Using Commas, Semi-colons and Colons

In this activity, you will learn about commas, semicolons, and colons. You will learn what each punctuation mark does, and how you can use them in a sentence.

**Commas**

A comma is a punctuation mark that is used for several grammatical purposes. It can be used to separate, stress, join, and clarify different elements in a sentence.

Use a comma between independent clauses if they are connected by a coordinating conjunction

An independent clause is a group of words with at least one subject and one verb, which can stand alone as its own sentence. A coordinating conjunction is a word (for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so) that joins two independent clauses. When you are joining two independent clauses with a coordinating conjunction, use a comma, followed by the coordinating conjunction.

Examples:

- I wanted to go, (comma) but I couldn’t afford to buy a ticket.
- You should pay your bills on time, (comma) or else you will have to pay interest.

Note: You can also join two independent clauses with a semicolon. You’ll learn about this later.

Do not use a comma as a period (comma splice)

When there are two sentences, a comma alone cannot be used to connect the two sentences, for this would be a comma splice. One can instead use one of the following three options:

1. a period
2. a comma followed by a coordinating conjunction
3. a semicolon. (if the two sentences/independent clauses are related in meaning)

Incorrect: Sally likes to jump, (comma) she plays hopscotch.
Correct: Sally likes to jump. (period) She plays hopscotch.
Correct: Sally likes to jump, (comma) so she plays hopscotch.
Correct: Sally likes to jump; (semicolon) she plays hopscotch.

Use commas to separate listed items

When three or more items are listed in a series, a comma is placed between the items.

E.g. We purchased bread, (comma) rice, (comma) and broccoli at the grocery store.
E.g. Mary wrote a letter of complaint to the clerk, (comma) to the manager, (comma) and to the CEO.
Use a comma to separate listed adjectives
When two or more adjectives are used to describe a noun, put a comma between the adjectives.

E.g. He drives an old, (comma) beat-up car.

**Caution:** It is not always necessary to separate listed adjectives with a comma. If the following tests are successful, use a comma:

1. Switch the order of the adjectives. Is the sentence still complete clear? E.g. He drives a beat-up, old car.
2. Add ‘and’ between the adjectives. Is the sentence still complete and clear? E.g. He drives an old and beat-up car.

Use a comma before and after non-essential material (non-restrictive adjective clause)
Any material that can be left out of the sentence without changing the main idea is nonessential. This information is known as a non-restrictive adjective clause.

When the non-restrictive clause is in the middle of a sentence, commas should be placed before and after.

E.g. Sandy Smith, (comma) who went to Seneca College, (comma) is the CEO.

When the non-restrictive clause is at the end of a sentence, it should be preceded by a comma and followed by a period.

E.g. The bottle is in my coat, (comma) which you can find in the closet.

Use a comma after transitional words or phrases
Transitions are words or phrases that connect the ideas of one sentence to another or one paragraph to another.

When a transitional word (such as **therefore**, **however**, **thus**, **first**, **second**, etc.) or phrase is used, a comma is placed after it.

E.g. **First**, (comma) I took out my keys, and then I unlocked the door.

Use commas around additional information that interrupts a sentence
You can use commas to separate a word or group of words that interrupt the flow of the sentence.

Examples:

- The fact is, (comma) Phil, (comma) that I feel quite unhappy about it.
- Bagels, (comma) for example, (comma) are delicious with cream cheese.
Other expressions that are generally set off with commas include: however, in fact, at any rate, of course, I think, therefore, by the way, finally.

Use commas for direct quotations
When a direct quotation is used, a comma is placed after the word that declares the direct quotation.

E.g. Her sister said, (comma) “I think I’m in love.”

When a direct quotation is before the declaring word, a comma is placed at the end of the quotation within the quotation marks.

E.g. “I’m playing with my Barbies,” (comma) replied Susie.

Use commas to separate a dependent clause from an independent clause
A dependent clause is a phrase that cannot stand alone—it needs an independent clause to make sense.

Use a comma after a lengthy introductory clause or phrase, or after a short introductory phrase to avoid unclear meaning.

Dependent clauses often contain words that indicate time (e.g. from, after, while, when, etc.).

Examples:

- Unclear: From the beginning the end of the film was obvious.
- Clear: From the beginning, (comma) the end of the film was obvious.

Use a comma to separate items in an address or a date.
Use a comma to separate days from months, and to separate dates from years.

E.g. Saturday, (comma) September 12, (comma) 1959

Use a comma between street address and city names, and between city names and provinces or territories.

E.g. 100 Hilda Ave., (comma) Willowdale, (comma) Ontario

**Semi-colons**
The semi-colon links closely related ideas by emphasizing the relationship between the parts of a sentence.

Use semi-colons to separate independent clauses that have closely related ideas.
The semi-colon marks the dividing point in a compound sentence (a sentence made up of two independent clauses that are not joined by a coordinating conjunction).

Examples:
- The policeman parked at the corner; (semi-colon) he was hoping to stop speeders.
- The manager had a good sense of humour; (semi-colon) nevertheless, he was strict.

Use a semi-colon when listing items that already include a comma. This helps to eliminate confusion about the listed items.

Example: We visited several schools, (comma) colleges, (comma) and universities; (semi-colon) many churches, (comma) offices, (comma) and factories; (semi-colon) and a number of public buildings.

**The Colon**

A colon is a punctuation mark used to introduce information (e.g. a list).

Use a colon to introduce a list.

The colon is principally used to introduce a list in conjunction with such words as following or as follows. **The colon may only be used after an independent clause.**

Examples:

- The Canadians at the International Writers Conference included the following: (colon) Madeleine Thien, Emma Donoghue, Joseph Boyden, and Lawrence Hill.
- The sports where the Ontario team seems in a good position to do well are as follows: (colon) hockey, soccer, badminton, and swimming.

**Test your Knowledge**

1. Read the following paragraph. Whenever there is a blank space, decide if there should be a comma (,), a semi-colon (;) or a colon (:). The answers will appear after the paragraph.

   **Paragraph:** Tom left work quickly (blank) he was excited to go home and watch all his favorite reruns. His wife was at a book club meeting (blank) so he could turn the television up as loud as he liked. He laid his snacks out on the table (blank) Crispy Crunch, Jolly Ranchers, and a Sprite. He was ready to turn the television on (blank) however, he could not find the remote control. Tom (blank) who did not normally like books (blank) decided to read instead.

   **Answer:** Tom left work quickly (semi-colon) he was excited to go home and watch all his favorite reruns. His wife was at a book club meeting (comma) so he could turn the television up as loud as he liked. He laid his snacks out on the table (comma) Crispy Crunch, Jolly Ranchers, and a Sprite. He was ready to turn the television on (semi-colon) however, he could not find the remote control. Tom (comma) who did not normally like books (comma) decided to read instead.

2. Choose whether a comma (,), a semi-colon (;) or a colon (:); should appear in the blank spaces to complete the following sentences.
   a. Last Friday (blank) I went to visit a friend in Toronto. (Answer: comma)
b. I don't like to sit at the back (blank) it’s too close to the bathrooms. (Answer: semicolon)

c. I had had a busy day at work (blank) so I dozed off not long after we pulled out of the station. (Answer: comma)

d. Tessa prepared a fantastic dinner (blank) zucchini pizza bites, salad, and mini cheesecakes. (Answer: colon)

e. We went out for brunch (blank) saw a movie (blank) and perused the cookbooks at Indigo. (Answers: comma and comma).

3. There are multiple correct ways to write two independent clauses. Which of the following options are correct?
   a. Mary usually sleeps, (comma) she is always tired. (period)
   b. Mary usually sleeps, (comma) for she is always tired. (period)
   c. Mary usually sleeps. (period) She is always tired. (period)
   d. Mary usually sleeps; (semi-colon) she is always tired. (period)

   Correct answer: option ‘a’ is incorrect, and options ‘b’, ‘c’, and ‘d’ are correct. You can’t join two independent clauses with only a comma. You can use a period, a comma followed by a coordinating conjunction, or a semicolon.

4. Where would you place the comma(s) to set off the non-essential material in the following sentence?
   a. Regina George, (comma) who plays lacrosse, (comma) was nearly elected prom queen.
   b. Regina George who plays lacrosse, (comma) was nearly elected prom queen.
   c. Regina George, (comma) who plays lacrosse was nearly elected prom queen.
   d. Regina George who, (comma) plays lacrosse, (comma) was nearly elected prom queen.

   Correct answer: ‘option a’, “Regina George, (comma) who plays lacrosse, (comma) was nearly elected prom queen” is correct. You would place a comma before and after the non-essential material.

5. Where would you place the commas to separate the list items in the following sentence?
   a. Mary planted turnips, (comma) carrots, (comma) and tomatoes.
   b. Mary planted turnips, (comma) carrots, (comma) and, (comma) tomatoes.
   c. Mary planted turnips carrots, (comma) and tomatoes.

   Correct answer: Option ‘a’, “Mary planted turnips, (comma) carrots, (comma) and tomatoes.” Is correct. You would place a comma between each of the listed items, and before the coordinating conjunction.

6. Would you need to place a comma between the adjectives in this sentence? “She prepared a delicious nutritious dinner.”
a. Yes  
b. No  

Correct answer: option ‘a’: yes. The order of the adjectives can be reversed, and you can add ‘and’ between them, so you would use a comma.

7. True or False. You should use a comma immediately after a transition, such as first or therefore.  
a. True  
b. False  

Correct answer: option ‘a’: True. You should use a comma after a transition.

Congratulations! You completed the activity.