

Punctuation

- [Commas, Colons, Semicolons](#)
- [Hyphens and Dashes](#)
- [Quotation Marks](#)

Commas, Colons, Semicolons

1. Don't use a comma to join two independent clauses. The result is a **comma splice**.

Don't write: *We tried to splice the film with cellophane tape, the film broke again when we ran the projector.*

Like the tape on the broken film, a comma is not strong enough to hold these two clauses together.

Solutions

- **Substitute a semi-colon for the comma.**
We tried to splice the film with cellophane tape; the film broke again when we ran the projector.
- **Use a coordinating conjunction (*and, but, or, for, nor, yet*).**
We tried to splice the film with cellophane tape, but the film broke again when we ran the projector. (Note that the writer maintains the comma before *but* when *but* introduces an independent clause.)
- **Use a subordinating conjunction.**
Although we tried to splice the film with cellophane tape, the film broke again when we ran the projector.
- **Break the sentence into two sentences.**
We tried to splice the film with cellophane tape. The film broke again when we ran the projector.

2. Don't use a semicolon to join an independent clause to a subordinate clause or a phrase.

Don't write: *The novelist Frances Burney achieved success at a young age; a rare feat for an author.*

Solutions

- **Use a comma to join a noun phrase to an independent clause.**
The novelist Frances Burney achieved success at a young age, a rare feat for an author.
- **Use a colon if the noun phrase repeats the meaning of a phrase in the independent clause.**
The novelist Frances Burney achieved a rare feat for an author: success at a young age.

3. Combine a semi-colon with a comma when using *however* or another conjunctive adverb to join two independent clauses.

Write: *Online registration has made it easier to schedule courses; however, I don't have access to a computer.*

If the adverb does not come between two independent clauses, set it off with two commas.

Write: *In the beginning, however, I was nervous about talking on the phone with strangers.*

4. Use colons to introduce a list or an example (the colon takes the place of the phrase such as):

Write: *The titles of Octavia Butler's novels suggest her interests in Psychology and Sociology: Adulthood Rites, Kindred, Mind of My Mind, and Survivor.*

Hyphens and Dashes

1. Use hyphens to connect compound words and numbers, especially when they serve as adjectives.

Compare the following:

Francis Bacon articulated the criteria of the New Science at the beginning of the **seventeenth century**.

Francis Bacon was a **seventeenth-century** author.

2. Use dashes (sparingly) to set off comments inserted in a sentence or to indicate emphasis or change of thought. Type dashes as a long line, two hyphens, or a hyphen surrounded by spaces.

The total eclipse of the sun - the last in this century - can be viewed in southern England as well as Asia.

The concert will go on as planned - unless the band's bus breaks down again.

Quotation Marks

1. In American usage, place commas and periods *inside* quotation marks unless they precede parentheses:

Write: Audre Lorde chills her audience by fusing images of beauty with shouts of racism in "Every Traveler has One Vermont Poem."

Write: New York City itself, not Ringling Brothers, is the subject of "Big Apple Circus" (Lorde 45).

2. Put semi-colons and colons outside quotation marks:

Write: We began the class by discussing Cicero's essay, "On Friendship"; Shakespeare obviously had this essay in mind when he wrote *The Winter's Tale*.

3. In American usage, indicate quotations-within-quotations by using single quotation marks:

Write: Sherry Turkle notes, "We remember that Lacan stresses that the ego is formed by a composite of false and distorted introjections so that 'I' and 'Other' are inextricably confused in the unconscious language of the self" (Psychoanalytic Politics 103).