronouns decline into possessive forms (such as *her*, *his*, *theirs*, *ours*, *its*—note the lack of apostrophes).



English language nouns no longer decline for subject or object case (once, long ago, they did). Identify a noun's use within a sentence and you will identify its case. In the following example, nouns and pronouns are underlined; verbs are placed in *italics*:

The bog iron furnaces and forges (of South Jersey) *made* a racket [when they *were* operational].

Words in Subject Case:

- Together furnaces and forges are the subject of the action verb *made* and are in the subject case.
- Within the dependent clause, they is the subject of the linking verb *were* and is in the subject case.

Words in Object Case:

- South Jersey is the object of the preposition “of” in the prepositional phrase “of South Jersey” and is in the object case.
- Racket is the direct object of the verb made and is in the object case.

Words in Possessive Case: none



Sentences are made up of grammatical structures—units of meaning. Think of these as building blocks:

- Words
- Phrases
- Clauses

Words are easy enough.

A **phrase** is a group of words that have a grammatical relationship to one another and, together, function as a unit. Phrases *do not have* both subject and verb.

Clauses are the most complex building blocks of sentences. There are two types: independent clauses, which can stand alone as sentences, and dependent clauses, which cannot stand alone. Every clause will have at least one subject and verb.

The trick to understanding case is to be able to identify phrases and clauses within a sentence. Once identified, the function of a noun or pronoun within its phrase or clause determines its case.



In the examples below, prepositional phrases, one type of phrase, are marked with parentheses. Dependent clauses, either subordinate or relative, are marked with square brackets. Remember, at the basic level, a prepositional phrase will not have subject and verb; clauses must have both.

Nouns and pronouns that are in the subject case below are underlined and in small caps; nouns and pronouns in the object case are underlined and in bold. The verbs are italicized.

[Because THEY *lived* far (from urban **centers**)], PINEYS *developed* their own **jargon**.

The COLLIERS, [WHO *sweated* (in the **heat**) (of the coal **pits**) [**which** THEY *tended* (by **themselves**)]], *gave* the **foreman** grim **smiles**.



Where most of the difficulty lies

The case of nouns presents no trouble. It is the case of pronouns (which *do* decline) that editors need to identify and, if necessary, correct. Misuse of *who/whom* and *I/me* are especially pernicious. Consider the following examples, which are correct:

The museum CURATOR, [WHO *was beloved* (by visitors)], *chatted* blithely (about early twentieth-century attitudes) (toward Pineys).

“(Between you and me), I *do believe* [that the CITIZENS (of East Jersey) *wanted* to maintain the isolation* (of the populace) (of the Pines).”

*isolation is the object of the infinitive “to maintain”

“[WHOEVER *spoke* (about their usefulness) (as citizens)] *would have been ostracized*.”

That same CURATOR [whom VISITORS *loved*]** *also liked* to discuss the writing conventions* (of exhibition blurbs).

**Relative clauses, like this one, are often placed out of normal S + V + DO order. The order of this example, DO + S + V, is common.



A worksheet

In the sentences below prepositional phrases are marked with parentheses; dependent clauses are marked with square brackets. Choose the correct case as dictated by the grammatical function of the pronoun in question.

Remember, case is dictated by the function of a noun or pronoun in its most immediate grammatical structure—its function within a phrase or clause.

The clammer, [who/whom enjoyed rainy days], sat (between his wife and I/me) [as Billy rowed slowly downriver].

[If it were (up to I/me)], I/me would ask you two to walk away.

The historian, [who/whom explained the events (of the past) [as though he lived they/them]], smiled [as he remembered].

That same historian, [who/whom the board members hired], asked (for changes) (from I/me).

The historian told my sister and I/me [that reading books (for fun) is, well, fun].



Another thing

Several grammatical functions call for use of the object case: objects of prepositions, direct objects, indirect objects, object complements, objects within verbal phrases.

Of course all subjects are in the subject case, but there is a special situation—when a linking verb makes use of a predicate noun—that also calls for the subject case:

Sally is president
Joe was the class clown.
The Beatles were a band.

Sally, *Joe* and *Beatles* are the subjects above; *president*, *clown*, and *band* are the predicate nouns (also named subject complements). All six of these words are in the subject case.

Thus, the following sentences are correct:

The band leader is she.
Yes, this is he.
It is I.

Fun, right?

