

# Punctuation Use



## The Comma

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1. **The comma** is probably the most commonly misused form of punctuation. Although its use is decreasing, commas are necessary to clarify many situations:
  - a. **To separate items in a series:** ( the oxford comma)  
She likes apples, oranges, and bananas.
  - b. **To separate two complete sentences joined by** for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so (the fanboys comma):  
He wanted to go to the meeting, but he had made other plans.
  - c. **To separate adjectives of equal rank and importance:**  
It is a dark, stormy night.
  - d. **After introductory parts of sentences:**
    1. After single words of transition such as **moreover, however, therefore**.  
The report is brief. However, it covers the subject fully.
    2. After short transitional expressions such as “on the other hand,” or “for example”: There are ways to make your writing more concise. For example, cut out phrases like “there are.”
    3. After introductory subordinate clauses:  
Unless measures are taken to counteract the current trend, the future looks bleak.
    4. After mild expressions or introductory elements:  
Yes, you are expected to attend. In fact, you may enjoy it.
  - e. **To separate words or word groups that interrupt the main idea of the sentence.**  
The argument, childish as it was, resulted in their not speaking for days.
  - f. **To set off modifying or descriptive phrases that are not necessary to define the noun being described. Compare the following sentences:**  
The woman who is standing by the door is my boss.  
My boss, who is a woman, is standing by the door.
  - g. **Between elements of dates in traditional order:**  
February 5, 1996, is the day I received a promotion.  
But notice new order: ...5 February 1996...Note: Any number, date or otherwise, which begins a sentence must be spelled out: Forty students signed up for rowing lessons.



## The Semicolon

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2. **The semicolon** acts like a period. It is a strong mark which should be used sparingly and then according to strict rules. Its use is declining.
  - a. **Closely related ideas written as independent clauses (complete sentences) not joined by “fanboys” should be separated by a semicolon:**  
I do not plan to attend the meeting; I feel very ill.
  - b. **Independent clauses joined by *for example, furthermore, nevertheless, therefore, however, and similar words* should be separated by a semicolon:**  
Dr. Harrison has read our papers; however, he has not marked them yet.  
Note the comma after the conjunction.
  - c. **A series of items containing commas within them should be separated by semicolons:**  
The committee met three times: September 2, 1992; November 28, 1994; and January 4, 1995.



## The apostrophe

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3. **The apostrophe causes more grief than any other punctuation mark.** Basically, it has only two uses.
  - a. **To show that letters or numbers have been left out:**  
You are: you're    it is: it's    class of '95    “Y'all come, now.”
  - b. **To show ownership or possession:**  
  
girl's sweater    men's room    anybody's book  
Note: an easy way to check on this use is to remember that something owned must be written (or implied) immediately after the apostrophe:  
It could be anybody's sweater.  
It could be anybody's. (sweater implied)

Note: Writers sometimes confuse the plural form of a noun with its possessive form, but the plural form of ordinary nouns does not use an apostrophe:

boy, boys; man, men, etc.

(Unusual nouns that do form plurals with an apostrophe are shown in 3 below.)

a. All singular possessives are formed by adding 's to the singular form:

girl's    people's    society's

Exceptions: Jesus'    Moses'    Achilles' and Greek names ending in s

b. Plural possessives are formed by first forming the plural: girls children.

If the plural ends in -s, simply add an apostrophe: girls'

If the plural does not end in -s, add 's: children's

**c. The unusual nouns which form plurals with 's are letters, numbers, abbreviated words, and words that you are talking about:**

My son got four A's this semester.

Don't bet any 3's.

These CPU's are defective.

You have too many *and's* in this sentence.

Note: also: Apostrophes are never used with the possessive of personal pronouns:

mine, his, hers, its, ours, your, theirs.