

# FORMAL PUNCTUATION RULES

Using correct punctuation is important because punctuation conveys meaning just as words do. Consider these two sentences:

Eat children.  
Eat, children.

Both sentences are commands, but the first sentence would be correct only in a society of cannibals!

## COMMAS {,}

Commas might be troublesome to learners because they are used differently in other languages. There are four basic rules for the use of commas in English:

**INTRODUCER COMMAS:** follow any element that comes in front of the first independent clause in a sentence:

- Words:           **Therefore**, I plan to quit smoking.  
                      **Nervously**, I threw away my cigarettes.
- Phrases:         **As a result**, I feel terrible right now.  
                      **After 16 years of smoking**, it is not easy to quit.  
                      **Having smoked for 16 years**, I find it difficult to quit.
- Dependent clauses:  
                      **Because I have a cough**, my doctor recommended that I quit smoking.
- Direct quotations:  
                      **“Stop smoking today,”** she advised.

**COORDINATOR COMMAS:** together with a coordinating conjunction, a comma links coordinate (equal) elements in a sentence.

- Compound sentence with 2 independent clauses:  
                      **She has a good job**, yet **she is always broke**.  
                      **They were tired**, so **they went home early**.
- Word lists (3 or more words):  
                      He does not enjoy **skiing, ice-skating, or sledding**.  
                      She speaks **English, Spanish, French, and Japanese**.  
(No comma with only 2 items:  
                      Chen speaks **Mandarin and Taiwanese**.)
- Phrase lists (3 or more phrases):  
                      A nurse has to work **at night, on weekends, and on holidays**.  
                      We **ran into the airport, checked our luggage, raced to the boarding gate, gave the attendant our boarding passes, and collapsed in our seats**.

**INSERTER COMMAS:** used before and after any element that is inserted into the middle of an independent clause.

- Words:           My uncle, **however**, refuses to quit smoking.

- Phrases: My father, **on the other hand**, had never smoked.  
There is no point in living, **according to my uncle**, if you do not do what you enjoy.
- Nonrestrictive phrases/clauses:  
My aunt, **grieving over her husband's death**, resolved never to smoke.  
My mother, **who just celebrated her fiftieth birthday**, enjoys an occasional cigarette.
- Reporting verbs in direct quotations:  
"I have tried to quit dozens of times," **she says**, "but I can't."

**TAG COMMAS:** used when adding certain elements to the end of a sentence.

- Words: He appears to be in good health, **however**.  
My uncle believes in drinking a daily glass of wine, **too**.
- Phrases: He swims for an hour every day, **for example**.  
He also plays tennis, **beating me most of the time**.
- Tag questions:  
It is not logical, **is it?**
- Direct quotations:  
He laughs as he says, "**I will outlive all of you**."

## **SEMICOLONS ;;**

They are used in three places:

**BETWEEN SENTENCES:** use a semicolon at the end of a sentence when the following sentence is closely connected in meaning.

**Independent clause; independent clause.**

Andrew did not accept the job offer; he wants to go to graduate school.  
The meeting ended at dawn; nothing had been decided.  
Computer use is increasing; computer crime is, too.

**BEFORE CONNECTORS:** use a semicolon before conjunctive adverbs (**however, therefore, nevertheless, furthermore**) and before transition phrases (**for example, as a result, that is, in fact**).

**Independent clause; conjunctive adverb/transition phrase, independent clause.**

Skiing is dangerous; **nevertheless**, millions of people ski.  
I have never been to Asia; **in fact**, I have never been outside the country.

**BETWEEN ITEMS IN A LIST:** use semicolons to separate items in a list when some of the items already contain commas.

I cannot decide which car I like best: the Ferrari, with its quick acceleration; the midsize Ford Taurus, with its comfortable seats; or the compact Geo, with its economical fuel consumption.

## COLONS {:}

They are used in the following ways:

**BEFORE LISTS:** use a colon to introduce a list.

I need the following groceries: **eggs, milk, and coffee.**

Libraries have two kinds of periodicals: **bound periodicals and current periodicals.**

**BEFORE APPOSITIVES** (appositive = a word/phrase that renames another word/phrase)

A doctor has two important abilities: **the ability to listen and the ability to analyze.**

He had one great love in his life: **himself.**

**BEFORE LONG QUOTATIONS:** (more than 3 lines) this type of quote is indented on both sides, and no quotation marks are used.

As Albert C. Baugh and Thomas Cable state in their book *The History of the English Language*:

**There is no such thing as uniformity in language. Not only does the speech of one community differ from that of another, but the speech of different individuals of a single community, even different members of the same family, is marked by individual peculiarities.**

**BEFORE SUBTITLES:** use a colon between the main title and the subtitle of a book, article, or play.

A popular book on nonverbal communication is Samovar and Porter's *Intercultural Communication: A Reader*.

The title of an article from the *New York Times* is "Man on Mars: **Dream or Reality?**"

**AFTER FORMAL SALUTATIONS:** (in a formal letter)

**Dear Professor Einstein:**

Excuse me for approaching in the following issue.

**Dear Ms. Smith:**

Thank you for your letter...

**To Whom It May Concern:** ...

(In informal letters, use a comma: Dear Mark, ...)

## QUOTATION MARKS {"..."}{

They are used in the following ways:

**AROUND DIRECT QUOTATIONS:**

**"We have already been waiting for an hour,"** we answered.

As John F. Kennedy reminded us, **"We should never forget the words of Martin Luther King, Jr., who said, 'I have a dream.'"** (a quotation within a quotation)

**AROUND UNUSUAL WORDS:** (often with ironic meanings)

The “**banquet**” consisted of hot dogs and soft drinks.

The little girl proudly showed her “**masterpiece**”: a crayon drawing of a flower.

**AROUND TITLES OF SHORT WORKS:** (articles from journals, magazines, chapters of books, etc)

In the article “**The Future of Manned Space Travel,**” published in the July 19, 2004, issue of *Space*, the authors explore the problems of a manned flight to Mars.

The *Times* of London recently published an article entitled “**Who Needs the Monarchy?**” in which the relevancy of the English monarchy was discussed.

NOTE: Underline or *italicize* titles of books, journals, magazines, newspapers, and movies.

Adapted from:

Oshima, A. and A. Hogue (2006) *Writing Academic English*. Pearson Longman.