

Quick Guide to Sentence Punctuation



Academic Support Center

College of the Redwoods Community College District

707-476-4106

COMMA (,)

1. To separate items in a series (more than two words, phrases or clauses). Put a comma followed by “and” before the last item.

- (series of words) Catholics, Protestants, and Jews were all represented at the meeting.
- (series of phrases) She kissed him on the nose, on both eyes, and on the left ear.
- (series of clauses) They came to the party, they bothered everyone, and they refused to leave.

[Note: commas are not used with conjunctions to join compound elements. Example: *We opened some of our presents on Christmas Eve but saved the rest of them for the morning.*]

2. To set off interrupters that are not essential to the sentence.

- Boston, *the site of the famous Tea Party*, is a city steeped in history.
- The stream, *once swift and clear*, is now dry. The winter rains, *however*, will fill it once again.
- John, *who knows everything about physics*, can't change a spark plug.

[However, no punctuation if a phrase or clause is essential. Example: **Men** *who take one baby aspirin every day* have a much lower risk of a heart attack.]

3. To set off introductory elements

- When you get out of school, come over to my house.
- Feeling tired and defeated, the Senator curled up with his teddy bear.
- Yes, I agree that we need to start all over again.

4. Before a conjunction (and, but, or, for, nor, so, yet) *when it joins independent clauses*

- We visit the Grundy's during Christmas vacation, and they visit us every summer.
- The batter swung at the ball three times, but he never came close.

5. To connect free modifiers to a base sentence

- The players sat quietly on the bench, *humiliated by the lopsided defeat.*
- The climbers struggled up the rock face, *clawing for handholds, their feet frantically searching for the next niche.*

COLON (:)

1. After a complete sentence that introduces a list or summary

- There are three kinds of theories which try to explain the secret of fire walking: physical, psychological and religious.

SEMI-COLON (;)

1. To connect closely related main clauses.

- We visit the Grundy's during Christmas; they visit us every summer.
- The batter swung at the ball three times; he never came close.
- The work is simple; however, it is exciting and rewarding.

2. To separate a series of items which themselves contain commas

- Board members are appointed from each of three general categories: a judge or lawyer of good repute; a professor of art, literature, or history; and a social worker, psychologist, or a clergyman.

DASH (--) Two hyphens

1. To mark a sudden break for emphasis

- These men and women are up for election in November--if they live until then.

2. To set off elements added at the end of the sentence

- You may still be discovering new ideas, but you are also trying to find a form-- to shape, limit, order and select.

3. To set off interrupter, especially when they contain commas (you may think of a dash as a “strong” comma)

- The canned goods--beans, corn, and peas--were stacked neatly on the shelves.
- Four states--Illinois, Ohio, Alabama, and New Jersey--are putting up metric highway signs.

PARENTHESES ()

1. To set off and de-emphasize explanatory or non-essential details in a sentence

- “You have seen the point,” said a PLA (People’s Liberation Army) officer with a knowing grin.
- Some states (New York, for instance) have outlawed the use of cell phones in moving vehicles.