

Punctuation Basics

1. Punctuation matters

Punctuation marks used correctly are essential to building clarity and meaning in your writing. Misplaced commas or missing punctuation marks might even change the meaning of your sentences. Consider these hilarious examples:

Comma: Let's eat Grandma vs. Let's eat, Grandma

Hyphen: Twenty five-dollar bills vs. twenty-five dollar bills (Business Insider)

2. Sentence patterns vis-à-vis punctuation patterns

Base your decision to use or not to use a punctuation mark on sentence structure. In English, we have three basic sentence types with some variability within each type.

➤ Independent clause (simple sentence)

Pattern#1:

I want to become a better writer. \ 'pir-ē-əd \ or exclamation point \ or question mark

Pattern#2:

Clause, phrase, or word [,] nonessential clause, phrase, or word [,] clause, phrase, or word.

I am participating in the writing workshop, among other workshops, scheduled for tomorrow.

➤ Compound sentence

Compound sentences consist of two or more independent clauses connected with a coordinating conjunction or conjunctive adverb.

Pattern#1:

Independent clause [;] independent clause. \ 'se-mē- ,kō-lən

I am participating in the writing workshop; I want to become a better writer.

Pattern#2:

Independent clause [;] conjunctive adverb therefore/however/moreover, etc. independent clause.

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I am participating in the writing workshop; moreover, I want to become a better writer.

Pattern#3:

Independent clause [,] coordinating conjunction and, but, for, or, nor, so, yet independent clause.

I am participating in the writing workshop, and I want to become a better writer.

A **comma splice** (a run-on sentence or a fused sentence) is a common error that occurs when we separate two independent clauses with a comma but omit a coordinating conjunction. Recognize what comma splices look like and fix them.

Comma splice: I am participating in the writing workshop, I want to become a better writer.

Revised: I am participating in the writing workshop, **and** I want to become a better writer. / I am participating in the writing workshop **as** I want to become a better writer.

➤ **Complex sentences**

Complex sentences are formed by adding two or more subordinate (dependent) clauses to the main clause.

Pattern#1:

Dependent marker (subordinating conjunction) because, before, since, while, although, if, until, when, after, as, as if dependent clause [,] independent clause.

Because I want to become a better writer, I am participating in the writing workshop.

Pattern#2:

Independent clause + dependent marker because, before, since, while, although, if, until, when, after, as, as if + dependent clause.

I am participating in the writing workshop because I want to become a better writer.

Pattern#3

Use relative pronouns *that*, *which*, or *who* and no comma to introduce an essential clause. Use *which* or *who* and a comma to introduce a nonessential clause. The APA style guide requires using *that* and no comma to introduce an essential clause and using *which* and a comma to introduce a nonessential clause.

Essential: We are looking for a student assistant *who/that* can write in English well.

Nonessential: I live in Dortmund, *which* is home to a large technical university.

Essential: Students *who have been caught cheating on a test* will have to own up to their mistakes.

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Nonessential: The two students involved in the incident, *who have been caught cheating*, will have to own up to their mistakes.

➤ Other patterns

Pattern#1

Use commas to separate items in a series: a, b, and c.

The writing workshop covers three topics: abstract writing, CV writing, and cover letter writing.

Pattern#2

Use a comma to set off any word, phrase, or clause that precedes the grammatical subject of a sentence.

To write the essay, I had to do some thorough reading.

Since my mind was not getting enough stimulation, I decided to read several good essays.

Pattern#3

She said, "... ."

"...", she said, "..."

"...", she said.

Pattern#4

Use commas to set off dates and addresses

- Wednesday, January 18, 2023, ...
- 8 January 2023
- In January 2023
- The Department of English, the Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio 43210
- Dortmund, Germany, ...

Useful Resources

Purdue OWL: https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/general_writing/punctuation/commas/index.html

APA Style Blog: <https://blog.apastyle.org/apastyle/punctuation/page/2/>

The Punctuation Guide: <https://www.thepunctuationguide.com/>

Grammarly Blog: <https://www.grammarly.com/blog/how-to-use-commas-in-your-writing/>

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