
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.

Adapted from: The Harbrace College Handbook (12th ed.) by Horner/Webb/Miller and A Writer’s Reference (4th ed.) by Diana Hacker.

*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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