

How to Master Tricky Elements of English Punctuation



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I. Commas and Semicolons in Compound Sentences

A group of words containing a subject and a verb and expressing a complete thought is called a sentence or an independent clause. Sometimes, an independent clause stands alone as a sentence, and sometimes two independent clauses are linked together into what is called a compound sentence. Depending on the circumstances, one of two different punctuation marks can be used between the independent clauses in a compound sentence: a comma or a semicolon. The choice is yours.

Use a comma after the first independent clause when you link two independent clauses with one of the following coordinating conjunctions: *and, but, for, or, nor, so, yet*. For example:

He's going home, and he intends to stay there.

It rained heavily during the afternoon, but we managed to have our tennis match anyway.

They couldn't make it to the summit and come back before dark, so they decided to camp for the night.

Use a semicolon when you link two independent clauses with no connecting words. For example:

He's going home; he intends to stay there.

It rained heavily during the afternoon; we managed to have our tennis match anyway.

They couldn't make it to the summit and come back before dark; they decided to camp for the night.

You can also use a semicolon when you join two independent clauses together with one of the following conjunctive adverbs (adverbs that join independent clauses): *however, moreover, therefore, consequently, otherwise, nevertheless, thus*, etc. For example:

He's going home; moreover, he intends to stay there.

It rained heavily during the afternoon; however, we managed to have our tennis match anyway.

They couldn't make it to the summit and come back before dark; therefore, they decided to camp for the night.

➤ Practice Quiz 1

Choose the correct form of punctuation for each sentence.

1. The computer could perform millions of operations in a split second ___ however, it could not think spontaneously.

- (a) ,
(b) ;

2. I thought registration day would be tiring ___ but I didn't know I'd have to stand in so many lines.

- (a) ,
(b) ;

3. The snowstorm dumped twelve inches of snow on the highway _ subsequently, the police closed the road.

- (a) ,
(b) ;

4. Large supermarkets fascinate me ___ I can find everything from frozen chow mein to soybean flour in one place.

- (a) ,
(b) ;

5. The obstacles are not insurmountable ___ but they are real and formidable.

- (a) ,
(b) ;

6. Professors are supposed to be absent-minded ___ and I've seen plenty of evidence to support that claim since I've been in college.

- (a) ,
(b) ;

7. The hill was covered with wildflowers ___ it was a beautiful sight.

- (a) ,
(b) ;

8. Vancouver is my favorite city ___ in fact, I plan to spend two weeks there this summer.

- (a) ,
(b) ;

9. The quarterback made a brilliant pass ___ and the receiver crossed the goal line for the winning touchdown.

(a) ,

(b) ;

10. Riding a bicycle is excellent exercise ___ I ride mine every day.

(a) ,

(b) ;

[View Answer Key](#)

II. Commas with Nonessential Elements

Some modifying elements of a sentence are essential, restricting the meaning of a modified term, while others are nonessential and don't restrict the modified term's meaning. These nonessential elements, which can be words, phrases, or clauses, are separated with commas.

Rule: Use commas before and after nonessential words, phrases, and clauses, that is, elements embedded in the sentence that interrupt it without changing the essential meaning.

Check → If you leave out the element or put it somewhere else in the sentence, does the essential meaning of the sentence change? If so, the element is essential; if not, it is nonessential.

➤ Nonessential elements

The average world temperature, *however*, has continued to rise significantly.
(word)

Company managers, *seeking higher profits*, hired temporary workers to replace full-time staff. (phrase)

My aunt, *who is eighty-two years old*, walks three miles every day. (clause)

➤ Practice Quiz 2

Write the appositives at the end of each sentence:

1. My son, the policeman, will be visiting us next week. _____
2. The captain ordered the ship's carpenters to assemble the shallop, a large rowboat. _____
3. Walter, the playboy and writer, is very attached to his mother, Mrs. Hammon. _____
4. The actor Paul Newman has directed only one picture. _____
5. Elizabeth Teague, a sweet and lovable girl, grew up to be a mentally troubled woman. _____

Write and punctuate the appositives at the end of each sentence. **Remember: not all require punctuation.**

6. Sweetbriar a company known throughout the southwest is considering a nationwide advertising campaign. _____
7. An above-average student and talented musician Rick made his family proud. _____
8. The extremely popular American film *Titanic* was widely criticized for its mediocre script. _____
9. The greatest American film ever made *Citizen Kane* won only one Academy Award. _____
10. *60 Minutes* the TV news magazine program featured a story on the popular singer Celine Dion. _____

[**View Answer Key**](#)

III. The Apostrophe

The apostrophe has three uses in the English language:

- 1) to form possessives of nouns
- 2) to show the omission of letters
- 3) to indicate certain plurals of lowercase letters.

Apostrophes are **not** used for possessive pronouns or for noun plurals, including acronyms.

➤ 1) Forming possessives of nouns

To see if you need to make a possessive, turn the phrase around and make it an "of the..." phrase. For example:

the boy's hat = the hat of the boy
three days' journey = journey of three days

If the noun after "of" is a building, an object, or a piece of furniture, then no apostrophe is needed!

room of the hotel = hotel room
door of the car = car door
leg of the table = table leg

Once you've determined whether you need to make a possessive, follow these rules to create one.

• **add 's to the singular form of the word (even if it ends in -s):**

the owner's car
John's hat

• **add 's to the plural forms that do not end in -s:**

the children's game
the geese's honking

• **add ' to the end of plural nouns that end in -s:**

houses' roofs
three friends' letters

• **add 's to the end of compound words:**

my brother-in-law's money

• **add 's to the last noun to show joint possession of an object:**

Todd and Anne's apartment

➤ 2) Showing omission of letters

Apostrophes are used in contractions. A contraction is a word (or set of numbers) in which one or more letters (or numbers) have been omitted. The apostrophe shows this omission. Contractions are common in speaking and in informal writing. To use an apostrophe to create a contraction, place an apostrophe where the omitted letter(s) would go. Here are some examples:

don't = do not

I'm = I am

he'll = he will

who's = who is

shouldn't = should not

didn't = did not

➤ 3) Forming plurals of lowercase letters

Apostrophes are used to form plurals of letters that appear in lowercase; here the rule appears to be more typographical than grammatical. To form the plural of a lowercase letter, place 's after the letter. There is no need for apostrophes indicating a plural on capitalized letters, numbers, and symbols (though keep in mind that some editors, teachers, and professors still prefer them). Here are some examples:

p's and q's = a phrase indicating politeness, possibly from "mind your pleases and thank yous"?

Nita's mother constantly stressed minding one's p's and q's.

three Macintosh G4s = three of the Macintosh model G4

There are two G4s currently used in the writing classroom.

▪ Don't use apostrophes for possessive pronouns or for noun plurals. Apostrophes should not be used with possessive pronouns because possessive pronouns already show possession -- they don't need an apostrophe. *His, her, its, my, yours, ours* are all possessive pronouns. Here are some examples:

wrong: his' book-

correct: his book

wrong: The group made it's decision.

correct: The group made its decision

wrong: a friend of yours'

correct: a friend of yours

Practice Quiz 3

Punctuate the following sentences with apostrophes according to the rules for using the apostrophe.

**NOTE – Please print this page to complete the quiz*

1. Whos the partys candidate for vice president this year?
2. The fox had its right foreleg caught securely in the traps jaws.
3. Our neighbors car is an old Chrysler, and its just about to fall apart.
4. In three weeks time well have to begin school again.
5. Didnt you hear that theyre leaving tomorrow?
6. Whenever I think of the stories I read as a child, I remember Cinderellas glass slipper and Snow Whites wicked stepmother.

[View Answer Key](#)

IV. The Hyphen

In English, two words brought together as a compound may be written separately, written as one word, or connected by hyphens. For example, three modern dictionaries all have the same listings for the following compounds:

hair stylist
hairsplitter
hair-raiser

Another modern dictionary, however, lists *hairstylist*, not *hair stylist*. Compounding is obviously in a state of flux, and authorities do not always agree in all cases, but the uses of the hyphen offered here are generally agreed upon.

- 1. Use a hyphen to join two or more words serving as a single adjective before a noun:

a one-way street
chocolate-covered peanuts
well-known author

However, when compound modifiers come after a noun, they are not hyphenated:

The peanuts were chocolate covered.
The author was well known.

- 2. Use a hyphen with compound numbers:

forty-six
sixty-three
Our much-loved teacher was sixty-three years old.

- 3. Use a hyphen to avoid confusion or an awkward combination of letters:

re-sign a petition (vs. resign from a job)
semi-independent (but semiconscious)
shell-like (but childlike)

- 4. Use a hyphen with the prefixes *ex-* (meaning *former*), *self-*, *all-*; with the suffix *-elect*, between a prefix and a capitalized word; and with figures or letters:

ex-boyfriend
self-assured
mid-September
all-inclusive
mayor-elect
anti-American
T-shirt
pre-Civil War
mid-1980s

- 5. Use a hyphen to divide words at the end of a line if necessary, and make the break only between syllables:

pref-er-ence
sell-ing
in-di-vid-u-al-ist

For line breaks, divide already hyphenated words only at the hyphen:

mass-produced
self-conscious

For line breaks in words ending in *-ing*, if a single final consonant in the root word is doubled before the suffix, hyphenate between the consonants; otherwise, hyphenate at the suffix itself:

plan-ning
run-ning
driv-ing
call-ing

Never put the first or last letter of a word at the end or beginning of a line, and don't put two-letter suffixes at the beginning of a new line:

lovely (Do not separate to leave *ly* beginning a new line.)

eval-u-ate (Separate only on either side of the *u*; do not leave the initial *e-* at the end of a line.)

V. The Colon



1. Use a colon (:) before a list of items or details.

- a. Do *not* capitalize the first letter of each item in a list when the items are included in a sentence. Include one space after the colon if what follows is not a complete sentence. Include two spaces after the colon if what follows is a complete sentence.

• *Jenny's mom sent her to the store to get these things: a 10-pound bag of potatoes, a gallon of 1% milk, and a dozen eggs.*

• *This is what I know: She picked up the money, deposited it in my bank account, and gave me the receipt.*

- b. Capitalize the first letter of each item in a list when the list is in column form.

• *Jeff's schedule included the following classes:*

1. *History*
2. *Art*
3. *Trigonometry*
4. *Drafting*
5. *Band*
6. *Tennis*



2. Use a colon before an appositive phrase or clause, which is a group of words that defines or identifies another word or group of words.

• *One of the lamps is cyan: a combination of blue light and green light.*

• *Gina stated the first portion of the Apostle's Creed: I believe in God, the Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth.*

➤ 3. Use a colon after the salutation of a business letter.

- Dear Dr. Marcos:
- To whom it may concern:
- Dear Madam:

➤ 4. Use a colon to divide the parts of time, chapters, and scripture references.

- 5:18 P.M.
- Chapter 6: Part II
- John 3:16
- 19:24:36
- Chapter III: Section C
- The Noble Qur'an: Surat 15

➤ 5. Use a colon between the city/state and the publisher in a book reference.

- Rosenthal, Marvin J. *The Pre-wrath Rapture of the Church*. (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1990), p. 53.

It might also be useful to mention when we don't use a colon. Remember that the clause that precedes the mark (where you're considering a colon) ought to be able to stand on its own as an independent clause. Its purpose might be strictly to introduce the clause that follows, so it might feel rather incomplete by itself, but grammatically it will have both a subject and a predicate. In other words, we would not use a colon in situations such as the following:

- *Her recipe for gunpowder included saltpeter, dry oatmeal, and ground-up charcoal briquettes.* (no colon after "included")
- *His favorite breakfast cereals were Rice Krispies, Cheerios, and Wheaties.* (no colon after "were")
- *Her usual advice, I remember, was "Keep your head up as you push the ball up the court."* (no colon after "was")

Practice Quiz 4

Add a colon to these sentences. In some sentences other punctuation changes may be necessary.

**NOTE – Please print this page to complete the quiz*

- 1) Several countries participated in the airlift Italy, Belgium, France, and Luxembourg.
- 2) Montaigne wrote the following “A wise man never loses anything, if he has himself.”
- 3) The following are the primary colors red, blue, and yellow.
- 4) The automobile dealer handled three makes of cars Volkswagens, Porsches, and Mercedes Benz.
- 5) The Endangered Species Act contains a potential problem for private property owners the government refuses to compensate them for the inconveniences imposed.
- 6) While working out, she discovered an amazing fact she was now able to bench-press ten pounds more than the week before.
- 7) The ice hockey player made a controversial move. A cross-check on another player.
- 8) Images of stylish men appear in the following media GQ Magazine, television commercials, and billboard advertisements.

[View Answer Key](#)

VI. Quotation Marks

- **Periods and commas always go inside quotation marks, even inside single quotes.**

The sign changed from "Walk," to "Don't Walk," to "Walk" again within 30 seconds.

She said, "Hurry up."

She said, "He said, 'Hurry up.'"

- **The placement of question marks with quotes follows logic. If a question is in quotation marks, the question mark should be placed inside the quotation marks.**

She asked, "Will you still be my friend?"

Do you agree with the saying, "All's fair in love and war"? (the question is outside the quote here)

- **When you have a question outside quoted material AND inside quoted material, use only one question mark and place it inside the quotation mark.**

Did she say, "May I go?"

- **Use single quotation marks for quotes within quotes. Note that the period goes inside all quote marks.**

He said, "Mary said, 'Do not treat me that way.'"

- **Use quotation marks to set off a direct quotation only.**

"When will you be here?" he asked.

He asked when you will be there.

- **Do not use quotation marks with quoted material that is more than three lines in length. Introduce the quotation with a colon and leave a blank line above and below the quoted material. Single space the quoted material and indent one-half inch on both the left and right margin.**
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➤ Practice Quiz 5

Add any necessary quotation marks or other punctuation to the sentences below. Some sentences are correct and do not require any extra punctuation.

***NOTE – Please print this page to complete the quiz**

1. Do you know Billy Collins's poem On Turning Ten she asked.
2. Of all the poems in his latest book she said this is my favorite. It's really very funny she added.
3. Turning towards her brother, she cried Help. There were tears in her eyes and clearly she was anxious about something. What's the matter he asked. I can't find our little sister she answered.
4. In Collins's poem, the line If you cut me I would shine suggests a child's belief in his own immortality.
5. In his article Building a Better Vocabulary Darling suggests making vocabulary development a personal mission in life.
6. Jeff's English professor asked him what was wrong.
7. So what else is new Raoul asked have you begun your studies in radiology yet
8. Who said To be or not to be, that is the question asked Professor Villa.

[View Answer Key](#)

Answer Key

Practice Quiz 1

1. b
2. a
- 3) b
- 4) b
- 5) a
- 6) a
- 7) b
- 8) b
- 9) a
- 10) b

[Return to Practice Quiz 1](#)

Practice Quiz 2

1. My son, the policeman, will be visiting us next week.
 2. The captain ordered the ship's carpenters to assemble the shallop, a large rowboat.
 3. Walter, the playboy and writer, is very attached to his mother, Mrs. Hammon.
 4. The actor Paul Newman has directed only one picture.
 5. Elizabeth Teague, a sweet and lovable girl, grew up to be a mentally troubled woman.
- Underline and punctuate the appositives in the following sentences. Remember: not all require punctuation.
6. Sweetbriar, a company known throughout the South, is considering a nationwide advertising campaign.
 7. An above-average student and talented musician, Rick made his family proud.
 8. The extremely popular American film Titanic was widely criticized for its mediocre script.
 9. The greatest American film ever made, *Citizen Kane* won only one Academy Award.
 10. *60 Minutes*, the TV news magazine program, featured a story on the popular singer Celine Dion.

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Practice Quiz 3

1. **Who's** the **party's** candidate for vice president this year?
2. The fox had its right foreleg caught securely in the **trap's** jaws.
3. Our **neighbor's** car is an old Chrysler, and **it's** just about to fall apart.
4. In three weeks time **we'll** have to begin school again.
5. **Didn't** you hear that **they're** leaving tomorrow?
6. Whenever I think of the stories I read as a child, I remember **Cinderella's** glass slipper and **Snow White's** wicked stepmother.

[Return to Practice Quiz 3](#)

Practice Quiz 4

- 1) Several countries participated in the airlift: Italy, Belgium, France, and Luxembourg.
- 2) Montaigne wrote the following: "A wise man never loses anything, if he has himself."
- 3) The following are the primary colors: red, blue, and yellow.
- 4) The automobile dealer handled three makes of cars: Volkswagen, Porsche, and Mercedes Benz.
- 5) The Endangered Species Act contains a potential problem for private property owners: the government refuses to compensate them for the inconveniences imposed.
- 6) While working out, she discovered an amazing fact: she was now able to bench-press ten pounds more than the week before.
- 7) The ice hockey player made a controversial move: a cross-check on another player.
- 8) Images of stylish men appear in the following media: GQ Magazine, television commercials, and billboard advertisements.

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Practice Quiz 5

1. "Do you know Billy Collins's poem 'On Turning Ten'?" she asked.
2. "Of all the poems in his latest book," she said, "this is my favorite. It's really very funny," she added.
3. Turning towards her brother, she cried, "Help!" There were tears in her eyes and clearly she was anxious about something. "What's the matter?" he asked. "I can't find our little sister," she answered.
4. In Collins's poem, the line "If you cut me I would shine" suggests a child's belief in his own immortality.
5. In his article "Building a Better Vocabulary," Darling suggests making vocabulary development a personal mission in life.
6. Correct.
7. "So what else is new?" Raoul asked. "Have you begun your studies in radiology yet?"
8. "Who said, 'To be or not to be, that is the question'?" asked Professor Villa.

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