NOTES ON PUNCTUATION

Simple English is no one's native tongue. It has to be worked for.
--Jacques Barzun

Although punctuation is far from the most important aspect of your writing, it serves a worthwhile purpose: it signals to the reader the relationship between your ideas. Simply put, a correctly punctuated passage is easier to read than one that is not. At times, punctuation also helps to determine meaning. Rules governing punctuation may be broken occasionally to create a particular rhetorical effect. On the whole, however, these rules should be followed because, as Donald Hall puts it, "rules describe the reader's expectations." In this handout, some of the major rules of punctuation are reviewed.

I.   **The Comma (,)**

   A.   Use a comma preceding a coordinate conjunction (and, but, or, nor, for, yet, so) that joins two coordinate (i.e., main) clauses.

      1.   Yesterday the town voted to suspend the sheriff, and his deputy took over the difficult task of enforcing the law.

      2.   Kafka is a profound religious thinker, but the product of his thought is not a system but a world of imagination.

      Exception: You may use only a comma to separate two independent clauses *if* they are brief and strongly parallel in structure.

      1.   "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times." (Charles Dickens)
      2.   We came to fight, we came to die.

      Otherwise, you must use a semicolon (e.g., Clarence has three kittens; one of them is uncommonly homely.). A comma splice occurs when you divide two longer, parallel main clauses or two not strongly parallel main clauses with a comma instead of with a semicolon, or a comma and a coordinating conjunction. A fused sentence occurs when you run two main clauses together without any separation.

   B.   Use a comma following an introductory subordinate (i.e., dependent) clause or a rather long introductory phrase.

      1.   Since the soil is essential for the production of nearly all terrestrial life, its loss is of serious import.

      2.   Every day of the week on a screen somewhere in the world, King Kong relives his agony.

C.   Use commas to set off a non-restrictive modifier, that is, a word, phrase, or clause that could be omitted without changing the essential meaning of the sentence. You should <u>not</u> set off the modifier with commas when it *is* essential to the meaning.

    1.   All students who can't swim must wear life jackets on the canoe outing.

    2.   Peter, who can't swim, must wear a life jacket on the canoe outing.

    3.   His son, who is a good swimmer, didn't wear a life jacket.

    4.   His son who is a good swimmer rescued his father.

D.   Use a comma before a phrase or clause tacked on at the end of a sentence.

    1.   "The universal brotherhood of man is our most precious possession, what there is of it." (Mark Twain)

    2.   My car just broke down again, thanks to my cousin Robert's expert repair work.

E.   Use commas to set off nouns of direct address, and introductory and transitional words.

    1.   Dr. Strangelove, your proposal boggles the mind.

    2.   Yes, we are now hopelessly lost.

    3.   We must, however, consider one thing.

F.   Use commas to divide elements (nouns and, if you can insert an "and" between them, adjectives) in a series.

    1.   Jeremy ordered tomato juice, bacon and eggs, pancakes, and coffee with cream.

    2.   Maynard Kitty has thick, short, gray, striped fur.

G.   Use commas to separate numeral and place names and to set off names of people from their titles (or from any other noun phrases modifying them).

    1.   Alice, who was born November 15, 1950, in Denver, Colorado, moved to Selma, Alabama, before she was old enough to ski.

    2.   You may write to Mr. Booth at 375 Fairview Avenue, Dallas, Texas 20036. The committee chose Lola Lopez, attorney-at-law, to represent their case.

H.   Use a comma to divide a quotation from your own words that introduce it. But omit the comma if you quote only part of a sentence or introduce the quotation with "that".

    1.   F.L. Lucas observes, "Most style is not honest enough."

    2.   F.L. Lucas observes that "Most style is not honest enough."

    3.   F.L. Lucas observes that in our writing we are often "not honest enough."

    Note: If you interrupt the quotation with your introduction, you must set your own words off with commas as you would any other interrupter.

    4.   "Most style," observes F.L. Lucas, "is not honest enough."

II. Placement of Punctuation with Quotation Marks

The period and the comma go inside quotation marks; the semicolon and the colon go outside. If the quoted material is a question, the question mark goes inside. The same holds true if the quoted material is an exclamation: the exclamation point goes inside the quotation marks. If not just the quotation but the entire sentence is a question (or an exclamation), the mark (or the point) goes outside the marks.

1. "Happy days are here again!" sang the Democrats.

2. Charlie Brown says "Rats"; Casper the Friendly Ghost says "Golly."

3. Did he say "fire"?

4. "Araby," "A Little Cloud," and "Counterparts" are three of the stories in Joyce's Dubliners.

III. The Semicolon (;)

A. Use a semicolon to link two closely related independent clauses.

  1. The inevitability of war became obvious to even the most casual observer; maneuvers were constantly being held.

  2. "When angry, count four; when very angry, swear." (Mark Twain)

B. Use a semicolon to avoid a comma splice when connecting two independent clauses with a conjunctive adverb, such as "however," "thus," "therefore," and "consequently."

  1. I support the demonstrators' objectives; however, I cannot condone their violence.

  2. This town is not big enough for both of us; therefore, I suggest we expand the city limits.

C. Use a semicolon in a series between items already containing internal punctuation.

  1. Clyde made several New Year's resolutions: to eat sensible, well-balanced meals; to study harder, sleep longer, and swear less; and to drink no more coffee or tea.

  2. Her children were born a year apart: Moe, 1936; James, 1937; and Larry, 1938.

  3. Her cat tangled with an enormous, testy tomcat; triumphed momentarily; lowered his guard; then suffered a torn ear, a scratched eye, and mangled whiskers.

IV. The Colon (:)

A. Use a colon to introduce a long or formal list, but do not use a colon after "to be" verbs or in any other place where its use would break the natural flow of the sentence, such as after a preposition.

Incorrect: Costa's favorite Victorian novels are: Great Expectations, Middlemarch, and Far From the Madding Crowd.

Correct: Costa's favorite Victorian novels are Great Expectations, Middlemarch, and Far From the Madding Crowd.

Correct: Her cat sometimes catches small animals: birds, snakes, moles, and mice.

Correct: Three women attended the meeting: the president, the treasurer, and the security officer.

B. Use a colon to connect two independent clauses when the second enlarges on or explains the first.

 1. The students had an inspired idea: they would publish an underground newspaper.

 2. There were only two choices: we could fire the comptroller or go out of business.

C. Use a colon to introduce a quotation in an essay.

Example: In the opening sentence of his novel <u>Scaramouche</u>, Rafael Sabatini says of his hero: "He was born with the gift of laughter, and the sense that the world was mad."

(Note in the above quotation from Sabatini the technically incorrect comma after the word "laughter"; it is used here for rhetorical effect.)

V. <u>The Dash</u> (--)

A. Use a dash in informal writing to add emphasis to an idea or to imply an afterthought at the end of a sentence.

Emphatic: Margie had only one chance -- and a slim one at that.

Less Emphatic: Margie had only one chance, and a slim one at that.

Emphatic: Use dashes with caution -- but use them.

B. In *informal* writing use dashes, instead of commas, around an interrupting phrase or clause to emphasize the interrupting material. To take away emphasis, use parentheses. Don't overuse either dashes or parentheses. Both, when used frequently, lose their effect.

Emphatic: My cousin Calvin -- the crazy one from Marion -- is running for the legislature.

Less Emphatic: My cousin Calvin, the crazy one from Marion, is running for the legislature.

Not Emphatic: My cousin Calvin (the crazy one from Marion) is running for the legislature.