

PUNCTUATION OVERVIEW

Academic Skills Center 1501 Shoreline Community College

PERIOD: Put a period at the end of a sentence and after most abbreviations.

Mr. A.D. Dr. Wed. sq. ft. etc. Jan. P.M. lbs.

QUESTION MARK: Put a question mark after a direct quotation (but not after an indirect one).

Shall we eat? (the exact words of the speaker)

She asked whether we should eat. (not the exact words of the speaker)

EXCLAMATION MARK: Put an exclamation mark after an expression that shows strong emotion.

Great! You won the game!

SEMICOLON: Put a semicolon between two closely related *independent* clauses unless they are joined by the connecting words *and, but, for, or, nor, yet, so*.

The hail struck with a vengeance; we ran for cover.

I have an appointment soon; therefore, I must hurry.

Note: It is also correct to use a period and capital letter instead of a semicolon.

The hail struck with a vengeance. We ran for cover.

I have an appointment soon. Therefore I must hurry.

COLON: Put a colon after a complete statement when a list or long quotation follows.

We packed the following items: hamburgers, chips, and soda. (*We packed the following items* is a complete sentence. You can hear your voice fall at the end of it. Therefore, we put a colon after it before adding the list.)

We took hamburgers, chips, and soda. (Here, *We took* is not a complete sentence; it needs the list to make it complete. Therefore, since we don't want to separate the list from the first part of the sentence, no colon is used.)

DASH: Use a dash to indicate an abrupt change of thought or to throw emphasis upon what follows.

Use it sparingly.

A mother's role is to deliver children--by labor once and by car forever after.

COMMA:

1. Put a comma before *and, for, or, nor, yet, so* when they connect two independent clauses.

She found a dollar, and that was the end of his worrying.

I may have to find a new job, or I may be able to keep this one.

Be sure such words do connect **two** independent clauses. The following sentence is merely one independent clause with one subject and two verbs. Therefore, no comma is used.

He wanted to travel in Europe but didn't have enough money.

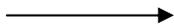
2. Put a comma between items in a series.

She ordered roast beef, potato, salad and pie.

He dropped the pen, shut the drawer, and stood up.

Some words "go together" and don't need a comma between them in a series.

He wore dirty old jeans.

The fading red evening light made him feel joyous. 

To decide if a comma is needed between two words in a series, see whether *and* could be used naturally between them. It sounds all right to say *roast beef and potato and salad and pie*; therefore commas are used. But it wouldn't sound right to say *dirty and old jeans*; therefore no commas are used. Put a comma where *and* would sound right.

Note: When an address or date is used, put a comma after every item, including the last.

She was born on June 10, 1968, in Salem, Oregon, and grew up there.

When only the month and year are used, omit the commas.

In April 1996 she moved to Portland, Oregon.

3. Put a comma after an introductory expression that doesn't flow smoothly into the sentence or before an afterthought that is tacked on at the end. It may be a word, a group of words, or a dependent clause.

Yes, I'll go. It's hot today, isn't it? Moreover, the janitor agreed with me.
Jogging up the hill, he tripped and fell. When you finish, dinner's ready.

4. Put commas around the name of a person spoken to.

I think, Kathy, that we're early. Are you ready yet, Tom?
George, why are you late?

5. Put commas around an expression that interrupts the flow of the sentence (such as *however, moreover, finally, therefore, of course, by the way, on the other hand, etc.*)

I expect, of course, that they'll agree.
We took our seats, finally, and waited for the meeting to start.
We will, I think, make a statement of our position.

Read the preceding sentences aloud. You'll hear how those expressions interrupt the flow of the sentence. Sometimes, however, such expressions flow smoothly into the sentence and don't need commas. The expressions that were interrupters in the preceding sentences are not interrupters in the following sentences and therefore do not require commas.

Of course I hope they'll agree.
Finally we took our seats and waited for the meeting to start.
I think we will make a statement of our position.

6. Put commas around nonessential material. Such material may be interesting, but the main idea of the sentence would be clear without it. In this sentence---

Jong Clark, who heads the art department, will speak tomorrow.

the clause *who heads the art department* is not essential to the main idea of the sentence. Without it we still know who the sentence is about and what he is going to do: Jong Clark will speak tomorrow. Therefore the nonessential material is set off from the rest of the sentence by commas to show that it could be left out. Whereas in this sentence--

The man who heads the art department will speak tomorrow.

the clause *who heads the art department* is essential to the main idea of the sentence. Without it the sentence would read: The man will speak tomorrow. We would have no idea which man. The *who* clause is essential because it tells us which man. It shouldn't be left out. Therefore no commas are used around it.

For more information and examples about COMMAS, see handout W-108.