

Punctuation: Periods, Question Marks, Exclamation Marks, Commas, and Semi-colons

This resource is designed for English Language Learners (ELLs) who require assistance in a particular academic skill. Each handout provides brief explanations related to different core skills (reading, writing, listening, and/or speaking), and it offers some simple examples of mistakes and how these might be corrected.

While these handouts are designed primarily for ELL students, anyone seeking to improve their writing may find these documents useful. Check out the links at the end of the handout for more resources.

The purpose of punctuation

Punctuation marks keep your work clear and your argument focused. Without punctuation, it can be difficult for readers to understand your writing.

The Period

The **period** signals the end of a sentence.

- ✓ The information in the instructions was clear.

The period is not used to ask a question.

- ✗ What time do you finish work.
- ✓ What time do you finish work?

The period makes the sentence sound neutral and is not a good choice for saying something with emotion.

- ✗ I love you more than anything in the world.
- ✓ I love you more than anything in the world!

The period can describe the question asked by someone else. This is because it describes the author's actions, rather than asking the question itself.

- ✗ I asked him if he really wanted to go skydiving?
- ✓ I asked him if he really wanted to go skydiving.

Rules for Using Periods

Abbreviations

Most abbreviations require periods:

- St. (Street)
- Dr. (Doctor)
- Mr. (Mister)
- Apt. (Appointment)
- Jan. (January)
- Dept. (Department)

Some abbreviations, like acronyms and initialisms, do not require periods.

An **acronym** is an abbreviation from the initial components of a phrase or a word. Acronyms are pronounced as words. For instance, NAFTA and SWOT are acronyms.

<https://www.uis.edu/cas/thelearninghub/writing/handouts/grammar-mechanics-and-style/acronyms-initialisms-and-capitalization/>

An **initialism** is a term formed from the initial letters of several words or parts of words. It is an abbreviation where each letter is pronounced separately. For example, ESL (for “English as a Second Language”) and UTM (for “University of Toronto Mississauga”) are initialisms. Initialisms cannot be pronounced as words.

<https://www.uis.edu/cas/thelearninghub/writing/handouts/grammar-mechanics-and-style/acronyms-initialisms-and-capitalization/>

Examples:

- NAFTA (North American Free Trade Agreement)
- CBC (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation)
- FIFA (Fédération Internationale de Football Association)

Do not put the second period after the abbreviation at the end of the sentence.

- ✗ The class ends at 2:00 p.m..
- ✓ The class ends at 2:00 p.m.

Put a question mark or an exclamation mark after the abbreviation at the end of the sentence.

- ✓ Does this class end at 2:00 p.m.?
- ✓ I am so surprised that it is almost 2:00 p.m.!

The Question Mark

A sentence with the question mark is used when the speaker wants information.

- ✓ Does this bus go to the subway?

The Exclamation Mark

The exclamation mark shows a statement’s emotion or intensity. However, academic writing rarely uses exclamation marks. Instead, use vocabulary such as strong adverbs and adjectives to modify nouns and convey intensity.

- ✓ This climate research is **absolutely vital** to humanity’s common future.

Rules for Using Exclamation Marks

Do not combine exclamation marks with other forms of punctuation, except for quotation marks.

- ✗ “That guy looks like Elvis!” he shouted.

- ✓ “That guy looks like Elvis!” he shouted.

The Comma

12 Rules for Using Commas

1. Insert the comma between independent clauses joined by a coordinating conjunction

An **independent clause** is a group of words that contains a subject and a verb and expresses a complete thought. The independent clause can stand alone as a sentence. In other words, it does not need any additional information to operate as a sentence. The sentence "He does not travel" is an example of the independent clause.

<https://www.nmu.edu/writingcenter/independentdependent-clauses>

Coordinating conjunctions join two equally important parts of the sentence. You can use the coordinating conjunctions, such as so, yet, but, and, or, nor, for. <https://www.bbc.com/bitesize/articles/z9wvqhv>

Example:

- ✗ The music was loud **so** I needed to cover my ears.
- ✓ The music was loud, **so** I needed to cover my ears.

Do not put the comma between two independent clauses unless the coordinating conjunction is also there. **Otherwise there will be a comma splice.**

A **comma splice** occurs when two independent clauses are joined together using only a comma as punctuation between them.

<https://www.iup.edu/writingcenter/writing-resources/punctuation/comma-splices/>

Example:

- ✗ The car **swerved, it** hit a tree.
- ✓ The car **swerved, and** it hit a tree.

2. Use the comma after an introductory word, phrase, or a subordinate clause

After the introductory word

- ✓ **However**, I am tired.

After the introductory phrase

- ✓ **To satisfy his hunger**, he ate a litre of ice cream.

After the subordinate clause

- ✓ **When she was sleepy**, she went to bed.

A **subordinate clause** (also known as **dependent clause**) is a group of words that contains a subject and a verb but does not express a complete thought. A subordinate clause cannot be an independent sentence. For example, "**because** he does not travel" is not a complete sentence. Often a subordinate clause is marked by a **subordinating conjunction** such as the marker "because" in the above example.

<https://www.nmu.edu/writingcenter/independentdependent-clauses>

3. Use the comma BEFORE AND AFTER a transitional expression in the middle of a sentence

- ✗ I am tired however and must sleep.
- ✓ I am tired, **however**, and must sleep.

4. Use commas to separate items in a series

- Culture is a way of thinking, feeling, and believing.

Do not put the comma BEFORE the first item in a list

- ✗ The flower garden **includes**, roses, lilies and orchids.
- ✓ The group of politicians **includes** roses, lilies, and orchids.

Do not put the comma AFTER the last item in a list

- ✗ Many artists, writers, and **composers, have** been daydreamers.
- ✓ Many artists, writers, and **composers have** been daydreamers.

Use commas for clarity in numbered lists

- ✓ To file your claim, please enclose 1) a letter requesting **payment**, 2) a police **report**, and 3) **proof** of purchase of the items you are declaring.

5. Use the comma to separate two adjectives of equal weight that modify a noun

- ✗ The **huge restless** crowd wanted to see the band.
- ✓ The **huge, restless** crowd wanted to see the band.

Testing for Coordinate Adjectives

Adjectives of equal weight are called “**coordinate adjectives**.” Determine if adjectives are coordinate by reversing their order or inserting “and” between the adjectives. If the meaning of the sentence does not change, then the adjectives are coordinate, and they must be separated **by** a comma.

http://www.southeastern.edu/acad_research/programs/writing_center/handouts/pdf_handouts/adjectives.pdf

Examples:

- ✓ The restless, huge crowd wanted to see the band.
- ✓ **Reversed order:** The huge, restless crowd wanted to see the band.
- ✓ **“And” inserted:** The restless **and** huge crowd wanted to see the band.

In each example above, the crowd is still huge and restless. The meaning does not change and therefore the original sentence needs a comma.

- ✓ Several new bands played.
- ✗ **Reversed order:** New several bands played. “New” cannot modify “several.”

“And” inserted: Several and new bands play. “Several” and “new” both modify “bands,” so they do not need a coordinating conjunction between them. The adjectives cannot be reversed, so the comma is not required.

Do not put the comma between the final coordinate adjective and the noun that it modifies

- ✗ Hundreds of cheering, waving, **happy, fans** filled the stadium.
- ✓ Hundreds of cheering, waving, **happy fans** filled the stadium.

6. Use commas to identify nonrestrictive elements, but do not use commas to set off restrictive elements.

Restrictive vs. non-restrictive elements

Restrictive elements

A **restrictive element** is information that is essential to the sentence’s meaning. It should not be separated from the sentence with commas.

<https://arts.uottawa.ca/writingcentre/en/hypergrammar/punctuation>

Example:

- ✗ The teacher thinks that his students, **who do their work**, should pass easily. The students’ work is central to the sentence’s meaning and cannot be separated by commas.

- ✓ The teacher thinks that his students **who do their work** should pass easily.

Do not separate restrictive elements with commas

- ✓ Some people **in my neighborhood** let their dogs run on my grass.
- ✓ People **who exercise regularly** are in good shape.

Non-restrictive elements

A **non-restrictive element** is extra information that is not central to the sentence's meaning.

<https://arts.uottawa.ca/writingcentre/en/hypergrammar/punctuation>

Example:

- ✓ Those people, **who are over 65 years old**, are my friends.

The important information is that those people are my friends. The age of the friends is less important and can be separated by commas. Separate non-restrictive elements with commas

- ✓ John, **who has a bad haircut**, is a little strange.
- ✓ Ahmed likes vegetarian food, **which is also my favourite kind of food**.

7. Commas replace parentheses

Authors sometimes use parentheses to enclose parts of the sentence that are not essential. However, parentheses should be replaced with commas.

- ✗ The cafeteria (located in a pretty part of campus) serves good-quality meals.
- ✓ The cafeteria, **located in a pretty part of campus**, serves good-quality meals.

8. Commas identify contrasts

- ✗ Failing the first test of the term is a serious but not overwhelming problem.
- ✗ Failing the first test of the term is a serious, **but not overwhelming**, problem.
The serious nature of the problem contrasts with it not being overwhelming.

9. Use commas to identify a direct address

- ✗ Join me, **friends**, in the battle to combat global warming.

10. Use commas inside quotation marks

- ✗ "We must stop global warming", said the man.
- ✓ "We must stop global warming," said the man.

11. Use commas to introduce or interrupt direct quotations.

- ✗ "Global warming," said the activist "must be stopped."
- ✓ "Global warming," said the activist, "must be stopped."

Commas are not necessary when the quotation is introduced by the conjunction like “that,” “whether,” or “as.”

- ✓ The man said **that** “global warming must be stopped.”
- ✓ The activists describe global warming **as** “a result of burning coal and oil.”

12. Insert commas after names, dates, and addresses

- ✓ Sunday, November 18, 2007
- ✓ Layla Mohammed, M.D., was a good woman.
- ✓ The city of Toronto, Ontario, is a popular tourist destination.

The semi-colon

Four Rules for Using Semi-colons

1. Use the semi-colon to connect two independent clauses when they are closely related in meaning

Two independent clauses

- ✓ The car swerved; it hit a tree.

Independent clause + conjunctive adverb + independent clause

- ✓ The car swerved; **nevertheless**, it hit a tree.

Independent clause + transitional expression + independent clause

- ✓ The car swerved; **as a result**, it hit a tree.

2. Do not use a semi-colon after an introductory phrase or a dependent clause.

- ✗ In spring; it rains a lot.
- ✓ In spring, it rains a lot.

- ✗ Although she campaigned tirelessly; the politician was unable to win the election.
- ✓ Although she campaigned tirelessly, the politician was unable to win the election.

3. Do not use a semicolon to separate elements in a list. Use a colon instead.

- ✗ My grocery list is short; eggs, milk, and bread.
- ✓ My grocery list is short: eggs, milk, and bread.

4. Use semi-colons to separate elements in the list that contains one or more commas

- ✗ There were students from Toronto; London; Athens; Cleveland.
- ✓ There were students from Toronto, Ontario; London, England; Athens, Georgia; and Cleveland, Ohio.

Practice Exercises

1. Choose the correct sentence.
 - A. I rode, my bike a mountain bike, to the movie last night.
 - B. I rode my bike, a mountain bike, to the movie last night.
 - C. I rode my bike a mountain bike, to the movie last night.
 - D. I rode my bike, a mountain bike, to the movie, last night.
2. Choose the correct sentence.
 - A. Amanda, and I, have had a lot of arguments.
 - B. Amanda and I, have had a lot of arguments.
 - C. Amanda and I have had a lot of arguments.
 - D. Amanda and I have had, a lot of arguments.
3. Choose the correct sentence.
 - A. You are I am sure, telling the truth.
 - B. You are, I am sure, telling the truth.
 - C. You are I am sure telling, the truth.
 - D. You are, I am sure telling the truth.
4. Choose the correct sentence.
 - A. She left Albany, New York, on January 18 of that year.
 - B. She left Albany, New York on January 18, of that year.
 - C. She left Albany New York, on January 18 of that year.
 - D. She left, Albany New York, on January 18 of that year.
5. Choose the correct sentence.
 - A. I am typing a letter, and she is talking on the phone.
 - B. I am typing a letter and she is talking, on the phone.
 - C. I, am typing a letter and she, is talking on the phone.
 - D. I am typing a letter and, she is talking on the phone.
6. Choose the correct sentence.
 - A. Fictions, memoirs, and academic books, published by this press sold well.
 - B. Fictions, memoirs, and academic books published by this press, sold well.
 - C. Fictions, memoirs and academic books published by this press sold well.
 - D. Fictions, memoirs, and academic books published by this press, sold well.
7. Choose the correct sentence.
 - A. The ticket to the large interesting auto show is expensive, I guess.
 - B. The ticket to the large, interesting, auto show is expensive I guess.
 - C. The ticket to the large interesting, auto show, is expensive I guess.
 - D. The ticket to the large, interesting auto show is expensive, I guess.
8. Choose the correct sentence.
 - A. The Picasso art exhibit is free, for students, I think.
 - B. The Picasso, art exhibit is free, for students I think.
 - C. The Picasso art exhibit, is free for students I think.
 - D. The Picasso art exhibit is free for students, I think.
9. Choose the correct sentence.
 - A. You asked for forgiveness, he gave it to you.

- B. You asked for forgiveness; he gave it to you.
- C. You asked for forgiveness: he gave it to you.
- D. You asked for forgiveness he gave it to you.

10. Choose the correct sentence.

- A. I have been to San Francisco, California, Reno, Nevada, and Seattle, Washington.
- B. I have been to San Francisco California; Reno Nevada; and Seattle Washington.
- C. I have been to San Francisco California, Reno Nevada, and Seattle Washington.
- D. I have been to San Francisco, California; Reno, Nevada; and Seattle, Washington.

Answers

1. B) I rode my bike, a mountain bike, to the movie last night.
2. C) Amanda and I have had a lot of arguments.
3. B) You are, I am sure, telling the truth.
4. A) She left Albany, New York, on January 18 of that year.
5. A) I am typing a letter, and she is talking on the phone.
6. D) Fictions, memoirs, and academic books published by this press, sold well.
7. C) The ticket to the large, interesting auto show is expensive, I guess.
8. D) The Picasso art exhibit is free for students, I think.
9. B) You asked for forgiveness; he gave it to you.
10. D) I have been to San Francisco, California; Reno, Nevada; and Seattle, Washington.

More resources for punctuation

Guide to Punctuation – University of Sussex

<http://www.sussex.ac.uk/informatics/punctuation/>

Punctuation Guide – University of New South Wales (UNSW Sydney)

<https://student.unsw.edu.au/punctuation-guide>

Punctuation Basics – Indiana University of Pennsylvania

<https://www.iup.edu/writingcenter/writing-resources/punctuation/punctuation-basics/>

Develop your academic language, improve your academic skills, and get a Co-Curricular Record notation. Attend the Professional English Language Skills (PELS) workshops: <https://www.utm.utoronto.ca/asc/professional-english-language-skills-pels>

Get feedback on your writing and discuss your thought process. Book an appointment with an instructor: <http://www.utm.utoronto.ca/asc/appointments-undergraduate>.

Looking for more learning strategies? Visit us at: <http://www.utm.utoronto.ca/asc/>.