

Commas and Semicolons Made Easy Module

Punctuation is one of the most common difficulties writers have with their writing and editing. While many view commas and semicolons as inconsequential or unimportant, quite the opposite is true. A single comma can alter the entire meaning of a sentence. For example, there is an example joke among many English instructors: Let's eat, grandma. Let's eat grandma.

The first example sentence indicates that someone is instructing his or her grandma to eat or declaring that it is time to eat. The next sample sentence without the comma indicates that grandma WILL be eaten for dinner. The punch line for this set of sample sentences is: Punctuation saves lives. While not all punctuation is a matter of life and death, punctuation does have a profound bearing on the meaning of one's sentences and, ultimately, one's ability to communicate effectively.

The comma is the most versatile, and therefore confusing, punctuation mark in the English language. Many people were taught to use a comma when they would naturally pause in a sentence, but that is incorrect. It is a decent way to guess if you have absolutely no idea whether you need a comma, but it is not a rule and will not reliably lead you to the right answer. You will end up using commas like taking target practice with a machine gun: with enough shots, you are bound to hit something correctly all while placing a lot of incorrect commas.

Often, commas and other punctuation are made much harder than they really are. However, in order to get a firm grasp of how to use commas, we must revisit a few basics.

To begin, we must remember that for a sentence to be complete, it must have a verb and a noun. This is referred to as an INDEPENDENT CLAUSE because it can stand alone as a sentence.

Ex. I ran.

I is the noun and ran is the verb. Yes, this is very simple, but it conveys the point.

Now, if you have two independent clauses together, you might wish to connect them if they are related in their subject matter. Also, you want to vary your sentences so your writing does not sound like a Dick and Jane book.

Ex. I ran. She walked.

If you have two independent clauses, you may join them using a comma and FANBOYS.

For

And

Nor

But

Or

Yet

So

Ex. I ran, but she walked.

Please note that the sentences **MUST** have two independent clauses in order to be joined by a comma and a **FANBOYS**.

If you are mathematically-minded, this next part will make a lot of sense. In order to achieve more sentence variety, you should note that **FANBOYS** is also equal to a **;** as well as **;****THINTIC**..

FANBOYS= **;** = **;****THINTIC**,

THINTICS are:

Therefore

However

Indeed

Nevertheless

Thus

In fact

Consequently

Ex. I ran, but she walked.

I ran; however, she walked.

I ran; she walked.

The key to these different sentence constructions is the **INDEPENDENT CLAUSES**. In order to use these constructions, you **MUST** have two independent clauses.

Next, you may wish to combine sentences but don't need the extra clutter of subjects from the second independent clause. Sometimes, the subject is inferred from the first independent clause. When this occurs, the second clause is a **DEPENDENT** clause because it relies on the first, or **INDEPENDENT**, clause for its meaning.

Ex. He was a student and also worked at the grocery store.

He was a student is the independent clause. Worked at the grocery store is the dependent clause. It relies on the first clause for its meaning. He is implied in the second clause. Because the two clauses share a subject, there is no need for a comma before and.

*Remember, you could not write Worked at the grocery store. There is no subject. Your audience would be perplexed.

Because is also one of the most common words that confuses comma usage. Most often, one does not use a comma before because in that it is linking ideas. Further, because is often a preposition.

Ex. I wanted to go to the store because I was out of food.

I wanted to go to the store is an independent clause. Because I was out of food is a dependent clause. Remember, you cannot run into a room and yell, “Because I was out of food.” and have people understand what you mean. They would be expecting something more for clarification. That is why it is a DEPENDENT clause. It relies on the initial independent clause for meaning.

However, if we flip the previous sample sentence around, the Because clause becomes an introductory phrase. Then, we use a comma after the because clause in that it is introducing the independent clause.

Ex. Because I was out of food, I wanted to go to the store.

*Many teachers in the past may have warned you against starting a sentence with because. This was merely to help you avoid writing incomplete sentences such as “Because I was late.” We often talk like this as the subject is inferred from previous points in the conversation; however, we cannot write this way.

See. Punctuation is not nearly as difficult as we make it. With a little practice, you can slay those mythical punctuation monsters and be on track to writing well and correctly.