

Commas:

The following rules cover the main uses. You will find that there are many other optional uses which lend emphasis or give a finer point of meaning.

Commas are used:-

A) to separate words, phrases or clauses in a list

- **A series of nouns:** *His room was littered with books, pens, papers and maps.*

- **A series of adjectives:** *He was a quiet, gentle, unassuming man.*

When one adjective describes the other or when the last adjective is closely linked with its noun, there should be no comma: *the deep blue sky; a new Cambridge college.* (Contrast: *a thin, white hand*)

- **A series of adverbs:** *Try to work quickly, confidently and efficiently.*

- **A series of phrases:** *We spent an enjoyable day visiting the zoo, rowing on the lake, and picnicking in the park.*

- **A series of verbs or clauses:** *He took a long run-up, slipped on the wet grass, and landed short of the sand-pit.*

It is better with larger groupings to put a comma before the 'and'. The comma is also used between two long main clauses joined by 'and' or 'but', especially when the subjects of the clauses are different.

B) before and after a phrase or clause in apposition (i.e. when placing a group of words after a noun to give a fuller explanation or description):

Jean, Bill's sister, bought a new hat, a pink one with feathers.

C) to separate 'sentence adverbs' – these show the link between the whole sentence and the preceding one(s):

However, on the other hand, moreover...

They tried hard. The conditions, however, were against them.

D) to mark off the person(s) addressed or called to (whether by name or description):

Look out, Fred! Now, you fool, you've missed it!

E) to bracket off insertions or afterthoughts. (Dashes or brackets may also be used for this). Use of commas on either side of parenthesis:

Sunday, as everyone knows, is a day of rest.

F) to mark off interjections – 'yes', 'no', 'please':

Well, er, no, I don't think I will, thank you.

G) before question tags:

They played well, didn't they?

H) to mark off a participial phrase:

Seeing the lion, Alexander screamed.

I) to mark off adverbial clauses, esp. when they start the sentence, except when they are very short. (Adverbial clauses are introduced by words like 'although', 'if', 'because'.):

Although you may not realise it, you need two commas in this sentence, because it contains two adverbial clauses.

J) to mark off an adjective clause which merely comments but does not limit or define:

The boys, who were fooling around, were punished.

(Without commas this would mean that *only* the boys who were fooling around were punished; with commas it means that *all* the boys were fooling around and *all* of them were punished. The commas act like brackets.)

NB Don't put a comma between the subject and its verb:

WRONG *what he wrote, was illegible.*

RIGHT *what he wrote was illegible.*

The semicolon is, or maybe used

A) to separate clauses which could stand as sentences but which are closely related, especially:

i) when the second clause expands or explains the first:

Neither of us spoke; we merely waited in silence.

ii) when the clauses describe a sequence of actions or different aspects of the same topic:

There was a sharp, bracing air; the ground was very dry; the sea was crisp and clear.

iii) before 'sentences' beginning with 'even so', 'so', 'therefore', 'for instance', 'nevertheless', 'then'...

He took great care; even so, he made a few errors.

iv) to suggest a contrast:

I like swimming; my sister hates it.

(In all of the examples above full stops could have been used but would have

been too abrupt). The clause after the semicolon always starts with a lower case letter.

B) to mark off a series of phrases (or clauses) which themselves contain commas. (Compare the use of square and round brackets in mathematics):

You will need to bring the following: some scrap paper; a pen, preferably blue or black; some envelopes; and some good, white, unlined writing-paper.

The colon is used

A) to introduce a list (see previous example).

B) before a clause which explains the previous statement. The colon represents 'namely' or 'that is':

One thing is certain: we shall not surrender. (Here a dash could be used)

C) to express a strong contrast:

God creates: man destroys.

D) to introduce a climax or concluding clause :

After pondering the choices before him he came to a decision: he joined the army.

E) to make a pointed connection:

Jeremy became a director in just three months: his father was the chief shareholder.

Overuse of the dash – even only a little overuse – gives writing an unpleasantly agitated – even explosive quality.