Punctuation Marks:
Make Them Allies, Not Foes, in Your Fight for Coherence

(Ab)Using Commas

General observations.

1. Commas are often overused: the salt and pepper syndrome

2. Take guidance from the natural cadence—pauses—and the intended meaning of your sentence

The proper use of commas.

Use a comma to

1. Set off introductory words, phrases, or clauses.

   Historically, loud music was unpopular in that culture.

   Having left the exam room early, Jerry was anxious about his performance on the test.

   Because he wrote well, he was widely admired by his colleagues.

2. Set apart 3 or more words, phrases, or clauses in a series.
I dislike onions, cauliflower and beets. Note the Oxford comma: will you use it? If not, delete the comma after the last element of the series. Whichever you use—and APA seems to prefer the Oxford comma—be consistent throughout your piece of work.

He was sad because he had been abused, left home at an early age, and lost contact with his family.

3. **Join independent clauses** (otherwise sentences on their own) using conjunctions “and”, “but”, or “so”, etc.

The student obeyed the teacher this time, and later he was glad he did.

Come here, or I will go there.

4. **Separate coordinating adjectives** (modifying the same noun but not another adjective).

The tiresome, pedantic professor fortunately was always late for class.

The bright green shamrock was a good omen.

5. **Set off non-essential words, phrases, or clauses in mid-sentence.**

The Canadian government, however, refused to cooperate.

The Canadian Senate, a much-respected institution in the early years, had fallen into disrepute. (See also em-dashes, below)
Sue, on the other hand, refused to accept the changes.

6. **Set off “which” clauses that are non-essential to the flow and meaning of the sentence.**

The black car, which had a large dent in its hood, must have belonged to the professor.

**But don’t use a comma before “that” clauses:**

[after a noun] The car that the professor drove had a large dent in its hood.

[after a verb] The student believed that she would be at the top of her class.

**With participles, it depends on your intended meaning (whether the clause is necessary to make the sentence complete or meaningful):**

The student, believing that she would win the prize, had already drafted her acceptance speech.

The student writing the best essay will win the award. *(clarifies who the subject “the student” is)*

7. **Set off contrasting words or indicate a shift/pause at the end of a sentence.**

The Prime Minister’s answer was merely evasive, not untruthful.

When he received the package, the old man was touched, even tearful.
8. Set off geographical names, dates.

Toronto, Ontario, is the home of a sad group of hockey players.

February 5, 2015, is the day the team will be auctioned off.

9. Set off non-restrictive appositives.

Dr. Johnson’s last book, *The Reluctant Scholar*, was an instant best-seller.

but

Johnson’s book *The Reluctant Scholar* was on the *NY Times* list for months. [necessary in order to know which book]

10. Introduce a quotation without using “that”, “which”, or a similar conjunction.

The judge wrote, “It is a miracle that a student would survive such gross negligence by a teacher.”

but

The judge wrote that “it is a miracle that a student…teacher.”
11. **Introduce a direct question.**

   The researcher asked, Why am I studying this particular sample of students?

   **but**

   The researcher asked herself why she was studying this particular sample of students.

12. **Set off “for example”, “e.g.”, “that is”, “i.e.”, “so forth”, etc.**

   The professor, for example, was not a kind soul.

   The class was assigned several tasks, for example, a five-page essay.

   **Common comma errors (errors shown in the examples).**

1. **Separating the subject and the verb.**

   An applicant with a criminal record, will not be accepted into the program.

2. **Placing a comma between two verbs relating to the same subject.**

   The professor took the book down from his shelf, and began to read about Dewey.
3. **Separating compound subjects or compound objects.**

   The science department head, and the principal, are graduates of Western’s Faculty of Education.

   The science department head told her students that Western was the best university in Canada, and recommended that they apply there.

4. **Joining two complete sentences (the “comma splice”).**

   The student took a course in history in the fall, in the spring he took a course in economics.

   To fix this mistake,

   Use a conjunction:

   …took a course in history in the fall but, in the spring, he took economics.

   Use a semi-colon:

   …took a course in history in the fall; in the spring, he took economics.

   **Using Semi-Colons**

   Use a semi-colon
1. **To join two independent clauses** (i.e. avoid the comma splice as above) and to avoid having two short sentences that have a close connection.

   The judge spoke harshly to the witness; she would tolerate no such language in her court.

2. **In the above type of construction, together with “however”, “thus”, “therefore”, “that is” and so on.**

   The judge listened intently; however, she interjected when the witness began to swear.

   The judge adjourned the case *sine die*; that is, she left it up to the parties to arrange a new date.

3. **To separate components in a complex list that itself has internal punctuation.**

   The school board adopted policies that prohibited cyberbullying, both inside and outside school; in-school harassment, hazing, and taunting; and discrimination on the basis of a student’s clothing.

**Using Colons**

Use a colon

1. **To introduce an element or series of elements expanding on or clarifying preceding words.**

   The accused had three choices: plead guilty, plead not guilty, or ask for an adjournment.
2. Together with “as follows”, “the following”, “had this to say” and so on.

The study made the following startling findings: (1) the world really is flat; (2) there really is no milk in a Caramilk bar; and (3) Charleton Heston really was Moses.

The BIG error—assuming that you *always* need to use a colon to introduce a list or quotation.

A colon should NOT intervene in what otherwise would be a complete, grammatical sentence.

Hence, the following is incorrect:

The study found: (1) the world really is flat; ….

Alternatively, one may say,

The study found that (1) the world really is flat; (2) …. 

**Using an Em-Dash (long dash)**

Use an em-dash

1. **To Set off explanatory/exemplifying elements (as an alternative to commas, parentheses or a colon).**

The anti-crime legislation—initially looked at suspiciously by the defence bar—passed through Parliament easily.
The report was inaccurate—let alone incoherent—and there was no option but to require its resubmission.

The legislation had several troublesome elements—vagueness, overreach, and a discriminatory effect.

2. Together with “namely”, “for example”, and so on, instead of commas.

The paper was deficient in several respects—namely, it had no introduction or conclusion, was rambling and incoherent, and had inaccurate and missing references.

Using an En-Dash (short dash)

Use an en-dash

1. Mostly to connect numbers (number ranges): dates, times, page numbers etc., so as to mean “up to and including.”

   Never to be used with “from” or “between” as in from 20—30 or between June 10--20.

   Instead, say “The answer was contained on pages 20 to 30” or “There were between 20 and 30 Justin Bieber sightings.”

2. In compound adjectives (instead of hyphens)

   e.g., field–tested procedures
References


