



University of Vermont Graduate Writing Center Common Uses of the Comma, Semicolon, Colon, and Dash

Commas

1. Use a comma to separate independent clauses when they are joined by a coordinating conjunction (*and, but, for, or, nor, so, yet*):

Example: The general class of basic HLH proteins is expanding rapidly, and many more such genes are likely to exist.

Example: The manuscript may not have been written in Richer's own hand, but documents indicate that he was overseeing the manuscript's creation and revision.

To determine if you have two independent clauses, look to see if each clause on either side of the conjunction has *both* a subject and verb and could stand alone as a sentence. In the below example, for instance, *no* comma is used before the coordinating conjunction "and" because the second clause is *dependent* on the first for its subject "general class":

Example: The general class of basic HLH proteins is expanding rapidly and suggests that many more such genes exist.

2. Use a comma after a transitional word or phrase (e.g., *however, therefore, nonetheless, otherwise, finally, instead, thus, of course, above all, for example, in other words, as a result, on the other hand, in conclusion, in addition*):

Example: However, Max is the only protein described that will dimerize with c-Myc.

Example: In addition, a chapter discussing Robert le Bougre is missing from this edition.

3. Use a comma to signal the end of a long introductory clause and the beginning of the main sentence—and make a complex sentence much more reader friendly:

Example: Since plm-1 oncogene was originally discovered as a common integration site in murine leukemia virus-induced T cell lymphomas, retroviral infection of the transgenic lines might substitute for the spontaneous infections occurring at this second locus.

4. Use commas to offset nonessential items in a sentence:

Example: c-myc, the earliest discovered nuclear oncogene, has been implicated in the control of normal cell proliferation.

Example: The Climate Change Tree Atlas, which ranks the most important factors influencing future habitat suitability, found that mean July temperature is a key predictor of suitable habitat for red oak.

To determine if a phrase is essential or nonessential, try reading the sentence with the phrase in question removed. For instance, “The Climate Change Tree Atlas found that mean July temperature” makes grammatical and logical sense without the additional explanatory phrase “which ranks the most important factors ...,” so that phrase is *nonessential* and should be set off with commas.

On the other hand, in the below example, *no* commas should be used because “myc” is *essential* to understanding *which* of many oncogenes this sentence discusses:

Incorrect: The oncogene, myc, is implicated in the control of normal cell proliferation.

Correct: The oncogene myc is implicated in the control of normal cell proliferation.

5. Use commas to separate three or more items in a series:

Example: Cyanobacteria blooms in Lake Champlain threaten public health and well-being, aquatic ecosystems, and Vermont’s economic prosperity.

Semicolons

1. Use a semicolon when you link two independent clauses (clauses that could stand on their own as two sentences) that are closely related but which are not connected with a conjunction such as “and” or “but”:

Example: One unresolved issue is the nature of cellular DNA-binding complexes; much work remains to substantiate the DNA-binding studies reported to date.

Example: Elevation featured prominently in our findings as well; low elevation stands appeared more responsive to moisture and pollution deposition levels.

2. You can use a conjunctive adverb (e.g. “however,” “therefore,” “otherwise,” etc.) with a semicolon to further emphasize a comparison, conclusion, or distinction:

Example: The roof shingles are cupped, cracked, and covered in organic growth; therefore, there is a likelihood that the entire roof may need replacement.

3. Also use a semicolon to distinguish among *broad categories* in a list when each category is further defined by its own list:

Example: We explored tree age, size, and health; site elevation, moisture, and pollution levels; and temperature, precipitation, and average first frost date.

Colons

1. Use a colon when you have an independent clause (a complete sentence) followed by a list:

Example: The economic pro forma will generally contain the following items: an executive summary; a conditions assessment; a needs assessment or marketing analysis; facility use recommendations; architectural recommendations; a cost summary; an operating pro forma; and, potentially, a business plan with management options.

2. You can also use a colon (rather than a period or semicolon) to separate two independent clauses if you want to emphasize how the second clause explains or illustrates the first:

Example: The first phase of this research began in the laboratory of Anton Berns: transgenic mice were found to develop clonal B cell tumors with very long latency.

Dash

1. Use a dash to offset—and also draw attention to—a nonessential phrase within a sentence or at the end of a sentence:

Example: This paper uses a modified mental model approach to identify how individuals in two groups—community members living along Lake Champlain and professionals with expertise in algal blooms—think about the lake’s cyanobacteria bloom problem.

Example: The antidote to *la langue de coton*, Marxist linguist Jean-Jacques Lecercle suggests, is *la langue de bois*—the language of protest and struggle.