Commas, Semicolons, and Colons

When and how to use commas:

- Commas come before **coordinating conjunctions** (for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so) when they link two independent clauses*:

  - It was raining, and I was hurrying to get home.
  - She felt terrible, but she went to class anyway.

- Commas separate **items in a series**, including **coordinate adjectives**:

  - He bought bananas, apples, oranges, and cheese.
  - She had long, dark, straight, thick hair.

- Commas set off parenthetical elements such as an appositive, which is a noun phrase or clause that renames or describes the noun directly beside it, and nonrestrictive relative clauses:

  - The Washington monument, a massive obelisk, was completed in 1884.
  - My parents, who met each other in 1962, have been married for 50 years.

- Commas set off **transitional phrases**:

  - On the other hand, many diets decrease stamina and strength.
  - As a matter of fact, American football was derived from rugby.
  - Many people, however, are allergic to cats.

- Commas follow **introductory clauses and phrases**:

  - On the way home, I stopped to buy groceries.
  - Because it was raining, I took a taxi home.
  - To our surprise, they were brothers.

- Use commas for **direct address, tag questions, mild interjections**, and **yes/no**:

  - I hate to say this, John, but this relationship just isn’t working out.
  - You like chocolate, don’t you?
  - Well, I might have time for lunch with you next week.
  - Yes, you must do the homework.

- Commas indicate **direct quoted speech**:

  - He said, “Let’s go,” and we did.
  - He said we should go, and we did.

- Commas go inside **quotation marks**:

  - He had heard about “oleo,” but he didn’t know what it was.

When and how to use semicolons:

- Semicolons connect **two independent clauses** that are closely related:

  - The book is informative; it has helpful charts and graphs.
  - My brother is going to Spain for the summer; he will be studying Spanish.
Semicolons separate three or more items in a series that already have commas in them:
- I like big, purple shirts; red, high-heeled shoes; and fluffy, yellow pillows.
- I live with Larry, a student; Moe, an executive; and Curly, a cop.

Semicolons separate two independent clauses that are joined by a transition word or phrase:
- It is important to get enough sleep; however, too much sleep can be bad for your health.
- Jack did not eat the leftovers in the fridge; instead, he ordered a pizza.

Semicolons go outside quotation marks:
- He had heard about “oleo”; he didn’t know what it was.

When and how to use colons:
- Colons come after independent clauses and may be followed by lists, words, phrases, clauses, or independent clauses:
  - Then I came to a shocking realization: He did not remember me.
  - She traveled to the following countries: England, Italy, and Japan.
  - He was cooking her favorite dinner: cheese fajitas with corn.

- Colons go outside quotation marks:
  - He explained “oleo”: it’s a non-dairy butter substitute.


*If you would like to know more about independent clauses, please see the George Mason Writing Center’s handout titled “Run-ons.”

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