

How to Use Commas, Semicolons, and Colons

..... a practical handout

What is the Purpose of a Comma?

Commas are used to separate two independent clauses. An independent clause can stand on its own as a sentence. They usually occur with coordinating conjunctions *and, but, for, or, nor, so, yet*.

Examples:

*The protest was successful, **but** steps toward a solution must still be taken.
The student explained her question, **yet** the instructor still didn't seem to understand.
Yesterday was her brother's birthday, **so** she took him out to dinner.*

When to Use Commas

To separate three or more items in a series:

Example: Fred Hampton, Stokely Carmichael, and Angela Davis are lesser known figures of the Civil Rights Movement.

To offset nonessential or nonrestrictive clauses:

Words or phrases that are not essential to the meaning of the sentence

Examples:

Clause: *That Tuesday, which happens to be my birthday, is the only day I am available to meet.*
Phrase: *The food, on the other hand, is rather bland.*
Word: *In this case, however, you seem to have over-exerted yourself.*

To interrupt or introduce direct quotations:

Examples:

*John said without emotion, "this system is awfully oppressive."
"I was able," she answered, "to complete the assignment."
In 1848, Marx wrote, "Workers of the world, unite!"*

To set off geographical names, items in dates, addresses, and titles in names:

Examples:

*The best Writing Center is in Chico, California.
On May 19, 1925, Malcolm X was born.
Who lives at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, Washington, DC?*

After introductory clauses, phrases, or words that come before the main clause:

Common starter words for introductory clauses that should be followed by a comma include: *after, although, as, because, if, since, when, while*.

Examples:

Because of unfair wages, the union was prepared to strike.

If inequalities continue, the guillotine needs to make a comeback.

When the time comes, we will take to the streets.

What is the Purpose of Semicolon?

Semicolons are used between two independent clauses. Closely related sentences are often linked to emphasize their relationship and to vary the pace of the writing.

Examples:

I am going home; I intend to stay there.

It rained heavily during the afternoon; we managed to have our picnic anyway.

They couldn't make it to the summit and back before dark; they decided to camp for the night.

When to Use a Semicolon

Semicolons are used to separate items in a list when one or more items contain a comma

Example:

The speakers included Dr. Sally Meadows, Biology; Dr. Fred Elliott, Animal Welfare; Ms. Gerri Taylor, Sociology; and Prof. Julie Briggs, Chemistry.

When you join two independent clauses together with one of the following conjunctive adverbs:

Adverbs that join independent clauses - *however, moreover, therefore, consequently, otherwise, nevertheless, thus*.

Examples:

I am going home; moreover, I intend to stay there.

It rained heavily during the afternoon; however, we managed to have our picnic anyway.

They couldn't make it to the back before dark; therefore, they decided to camp for the night.

What is the Purpose of a Colon?

Colons are used to announce, introduce, or direct attention to a list, a noun/noun phrase, a quotation, or an example/explanation.

Examples:

Topics discussed will include: the structure of viruses, virus families and current concerns in virology.

I know the perfect job for her: a politician.

When to Use a Colon

The colon acts as a pause, which introduces related information. It indicates that the reader should look forward to information that follows on from the earlier statement.

Example:

Road construction in Dallas has hindered travel around town: parts of Main, Fifth, and West Street are closed during the construction.

References

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