THE WRITING CENTER

Commas and Other Punctuation

Commas

Commas separate things. In fact, commas separate all kinds of things like introductory phrases, items in lists, subordinate clauses or phrases, and, with the help of coordinating conjunctions, independent clauses. Commas also have a number of conventional uses based on their role as general separator of stuff in English. For instance, we use commas to set off names in direct address ("George, it's over"), portions of dates and locations (July 4, 1776, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania) and, in bibliographies and phone books, full names in reverse order (Jefferson, Thomas).

Writers should pay special attention to the use of commas with coordinating conjunctions because this pair now conventionally signifies a break between two complete sentences and can cause misreadings if used for other purposes (or not used, as in a comma-splice). For example:

> *Sam spent Saturday mornings fishing, and swimming at the lake.* (We generally expect a comma and a coordinating conjunction to join two independent clauses. In this case, the comma joins two present participles, not two independent clauses.)

> *Sam hated fishing, her brother couldn't swim.* (A comma is not strong enough to join two independent clauses; it must be accompanied by a coordinating conjunction. For more on this, see the "Fragments and Run-ons" handout.)

Commas can also be used to clarify potentially ambiguous language. Compare the meanings of the following sentences:

> *The chef ate, fried mushrooms, and went home.*

> *The chef ate fried mushrooms and went home.*

Writers should avoid the inexplicably common advice to insert a comma wherever there would be a natural pause in speech. We don't have commas in speech, incidentally, and while we might indicate a written comma by a brief pause in our recitation, we should not reverse the order and insert a comma anywhere we want to pause for effect.

Semicolons

Semicolons balance ideas. The first advice in semicolon use is always, "use them sparingly." Some writers have a love affair with semicolons, but, in most styles and conventions, frequent semicolon use is not a habit to cultivate. When a writer does use a semicolon, it should 1) connect two independent clauses (same as a comma and coordinating conjunction) and 2) indicate a balance of ideas in each clause. For example:

> *Semicolons are most effectively used to show two perspectives on a single idea; the second clause in a compound sentence joined by a semicolon should restate the same idea as the first sentence from a different angle or with a different nuance.*

Colons

Colons move from general to specific. Like semicolons, colons can join two independent clauses, but they can also introduce a bit of evidence (a quotation, for instance) or a list of items. In any case, what follows the colon should be specific examples of the general idea that preceded it: lists, evidence, quotations, etc. As I said before, colons can also join two independent clauses: this compound sentence is an example of that general rule.

M-dashes and Parentheses

M-dashes shout and parentheses whisper. M-dashes (two hyphens put together in most word processors) and parentheses are most often used to set a bit of information apart from the rest of a sentence. They each function in the same general way as a pair of commas, but the m-dash emphasizes the importance of the aside while parentheses minimize it.

> *We're going to have eight different kinds of pie—including chocolate and key lime—at the picnic.*

> *We're going to have eight different kinds of pie (even low-fat, low-calorie raisin pie) at the picnic.*

Notice how the first sentence draws the reader's attention to the exciting kinds of pie that will be at the picnic, while the second sentence minimizes the fact that there will be a healthy, unappetizing-sounding pie among the eight.

Some manuscript styles also use parentheses for citing and attributing sources. You should check the specific style guide for the appropriate use.

Quotation Marks

Quotation marks speak in another voice. Quotation marks typically set a direct quotation apart from your running text. They signal to your readers that those words belong to someone other than you. For instance, I can quote Thomas Jefferson without confusion if I place his words in quotation marks:

> *As Jefferson wrote in 1776, "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal."*

Quotation marks can also indicate that you are presenting a word or phrase that you would not use yourself. We call this use of quotation marks "scare quotes," and they indicate that someone, but not you, would use this language. Scare quotes can help you distance your own beliefs and language from the beliefs or language of a person or group you are researching. For instance, if you are writing about Nazi propaganda, you might want to place "master race" in scare quotes when discussing theories of "Aryan supremacy."

Finally, quotation marks speak in another voice when they indicate specialized terminology. The introduction of "scare quotes" above uses quotation marks to indicate the specialized term. While quotation marks are sometimes used colloquially for emphasis, you should avoid that use in formal and semi-formal writing.