

Punctuation, Grammar, Style, & Usage: Twelve Guidelines



Below are guidelines for the most basic and most commonly accepted conventions of edited American English. Knowing them will help you when writing for class as well as your future job and everyday life.

Punctuation

1. To join two or more independent clauses, use: (1) a comma followed by a coordinating conjunction; or (2) a semicolon alone; or (3) a semicolon followed by a conjunctive adverb.

An independent clause is a group of words that contains a subject and a predicate and can stand alone as a sentence. To remember the coordinating conjunctions, think FANBOYS (For, And, Nor, But, Or, Yet, So). Conjunctive adverbs are words like *however, nevertheless, otherwise, thus, moreover, additionally*, etc.

- Ex. (1)** A simple sentence has a main actor and an action, and it make sense independently.
- Ex. (2)** A simple sentence has a main actor and an action; it makes sense independently.
- Ex. (3)** A simple sentence has a main actor and an action; additionally, it makes sense independently.

2. When beginning a sentence with an introductory phrase or an introductory dependent clause, follow the introductory element with a comma.

Words found opening an introductory clause include *after, although, as, as if, as long as, because, before, if, in order that, since, so that, though, unless, until, when, whenever, where, wherever, and while*. If the introductory phrase is short, the comma is sometimes omitted. Use your judgment.

- Ex.** If in doubt about how to punctuate after an introductory clause or phrase, always use a comma.
- Ex.** With a short phrase the comma is often omitted.
- Ex.** Actually, a comma is usually the best option even after a single word opening.

3. Use commas to bracket nonrestrictive words or phrases that are not essential to the sentence's meaning. Use "which" instead of "that" when the information is nonessential.

- Ex.** The boys, who were both friends of the defendant, entered the courtroom.
- Ex.** The pen I will use, which is engraved with my initials, was given to me by my father.

4. Do not use commas to bracket words or phrases that are restrictive, or essential to the sentence's meaning.

- Ex.** The boys who were friends of the defendant stood behind him in support; those who were not friends shouted angry words.
- Ex.** The pen that is engraved with my initials is the one I will use; it was given to me by my father.

5. The rule for the final comma within a series varies. In Associated Press (AP) style, the comma is omitted. In Chicago Manual of Style (CMS) and Modern Language Association (MLA) style, the final comma is recommended to clarify possible ambiguity. If the series elements are long and contain commas, separate them with semicolons.

- Ex.** My favorite colors are blue, yellow, and green **OR** My favorite colors are blue, yellow and green
- Ex.** The first element, being so important, was to be emphasized; the second, being less crucial, could be less prominent; and the third hardly mattered.

6. Use proper punctuation to integrate a quotation into a sentence. If the introductory material is an independent clause, add the quotation after a colon. If the introductory material ends in "thinks," "says," or some other verb indicating expression, use a comma. Commas and periods go inside quotation marks. Question marks and exclamation points go inside if they are part of the quoted text.

Ex. In *The Awakening*, Mme. Ratignolle exhorts Robert Lebrun to stop flirting with Edna: "She is not one of us; she is not like us."

Ex. In a song featured in *South Pacific*, Oscar Hammerstein writes, "You have to be carefully taught!"

Ex. In Duin's and Graves' study of vocabulary instruction, it is noted that "traditional vocabulary instruction is not effective" (328).

Grammar

7. Make the subject and verb agree with each other, not with words that come between them. *Anyone, anybody, anything, each, everyone, everybody, everything, nobody, no one, nothing, somebody, someone, and something* are singular.

Ex. Nobody reads novels anymore.

Few, many, and several are plural.

Ex. Few have the ability to concentrate for more than 55 minutes.

All, any either, more, most, neither, none, and some can be singular or plural, so use your judgment. Collective nouns such as *gang, crowd, class, team, or committee* can be either singular or plural. If you want to focus on the whole, use plural, if on the members (as in *the members of the class*), use singular.

Ex. None of the approximately eight-five thousand people attending the football game knows how it will end.

Ex. The class is inattentive. OR The class are inattentive.

8. Be sure that a pronoun, a participial phrase, or an appositive refers clearly to the proper subject.

Appositives are nouns that follow other nouns and rename them. The personal pronouns are *I, you, he, she, it, we, they, me, him, her, them, my, your, his, her, hers, its, our, their, mine, yours, ours, theirs*. Some writers follow colloquial speech and use *they* with gender inclusive terms such as *anyone* or a *person*. Some use a version of *his/her*; others alternate between *his* and *her*. The most conservative use only the male pronoun (*his, etc.*). Often writers use the plural (*students . . . they*) or imperative to avoid the issue.

Ex. A student must always bring his or her textbook to class.

Ex. Students must always bring their textbooks to class.

Ex. Always bring your textbooks to class.

Participial phrases are made up of the present participle (-ing) form or the past participle (usually -ed) form of a verb, the object of the participle, and any modifier, as in *dressed to kill* or *moving slowly down the field*. The error often referred to as a dangling modifier occurs when the participial phrase which opens a sentence is not followed by the subject to which it refers, as in Having hit the fast ball, the game was won. (The game didn't hit the ball.)

Ex. Followed by three suspicious men, the woman hurried down the street.

Ex. Having hit the fast ball, the batter declared victory.

Style

9. Use parallel construction to make a strong point and create a smooth flow. It doesn't matter what grammatical construction you use; just be consistent. You may truncate functional words such as "if you are" in the last example below.
- Ex. To be late, to dress poorly, or to fail to complete your work are grounds for dismissal.
 - Ex. Being late, dressing poorly, or failing to complete your work might cause you to lose your job.
 - Ex. You might lose your job if you are constantly late, if you dress poorly, or if you fail to complete your work.
 - Ex. You might lose your job if you are constantly late, dress poorly, or fail to complete your work.
10. Use the active voice to stress the actor and the passive voice to stress the action, to underplay the action, or when the actor is unknown. In active voice the subject performs the action, as in "Samantha dunked the ball." In passive voice the subject receives the action, as in "The ball was dunked by Samantha" or "The ball was dunked."
- Ex. Mistakes were made. The CEO was fired.
 - Ex. Mistakes were made by the CEO. The CEO was fired by the Board of Directors.
 - Ex. The CEO made mistakes. The Board of Directors fired her.

Usage

11. You may split an infinitive if it would sound awkward to leave the verb and the infinitive (to + verb) together, or for stylistic effect.
- Ex. to go boldly
 - Ex. to boldly go
12. You may end a sentence with a preposition if it would sound more graceful or natural to do so, or for stylistic effect.
- Ex. Don't ask me what the screwdriver is for. [Informal style]
 - Ex. Don't ask me for what you will use the screwdriver. [Too formal for the situation, and awkward]
 - Ex. This is a problem to which philosophers are attracted. [Academic style]
 - Ex. This is a problem that philosophers are attracted to.