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Lesson Eight: Punctuation

Introduction

Grammar is valuable in contexts in order to guarantee clarity and bring a level of order and elegance in language. It is the basic rules of language that gives meaning to what we are talking about.

In this lesson on grammar, students will learn how to use punctuation correctly.

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What Will You Learn?

BWV1.09- Use appropriate strategies to edit written work (e.g., read aloud to detect errors; correct errors using personal checklists “look fors”, a shared word/grammar wall, a personal grammar guide, and/or computer spelling and grammar programs to achieve accuracy in the use of the conventions of standard Canadian English, including the requirements of grammar, usage, spelling, and punctuation listed below:

- Use punctuation correctly, including period, question mark, exclamation mark, comma, dash, apostrophe, colon, quotation marks, parentheses, and ellipses.

Commas, Turning Up, Everywhere

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WASHINGTON—In the midst of a crisis that may have reached a breaking point Tuesday afternoon, linguists, and grammarians, everywhere say they are baffled, by the sudden and seemingly random, appearance of commas, in our nation’s sentences. The epidemic of errant punctuation has spread, like wildfire, since signs of the epidemic first, appeared in a *Washington Post* article, on Federal Reserve Chairman, Ben, Bernanke. “This, is an unsettling trend,” columnist William Sa, fire, told reporters. “We’re seeing a collapse of the grammatical rules that have, held, the English language, together for,

centuries." Experts warn, that if this same, phenomenon, should occur with ellipses...

Using Commas after "Setting the Scene"

At 7 o'clock sharp, dinner will be served. ✓

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It is quite common for a sentence to start with words which "set the scene." These words usually state a place, a time, a condition, or a fact before the main part of the sentence. Words that "set the scene" at the start of a sentence are usually followed by a comma. You do not have to use a comma; i.e., it's not a strict ruling. It's just a common style. However, as it will help your reader, it is a useful style to adopt. For example:

- **In Paris**, they simply stared when I spoke to them in French. ✓
(sets a place)
- **At exactly 4 o'clock**, two of the kidnappers re-entered the room. ✓
(sets a time)
- **If you don't know where you are going**, you will probably end up somewhere else. ✓ (Laurence J. Peter, 1919–1988)
(sets a condition)
- **As you were born here**, it makes sense for my group to take the map. ✓
(states a fact)

Often, the words that "set the scene" are a little harder to spot:

- **When a man tells you that he got rich through hard work**, ask him "Whose?" ✓
(Don Marquis, 1878–1937)
(sets a time)

These "scene setting" words (or [adverbial clauses](#) or [adverbial phrases](#) as they're really called) vary hugely. You do not have to use a comma after an adverbial clause or phrase, but a comma will make it clear where the main clause starts. When an adverbial clause or phrase is very short (e.g., *Nowadays*, *Now*, *Yesterday*, *Today*), you are safer to omit the comma. For example:

- When I was a boy, I was told that anybody could become President. Now I'm beginning to believe it. ✓ (Clarence Darrow, 1857 – 1938)

(First "scene setting" adverb – comma used. Second "scene setting" adverb – no comma required)

When an adverbial clause or phrase is at the end of a sentence, there is usually no need for a comma before it. When it is in the middle of a sentence, you should use commas if you think they will help the reader. For example:

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- Two of the kidnappers re-entered the room at exactly 4 o'clock. ✓
- Two of the kidnappers, at exactly 4 o'clock, re-entered the room. ✓

Using Commas after a Transitional Phrase

I think. Therefore, I am.



A transitional phrase is a term like *However*, *Consequently*, *Therefore*, and *As a result*. (There are others, but these are the most common.) A transitional phrase usually sits at the start of sentence and acts like a bridge to a recently mentioned idea (often an idea in the preceding sentence). A transitional phrase is usually followed by a comma. For example:

- John has eaten at least two cakes a day for the last decade. **As a result**, he has been placed in a high-risk group for diabetes. ✓
- I think. **Therefore**, I am. ✓ Rene Descartes (1596–1650)
- All progress is initiated by challenging current conceptions, and executed by supplanting existing institutions. **Consequently**, the first condition of progress is the removal of censorship. George Bernard Shaw (1856–1950) ✓
- Orthodox medicine has not found an answer to your complaint. **However**, luckily for you, I happen to be a quack. ✓

A transitional phrase is never preceded by a comma. You can, on occasion, precede it with a [semicolon](#) (or a [dash replacing a semicolon](#)), but never a comma. That's called a [run-on error](#).

Using Commas after an Interjection

Yes, it's true.



An [interjection](#) is usually a short word inserted into a sentence to express an emotion or feeling. Expressions such as *yes*, *phew*, and *indeed* are examples of interjections. Often, an interjection will sit at the start of the sentence but not always. It is normal practice to offset an interjection with a comma (or commas if it's in the middle of the sentence). In the examples below, the interjections are shaded:

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- Oh great, the boiler's broken down. ✓
- Yes, that's three out of three. ✓
- I understand your predicament, but, crikey, there is nothing we can do. ✓

Note: If the interjection is to express a powerful emotion or feeling (and it's not in the middle of your sentence), then it can be followed by an exclamation mark.

Using Commas before a Conjunction

We love cake, and we love chocolate.



Words like *and*, *or*, and *but* are known as [conjunctions](#). (There are other conjunctions, but these three are the most common.)

When a conjunction joins two standalone sentences (or [independent clauses](#)), it is usual to place a comma before it. For example (conjunctions shaded):

- Lee can sing, and he can dance ✓

(Here, the conjunction *and* is joining two standalone sentences: "Lee can sing." + "He can dance.")

- Lee can sing, and dance ✗

(Here, the conjunction *and* is not joining two standalone sentences. The words "and dance" are not a standalone sentence. This is just a list of things that Lee can do. This section is not about using commas in lists. That is covered below and in the lesson [Using Commas in Lists](#).)

Here are some real examples:

- No amount of time can erase the memory of a good cat, and no amount of masking tape can ever totally remove his fur from your couch. ✓ (Leo Buscaglia, 1925–1998)
- When you have got an elephant by the hind leg, and he is trying to run away, it's best to let him run. ✗ (Abraham Lincoln, 1809–1865)

("When you have got an elephant by the hind leg" is not a standalone sentence.)

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Using Commas for Parentheses

Bill, aged 17, loves cake.



We all know that additional information (such as an explanation or an afterthought) can be offset with brackets. However, [brackets](#) are just one of the choices you have. You can also use commas or [dashes](#). The information which is offset by commas, brackets, or dashes is called a [parenthesis](#). The punctuation marks used to offset a parenthesis (i.e., dashes, brackets, or commas) are called parentheses.

Examples (with each example of parenthesis shaded):

- The case has, in some respects, been not entirely devoid of interest. ✓
- At 4 o'clock yesterday, David Frost, a cleaner from the Lakes Estate, was charged with "dog napping" his former headmaster's poodle. ✓
- Joanne Baxter, who originally appeared as a witness, has been found guilty of handling stolen goods. ✓

(Note: When a parenthesis starts with *who* or *which* (i.e., a [relative pronoun](#)), you should look to use commas as opposed to brackets or dashes. This is not a 100% rule, but commas are far more common when the parenthesis starts with a relative pronoun.)

Commas are often more suitable for formal writing than brackets, as brackets can make your work look a little unorganised. Also, commas are often preferable to dashes because dashes are quite stark. The disadvantage of using commas as parentheses (as they're called) is they can be easily confused with other commas in the sentence because — as you can see from this page — commas have lots of uses.

Using Commas in Lists

M2, M3, M4, M6, and M62



M2, M3, M4, M6 and M62



When writing a list in "sentence form" (i.e., not as bullet points), then it is normal practice to separate the list items using commas. For example:

- Fish, chips, and peas ✓

The big question is whether there needs to be a comma before the [conjunction](#) (in this example, it's the word *and*). Unfortunately, there is no simple rule for this.

The first part of the rule is easy enough: when there are just two items in a list, there is no need to use a comma between them.

- Fish and chips ✓

However, you can use a comma if you think it helps your reader.

- The Bakerloo Line runs between Harrow and Wealdston, and Elephant and Castle. ✓

When there are more than two list items in a list, then those following "US convention" should use a comma before the conjunction (usually *and* or *or*), and those following "UK convention" shouldn't. Therefore:

- Fish, chips, and peas ✓ (🇺🇸)
- Fish, chips and peas ✓ (🇬🇧)

Unfortunately, it gets a little more complicated than that. The comma before the conjunction is known as an *Oxford Comma*, and it is condoned by lots of individuals and organisations in the UK, and it is avoided by a few individuals and organisations in the US. Therefore:

- Fish, chips, and peas ✓ (🇬🇧) (If you're an advocate for the Oxford Comma.)

The bottom line is you should follow whatever convention those around you (e.g., your company seniors) follow. If there is no guidance like that, then follow whatever convention you like — but be consistent. If you have to break that convention for the sake of clarity, then have the confidence to do it. Clarity trumps style every single time.

Using Commas after a Long Subject

A, B, C, and D, are available.



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When the [subject of a sentence](#) is made up of lots of elements, it is known as a [compound subject](#). For example:

- **Janet** is popular.

(Normal subject made up of one element: Janet)

- **Janet and John** are popular.

(Compound subject made up of two elements: Janet and John)

- **The large gorilla** is popular.

(Normal subject made up of one element: The large gorilla)

- **The large gorilla with the bright blue eyes and the albino lion cub with piercing pink eyes** are popular.

(Compound subject made up of two elements)

In the last example, the compound subject is starting to get quite long. When a subject starts getting complicated, some writers like to show the end of the subject with a comma. Be aware that this is not a popular practice among many grammarians, but if you think it helps your reader, you can do it. For example:

- **Leaving a list of Internet passwords, increasing your life insurance and writing a will,** will give you peace of mind while you are on operations.

(Here, the writer has used a comma after *will* to show the end of the subject. It is hard to argue that this comma does not help the reader.)

Using Commas before Speech Marks

He shouted, "No chance!"



Words like *He said*, *She shouted*, *The author stated*, and *She wrote* often precede

a quotation. A comma can be used after these words to separate them from the quotation. For example:

- He said jokingly, "The world is my lobster." ✓
- Paul whispered, "Is he always that miserable?" ✓

Note: You don't have to use a comma. [Using nothing and using a colon after the words that introduce a quotation](#) are also options.

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In fact, it's your choice whether you follow your introductory words with a comma, a colon, or nothing. It depends on your desired flow of text. If you don't really care about the desired flow of text and you'd like some guidelines to help you decide which to use, then there is a useful guideline which states that a comma should be used for short quotations (six words or fewer) and colon should be used for longer quotations. (This is not a rule. It's a useful guideline.)

Using Commas with the Vocative Case

I know your brother, Sarah.



When words are used to address somebody (or something) directly, those words are said to be in the [vocative case](#). In English, the vocative case is shown by offsetting it from the rest of the sentence with a comma (or commas if it's in the middle of the sentence). In the examples below, the words in the vocative case are shaded:

- Do me the courtesy of shutting up, **Alan**. ✓
- **Darling**, can you take the casserole out the oven? ✓
- I know your sister, **Jason**. ✓
- Tell me it's good news, **doctor**. ✓
- And that, **your Majesty**, is how you make Eccles Cakes. I mean, it's how one makes Eccles Cakes. ✓

Colons (:)

- Use a colon to introduce a list:
He visited three cities last summer holiday: Madrid, Roma and Athens.
- To introduce an idea or an explanation:
He had one idea in mind: to see her as soon as possible.

- To introduce direct speech or a quotation:
The secretary whispered in his ear: "Your wife is on the phone. "

Semicolons (;)

- Semicolons are used instead of a full stop or period to separate independent sentences:
They woke up early; then they went jogging.
- Use a semicolon to separate items in a series when those items contain punctuation such as a comma:
They visited the Eiffel Tower, Paris; Big Ben, London; and the statue of liberty, New York

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Celebrating the Semicolon in a Most Unlikely Location



Cary Conover for The New York Times

Neil Neches, on a No. 5 train, underneath the placard that has earned him plaudits for his proper use of the semicolon.

By [SAM ROBERTS](#)

Published: February 18, 2008

It was nearly hidden on a [New York City Transit](#) public service placard exhorting subway riders not to leave their newspaper behind when they get off the train.

“Please put it in a trash can,” riders are reminded. After which Neil Neches, an erudite writer in the transit agency’s marketing and service information department, inserted a semicolon. The rest of the sentence reads, “that’s good news for everyone.”

Semicolon sightings in the city are unusual, period, much less in exhortations drafted by committees of civil servants. In literature and journalism, not to mention in advertising, the semicolon has been largely jettisoned as a pretentious anachronism.

Americans, in particular, prefer shorter sentences without, as style books advise, that distinct division between statements that are closely related but require a separation more prolonged than a conjunction and more emphatic than a comma.

“When Hemingway killed himself he put a period at the end of his life,” [Kurt Vonnegut](#) once said. “Old age is more like a semicolon.”

In terms of punctuation, semicolons signal something New Yorkers rarely do. [Frank McCourt](#), the writer and former English teacher at [Stuyvesant High School](#), describes the semicolon as the yellow traffic light of a “New York sentence.” In response, most New Yorkers accelerate; they don’t pause to contemplate.

Semicolons are supposed to be introduced into the curriculum of the New York City public schools in the third grade. That is where Mr. Neches, the 55-year-old New York City Transit marketing manager, learned them, before graduating from Tilden High School and [Brooklyn College](#), where he majored in English and later received a master’s degree in creative writing.

But, whatever one’s personal feelings about semicolons, some people don’t use them because they never learned how.

In fact, when Mr. Neches was informed by a supervisor that a reporter was inquiring about who was responsible for the semicolon, he was concerned.

“I thought at first somebody was complaining,” he said.

One of the school system's most notorious graduates, [David Berkowitz](#), the Son of Sam serial killer who taunted police and the press with rambling handwritten notes, was, as the columnist [Jimmy Breslin](#) wrote, the only murderer he ever encountered who could wield a semicolon just as well as a revolver. (Mr. Berkowitz, by the way, is now serving an even longer sentence.)

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But the rules of grammar are routinely violated on both sides of the law.

People have lost fortunes and even been put to death because of imprecise punctuation involving semicolons in legal papers. In 2004, a court in San Francisco rejected a conservative group's challenge to a statute allowing gay marriage because the operative phrases were separated incorrectly by a semicolon instead of by the proper conjunction.

[Louis Menand](#), an English professor at [Harvard](#) and a staff writer at *The New Yorker*, pronounced the subway poster's use of the semicolon to be "impeccable."

Lynne Truss, author of "Eats, Shoots & Leaves: The Zero Tolerance Approach to Punctuation," called it a "lovely example" of proper punctuation.

Geoffrey Nunberg, a professor of linguistics at the University of California, Berkeley, praised the "burgeoning of punctuational literacy in unlikely places."

Allan M. Siegal, a longtime arbiter of New York Times style before retiring, opined, "The semicolon is correct, though I'd have used a colon, which I think would be a bit more sophisticated in that sentence."

The linguist [Noam Chomsky](#) sniffed, "I suppose Bush would claim it's the effect of [No Child Left Behind](#)."

New York City Transit's unintended agenda notwithstanding, e-mail messages and text-messaging may jeopardize the last vestiges of semicolons. They still live on, though, in emoticons, those

graphic emblems of our grins, grimaces and other facial expressions.

The semicolon, befittingly, symbolizes a wink.

End punctuation marks:

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1. Full stop , or period (.)

- Used a full stop at the end of a sentence:
She stood up and went away. She was furious.
- Used for abbreviations:
Co. (Company)
M.P. (Member of Parliament)

2. Question marks (?)

- Question marks are used at the end of direct questions:
Where do you live?
Are you crazy?
Did you do the homework?
- Use a question mark at the end of tag questions:
You will help me, won't you?
He likes soccer, doesn't he?

3. Exclamation marks (!)

- Used to indicate strong emotions:
She's so beautiful!
What a nice girl!
How interesting!
- Used after interjections:
Oh! It's awful.
Hi! What's up?

What Is Ellipsis? (with Examples)

An ellipsis (...) is three dots used to show that words have been omitted from a quotation or to create a pause for effect. More specifically, an ellipsis can be used:

- To show an omission of a word or words (including whole sentences) from a text.
- To create a pause for effect.
- To show an unfinished thought.
- To show a trail off into silence.

Examples of Ellipsis

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Here are some examples of ellipsis:

- The brochure states: "The atmosphere is tranquil ... and you cannot hear the trains."

(omitted text)

- A credit card stolen in London was used to pay for a Chinese meal five hours later ... in Bangkok.

(pause for effect)

- "Yeah? Well, you can just💎."

(unfinished thought)

- Standing tall and with the Lord's Prayer mumbling across our lips, we entered the chamber💎."

(trail off into silence)

Note: When an ellipsis ends a sentence, four dots are used (three for the ellipsis and one for the period 🇺🇸 / full stop 🇬🇧).

Using Square Parentheses (Square Brackets) with Ellipsis

When using an ellipsis to show that words are missing from a quotation, it is a common practice (but not essential) to put square parentheses ,i.e., square brackets like these [], around the ellipsis to differentiate it from an ellipsis which appeared in the original text or to make it clear it's not a pause for effect. For example:

- He would eat [...] jam, ham, spam, lamb, and cram...berries by the tram load.

(The square brackets around the ellipsis tell us that the omission was not the work of the original author.)

Square brackets are not used with an ellipsis for a pause. For example:

- Gleaming through the sludge in the U bend was [☒ my earring. ✗

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The Format for Ellipsis

When using ellipses, be consistent with your formatting. That is the golden rule. The formats offered in style guides vary. Your options, in our assessed order of popularity, are:

- "Hello ◆ world"

(space-dot-dot-dot-space)

- "Hello . . . world"

(space-dot-space-dot-space-dot-space)

- "Hello [...] world"

(space-[dot-dot-dot]-space)

- "Hello [. . .] world"

(space-[dot-space-dot-space-dot]-space)

- "Hello 彙 orld"

(dot-dot-dot)

When an ellipsis replaces words at the end of a sentence, your options are:

- "I have left out some words at the end, and this is the new end of the sentence... ."

(dot-dot-dot-space-dot)

- "This is the new end of the sentence...."

(dot-dot-dot-dot)

- "This is the new end of the sentence"

(space-dot-dot-dot-space-dot)

- "This is the new end of the sentence [...]."

(space-[dot-dot-dot]-dot)

Note: Whatever format you use, you're trying to show an ellipsis and then an end mark (i.e., period). (These formats are possible in the . . . (dot-space-dot-space-dot) versions too, but be aware this might hide the distinction between the end mark and the ellipsis.)

When a quote ends with an original sentence, but you want to show other sentences have been omitted, your options are:

- "I have left out at least one more sentence. ..."

(dot-space-dot-dot-dot)

- "I have left out at least one more sentence...."

(dot-dot-dot-dot)

- "I have left out at least one more sentence.[...]"

(dot-[dot-dot-dot])

- "I have left out at least one more sentence. [...]"

(dot-space-[dot-dot-dot])



Assessment as Learning

Complete the following worksheet to practice your punctuation rules.



Punctuation Worksheet

Commas: Correct the sentences by adding commas.

1. Dr. Charles Drew worked as a surgeon developed new ways of storing blood and was the director of the Red Cross blood bank program.
2. I am going to take English science social studies algebra and Spanish.
3. The loud insistent school bell woke us from our dreams.
4. Please pass those delicious blueberry pancakes the butter and the syrup.
5. My twin sister can run faster jump higher and do more push-ups than I can.
6. People visiting the reservation will be barred from burial sites which are considered holy by Native Americans.
7. Ellen Barnes who is captain of the basketball team is a honor student.
8. A towering skyscraper would in theory be a good place to live.
9. According to her birth certificate she was born July 7 1971 in Juneau Alaska.
10. The Comanches like many nomadic tribes once traveled throughout Kansas New Mexico Texas and Oklahoma.

Semi-colons & colons: Correct the sentences by adding semi-colons or colons.

11. A small, windowless log cabin stood against the rail fence directly behind it ran a muddy stream.
12. Because the club has run out of funds, the following supplies must be brought from home pencils, erasers, paper, and envelopes.
13. I will consider only the following part-time jobs gardening, baby-sitting, and walking dogs.

14. Other jobs take too much time for example, if I worked in a store, I would probably have to work most nights and all day Saturday.
15. American cowhands used the ten-gallon hat as protection from the sun and as a dipper for water the leather chaps they wore served as protection from thorny bushes.
16. A rabbi, a minister, and a priest discussed their interpretations of Isaiah 2 2 and 5 26.
17. In his speech to the PTA board, Dr. Hayakawa quoted from several poets Rudyard Kipling, David McCord, and Nikki Giovanni.
18. Sojourner Truth, a former slave, could neither read nor write however, this accomplished woman spoke eloquently against slavery and for women's rights.
19. From 1851 to 1864 the United States had four presidents Millard Fillmore, a Whig from New York Franklin Pierce, a Democrat from New Hampshire James Buchanan, a Democrat from Pennsylvania and Abraham Lincoln, a Republican from Illinois.
20. From 12 30 to 1 00 p.m., I was so nervous that I could not sit still I paced up and down, swinging my arms and taking deep breaths, while I rehearsed each play in my mind.

Hyphens & dashes: Correct the sentences by adding hyphens or dashes.

21. I will be twenty one on the twenty first of September.
22. A dog I think it was a poodle jumped into the lake.
23. Many voters thought that the candidate's remarks were un American.
24. He claimed and no one denied it that the money was misplaced when the office was relocated.

25. At the auction someone bid one thousand dollars for a pre Revolutionary desk.
26. The Historical Society the local members, that is will conduct a tour of the harbor.
27. If she wins the marathon we're all rooting for her the trophy will still be ours.
28. "Operator, please call" Then the phone went dead.
29. My sister Patricia her nickname is "Peachy" wants to be a marine biologist.
30. I have never or *almost* never forgotten a name after an introduction.

Ellipses: Rewrite each sentence by omitting words or phrases and inserting an ellipsis.

31. Ellipsis can be an artful and arresting means of securing economy of expression. We must see to it, however, that the understood words are grammatically compatible.
32. Juan thought and thought and then thought some more. "I'm wondering" Juan said.
33. Stonehenge was a place of burial from its beginning to its zenith in the mid-third millennium B.C. The cremation burial dating to Stonehenge's *sarsen* stones phase is likely just one of many from this later period of the monument's use and demonstrates that it was still very much a domain of the dead.
34. Most of the cholesterol in the body is synthesized by the body and has a dietary origin. Cholesterol is more abundant in tissues that either synthesize more or have more abundant densely-packed membranes, for example, the liver, spinal cord and brain.

35. In vertebrates blood is composed of cells suspended in a liquid called plasma. Plasma, which comprises 55% of blood fluid, is mostly water (90% by volume), and contains dissolved proteins, glucose, mineral ions, hormones, carbon dioxide, platelets and the blood cells themselves. The blood cells present in blood are mainly red blood cells and white blood cells.