

Punctuation

Commas

The most common uses for the comma are to separate main clauses joined by a coordinating conjunction, to separate an introductory element, to set off parenthetical elements, and to join items in a series.

To join two main clauses with a coordinating conjunction, place a comma before the conjunction. In the following sentences, *but* is the coordinating conjunction:

I enjoy writing, *but* I don't like public speaking.

Studying Political Science is fun, *but* studying Engineering can get you a job.

(A main clause has a subject and a verb and can stand alone as a sentence. Examples of coordinating conjunctions are: and, but, nor, for, or, yet, and so.)

A comma is required to separate an introductory element from the rest of a sentence.

If I don't write my paper early, I will probably get a poor grade.

No, I don't remember hearing you say that.

Commas are also used to separate parenthetical elements from the rest of a sentence:

The writing center, located in Gowen 111, is available to any student taking a Political Science; Law, Societies, and Justice; or School of International Studies class.

Finally, commas are used to join items in a series:

This quarter I'm taking International Relations, Political Theory, Comparative Politics, and American Government.

Semicolons

Semicolons are used to link two very closely related sentences or to separate items in a series that already have commas. Using a semicolon means you should not use a conjunction (such as "and").

The Mariners used to be a great team; this season they finished in last place.

This course will review past material; introduce fractions, decimals, and exponents; test your ability to apply basic mathematics to real world problems; and train you to think like a mathematician.

Colons

Colons are used when the second part of the sentence is explaining or amplifying the first part of the sentence or to introduce a formal quotation. Whatever appears before the colon must be a complete sentence.

The most famous rule in English spelling is this: i before e except after c.

Students who hope to succeed in their classes would do well to remember Justice Louis Brandeis's advice: There is no such thing as good writing, only good rewriting.

Dashes

Dashes are used to denote a formal aside—they are practically interchangeable with parenthesis, but are a little more dramatic. They function as an interruption of the main thought, but one that is important.

Dashes should be made with two hyphens, and there should be no space between or on either side of the dash. They should be used infrequently in formal writing.

President X—in direct opposition to her campaign promises—came to see the grave consequences of this step and refused to do it.

Ellipsis Points

A series of period dots, called ellipsis points, are used to show any omission of words, phrases, or paragraphs in quoted material. Since the ellipsis points stand for omitted words, they are always placed within quotation marks.

An omission within a sentence is shown by three dots:

In conclusion, he stated, “What we need now ... is a bold new plan of attack.”

An omission following a sentence is indicated by four dots, with the first dot placed immediately after the last word.

“They were all hungry, but no one could decide on what to eat. ... After much squabbling, they agreed to go out for pizza.”

Ellipsis dots generally should not be used to begin or end a quotation and should not be used to string together fragments of quotations to form new sentences.

Apostrophes

Apostrophes are required to denote possession; they are also required to form the plural of abbreviations with periods, lower case letters, and capital letters that would be confusing if *s* alone were added.

To indicate a singular possessive, use '*s*:

This is Lisa's computer.

I can't talk long; I'm on my boss's phone.

To indicate plural possessives, use '*s*'

The Professor blanched when she realized she had lost two dozen of her students' papers.

Use '*s*' to form a plural only when necessary to avoid confusion.

Almost all of the professors at the University of Washington have their Ph.D.'s.

Some people look at algebra and see mathematics; I just see a bunch of x's and y's.

Other Common Mistakes

Be sure to use the correct version of the following words:

Its – possessive form of it

I don't know how long its [the car's] engine can last without adding oil.

It's – contraction of “it is”

It's [it is] OK to say no.

Their – possessive form of they

Their hands were very cold.

They're – contraction of “they are”

They're headed inside (to warm up their hands).

There – a place that is not here.

I don't want to live there; it's far too cold.