

Exclamation Point !

The exclamation point tells readers that the sentence should be interpreted as forceful or dramatic.

Fire!

Shut that door immediately!

Because they give the impression of shouting, exclamation points are rarely needed in formal business and academic writing.

5B Semicolon ;

Semicolons are mainly used for connecting two (or sometimes three) independent clauses.

Dengue hemorrhagic fever is a viral infection common to Southeast Asia; it kills about 5,000 children a year.

Sometimes the second clause contains a transitional adverb (see 1B Comma Splices):

Dengue has existed in Asia for centuries; *however*, it grew more virulent in the 1950s.

Do not use a comma where a semicolon or period is required; the result is a comma splice (see 1B Comma Splices). In contrast, a semicolon used in place of a comma may result in a type of fragment (see 1A Fragments):

In populations where people have been stricken by an infectious virus, survivors have antibodies in their bloodstreams; *which prevent or reduce the severity of subsequent infections*. **The semicolon makes a fragment of the *which* clause.**

Do not confuse the semicolon with the colon (see 5D Colon). While the semicolon connects independent clauses, a colon ordinarily does not.

The semicolon is also used to separate items in a series when the items contain internal commas:

Scientists are researching the effects of staphylococcus bacteria, which cause infections in deep wounds; influenza A virus, which causes respiratory flu; and conjunctivitis bacteria, which have at times caused fatal purpuric fever.

5C Comma ,

The comma is probably the most troublesome mark of punctuation because it has so many uses. Its main uses are explained here.

Compound Sentences. A comma joins two independent clauses connected with a coordinating conjunction (see 1B Comma Splices):

Martinique is a tropical island in the West Indies, *and* it attracts flocks of tourists annually.

Do not use the comma between independent clauses without the conjunction, even if the second clause begins with a transitional adverb:

Faulty: Martinique is a tropical island in the West Indies, it attracts flocks of tourists annually. **Two independent clauses with no conjunction creates a comma splice.**

Faulty: Martinique is a tropical island in the West Indies, consequently it attracts flocks of tourists annually. **Two independent clauses with transitional adverb creates a comma splice.**

Introductory Sentence Elements. Commas set off a variety of introductory sentence elements, as illustrated here:

When the French colonized Martinique in 1635, they eliminated the native Caribs.
Introductory subordinate clause

Choosing death over subservience, the Caribs leaped into the sea. **Introductory participial (verbal) phrase**

Before their death, they warned of a “mountain of fire” on the island. **Introductory prepositional phrase**

Subsequently, the island’s volcano erupted. **Introductory transitional adverb**

Short prepositional phrases sometimes are not set off with commas:

In 1658 the Caribs leaped to their death.

Sometimes, however, a comma must be used after a short prepositional phrase to prevent misreading:

Before, they had predicted retribution. **Comma is required to prevent misreading**

Nonrestrictive and Parenthetical Elements. Words that interrupt the flow of a sentence are set off with commas before and after.

In this class are nonrestrictive modifiers (see 1B Restrictive and Nonrestrictive Modifiers), transitional adverbs (see 1B Comma Splices), and a few other types of interrupters. Here are examples:

This rugged island, *which Columbus discovered in 1502,* exports sugar and rum.
Nonrestrictive *which* clause; commas before and after

A major part of the economy, *however,* is tourism. **Interrupting transitional adverb; commas before and after**

Tourists, *attracted to the island by its climate,* enjoy discovering its culture.
Interrupting participial (verbal) phrase (see 1A Fragments); commas before and after

A popular tradition in Martinique is the Carnival, *which occurs just before Lent each year.* **Nonrestrictive *which* clause; one comma**

Martinique is an overseas department of France, *a status conferred in 1946.* **An absolute, ending the sentence (participial phrase plus the noun it modifies)**

Series

Commas separate items in a series:

Martiniquans dance to *steel drums, clarinets, empty bottles, and banjos*. **Four nouns**

Dressing in colorful costumes, dancing through the streets, and thoroughly enjoying the celebration, Martiniquans celebrate Carnival with enthusiasm. **Three participial (verbal) phrases**

Martinique has a population of over 300,000, its main religion is Roman Catholicism, and its languages are French and Creole dialect. **Three independent clauses**

Various sentence elements can make up a series, but the joined elements should be grammatically equivalent (see 1D Parallelism, which discusses faulty parallelism). Common practice calls for a comma before the conjunction joining the last item in the series.

Quotations

Commas set off quoted sentences from the words that introduce them:

“A wise man,” says David Hume, “proportions his belief to the evidence.”

According to Plato, “Writing will produce forgetfulness” in writers because “they will not need to exercise their memories.” **The second clause is not set off with a comma.**

“X on beer casks indicates beer which paid ten shillings duty, and hence it came to mean beer of a given quality,” reports *The Dictionary of Phrase and Fable*.

Quotations introduced with *that* and other connectors (such as *because* in the second sentence here) are not set off with commas. Commas at the end of quotations go inside the quotation marks.

Coordinate Adjectives

Commas separate adjectives that equally modify a noun:

The “food pyramid” was designed as a *meaningful, memorable* way to represent the ideal daily diet. **Two adjectives modify the noun *way* equally.**

When you’re not sure about using a comma, try inserting the coordinating conjunction *and* between the two adjectives to see if they are truly coordinate (*meaningful and memorable*). Do not use a comma between adjectives that are not coordinate or between the last adjective and the noun being modified. (See also 1J Adjectives and Adverbs.)

Addresses and Dates

Use a comma to separate city and state in an address, but not to set off the zip code:

Glen Ridge, New Jersey 07028 *or* Glen Ridge, NJ 07028

In a sentence, a state name is enclosed in commas:

The letter from Glen Ridge, New Jersey, arrived by express mail.

Dates are treated similarly:

January 5, 1886 *but* 5 January 1886

The events of January 5, 1886, are no longer remembered. **When other punctuation is not required, the year is followed by a comma.**

Commas to Avoid

A comma does mean pause, but not all pauses are marked by commas. Use a comma only when you know you need one. Avoid the following comma uses:

1. To set off restrictive sentence elements:

People, *who want a balanced diet*, can use the food pyramid as a guide. **The restrictive *who* clause is necessary to identify *people* and should not be set off with commas.**

2. To separate a subject from its verb and a preposition from its object:

People who want a balanced diet, can use the food pyramid as a guide. **The comma following the *who* clause separates the subject, *people*, from its verb, *can use*. Treat the noun phrase (*People who want a balanced diet*) as if it were a single word.**

The bottom level of the food pyramid contains food from grains, *such as*, bread, cereals, rice, and pasta. **The preposition *such as* should not be followed by a comma.**

3. To follow a coordinating conjunction (see 1B Comma Splices):

The food pyramid describes a new approach to a balanced diet. But, the meat and dairy industries opposed it. **The coordinating conjunction *but* should not be set off with a comma.**

4. To separate two independent clauses (see 1B Comma Splices) not joined with a coordinating conjunction:

The pyramid shows fewer servings of dairy and meat products, therefore consumers would buy less of these higher-priced foods. **The comma should be replaced with a semicolon (5B).**

5. To set off coordinate elements joined with a coordinating conjunction:

Vegetables and fruits are near the bottom of the pyramid, *and should be eaten several times a day*. **The coordinating conjunction *and* joins a second verb, *should be eaten*, not a second independent clause; therefore no comma is needed.**