

Commas (,)

1. Commas are usually used to separate independent clauses linked by a coordinating conjunction (the FANBOYS: for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so):

Shakespeare is the most famous playwright, but many people find his work difficult to read.

2. If the sentence is very short, however, the comma is optional:

Romeo is banished and Juliet is devastated.

3. Commas are used to separate most introductory or transitional words, phrases, or clauses:

Although Shakespeare is the most famous playwright, he may not have written as much as we think.

4. Commas set off non-restrictive, or non-essential, phrases or clauses (information within commas can be removed from the sentence without changing the essential meaning or structure of the sentence):

Romeo and Juliet, which was originally published in 1597, has now been made into several film versions.

5. Be careful when referring to works such as novels, poems, movies, and the like, that you are not creating a non-restrictive clause that changes the meaning of your sentence. Consider the difference:

Canada's short story writer, Alice Munro, won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2013. (This means, inaccurately, that Alice Munro is the only short story writer in Canada.)

Canada's short story writer Alice Munro won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2013. (accurate)

6. Commas set off non-essential phrases expressing contrast:

Ottawa, not Toronto, is the capital of Canada.

7. Commas are used between coordinate adjectives (adjectives that separately modify a noun):

An expensive, environmentally harmful factory was built next to the river.

8. Use commas in three-part dates (March 5, 1980 but not November 1979), to separate cities, provinces, and countries (Victoria, BC and Reykjavík, Iceland), and in numbers with more than four digits (65,962).

9. Commas identify words before and after a quotation:

Oscar Wilde once said, "The truth is rarely pure and never simple."

- *...except when the quotation is introduced by "that," or when the quotation ends in a question mark or exclamation point:

Oscar Wilde once said that "[w]ork is the curse of the drinking classes."

"What's in a name?" Juliet asks.

10. Commas are used between items in a list:

The novel's three main themes are the loss of childhood, life as a puzzle, and the inevitability of death.

- *The final comma that comes before "and" is called the Oxford comma, series, or serial comma. Some writers prefer to leave it out, which is fine as long as this is consistent. However, omission may cause confusion:

I owe everything I am today to my amazing parents, a plastic surgeon and a Saint Bernard.

Colons (:)

1. A colon can be used after an independent clause to introduce more information, such as an explanation, expansion, clarification, or rule:

Juliet has only one option: suicide.

The consequences for plagiarism can be devastating: students can fail an entire course or be expelled.

2. A colon can introduce a quotation not integrated into a sentence and not introduced by a verb, where what precedes the quotation is a complete sentence:

The narrator begins to have a strange relationship with her surroundings: “There are things in that wallpaper that nobody knows about but me, or ever will” (951).

3. A colon can also be used to introduce a list that follows a complete sentence:

There are three main sentence errors: comma splice errors, run-on sentences, and sentence fragments.

*Never use a colon directly after a verb, a preposition, or a phrase like *for example*, *especially*, or *including*.

Semicolon (;)

1. A semicolon can be used between related independent clauses not joined by a coordinating conjunction (such as *and*, *but*, *so*, etc.):

Romeo is handsome, idealistic, and romantic; he is also a Montague, which makes him Juliet’s enemy.

2. A semicolon can also separate independent clauses joined by *however*, *thus*, *therefore*, or another conjunctive adverb:

Romeo and Juliet get married secretly; however, further obstacles arise when Tybalt is killed and Juliet’s father decides that she should marry Paris.

3. Long items in a list can also be separated by semicolons instead of commas:

He set out on a journey to see some of the world’s most famous landmarks: the pyramids in Egypt; the Great Wall of China; the Eiffel Tower in Paris, France; and Angkor Wat in Cambodia.

Comma Splice Errors

When two complete sentences are joined together with just a comma, without a coordinating conjunction, you have a comma splice error.

Alice does not usually think before she acts, she follows the white rabbit down the hole.

Colons and semicolons can fix these problems:

Alice does not usually think before she acts; she follows the white rabbit down the hole.

Alice does not usually think before she acts: she follows the white rabbit down the hole.