

Common Punctuation Errors

⇒ Comma Splices

When two independent clauses (that is, two phrases that could each stand alone as a complete sentence) are joined by only a comma, a comma splice occurs. The following construction is an example of a comma splice:

"Japan will design the aircraft, the United States will provide the technology."

This sentence can be revised the following ways:

- Separating the clauses into two separate sentences using a period:
"Japan will design the aircraft. The United States will provide the technology."
- Linking the clauses with a semicolon:
"Japan will design the aircraft; the United States will provide the technology."
- Linking the clauses with a comma and a coordinating conjunction (e.g., and, but):
"Japan will design the aircraft, and the United States will provide the technology."



The comma splice most commonly seen is illustrated in the following sentence:

"In the past, the team has had a difficult time winning games, however, the new coach has made many helpful improvements."

Conjunctive adverbs (like "however," "therefore," "moreover") or transitional phrases (like "in fact," "in addition") must be used with a semicolon when they connect two independent clauses. The sentence should be revised as follows:

"In the past, the team has had a difficult time winning games; however, the new coach has made many helpful improvements."

⇒ Compound Sentences

When two independent clauses are joined by a coordinating conjunction ("and," "but," "or," "nor," "for," "so," "yet") a comma must connect the two clauses. A frequently-seen faulty construction is a sentence without a comma:

"Wordsworth is an English poet and Cather is an American novelist."

The sentence is fixed by adding a comma before the coordinating conjunction:

"Wordsworth is an English poet, and Cather is an American novelist."

⇒ Numbered Items Within Sentences

When numbered items have internal commas, separate them with semicolons.

"Before a loan could be made, the committee had to determine that (1) the borrower's earning power, together with the security pledged, (*internal commas*) ensured loan repayment; (2) the loan was needed to avoid adverse economic effects; and (3) credit was not available elsewhere."

If there are no internal commas in the numbered items, you need only commas to separate the items.

"The meeting will address three areas of concern for the students: (1) housing and visitation policies, (2) curriculum requirements, and (3) clubs and organizations."

⇒ Nonrestrictive and Restrictive Modifiers

Nonrestrictive phrases or clauses are set off by commas because they do not limit or "restrict" the meaning of the words they modify. In other words, these phrases are not essential to the meaning of the sentence.

"The law, which was passed March 11, 1997, authorized a reduction in the city sales tax."

The meaning of the sentence would not be changed without the phrase "which was passed March 11, 1997." The phrase adds information but is not essential; therefore, it is set off by commas. **Restrictive** phrases or clauses do limit the meaning of the words they modify and are not set off by commas.

"The majority of the agencies said they had no basis to judge the impact the provisions were having on borrowers who were delinquent."

The clause "who were delinquent" is necessary to the meaning of the word it modifies--"borrowers." If the clause were not there, the meaning of the sentence would be changed. The "impact the provisions were having" would be on all borrowers, not just those who were delinquent.

⇒ Appositives

An appositive is a noun or a noun substitute (along with its modifiers) that repeats the meaning of or identifies the noun immediately preceding it. When the appositional phrase is not necessary and merely provides extra information, it is set off by commas, as shown in the following example:

"Toni Morrison, an African-American author, has written such well-known novels as *Beloved* and *Tar Baby*."

The appositional phrase "an African-American author" provides extra information about Toni Morrison but is unnecessary to the meaning of the sentence.

A restrictive appositional phrase, or a phrase that is required to give meaning to the sentence, should not be set off with commas.

The Directors Mary Smith, Harvey Jones, and Michael Williams developed the personnel policy.

Because there are other directors, identifying which directors developed the policy is important to the meaning of the sentence.

⇒ Commas In a Series

When you have three or more parallel words, phrases, or clauses in a series, be sure to add a comma before the coordinating conjunction that connects the last two elements of the series.

"The program included sessions on time management, study skills, oral presentations, and writing papers."

⇒ Commas With Dates

Use commas to set off the year when a specific month and day are given:

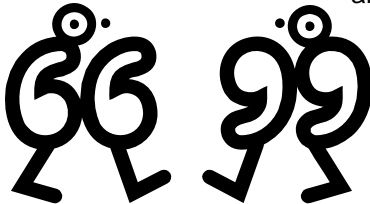
"In a May 17, 1985, memorandum the director discussed the new personnel policies."

However, when only the month and year are cited, do not set off the year with commas:

"In a September 1987 letter, the President proposed a solution to the problem."

⇒ Punctuation With Quoted Material

Commas and periods always go inside quotation marks; colons, semicolons, and footnote numbers always go outside quotation marks. The following examples illustrate the proper use of punctuation with quotation marks:



The director said that "the new policy was ready for implementation," but the committee disagreed.

The director believes that "the new policy is ready for implementation"; however, she made her recommendation without studying the entire proposal.

The committee has published the results of its study in a paper entitled "Employee Morale."¹

If a question mark is part of the quotation, it goes inside the quotation marks.

As part of our study, we asked agency officials to respond to the following question: "Do you plan to retire within the next 5 years?"

A question mark follows the quotation marks if it applies to the entire sentence.

Are our conclusions going to be in our testimony "Aid to Central America"?

⇒ Bulleted Items

Faulty punctuation of bullets is one of the most common mistakes seen in writing. The following examples show different constructions of bulleted items and their correct punctuation.

Lead is a Sentence

If the lead is a complete sentence but the bulleted items are only phrases or clauses, punctuate as shown.

Major initiatives in the report include the following:

(If the lead contains the phrase "as follows" or "the following," always use a colon after it.)

- conversion of an old dormitory into administrative offices,
- development of new recreational facilities, and
- reduction of wasted classroom space.

(Phrases begin with lowercase letters because they are not complete sentences. The bulleted items have no internal commas; thus, only commas are needed to separate each item.)

If the bulleted items are punctuated as separate sentences, the lead should always be a sentence.

The new visitation policy includes three options for upper-class students.
(Because the lead is a sentence and doesn't include either of the phrases "as follows" or "the following," it ends with a period.)

- Option one allows visitation at any time.
- Option two allows visitation only on weekends.
- Option three allows no visitation at all.
(Because each bulleted item is a complete sentence, each one begins with a capital letter and ends with a period.)

Lead Is Not a Sentence

If the lead is not a sentence, and the bulleted items are phrases or clauses that complete the sentence, punctuate as shown in the following two examples:

This report includes information on the

- registration policy,
- new courses to be offered next year, and
- advising period.

In the past, the poor administration of the program has resulted in various problems. For example,

- membership in the sponsoring organization has decreased and
- very few service projects were accomplished.

Items Are a Mixture of Phrases and Sentences

If one or more of the bulleted items include both a phrase and a sentence, rewrite the phrase to make it a complete sentence. The following shows the incorrect punctuation of a lead that is a sentence and a phrase and a sentence used as a bulleted item:

This type of arrangement could result in the following benefits:

- A reduction of the total number of personnel at all offices that deal with licensing.
This reduction results from the elimination of the need to perform all the licensing functions at each office.
- The elimination of duplicate office and computer equipment at each office.

Rewrite to make the elements in the bulleted items into sentences.

This type of arrangement could result in the following benefits:

- The total number of people handling licensing could be reduced by eliminating the need to perform all of the functions at each office.
- Duplicate office and computer equipment at each office could be eliminated.