

# Commas, Semi-Colons, and Colons

## Commas

There are **five** main uses of commas:

1. Set off a phrase or clause before the subject.  
Ex: While she was cooking, her friends arrived.
2. Separate items in a list when no other internal commas are used.  
Ex: They bought lamps, chairs, and wastebaskets.  
\*Note the comma before “and” in the list of items.
3. Indicate appositive (inserted) material.  
Ex: Harold, my boss, gave me a raise.
4. Introduce or end a quotation.  
Ex: He said, “You’ve deserved it.” or “You’ve deserved it,” he said.
5. Separate independent clauses joined with a coordinating conjunction.  
Ex: I was grateful, so I sent him a birthday gift.  
\*Coordinators include: for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so  
\*Note that a comma is NOT used before a clause introduced by “that.”  
Ex: He said that she should not worry.

## Comma Splices and Run-On Sentences

- A **comma splice** occurs when main clauses are joined by a comma alone.  
Ex: Some composers put notes down as rapidly as their hands can move across the paper, others write and rewrite slowly.
- A **run-on** occurs when main clauses are joined without a coordinating conjunction or punctuation mark.  
Ex: In earlier centuries most composers were employed by churches or noblemen now they are usually employed by universities.

## Ways to Correct Comma Splices and Run-ons

1. Use a period to make separate sentences.  
Ex: Some composers put notes down as rapidly as their hands can move across the paper. Others write and rewrite slowly.
2. Use a semicolon to show a close relation between the two clauses.  
Ex: Some composers put notes down as rapidly as their hands can move across the paper; others write and rewrite slowly.
3. Use a comma and a coordinating conjunction to show the relation between the main clauses.  
Ex: Some composers put notes down as rapidly as their hands can move across the paper, **and** others write and rewrite slowly.
4. Use a subordinating conjunction to introduce the less important clause of the two. (Subordination is used to distinguish the main clause in a sentence from less important clauses: *after, although, as, as*)

Handout adapted from [www.unc.edu/depts/wcweb](http://www.unc.edu/depts/wcweb) 1998 - 2007 and <http://www.speak-read-write.com/grammar1.html>

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*if, because, in order that, since, so that, than, that, unless, until, when, whenever, where, wherever, whether, while, etc.)*

Ex: **Although** some composers put notes down as rapidly as their hands can move across the paper, others write and rewrite slowly.

### Unnecessary Comma Usage

1. Do not use a comma between a subject and a verb.  
 Ex: (Incorrect) First contact between human kind and celestial aliens, is the subject of many science-fiction works.  
 Ex: (Correct) First contact between human kind and celestial aliens is the subject of many science-fiction works.
2. Do not use a comma between a preposition and its object.  
 Ex: (Incorrect) Comets were once thought to be fiery messages from, angry gods.  
 Ex: (Correct) Comets were once thought to be fiery messages from angry gods.
3. Do not use commas to separate restrictive elements from the rest of the sentence.  
 Ex: (Incorrect) The belief, that comets are the fiery messages of the gods, is an ancient one.  
 Ex: (Correct) The belief that comets are the fiery messages of the gods is an ancient one.
4. Do not use a comma after *such as* and *like*.  
 Ex: (Incorrect) Some writers, such as, Hemingway and Faulkner, influenced contemporary American writers.  
 Ex: (Correct) Some writers such as Hemingway and Faulkner, influenced contemporary American writers.
5. Do not use a comma before the first or after the last item in a series unless a rule requires it.  
 Ex: (Incorrect) Reading, writing, and arithmetic, should be the spine of education.  
 Ex: (Correct) Reading, writing, and arithmetic should be the spine of education.
6. Do not use a comma before the word *than* in a comparison.  
 Ex: (Incorrect) Hang gliding is more exciting, than skydiving.  
 Ex: (Correct) Hang gliding is more exciting than skydiving.

### Semi Colons

Semi colons separate two main clauses that are closely related but could stand on their own.

They can add variety to paragraphs with many short sentences.

Ex: He decided that his calling in life would be to write for ESPN Magazine; he changed his major from dance performance that afternoon.

Semi colons can also be used in lists where a comma will not sufficiently separate the items.

Ex: Students came from Rochester, Minnesota; Milwaukee, Wisconsin; Aurora, Illinois; and Mason City, Iowa.

\*Because the items in the list already have commas, semi colons are necessary.

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**Colons**

Semi colons can be used to add and/or separate information to a complete sentence.

Ex: She knew exactly what she wanted: banana cream pie.

\*If the sentence is not complete, this can frequently be fixed by adding “the following” before the colon.

Ex: His grocery list included: rice, beans, and cookies. (INCORRECT)

His grocery list included the following: rice, beans, and cookies. (CORRECT)

\*If you aren't sure if a colon is appropriate, see if you could replace it with “namely.” If the sentence would be correct with “namely,” it's probably correct with a colon.

Ex: She knew exactly what she wanted, namely, banana cream pie. (CORRECT)

She knew exactly what she wanted: banana cream pie. (ALSO CORRECT)