

# Using Commas, Semicolons and Colons

This resource shows the most common ways commas, semicolons and colons are used in academic writing to help you begin to understand how to use them correctly.

## Using Commas ,

To start to understand how to use commas, you can review these four functions.

### 1. Commas separate introductory parts of sentences

A comma is used after introductory words, phrases or clauses. Commas come before the main subject of a sentence as a sign to the reader that the main subject is coming.

**Words:** *Unfortunately, our picnic was rained out.*

**Phrases:** *Laughing to himself, he drew a cartoon.*

*In conclusion, the law needs to be changed.*

**Clauses:** *After she finished her paper, she fell into bed and slept.*

*If I won the lottery, I would travel.*

### 2. Commas separate ideas inserted within a sentence

When information is added to a sentence that interrupts the flow of ideas of the sentence, commas are used in pairs like brackets to separate the clause that is interrupting.

- *Julie Payette, for example, is an excellent role model for girls.*
- *John A. McDonald, Canada's first Prime Minister, had a drinking problem.*
- *Nick, who struggled with grades in high school, is doing quite well in college.*

### 3. Commas separate complete sentences with a coordinator

A comma often comes before a coordinator which joins two independent clauses. An independent clause expresses a complete thought, like a simple sentence. The most common coordinators are *and*, *but*, *or*, *yet*, and *so*. The complete list of coordinating conjunctions can be remembered using the mnemonic FANBOYS (*for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so*).

Bt        *She wanted to order oysters, but the restaurant had run out of them.*

Or        *Would you like dessert, or would you prefer to get your bill?*

Yet      *They loved the chocolate cake, yet the pieces were too big to finish.*

So        *The service was excellent, so they left a big tip.*

### 4. Commas separate items in lists (3 or more).

Note the comma that comes before the last item in the list is optional and dependent on style guidelines for your assignment.

- *She invited Amanda, Amy, Nick, and Claire to her party.*
- *Strawberries, watermelon, and apricots are my favorite fruits.*
- *A student has to go to class, take notes, read textbooks, and write exams.*

## Using Semicolons ;

Semicolons are strong, end-of-sentence punctuation marks that work much like periods.

### 1. Between two related sentences

As with a period, a semicolon can be used to separate two complete sentences, but a semicolon is used to show a clear connection between the two sentences.

- *Anna loves figure skating; she hates hockey.*
- *He loves her; she loves him.*

### 2. Before a conjunctive adverb that links one sentence to the next sentence.

Conjunctive adverbs include words like however, therefore, also, for example, in addition, and otherwise.

- *Bring your I.D. card; otherwise, you won't be allowed in.*
- *She does a lot of travelling between semesters; for example, she went to Mexico last semester break.*

Notice, however, that semicolons are not used before subordinators (e.g. *if, because, although, when*) or coordinators (e.g. *and, but, so, yet*).

### 3. Between items in a list

Semicolons are needed in a list when commas have already been used within the individual items within the list; in those cases, semicolons are used to separate the listed items.

- *I am struggling to decide what university to attend: U.B.C., which has a big beautiful campus; S.F.U., which is close to my home; or U.F.V., which is smaller and more personal.*

## Using Colons :

The colon is used to introduce a list after a complete sentence. Like a period and a semicolon, a colon is punctuation that finishes a complete thought.

- *We have three levels of government: municipal, provincial and national.*
- *Although the battle at Dieppe was a disaster, it served some useful purposes: it distracted the enemy from the Eastern front, it taught the Allies about the importance of reconnaissance, and it gave the inactive Canadian troops in Britain something to do.*

### A Common Error to Avoid with Colons

You may see examples of colons being used after incomplete sentences in novels, newspapers and magazines, but in academic writing, you must have a complete sentence before a colon. A colon should not come after a verb like "is" or after a listing expression like "such as."

(Incorrect) *The causes of Cathy's success are: her intelligence, her hard-working approach, and her high level of motivation.*

Explanation: "The causes of Cathy's success are" is not a complete sentence.

(Correct) *Cathy is successful for a number of reasons: her intelligence, her hard-working approach, and her high level of motivation.*

Explanation: "Cathy is successful for a number of reasons" is a complete sentence.