



Commas and Colons and Semicolons... OH MY!

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Confused by commas? Confounded by colons? Stumped by semicolons?

You're not alone. Choosing the correct punctuation can be confusing, and these three critters are some of the worst. To comma or not to comma, is a question that stumps many writers. To comma or semicolon stumps others. And what is a colon used for anyway?

Commas

Commas clarify meaning and set sentence meter for readers.

1. Use commas to separate items in a list.
 - ♣ I can't believe you went to Disneyland, Six Flags, and Universal Studios all in one day!
 - ♣ He likes mustard, onions, and chili on his hotdogs.
2. Use commas after longer introductory phrases and clauses.
 - ♣ After we completed our whirlwind visit to all three amusement parks, we fell into a dead sleep for 12 hours.
3. Use commas after shorter introductory phrases and clauses if necessary to avoid confusion.
 - ♣ To Donald Duck, Mickey Mouse is no stranger.
 - ♣ To chili, hotdogs are a natural accompaniment.
4. Use commas to set off nonrestrictive (nonessential) clauses from the rest of a sentence.
 - ♣ My favorite roller coaster, the Raging Bull, was shut down for the day.

Serial Commas
Do you include a comma before the coordinating conjunction in front of the last item in a list? Journalistic style **does not** call for the comma while formal academic writing **does**. Whichever method you are using, remember the most important rule... Maintain consistency!

***To determine whether a phrase, clause or modifier is essential or not, read the sentence without it to see if the sentence makes sense. If it does, the phrase is nonessential.

5. Use commas to set off parenthetical phrases. (These expressions are not part of the main text, but give additional information to your audition; think of a theatrical aside.)
 - ♣ How, we thought to ourselves, did we survive Disneyland, Six Flags, and Universal Studios all in one day?
 - ♣ I can't believe, he groaned silently, I ate so many hotdogs.
6. Use commas to separate coordinate modifiers (descriptive modifiers of equal rank). To determine whether modifiers are coordinate or not, insert "and" between them. If the sentence still makes sense, the comma is required.
 - ♣ Disneyland is a fun, expensive place. (coordinate)
 - ♣ He eats only roasted Hebrew National hotdogs. (not coordinate)
7. Use commas to set off participial phrases that modify part of an independent clause.
 - ♣ We slept like babies that night, having visited all three amusement parks.
 - ♣ He had a horrible stomach ache, having eaten six hotdogs.
8. Use commas to separate two independent clauses joined by a coordinating conjunction.
 - ♣ We knew it would be a long day, but we decided to go to all three amusement parks anyway.
 - ♣ He roasted five hotdogs at the bonfire, and he also set a hay bale on fire.

Essential or Not?
***An essential clause must be included in a sentence in order for it to make sense.

***A nonessential clause may be cut from a sentence without altering its meaning.

Common Coordinating Conjunctions:
-and
-or
-but
-nor
-for
-yet
-so

Comma Misuse

1. Do not use a comma to separate two independent clauses not joined by a coordinating conjunction. This creates a run-on sentence.
 - ♣ We went to Disneyland, we went to Six Flags.
 - ♣ He ate six hotdogs, he got a stomach ache.
2. Do not use a comma to introduce a subordinate clause. If the subordinate clause is used at the beginning of the sentence, a comma is required.
 - ♣ We went to all three theme parks because we were bored.
 - ♣ Because he was hungry, he ate six hotdogs.
3. Do not use a comma to precede a partial quotation.
 - ♣ My sister said that we were "crazy park hoppers".
 - ♣ After he ate all those hotdogs he was "ready to bust".

Subordinate Clauses
Beginning with the word "because," subordinate clauses are easy to spot. Many people believe they must always use commas when introducing these phrases, so be careful and stick to the rules!



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Colons

Colons “announce”. They add dramatic flourishes that introduce lists, quotations, complete sentences, and dialogue.

1. Use a colon to introduce a quotation longer than one sentence.
 - ♣ The attendant looked straight at us and said: “This ride is not for sissies. It is a high speed thrill ride. You will yell. You will scream. You will cover your eyes and beg for your momma. If you don’t think you can handle it, get out of line now!”
2. Use a colon to end a paragraph that introduces a quotation in the next paragraph.
 - ♣ After he won the hotdog eating contest, he prepared to make his speech: “I trained long and hard for this event,” he began. “I knew the competition would be tough so I had to be tougher...”
3. Use colons to introduce the text of questions and answers (i.e. in interviews).
 - ♣ Q: What was your favorite Disneyland ride?
A: Pirates of the Caribbean
4. Use colons to show times.
 - ♣ We finished our theme park tour at 1:15 a.m.
5. Use colons to show citations.
 - ♣ Ecclesiastes 3:1-8 tells us that there is a season for everything.

Colons and Capitalization

1. When you use a colon to introduce a complete sentence, capitalize the first word.
 - ♣ I have this advice for you: If you are going to tour three theme parks in one day, wear comfy shoes!
 - ♣ He had a great idea: The next time we roast hotdogs, we need to make s’mores too.
2. When you use a colon to introduce an incomplete sentence, do not capitalize the first word following the colon.
 - ♣ Mickey Mouse has two things Mighty Mouse lacks: charm and his own empire.
 - ♣ The hotdogs were missing a key ingredient: chili.

Semicolons

A semicolon is not quite a comma, not quite a period. It is a break in thought, but not a complete stop... more like an elongated pause.

1. Use a semicolon to connect independent clauses and avoid run-on sentences.
 - ♣ We went to Disneyland; we had a great time.
 - ♣ He ate six hotdogs; he also got a stomach ache.
2. Use a semicolon to separate internally punctuated independent clauses joined by a coordinating conjunction.
 - ♣ Skipping the Cinderella parade, which was much too long, we went to The Haunted Mansion; and we were able to walk right on without waiting in line.
 - ♣ After finishing those hotdogs, a feat in itself, he got a stomach ache; and then he went to the hospital to get his stomach pumped.
3. Use a semicolon to separate items in a list that also include commas.
 - ♣ Donald Duck brought his favorite lunch, a sandwich, chips, and crackers; his nephews, Huey, Dewey, and Luey; and his favorite girl Daisy.
 - ♣ In order to win the contest, John starved himself for two days, Monday and Tuesday; wore extra large clothes, size 42 jeans and XXL shirt; and drank castor oil.