Grammar Guides

These guides provide examples of the most common grammatical errors and explain how to fix them. For further reference, consult Diana Hacker's *Rules for Writers*, from which portions of these guides have been adapted.

- Run-ons and Fragments
- Agreement Errors
- Restrictive and Nonrestrictive Elements
- Pronoun Reference
- Parallelism
- Mixed Constructions
- Misplaced Modifiers
- Passive Voice
- Gender Neutral Language

Punctuation Guides

The following are the most commonly used and abused rules of punctuation, as adapted from Diana Hacker’s *Rules for Writers*. For further guidance, please visit the Writing Center.

- Commas
- Semicolons and Colons
- Dashes, Parentheses, Brackets, Ellipses
- Quotation Marks
RUN-ON SENTENCES
Run-on (or fused) sentences are composed of two or more complete sentences without proper punctuation between them.

INCORRECT: I went to the mall it was busy because of the upcoming holidays.

You can make a few different revisions to fix a run-on sentence:

a. **Split it into two sentences with a period.**

CORRECTED: I went to the mall. It was busy because of the upcoming holidays.

b. **Connect the two parts with a comma and a conjunction.**

CORRECTED: I went to the mall, and it was busy because of the upcoming holidays.

c. **If the parts are closely related, connect them with a semicolon.**

CORRECTED: I went to the mall; it was busy because of the upcoming holidays.

d. **If the second part is a restatement or amplification of the first, connect them with a colon.**

CORRECTED: I shop constantly because I can’t stop: I’m addicted to it.

SENTENCE FRAGMENTS
Sentence fragments are groups of words that cannot stand on their own as sentences. Avoid fragments in your writing by going through the following checklist. If you answer yes to any of these questions, you have a fragment, and you must revise it.

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1 The conjunction is essential here; omitting it results in a comma splice, which is discussed further in the comma handout
a. Does it lack a subject?

INCORRECT: And went to the store this morning to buy groceries.

CORRECTED: I got up and went to the store this morning to buy groceries.

b. Does it lack a verb?

INCORRECT: Her expensive outfit, with all its rich accessories.

CORRECTED: Her expensive outfit, with all its rich accessories, didn’t help her gain acceptance with the clique.

c. Is it a subordinate clause?

INCORRECT: Although she could’ve ordered any entrée she wanted.

CORRECTED: Although she could’ve ordered any entrée she wanted, she went with the cheapest one on the menu.

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2 Subordinate clauses are groups of words that have subjects and verbs, but they begin with a subordinating conjunction or relative pronoun such as after, although, because, etc. See Hacker for a complete list.
SUBJECT/VERB AGREEMENT
In every sentence, the subject and verb must agree. Consider the following example:

CORRECT: This sentence works correctly.

The subject (sentence) agrees with its verb (works). However, in more complicated sentences, there are many places where subject/verb agreement gets confusing. Use the following guidelines to avoid agreement errors in your writing.

a. Make sure you’re looking at the correct subject.

INCORRECT: The writing in those paragraphs are absolutely horrible.

Because paragraphs is the last noun before the verb, it’s tempting to treat it as the subject. Actually, it’s just the object of a preposition (in). Writing is the subject.

CORRECTED: The writing in those paragraphs is absolutely horrible.

b. Know which subjects should be considered singular.

Indefinite pronouns (e.g. anybody, everybody, none, etc.)

CORRECT: Everybody needs to pick up after himself.

Collective nouns (e.g. family, congregation, audience, etc.)

CORRECT: My family is going on vacation.

c. Know which subjects should be considered plural.

Compound subjects joined with and, unless the pieces of the subject form a single unit (e.g. peaches and cream or sticks and stones) or are preceded by each or every (e.g. every girl and boy)

CORRECT: My sister and brother exercise together.
CORRECT: Peaches and cream is a delicious dessert.

*Collective nouns when parts of the whole are acting as individuals*

CORRECT: The faculty are in disagreement about the curriculum.

d. When or, nor, either/or, or neither/nor connects two subjects, make the verb agree with the closer subject.

CORRECT: A personal statement or SAT scores are required.

e. Be careful with inverted sentences.

INCORRECT: There was a doctor and a crew of nurses in the emergency room with me during my surgery.

CORRECTED: There were a doctor and a crew of nurses in the emergency room with me during my surgery.

Because the verb (were) precedes the subject (a doctor and a crew of nurses), it’s easy to get confused. Make sure you’re identifying the subject correctly in this kind of sentence.

f. Watch out for subject complements.

INCORRECT: A good book and a hammock is all the entertainment I need.

CORRECTED: A good book and a hammock are all the entertainment I need.

In this sentence, entertainment is a subject complement, but it could easily be confused with the real subject, which is a good book and a hammock. The verb needs to be plural to agree with the subject, not singular to agree with the complement.

g. Who, which, and that should be followed by verbs that agree with their antecedents (i.e. the words they refer back to).

CORRECT: Pick apples that don’t have bruising.

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3 “Words or word groups that complete the meaning of the subject by either renaming it or describing it” (Hacker 487).
h. Be aware of certain plural forms that sometimes take singular verbs.

CORRECT: Measles is a very painful disease.

i. Titles, company names, words mentioned as words, and gerund phrases\(^4\) should be considered singular.

CORRECT: Twelve Angry Men is a great movie.

CORRECT: Jackson and Sons provides us with fresh produce.

CORRECT: Celebutantes is a nice way of referring to people who are famous for no good reason at all.

CORRECT: Taking detours is annoying, especially when you're late for work.

**PRONOUN/ANTECEDENT AGREEMENT**

Pronouns must agree with their antecedents (i.e. the words they refer back to). Use the following guidelines to help you find and correct instances of disagreement.

a. Antecedents that are considered singular

*Indefinite pronouns (e.g. everybody, nobody, somebody, etc.)*

INCORRECT: Everybody should open their book to page 10.

CORRECTED: Everybody should open his book to page 10.

*Generic nouns\(^5\) (e.g. student, athlete, doctor, etc.)*

INCORRECT: A student should study hard if they want to do well in school.

CORRECTED: A student should study hard if she wants to do well in school.

*Collective nouns (e.g. congregation, audience, jury, etc.)*

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\(^4\)“A gerund phrase consists of an –\textit{ing} verb followed by any objects, complements, or modifiers” (Hacker 195).

\(^5\)Hacker defines a generic noun as “a typical member of a group” (198).
INCORRECT: The generous congregation gives their fundraising proceeds to charity.

CORRECTED: The generous congregation gives its fundraising proceeds to charity.

b. Antecedents that are considered plural

Compound antecedents joined by and

CORRECT: Jack and Jill went up the hill, and they fetched water.

Collective nouns when parts of the whole are acting as individuals

INCORRECT: The audience’s response was mixed; it wasn’t all clapping at the end of the movie.

CORRECTED: The audience’s response was mixed; they weren’t all clapping at the end of the movie.

c. When compound antecedents are joined by or, nor, either/or, or neither/nor, the pronoun should agree with the nearer antecedent.

CORRECT: Neither the nurse nor the doctors like when their patients are in pain.
RESTRICTIVE ELEMENTS
Restrictive elements are word groups that are necessary to retain meaning. They are not set off from the rest of the sentence by commas or other punctuation.


Because Faulkner has written numerous novels, the writer must specify which one of them he’s referring to. Setting the title off with commas would suggest that it could be removed without changing the meaning of the sentence; however, the title is essential for meaning.

For the same reason, restrictive clauses are not set off from the rest of the sentence by commas or other punctuation. These clauses usually begin with *that* or *who*.

INCORRECT: To do yoga, I need a shirt, that is loose and comfortable.

CORRECTED: To do yoga, I need a shirt *that is loose and comfortable*.

In this example, the speaker does not need just any shirt. It must be loose and comfortable. Because the phrase changes the meaning of the word “shirt,” the phrase is restrictive. Removing it would change the meaning of the sentence.

NONRESTRICTIVE ELEMENTS
Nonrestrictive elements are groups of words that can be removed without changing the meaning of the sentence. Because removing them does not change meaning, nonrestrictive elements can be set off from the rest of the sentence.

CORRECT: I’d like to have more pets, but I only have one cat, *Bill*. 
Because the writer only has one cat, its name just adds extra information. If the name were removed, the reader would still know what cat was being discussed.

For the same reason, nonrestrictive clauses can be set off from the rest of the sentence by commas or other punctuation. These clauses usually begin with *which* or *who*.

CORRECT: When I do yoga, I wear my favorite shirt, *which is really old*.

In this example, the fact that the writer’s favorite shirt is old has no bearing on the meaning of the word *shirt*. It’s simply a detail she decided to add. Therefore, it is nonrestrictive. It can be removed without changing the meaning of the sentence.
Swarthmore College Writing Associates Program

**AMBIGUOUS REFERENCES**
Sometimes sentences are structured such that they end up containing pronouns that could refer back to two or more different antecedents. Revise your writing to avoid these ambiguous references.

**UNCLEAR:** Jane told Ruth that her roommate is a nightmare.

In this example, it's impossible to tell whose roommate we're talking about. Jane could be telling Ruth that Jane's roommate is awful, or she could be telling Ruth that Ruth's roommate is awful. It could be revised as follows:

**REVISED:** Jane told Ruth, "Your roommate is a nightmare."

Ambiguous references often occur when there are introductory elements in the sentence:

**UNCLEAR:** When I banged my arm into the glass door, I broke it.

Here it's impossible to tell whether my arm or the glass door broke. It could be revised as follows:

**REVISED:** I broke my arm when I banged it into the glass door.

**BROAD REFERENCES**
Often, pronoun references can be too broad to refer back to one obvious antecedent. For clarity, you want to avoid such confusing references.

**UNCLEAR:** Sometimes my boss yells at me because of his frustrations with things that have nothing to do with me, and sometimes he's perfectly pleasant. I just sit back and take it.

When reading this sentence, you can probably figure out what it signifies, but a simple revision makes the meaning much more obvious:

**REVISED:** Sometimes my boss yells at me because of his frustrations with things that have nothing to do with
me, and sometimes he’s perfectly pleasant. I just sit back and take his unpredictability.

The addition of one word greatly increases the clarity of the sentence without seeming repetitive or taking up too much space. Consider the following example:

UNCLEAR: My best friend is dating a guy who is rude, who treats her badly, who doesn’t ever help with anything around the house, and who never thinks about anyone but himself. It’s hard for me to watch this.

What does this refer to? More specifically:

REVISED: My best friend is dating a guy who is rude, who treats her badly, who doesn’t ever help with anything around the house, and who never thinks about anyone but himself. It’s hard for me to watch her suffer as a result of all his bad traits.

**IMPLIED REFERENCES**
You should never use pronouns to refer to words that are only implied, but not actually stated, in your sentences.

INCORRECT: In Faulkner’s *Light in August*, he writes extensively about race relations and tensions.

*Faulkner* is working as a possessive adjective here, not a noun, so using *he* to mean *Faulkner* is referring to an implied antecedent. You could revise it as follows:

CORRECTED: In *Light in August*, Faulkner writes extensively about race relations and tensions.

In this example it’s much clearer whom you’re talking about. Also consider the following example:

INCORRECT: When the dog gave birth, the family chose one.

Even though we can assume what the family is choosing, the sentence doesn’t actually name what was born. Revise the sentence:

CORRECTED: When the dog gave birth, the family chose a puppy.
PARALLELISM
When parts of a sentence are equivalent, they should be expressed in parallel form. Parallelism can refer to single words, phrases, or clauses. If you have trouble with parallelism, simply go through one element at a time and figure out what form each is in. You can then revise any that don’t mesh with the whole.

NOT PARALLEL: He is honest, you can trust him, and so kind.

This list gets confusing because the elements aren’t grammatically parallel. If you revise to make all the elements into adjectives, the sentence sounds much better:

PARALLEL: He is honest, trustworthy, and kind.

Sometimes elements are much more complicated than single words, so parallelism becomes even more important for clarity:

PARALLEL: As I’ve gained experience in the working world, I’ve realized that it’s important to be pleasant to your coworkers, to take criticism kindly, to always be on time, and to get your work done promptly.

Each item in this series is expressed in the infinitive form, making the whole list parallel and, therefore, easier to understand.

Often parallelism is forgotten in sentences that contain pairs of things. Consider the following example:

NOT PARALLEL: In my high school, bad grades could be grounds for detention or being suspended.

Detention and being suspended aren’t parallel. Revise as follows:

PARALLEL: In my high school, bad grades could be grounds for detention or suspension.

The same problem can occur in comparisons:

NOT PARALLEL: Flying off the handle is easier than to stay calm.
The two elements in this sentence are not working together because of the lack of parallel construction. Revise as follows:

PARALLEL: Flying off the handle is easier than staying calm.

Often function words⁶ can be repeated at the beginning of parallel structures that are complicated or easily missed when reading.

UNCLEAR: My doctor told me that I needed to make a lot of changes to my lifestyle but I needed to introduce them gradually.

Adding a second that can help this sentence read more clearly:

REVISED: My doctor told me that I needed to make a lot of changes to my lifestyle but that I needed to introduce them gradually.

⁶ Usually prepositions (in, for, with, etc.) or subordinating conjunctions (that, because, etc.) that "signal the grammatical nature of the word groups to follow" (Hacker 113).
**MIXED CONSTRUCTIONS**

Mixed constructions often happen when you start a sentence with one grammatical structure and then switch to another.

**INCORRECT:** For most people who have pets live longer, happier lives.

This sentence seems to be going in one grammatical direction, but suddenly switches to another without warning. It can be revised a few different ways:

**CORRECT:** For most people who have pets, life is longer and happier.

**CORRECT:** Most people who have pets live longer, happier lives.

Another instance of mixed construction is when the subject and the predicate of the sentence don’t make logical sense together.

**INCORRECT:** The court decided that the woman's welfare was not safe with her abusive partner.

The woman is who should be safe, not the welfare. Revise:

**CORRECT:** The court decided that the woman was not safe with her abusive partner.

A much more specific mixed construction happens when an appositive and its noun do not agree.

**INCORRECT:** Doctors, an honorable profession, requires a great attention to detail and a lot of memorization.

**Doctors** are not a profession, **medicine** is. Revise:

**CORRECT:** Medicine, an honorable profession, requires a great attention to detail and a lot of memorization.

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7 *Predicate* is “the grammatical term given to the verb plus its objects, complements, and adverbial modifiers” (Hacker 484).

8 Appositives are words or word groups that rename nouns.
MISPLACED MODIFIERS
Often writers intend for a clause or phrase to modify one element in the sentence, but the placement of the modifier actually causes it to modify a different element.

UNCLEAR: My English professor is a unique-looking man with crazy white hair, standing about 6 feet 6 inches tall.

The last clause, standing about 6 feet 6 inches tall, obviously refers to the professor, but because of the way it's placed in the sentence it actually refers to his hair. To convey the desired meaning, it needs to be rephrased:

REVISED: My English professor, who stands about 6 feet 6 inches tall, is a unique-looking man with crazy white hair.

AMBIGUOUS MODIFIERS
These are modifiers that could refer to more than one element in the sentence but that would change the meaning based on which element they modify.

UNCLEAR: The woman who works at the farm stand where I buy my vegetables occasionally asks me about my family.

There are two possible readings of this sentence because it's not clear what is happening occasionally. Either the writer occasionally buys his vegetables at a certain farm stand, or the woman at the farm stand occasionally asks him about his family. To get one meaning or the other, the sentence would have to be rephrased in one of the following ways:

REVISED: The woman who works at the farm stand where I occasionally buy my vegetables asks me about my family.

REVISED The woman who works at the farm stand where I buy my vegetables asks me about my family occasionally.
**AWKWARD MODIFIERS**
These disrupt the flow of a sentence by being placed between subject and verb or verb and object.

AWKWARD: My little brother, when his teacher threatened to kick him out of class if he didn't start behaving, shaped up.

By the time you're finished reading the long modifier, you've probably forgotten whom it's even talking about. Rephrase:

REVISED: When his teacher threatened to kick him out of class if he didn't start behaving, my little brother shaped up.

**DANGLING MODIFIERS**
These do not logically refer to any word appearing in the sentence. They usually suggest an actor but do not actually name it.

ILLOGICAL: Flying in the helicopter, the cows in the field looked tiny.

According to this sentence, the cows are flying in the helicopter. Clearly this is not the intended meaning, but the correct subject is missing. Revise:

REVISED: Flying in the helicopter, we thought the cows in the field looked tiny.
PASSIVE VOICE
Active voice gives added strength to your statements by emphasizing the actor and allowing you to use more interesting verbs. It also reduces wordiness.

PASSIVE: The town was decimated by the earthquake.

In active voice, the sentence emphasizes the earthquake as the actor. Rephrasing also removes superfluous words.

ACTIVE: The earthquake decimated the town.

Passive voice can also make your statements vague, which causes them to have less impact:

PASSIVE: Mistakes were made.

Sentences like the one above make the writer seem either cowardly (doesn’t want to admit who made the mistake) or ignorant (simply doesn’t know who made the mistake), neither of which is a particularly good thing. Rephrase:

ACTIVE: We made mistakes.

This revised sentence is much clearer, and it will prevent readers from accusing the writer of being non-committal.

There are, of course, situations in which the use of passive voice is preferred:

- Certain types of science writing require passive voice because it is essential that the actor be entirely removed from the writing.
- When you need to emphasize the recipient of the action rather than the actor, passive voice is appropriate. For example, if in the following sentence you were writing to emphasize the widespread use of pesticides rather than the people who use them, you would use passive voice: Thousands of American fields are sprayed with harmful pesticides every day.
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There are varying degrees of sexist language, and none are acceptable. Here are some examples of terms/statements you should avoid and some ideas of what to replace them with.

**DEROGATORY LANGUAGE**
Derogatory language is the most straightforward type of sexist language. Its purpose is to demean the person it is used to describe. Remove all terms that could be considered derogatory to any group or individual.

DEROGATORY: Those broads really need to get a sense of humor.

**STEREOTYPICAL AND GENERIC LANGUAGE**
Stereotypical language (e.g. that which suggests that all secretaries are women) and generic language (e.g. that which uses male pronouns as a default) might be slightly more difficult to recognize, but they can be perceived in the same way as derogatory language.

STEROTYPICAL: When a doctor graduates from medical school, it’s one of the proudest moments of his life.

This statement implies that all doctors are men, which is obviously not the case. There are a few ways to revise it:

*Pluralize to avoid gendered pronouns*
REVISIED: When doctors graduate from medical school, it’s one of the proudest moments of their lives.

*Reference both sexes*
REVISIED: When a doctor graduates from medical school, it’s one of the proudest moments of his or her life.

*Remove the gender reference*
REVISIED: Graduating from medical school is one of the proudest moments in a doctor’s life.

Depending on the structure of the sentence, one of these strategies may work better than the others. Try to vary your use of the strategies to avoid needless repetition and stilted language.
COMMAS

1. Use a comma before a coordinating conjunction\(^9\) that connects two independent clauses\(^{10}\).

CORRECT: I want to major in English, but my mother says it’s not practical.

**Do NOT put a comma before every instance of a conjunction!**

Conjunctions perform many functions, so make sure they’re separating independent clauses before you insert a comma.

CORRECT: I want to major in English and minor in economics.

In the above example, there is a compound predicate. Without a separate subject for the second verb, you don’t need a comma.

Remember not to put commas after conjunctions that separate independent clauses (e.g. after the but in the first example above).

MOST IMPORTANTLY, do not connect two independent clauses with just a comma! This is a common error called the comma splice. Below is an example.

INCORRECT: I took English this semester, it was really hard.

There are many ways to fix this sentence. Adding a conjunction after the comma is one.

CORRECTED: I took English this semester, and it was really hard.

You can also split it into two sentences with a period.

CORRECTED: I took English this semester. It was really hard.

Semicolons and colons are another option, which will be discussed in the appropriate guides.

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\(^9\) The coordinating conjunctions are: and, nor, or, for, but, so, and yet

\(^{10}\) Word groups that can stand on their own as sentences (i.e. have a subject and verb)
2. Use commas to set off introductory elements.

Introductory elements are often clauses or phrases that explain when, where, why, or how something happened. You may omit the comma if the introductory element is short and there is no danger of the sentence being misread as a result.

CORRECT: When I got to my first class, everyone looked really nervous.

The comma is correct here, but it can also be left out without the sentence becoming confusing to the reader. The following sentence is an example of where the comma is necessary.

INCORRECT: When he was ready to eat his dog begged for food at the table.

CORRECT: When he was ready to eat, his dog begged for food at the table.

Without the comma, the reader might think for a moment that the man in the sentence was ready to eat his dog. This is clearly not what the writer intended.

Be careful about inverting sentences. Most sentences do NOT need a comma when their parts are reversed.

INCORRECT: Everyone looked really nervous, when I got to my first class.

CORRECT: Everyone looked really nervous when I got to my first class.

3. Use commas to separate items in a series.

CORRECT: I bought grapes, apples, and pears at the market this morning.

There is sometimes dispute over whether you need a comma between the last two items in a series (in this case "apples and pears"). Grammatically, either way is correct, as long as the absence of the comma doesn’t make the sentence confusing or ambiguous. However,
once you decide to use the comma or not, stick with your decision; you need to be consistent.

There is no need for a comma before the first item or after the last item in a series. In this case, commas before grapes and after pears would be incorrect.

4. **Commas come between coordinate adjectives**; do not separate cumulative adjectives.

To see if adjectives are coordinate, add “and” between each adjective in the series. If it still makes sense, you need commas.

CORRECT: He is a sensitive, helpful, friendly person.

In cases where the adjectives build on one another, separating them with commas is incorrect.

CORRECT: There are five small yellow birds on the birdfeeder.

5. Use commas to set off nonrestrictive elements; do not set off restrictive elements.

Nonrestrictive elements are groups of words that can be removed without changing the meaning of the sentence; restrictive elements are word groups that are necessary to retain the meaning of the sentence.

Restrictive
CORRECT: To do yoga, I need a shirt that is loose and comfortable.

The speaker does not need just any shirt. It must be loose and comfortable. Because the phrase changes the meaning of the word it modifies (shirt) the phrase is restrictive and no comma is needed.

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11 This is a case “when two or more adjectives each modify a noun separately” (Hacker 275). If you can put and between the adjectives or rearrange them without losing meaning, they are coordinate.

12 Adjectives that wouldn’t retain meaning if placed in a different order or separated by and.

13 Often these elements will begin with relative pronouns (i.e. that and which). Restrictive elements take that. Nonrestrictive elements take which.
Nonrestrictive
CORRECT: When I do yoga, I wear my favorite t-shirt, which is really old.

The fact that the speaker’s favorite shirt is old has no bearing on the meaning of the sentence. It’s simply a detail she decided to add. Therefore, it is nonrestrictive and needs to be set off with a comma.

6. Commas separate transitional and parenthetical expressions, absolute phrases, and contrasting elements.

Transitional Expressions
CORRECT: Therefore, I could not finish writing my paper.

Parenthetical Expressions
CORRECT: You, on the other hand, can’t carry a tune.

Absolute Phrases
CORRECT: Having taken preventative measures, I did not get sick.

Contrasting Elements
CORRECT: I want English, not Economics, classes.

7. Use commas to separate direct address, yes and no, interrogative tags, and interjections.

Direct Address
CORRECT: I’m sorry, John.

Yes and No
CORRECT: Yes, I’m coming to the party.

Interrogative Tags
CORRECT: You’re supposed to be at work at 9, aren’t you?

Interjections
CORRECT: Well, I can’t see why that would be a problem.

8. Use commas to set off quotations.

CORRECT: My professor said, "This midterm is going to be impossible."
SEMICOLONS

1. Use semicolons to connect independent clauses without a coordinating conjunction. Also use semicolons to connect independent clauses separated by transitional expressions (i.e. conjunctive adverbs\textsuperscript{14} and transitional phrases\textsuperscript{15}).

A semicolon is another way to avoid a comma splice. Simply place the semicolon between independent clauses. However, make sure the independent clauses you’re connecting have something to do with one another. Linking two unrelated sentences with a semicolon is not correct usage.

INCORRECT: I took English this semester; I don’t understand my economics class at all.

CORRECTED: I took English this semester; it was really hard.

Semicolons can also be used as an alternative to periods when separating independent clauses with transitional expressions. Commas are unacceptable to use in this situation.

INCORRECT: I took English this semester, however, I really wish I’d taken economics instead.

CORRECTED: I took English this semester; however, I really wish I’d taken economics instead.

Be aware that transitional expressions that don’t separate independent clauses do not require semicolons.

CORRECT: You should know, however, that I’m not going to edit your paper for you.

2. Use a semicolon to avoid confusion in complicated lists.

\textsuperscript{14} Some conjunctive adverbs: however, moreover, nevertheless, therefore, etc. (see Hacker for a complete list)

\textsuperscript{15} Some transitional phrases: after all, in other words, for example, etc. (see Hacker for a complete list)
Lists that contain punctuation within individual items should be separated with semicolons instead of commas to prevent reader confusion.

CORRECT: Present at the party were my mother, Jane; my sister, Erica; my boyfriend, Brian; and my roommate, Lauren.

**COLONS**

1. **Use a colon to introduce a list, an appositive, or a direct quotation.**

   *Lists*
   
   CORRECT: For the cake you will need the following: eggs, sugar, flour, and baking powder.

   *Appositives*
   
   CORRECT: There is one food I refuse to eat: olives.

   *Direct Quotations*
   
   CORRECT: This was my grandmother’s favorite piece of advice: “never go to bed angry.”

Be aware that a colon needs to be preceded by a complete independent clause, not a sentence fragment.

2. **Use a colon between independent clauses not joined by a coordinating conjunction.**

   This rule only applies if the two clauses are very closely related (e.g. the second one clarifies the first). If you’re not sure that they’re close enough to be joined by a colon, use a semicolon, comma, or period.

   CORRECT: Getting hurt in relationships is inevitable: love is messy.

16“Words or word groups that complete the meaning of the subject by either renaming it or describing it” (Hacker 487).
The following punctuation marks should be used sparingly, as they are more specialized than those that appear above.

**DASHES**
Use a dash to draw attention to parenthetical information, to prepare for changes in tone, or to introduce or emphasize information.

CORRECT: Everything about the test – especially the surprise essay section – was incredibly difficult.

CORRECT: He took a deep breath, began to sprint toward the finish line – and collapsed just a few feet before he crossed it.

CORRECT: I need three things from you – patience, kindness, and understanding.

CORRECT: I hate – absolutely abhor – that band.

Dashes are fairly versatile, so there aren’t many obvious errors related to their usage. Just be careful not to overuse the dash, as it’s less formal than other punctuation. Also remember that a dash is composed of two lines (--) not just one (-), which is a hyphen\(^{17}\).

**PARENTHESES**
Use parentheses to set off extra material, digressions, or afterthoughts.

CORRECT: After her eggs, bacon, and coffee (her usual breakfast), she leaves for work.

CORRECT: My mother tolerates (i.e. hates) my nose piercing.

**BRACKETS**
Brackets are used to enclose words that you add to a direct quotation\(^{18}\).

\(^{17}\) Hyphens are most commonly used within single words (i.e. to connect compound words, as in *well-known*, or to attach prefixes or suffixes, as in *self-respect*).

\(^{18}\) Words are often added for clarity, especially if the quotation is heavy with pronouns. See Hacker for examples.
CORRECT: In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, “he [Billy] is in a constant state of stage fright, he says, because he never knows what part of his life he is going to have to act in next.”

If there is an error in the original quotation, the word *sic* appears in brackets after the word containing the error.

CORRECT: “This sentence contains an error [sic].”

Paraphrasing quotations can eliminate the need for this use of brackets. Try paraphrasing to avoid calling attention to others’ mistakes whenever possible.

**ELLIPSIS**

The ellipsis is used to show the deletion of words from a direct quotation.

If the original quotation says:

**ORIGINAL:** “The best way to be healthy, according to the most prestigious doctors at the University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine, is to eat right, exercise, and get plenty of sleep.”

You can use the ellipsis as follows:

**REPHRASED:** “The best way to be healthy...is to eat right, exercise, and get plenty of good sleep.”

Keep in mind that you don’t need to use the ellipsis to show words omitted at the beginning of a quote. If you paraphrased the beginning of the quote above, you wouldn’t need to use ellipsis:

**REPHRASED:** If a person wants to be the healthiest he can, he should “eat right, exercise, and get plenty of good sleep.”

You also don’t need to use the ellipsis at the end of a quote unless you are omitting words from the end of a multi-sentence quote. Use brackets around the ellipsis in this case, to show that the mark itself is not a part of the original sentence.
If the original quote reads:

ORIGINAL: “The best way to be healthy, according to the most prestigious doctors at the University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine, is to eat right, exercise, and get plenty of sleep. This is the first of many important suggestions, the rest of which deal with managing everyday pressures such as family, career, and other commitments.”

You could abbreviate it as follows:

REPHRASED: “The best way to be healthy, according to the most prestigious doctors at the University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine, is to eat right, exercise, and get plenty of sleep. This is the first of many important suggestions[...].”
Swarthmore College Writing Associates Program

**QUOTATION MARKS**

There are many conventions to using quotation marks that can get confusing. Use the following rules to make sure your usage is correct.

1. **Always put direct quotations in quotation marks**

   CORRECT:  My mother said, “Stop making that face, or it’ll stay that way.”

2. **If a direct quote is longer than four typed lines, block it**

   Block quotes:
   - Should be indented from the left margin. Different manuscript formats have different rules, so consult your professor to make sure which format you should be using.
   - Should NOT be enclosed in quotation marks.
   - Should be followed by a citation that comes OUTSIDE the closing punctuation of the quote.

3. **Put quotes within quotes in single quotation marks**

   CORRECT:  My sister told me, “Mom keeps yelling ‘clean your room’ at me, and I’m sick of it.”

4. **Put titles of “short works”¹⁹ in quotation marks**

   CORRECT:  Borges’ “The Handsomest Drowned Man in the World” is a really interesting story.

5. **Use quotation marks to enclose words used as words**

   CORRECT:  I always spell “commemorate” wrong.

   You will also sometimes see these words italicized or underlined. Any method is fine as long as it’s consistent.

   DO NOT use quotation marks to set off slang, kitschy expressions, or words you mean to useironically.

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¹⁹ Hacker 305. Examples include articles, poems, short stories, songs, television episodes, radio programs, and chapters or subdivisions of longer works.
INCORRECT: My sister is a real “girly-girl.”

6. Place punctuation correctly in reference to quotation marks

Periods and Commas
These marks should go inside the ending quotation mark when there is no citation involved.

CORRECT: I told my colleague, “You need to do it over again.”

When the quote is followed by a citation, the punctuation goes outside the parenthetical.

CORRECT: Diana Hacker says, “the period goes outside the parenthetical” (306).

Colon and Semicolons
These marks should go outside the ending quotation mark. If there is a citation, they follow it.

CORRECT: I told my colleague, “You need to do it over again”; he didn’t take that well at all.

CORRECT: Diana Hacker says, “put colons and semicolons outside quotation marks” (306); this is a good rule to follow.

Question Marks and Exclamation Points
These marks should go inside quotation marks if they’re part of the quotation itself. If they apply to the whole sentence, they go outside the quotation marks.

CORRECT: I always end my sessions by asking, “do you have any questions?”

CORRECT: Haven’t you ever heard anyone say, “don’t count your chickens before they’re hatched”?