

COMMON PUNCTUATION ISSUES IN GRADUATE WRITING

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Organization of this tutorial

This tutorial covers several issues related to punctuation that graduate writers often encounter. The tutorial is organized into four primary sections, each of which corresponds to a particular function of punctuation:

1. Inserting extra information into a sentence
2. Punctuating a list
3. Connecting clauses
4. Quoting and citing sources

Within these sections, you will find examples of constructions involving the following punctuation marks:

, **comma**

— **em dash**

: **colon**

() **parentheses**

; **semi-colon**

– **en dash**

- **hyphen**

[] **square brackets**

“ ” **double quotation marks**

‘ ’ **single quotation marks**

1. Inserting extra information into a sentence

There are several ways to insert extra information into a sentence through use of punctuation. The three most common methods are (1) setting the information off with **commas**, (2) enclosing the information within **parentheses**, and (3) setting the information off with **em dashes**. Consider the following examples:

Alaska, purchased by the United States from Russia in 1867, became the 49th state in 1959.

Alaska (purchased by the United States from Russia in 1867) became the 49th state in 1959.

Alaska—purchased by the United States from Russia in 1867—became the 49th state in 1959.

The three methods differ slightly in the stress that they lay upon the extra information. (1) Using **commas** is a “neutral” method: the information is included in the sentence without indicating any difference in stress relative to the rest of the sentence. (2) Using **parentheses** generally signals that the information within the parentheses is less significant than the rest of the sentence; if the reader skips this information, it will not adversely affect their comprehension of the sentence’s intended meaning. (3) Using **em dashes**, in contrast, draws the reader’s attention to the information between the dashes as significant.

Common Mistakes

Omitting punctuation

When the researchers concluded the experiment nearly four months after the first trial they realized that their initial hypothesis would need to be revised.

Here, the extra information, “nearly four months after the first trial,” should be set off with punctuation in order to make the sentence read more smoothly.

When the researchers concluded the experiment, nearly four months after the first trial, they realized that their initial hypothesis would need to be revised.

Using incorrect punctuation

John Climacus – one of the most famous monks in Eastern Orthodox tradition – served as the leader of the remote Monastery of St. Catherine in the Sinai in the sixth and seventh centuries.

Here, **em dashes** should be used instead of **en dashes** (en dashes are used for ranges of dates or numbers). Although some genres, such as newspaper writing, allow a space on either side of the em dash, most academic writing favors using em dashes *without spaces*.

John Climacus—one of the most famous monks in Eastern Orthodox tradition—served as the leader of the remote Monastery of St. Catherine in the Sinai in the sixth and seventh centuries.

2. Punctuating a list

You can introduce a list either by introducing a new clause with a **colon** or by integrating the list into the structure of the main clause.

This article focuses on three areas of overlapping concern: A, B, and C.

This article focuses on three areas of overlapping concern, including A, B, and C.

This article focuses on A, B, and C.

Use a **comma** when separating items in a list. A list item can be a word or a phrase.

Kafka's oeuvre includes letters, diaries, short stories, and three unfinished novels.

"Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, the wretched refuse of your teeming shore."

Use a **semi-colon** to separate items in a list that contain appositive phrases. An *appositive phrase* follows a noun and provides additional description or parenthetical information about the noun in question.

Kafka frequently wrote letters to Felice Bauer, *a woman to whom he was twice engaged*.

If your list contains appositive phrases, use semi-colons instead of commas to separate each item. Doing so makes the sentence easier to read by marking off the appositive phrases that describe each item from the items themselves. Without semi-colons, there is no way for the reader to discern whether the phrases are additional list items or a description of the preceding noun.

Kafka frequently wrote letters to Felice Bauer, a woman to whom he was twice engaged; Max Brod, his friend and literary executor; and Milena Jesenská, a Czech journalist and translator.

When listing items, be sure to include a **comma** before the final conjunction (usually the word "and"). This is called the Oxford comma or serial comma. While some style guides regard the Oxford comma as optional, others, including the *Chicago Manual of Style*, require it. Though the Oxford comma is not necessary in all cases, omitting it can sometimes result in confusion or ambiguity.

Italo Svevo was influenced by the founders of psychoanalysis, Bergson and Kafka.

In the example sentence, the omission of the Oxford comma implies that Bergson and Kafka are the founders of psychoanalysis. In order to avoid this confusion, the sentence would need to be written as follows:

Italo Svevo was influenced by the founders of psychoanalysis, Bergson, and Kafka.

While this case clearly demonstrates the necessity of the Oxford comma in certain situations, there are also cases in which the Oxford comma *creates* ambiguity. For example,

Italo Svevo was influenced by Kafka, the founder of psychoanalysis, and Bergson.

In this example, it is ambiguous whether Kafka is the founder of psychoanalysis or whether “the founder of psychoanalysis” refers to another unnamed person. Often, as in this case, the best way to avoid ambiguity relating to comma placement is to simply reorder the items in the list.

Italo Svevo was influenced by Kafka, Bergson, and the founder of psychoanalysis.

Common Mistakes

Faulty parallelism

This fellowship appeals to me because it encourages diversity, intercultural communication, and being responsible for others.

In a list, each item must be the same part of speech and form in order to preserve the parallel structure. If your first item is a noun, then the remaining items in the list should also be nouns; likewise, if your first item is an infinitive (to + verb), then the remaining items should also be infinitives. In the example sentence above, the first two items are nouns and the third is a gerund (“being”); to preserve the parallelism, the third item should be rewritten as a noun, like so:

This fellowship appeals to me because it encourages diversity, intercultural communication, and mutual responsibility.

3. Connecting clauses

There are several ways to connect two independent clauses together within a single sentence: with a **comma**, a **semi-colon**, or a **colon**. Though a comma is generally neutral, the semi-colon and colon communicate something subtly different about the relationship between the two clauses: a **semi-colon** suggests that the two clauses are closely related and of equal importance; a **colon** can indicate that the second clause is a consequence or illustration of the idea in the first clause or that the second clause deserves extra emphasis.

Alexander Graham Bell is best known as the inventor of the telephone, but few know that he also invented an early version of the metal detector.

The Patriots, also known as American Whigs, embraced republicanism and called for the foundation of an independent nation; the Royalists, known as Tories or Loyalists, espoused traditionalist conservatism and supported British rule of the colonies.

According to the famous line, only two things are certain: death and taxes.

Use a **comma** before the words **and**, **but**, **or**, **yet**, **nor**, **so**, and **for** when they connect two independent clauses together, i.e. when they function as coordinating conjunctions.

Common Mistakes

Comma splice

A comma splice is a type of run-on sentence that occurs when two independent clauses are connected without a conjunction.

Fellini's best known film is 8 1/2, it influenced many filmmakers.

In order to be grammatically correct, the above sentence should be rewritten with a **semi-colon** connecting the two independent clauses. Alternatively, you could insert a coordinating conjunction such as "and" between the two clauses or simply rewrite the sentence as two separate sentences.

Fellini's best known film is 8 1/2. It influenced many filmmakers.

Fellini's best known film is 8 1/2; it influenced many filmmakers.

Fellini's best known film is 8 1/2 and it influenced many filmmakers.

An exception to this rule is sometimes made for phrases that are spoken and short, such as the famous line:

"I came, I saw, I conquered."

Dangling modifier

An introductory phrase that is not immediately followed by the noun it modifies is called a misplaced or dangling modifier. When you begin a sentence with an introductory phrase, make sure that you do not banish the noun it modifies to distant parts of the sentence. Doing so can introduce unnecessary ambiguity.

Having never seen the film before, the professor took her time explaining the plot to the class.

The above sentence implies that the reason the professor took her time explaining the film was because she had never seen it. If you intend to say that the professor took her time explaining the film because *the class* had never seen it, then you need to rearrange the sentence like so:

The professor took her time explaining the plot to the class, who had never seen the film before.

The professor took her time explaining the plot to the class, since they had never seen the film before.

4. Quoting and Citing Sources

Conventions for using punctuation when quoting and citing sources vary across academic disciplines and across different regions. Below are a few common issues within the context of North American academic writing.

Use of quotation marks next to other punctuation

When quoting, place **quotation marks** *inside* other punctuation marks, with the exception of periods, commas, and (if the original quotation is a question) question marks.

“Is there any essential connexion,” wrote Tolkien in a now-famous essay, “between children and fairy-stories?”

Use of single quotation marks

Use **single quotation marks** for quotations within quotations.

When I asked him why he had come to the Writing Center, he responded, “My professor told me that I should come here to ‘fix issues with your use of punctuation.’”

Use of footnotes and endnotes next to punctuation

Superscript numbers for footnotes and endnotes at the end of a clause or sentence should be placed *outside other punctuation*.

“The human brain,” writes psychologist Lisa Feldman Barrett, “is a master of deception.”¹

The health hazards of cheese have been researched extensively;² its benefits for emotional well-being, however, have long been overlooked by scholars.

The only exceptions to this rule are the **em dash** and, in certain cases, **parentheses**.

The em dash—touted by *The Punctuation Guide* as “perhaps the most versatile punctuation mark”³—is on the rise in both academic and non-academic writing.

The colloquial use of the phrase “moot point” in American English to denote something no longer worth discussing stands in contrast with its “official” definition as something which is open to discussion (the word “moot” derives from an Old English word for assembly or meeting⁴).

Use of hyphens versus en dashes

Hyphens are used to connect words or names (e.g., “semi-colon” or “Jean-Jacques Rousseau”). If you want to denote a range of dates or numbers, use **en dashes**.

The conference, which occurred May 22–25, 1958, was later hailed as “one of the most important events of the decade” for the developing field of ethnomusicology (Springer 2010, pp. 8–9).

Use of parentheses versus square brackets

Parentheses are replaced by **square brackets** when the bracketed phrase occurs within a quotation or a parenthetical construction. Thus,

One of the most famous phrases of the Christian New Testament occurs at the start of the *Gospel according to John*: “In the beginning was the Word [*logos*], and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (Jn 1:1 [RSV translation]).

Here, the Greek word *logos* is in square brackets because it occurs within a quotation; “RSV translation” is in square brackets because it occurs within a parenthetical construction.

Additional Resources

[The Punctuation Guide](#) is organized by punctuation mark and includes examples of the different uses of each one.

For suggestions on how to avoid comma splices, see this [tutorial](#) by the George Mason University Writing Center.

The [Yale Poorvu Center for Teaching and Learning](#) has an extensive collection of materials on citation practices and styles, with links to further resources.