

EDU 709
PUNCTUATION

Punctuation marks are traffic signals:

Period = Stop Sign

Come to a full stop. Then go on—no sliding through.

Comma = Flashing Yellow Light

Slow down, look left and right, then continue.

Semicolon = Flashing Red Light

Stop briefly; forge ahead.

Colon = Arrow or Road Sign

Listen up! What follows explains or adds information.

Parentheses and Dashes = Detour

Take a quick detour—then proceed. (Fine & Josephson, p. 50)

Which is correct?

I like the new schedule. My colleagues prefer the old one. (OK)

I like the new schedule, my colleagues prefer the old one. (NOT)

I like the new schedule; my colleagues prefer the old one. (OK)

I like the new schedule, but my colleagues prefer the old one. (OK)

Commas

Use a comma before a coordinating conjunction (and, but, for, or, nor, so, yet) that introduces an independent clause (a complete sentence by itself).

Sally had the highest grades in the class, and she won a scholarship. (OK)

Sally had the highest grades in the class and she won a scholarship. (NOT)

Sally had the highest grades in the class, and won a scholarship. (NOT)

Sally had the highest grades in the class and won a scholarship. (OK)

Use a comma after a conjunctive adverb (however, furthermore, therefore, etc.)

Bob thought his science project was perfect; however, his teacher did not. (OK)

Ms. Wilson thought Bob did not give enough attention to his project; therefore Bob had to do another one. (NOT)

Use a comma after an introductory clause or phrase.

Because the classes are held on weekends, I enrolled in a master's program. (OK)

In August we will begin our second semester of classes. (OK)

In August, we will begin our second semester of classes. (OK)

If the clause or phrase is short, you may omit the comma; however, be careful that the omission does not decrease clarity.

“After eating my cat hiccups” (Elliott, p. 84).

“After eating, my cat hiccups” (Elliott, p. 84).

Use commas between consecutive adjectives that describe the same noun if you can substitute the word *and* for the comma and it would sound right.

She was a warm, friendly, caring teacher. (OK)

She was a warm and friendly and caring teacher. (Sounds right)

Classes were held on a hot June day. (OK)

Classes were held on a hot and June day. (Doesn't sound right)

Use commas to separate items in a list (single words, phrases, or clauses). Include a comma between the last two words.

I plan to attend all my classes, revise all my lesson plans, and take a vacation before school starts in August. (OK)

I want eggs, bacon, pancakes and toast. (NOT)

Semicolons

Use a semicolon to separate two closely related sentences.

I like to shop at the mall; my dog has fleas. (NOT)

I studied all night; I was drowsy the next day. (OK)

I studied all night; and I was drowsy the next day. (NOT)

I forget to study for my test; however, I still passed. (OK)

I forget to study for my test. However, I still passed. (OK)

Use semicolons to separate items in a list that already includes commas.

I met George Bush, the president, Laura Bush, the first lady, and Colin Powell, the Secretary of State. (NOT)

I met George Bush, the president; Laura Bush, the first lady; and Colin Powell, the Secretary of State. (OK)

Colons

Use a colon after a complete sentence that is followed by a list, an example, or an explanation. If a complete sentence follows the colon, it starts with a capital letter.

The classes that I teach are: math, language arts, and science. (NOT)

The classes that I teach are math, language arts, and science. (OK)

I teach the following classes: math, language arts, and science. (OK)

Understanding the APA manual is impossible: The people who wrote it must be insane. (OK)

Understanding the APA manual is impossible. The people who wrote it must be insane. (OK)

Dashes

Dashes add information. Dashes (em dashes) are two hyphens. Don't overuse them in a formal paper.

Three of the subjects—two females and one male—transferred out of the class before the study was completed.

Quotation Marks and Other Punctuation

Periods and commas always go inside the quotation marks.

Colons and semicolons always go outside the quotation marks.

Question marks and exclamation points go inside the quotation marks if they are part of the quoted material. If not, they go outside the quotation marks.

Gail said, "I know the answer to the question." (OK)

Gail said, "I know the answer to the question". (NOT)

Robby asked his parents, "How much longer before we get there?" (OK)

Robby asked his parents, "How much longer before we get there"? (NOT)

Did you tell him, "About three hours?" (NOT)

Did you tell him, "About three hours"? (OK)

Ellipsis Points (. . .) (. . . .)

Use ellipses to show that material has been left out of a quotation. If the omitted material is within a sentence, use three periods with a space before and after each period. If the omitted material is between two sentences, use a period at the end of the first sentence followed by three periods with a space before and after each period.

Don't use ellipsis points at the beginning or end of quotations unless it is necessary to prevent misinterpretation.

It is very important for our children to have plenty of play time. Some people argue that the school year be extended, but I feel that our kids work hard enough and that they go to school enough days. Nobody should go to school 360 days a year. (Elliott, p. 117)

“Some people argue that the school year be extended, but I feel . . . that they go to school enough days. Nobody should go to school 360 days a year” (Elliott, p. 117).

“It is very important for our children to have plenty of play time. . . . Nobody should go to school 360 days a year” (Elliott, p. 117).

Be careful when you use ellipsis points. Don't change the meaning of a quotation.

The governor said, “It is very important for our children . . . that the school year be extended . . . and that they go to school . . . 360 days a year” (Elliott, p. 117).

It is very important for our children to have plenty of play time. Some people argue that the school year be extended, but I feel that our kids work hard enough and that they go to school enough days. Nobody should go to school 360 days a year. (Elliott, p. 117)

References

Elliott, R. (1997). *Painless grammar*. Hauppauge, NY: Barron's.

Fine, E. H., & Josephson, J. P. (1998). *Nitty-gritty grammar: A not-so-serious guide to clear communication*. Berkeley, CA: Ten Speed Press.