

LANGUAGE USAGE PUNCTUATION



DEPENDENT AND INDEPENDENT CLAUSES

Because she was rushing to get to school

In order to understand the correct use of commas and semicolons, you must first understand the difference between a dependent and an independent clause. **Clauses** are groups of words that make up sentences. A **dependent clause** can't stand as a complete sentence on its own, whereas an **independent clause** forms a complete sentence and can stand on its own.

She forgot her sunglasses at the library.

The clause in this example is an independent clause because it forms a complete or **simple sentence**. It can stand entirely on its own.

The clause in the following example, by contrast, is a dependent clause. It does not form a complete sentence; we need more information to understand the full meaning being conveyed.

Here are a few more examples of dependent and independent clauses.

- After the football game ended Dependent
- The committee voted against the bill
 Independent
- You really should learn to tie your shoe laces
 Independent
- Although Laura drove all over town Dependent

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COMMAS, SEMICOLON, AND COLONS

Dependent and independent clauses are important in understanding how and when to use commas and semicolons. A **comma** is a punctuation mark that shows a pause between ideas. Among other uses, commas can be used to separate items in a list and to join parts of sentences.

The following example of a simple sentence uses commas correctly to separate three items in a list.

Rashid bought school supplies, water, and a backpack at the store.

Now consider this sentence, which uses commas correctly to join parts of a sentence.

Even though it was cold outside, we went camping anyway.

Notice that here we have a **complex sentence** and the comma is being used to join a dependent clause – *Even though it was cold outside* – with an independent clause, *we went camping anyway*.

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COMMAS, SEMICOLON, AND COLONS

Commas can also be used to join two independent clauses in a **compound sentence**, but the comma must be followed by a connecting word such as *and*, *but*, *for*, or *so*. These connecting words are called **coordinating conjunctions**. There are seven coordinating conjunctions that can be used to join independent clauses.

Coordinating Conjunctions

- for
- and
- nor
- but
- or
- yet
- so

Coordinating conjunctions can be remembered by using a memory phrase. The first letter of each conjunction spells out the word FANBOYS.

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If you use a coordinating conjunction to join two independent clauses in a compound sentence, a comma must come directly before the conjunction.

A crowd gathered outside the building, and the protestors began to seem restless. **Correct.**

A crowd gathered outside the building, the protestors began to seem restless. **Incorrect.**

A crowd gathered outside the building and the protestors began to seem restless. **Incorrect.**

The first example uses the coordinating conjunction *and*, which is correctly preceded by a comma. The second sentence is incorrect because it omits the coordinating conjunction. The last example is incorrect because it omits the comma before the coordinating conjunction.

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Semicolons can be used to join two independent clauses without a coordinating conjunction.

A crowd gathered outside the building; the protestors began to seem restless. **Correct.**

Semicolons are not used to join independent clauses with coordinating conjunctions, but they can be used with transitional words, such as *however*, *nevertheless*, and *therefore*. Whenever a semicolon joins two independent clauses with the help of a transitional word, a comma must follow the transitional word.

The evidence against the defendant was strong; nevertheless, the defendant was acquitted. **Correct.**

In the preceding example, the transitional word *nevertheless* is preceded by a semicolon and followed by a comma. Without both of these punctuation marks, the sentence would be punctuated incorrectly.

The evidence against the defendant was strong; nevertheless the defendant was acquitted. **Incorrect.**

The evidence against the defendant was strong nevertheless, the defendant was acquitted. **Incorrect.**

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Similar to semicolons, **colons** can also be used to join independent clauses. For a colon to be used, the second independent clause must expand upon the ideas in the first independent clause, as in the following sentence.

The evidence against the defendant was strong: the prosecution had gathered testimony from multiple eye witnesses. **Correct.**

Colons can also be used to introduce elements in a list.

Three items should accompany you on every rafting trip: a rain poncho, a waterproof lunch kit, and a sturdy life jacket. **Correct.**

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APOSTROPHES AND HYPHENS

Apostrophes are used to show possession and to form contractions. To show possession, we normally add an apostrophe followed by an s.

Noun Form	Possessive Form	Example
the sun	the sun's	the sun's rays
a dog	a dog's	a dog's toy
our car	our car's	our car's horn

If the noun that is showing possession is a plural that ends in the letter s, normally only an apostrophe is used.

Noun Form	Possessive Form	Example
the families	the families'	the families' picnic baskets
the windows	the windows'	the windows' panes
your sneakers	your sneakers'	your sneakers' laces

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APOSTROPHES AND HYPHENS

Hyphens are used to separate some prefixes from the main part of the word, or root word. Hyphens should always be used following the prefixes *all-*, *ex-*, and *self-*. They should also be used after prefixes that precede a proper noun or a proper adjective.

Prefixes	Proper Nouns and Adjectives
all-seeing	trans-Siberian
ex-employer	mid-Atlantic
self-supporting	un-American

Hyphens are also used with compound adjectives that come before the word they modify.

Emma was strong-willed person.

Correct

Treats are an often-used incentive at the vet's office.

Correct

Sunday's game was full of record-breaking plays.

Correct

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APOSTROPHES AND HYPHENS

Hyphens are not used, however, in compound adjectives that start with adverbs ending in *-ly*.

Incorrect	Correct
a frequently-made error	a frequently made error
a filmily-built house	a filmily built house
an awfully-loud noise	an awfully loud noise

In the left column in the table above, the words *frequently*, *filmily*, and *awfully* are all adverbs ending in *-ly*. Hyphens should not be used following these words, as shown in the column on the right.

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QUOTATION MARKS

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Quotation marks can come in double or single form, each with its own specific uses. **Double quotation marks** are used to signal direct quotations.

Question marks, periods, commas, and exclamation points should be placed *inside* quotation marks.

Sarah said, "It's a lovely day to go hiking."

The detective asked the witness several times, "Are you sure?" **Incorrect**

A comma should also follow the direct quotation if the phrase is a statement.

The detective asked the witness several times, "Are you sure?" **Correct**

"It's a lovely day to go hiking," Sarah said.

If the quoted phrase is a question, it should end with a question mark.

"Would you like to go on a hike with me?" Sarah asked.

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QUOTATION MARKS

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Single quotation marks are used to denote a quotation within a quotation.

Whenever quotation marks are used – either single or double – they should always precede and follow the quoted phrase. Both the beginning and ending quotation marks must be included.

Mrs. Suarez replied, "Sam said that he would 'need the car soon,' so don't keep it for too long."

Everyone yelled, "Go team! And cheered the players to victory. **Incorrect**

It is not correct to use single quotation marks to show direct quotations. Double quotation marks should always be used for this purpose.

Everyone yelled, "Go team!" and cheered the players to victory. **Correct**

The errand boy told his boss that he was 'just going out for pizza run.' **Incorrect**

In this example, the first sentence is missing the quotation marks after *team* that close the quoted phrase. The second example corrects this error by including the opening and closing quotation marks.

The errand boy told his boss that he was "just going out for a pizza run." **Correct**
