

**USE THE COMMA ( , )**

1. To separate items in a **series.**

* (series of words) – Sophomores, Juniors, and Seniors attended the assembly.
* (series of phrases) – She got paint on her shirt, on her shoes, and in her hair.
* (series of clauses) – They came to the party, they drank all the beer, and they refused to leave.

**Note**: Some writing guides suggest leaving out the last comma in a series: Sophomores, Juniors and Seniors attended the assembly.

1. To set off all types of **nonrestrictive elements** (information not necessary to the meaning of the core sentence)**.**

* New Orleans, home of the po-boy sandwich, is a fascinating city.
* The marsh, once full of wildlife, is now covered in oil.
* John, who knows everything about physics, can’t boil an egg.

**Note**: Do not put commas around essential (restrictive) information: The woman who is sitting four seats to the left is falling asleep. [The location of the woman is essential information].

1. To set off **introductory elements** (introductory or transitional words, phrases, or dependent clauses that come at the beginning of a sentence)**.**

* In this box, you will find the treasure you seek.
* Hearing her name called, she rose from her seat in the jury room.
* After he left high school, he volunteered for two years.

1. Before a coordinating conjunction (for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so) when used to **connect main clauses.**

* We leave food out at night for the stray cats, and it is always gone by the morning.
* He ran a strong race, but he came in second.

**Note:** Do not use a comma if the coordinating conjunction connects compound subjects, verbs, or objects: He ran a strong race but came in second.

1. To **connect free modifiers** to a base sentence.

* The children sat in three straight rows, fidgeting and squirming in their seats.
* A few hours later we spotted two small dolphins, startlingly beautiful fish of pure gold, pulsing and fading and changing color.

**USE THE COLON ( : )**

1. After a complete sentence that introduces a **list or a full-sentence quotation.**
   * There are three major ways to cut your risk of heart disease: exercise regularly, eat a healthy diet, and reduce stress levels in your everyday life.
   * Hemingway expresses the struggles of the writer this way: “There is nothing to writing. All you do is sit down at a typewriter and bleed.”

**USE THE SEMICOLON ( ; )**

1. To connect **closely related main clauses.**
   * We prepared food for fifty guests; only ten diners showed up.
   * He ran a strong race; however, he came in second.
2. To separate a **series of items** that themselves contains commas.

* The committee received suggestions from a veterinarian in Anchorage, Alaska; a lawyer in Medford, Massachusetts, who has handled animal cruelty cases; and an animal rescue worker in New Orleans, Louisiana, who is a specialist in rescuing wild animals in urban settings.

**USE THE DASH ( -- )**

1. To mark any **sudden break and add emphasis.**
   * She will finally receive her degree in May—if she survives her final exams.
2. To set off **elements added at the end of the sentence.**

* He packed the necessary items in the duffel bag—duct tape, a rope, and an axe.

1. To set off **interrupters**, especially when they contain commas (a dash works as a “strong” comma).

* The necessary items—duct tape, a rope, and an axe—were packed in the duffel bag.

**Notes:** A dash is not a comma substitute. Use it only sparingly, such as in the cases described above.

**USE PARENTHESES ( )**

1. To set off and **de-emphasize** explanatory or less important details inserted into a sentence:
   * Oswaldo was born in Honduras (although he lived there only seven years).

**USE THE APOSTROPHE ( ’ )**

1. To mark a **possessive:**
   * That is Ann’s yogurt, so please do not eat it. [singular word, not ending in “s”]
   * The cats’ tails were twitching in irritation. [plural word]
   * The children’s snacks filled the ice chest. [word that is plural without adding “s”]

**Note:** The possessive form of “its” doesn’t use an apostrophe: That coat is losing its buttons.

1. To mark the missing part of the word in a **contraction (and other omissions).**

* That’s Ann’s yogurt, so please don’t eat it.
* It's ten o'clock. [originally "It is ten of the clock."]

3.To form **certain plurals** when clarity is an issue.

* The old typewriter doesn’t type e's. (“The old typewriter doesn’t type es” has a different meaning).