

Punctuation Guide

The Comma (,)

- **Use to separate three or more items in a series**

She wrote a clear, intelligent, well-organised essay.

These famous stories have inspired plays, films, operas and paintings.

N.B. Sometimes there has to be a comma before the final 'and' to make the meaning clear.

- **Use after introductory word or phrase**

However, there are numerous other possibilities.

Although he did a great deal of research, he never managed to finish the thesis.

- **Use in pairs around 'interrupters' i.e. part of sentence that adds information but could be omitted without making the sentence ungrammatical.**

Canada, for example, introduced a different form of consumer tax. (Could read: Canada introduced a different form of consumer tax.)

The head of department, Professor Jones, liked to have a weekly staff meeting. (Could read: The head of department liked to have a weekly staff meeting.)

- **Use before a conjunction (and, but, or, nor, for, so, yet) joining two independent clauses i.e. parts of sentence that could stand alone as a complete sentence.**

I have just handed in an essay, but I have three more to write by the end of the month.

All attempts at negotiation failed, and the army began preparations to invade.

N.B. When the independent clauses are very short, the comma is optional.
When the independent clauses are quite long, it might be better to use a semicolon (see below).

The Semicolon (;)

- **Use to link independent clauses (see above), especially when the clauses are quite long, or you want your sentence to sound emphatic rather than flowing.**

University essays are different from school essays; many students are unaware that they need to adapt their essay writing skills.

Once again the price of electricity has risen; competition has not succeeded in giving consumers the lower prices that were expected.

- **Use to separate the items in a series when the items include commas.**

Speakers at the meeting included Professor Jones, a biologist; Dr Black, a zoologist; and Dr Smith, a biochemist.

The Colon (:)

- **Use after an independent clause to introduce a list.**

The course includes three novels by Dickens: *David Copperfield*, *Bleak House* and *Our Mutual Friend*.

- **Use after an independent clause to introduce an elaboration of what was just said.**

The plot is founded on deception: the three main characters have secret identities.

- **Use before a quotation that is independent from the structure of your introductory words.**

Smith (1996, p. 48) is firmly opposed to this course of action: "There is no valid reason to change the constitution."

N.B. There is no need for a colon when the quotation is integrated into your sentence structure e.g.

Smith (1996, p.48) argues that there is "no valid reason to change the constitution."