

**A SHORT, SWEET PUNCTUATION GUIDE**  
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**COMMAS**

- \* **between major "modules" or units in a sentence:**

*This chapter is significant in relation to the novel as a whole, and it deserves careful study.* (two independent clauses joined by a conjunction)

*Although many have studied it, no one has successfully explained it.*  
(introductory phrase/clause separated from main clause)

*When the novel was published, //it was widely attacked by critics and the public,  
//for it took highly unusual risks and spoke openly of sex, //a subject not discussed  
openly at the time.*  
(commas separate introductory clause, independent clauses, final descriptive phrase)

- \* **to set off parenthetical phrases that "digress" or "interrupt" the flow of a sentence:**

*The novel, **written forty years ago,** has a timeless quality.*

*It has devoted fans who, **though they tend not to be academics,** are nevertheless articulate and persuasive in its defense.*

- \* **between adjectives before a noun:** *She has a terse, compressed writing style.*
- \* **between items in a list:** *He wrote novels, plays, poetry, and film scripts.*

*He was reclusive, ornery, and fabulously wealthy.*

**SEMICOLONS**

- \* **to separate independent clauses closely related to each other (an independent clause is part of a sentence that could stand alone as a separate sentence):**

*The narrator is highly unreliable; he lies on several occasions.*

*The critics were unanimous in their praise; however, the sales were terrible.*

- \* **for clarity, to act as commas in a list in which there are already several commas:**

*There were public performances on Sunday, February 2nd, 1886; Thursday, July 2nd, 1887; and Monday, September 6th, 1888.*

*The setting has everything a gothic novel needs, including an ancient, decrepit castle filled with friendly bats; a madwoman, who turns out to be the hero's mother, locked in an attic room; and nearly constant lightning storms, even in the dead of winter.*

**COLONS**

*General rule: a colon ALWAYS follows an independent clause.*

*Another: a colon points FORWARD to something that will clarify what's just been said.*

- \* **before identifying something previously mentioned (often a comma could be used too):**

*Her poems were characterized by two features: strong images and complex tone.*  
(versus *Her poems were characterized by strong images and complex tone*)

\* **before an example:**

*His career was marked by terrible decisions: for example, his marriage.*

*He is hardly unbiased toward his boss: he calls her, at one point, a "tyrant" (344).*

\* **before a quotation used to exemplify a point:**

*In chapter 28, she finally tells her mother what she thinks: " \_\_\_\_\_ "*

(Note: if the quotation is long, it is indented WITHOUT quotation marks.)

**DASH VS. HYPHEN**

**HYPHEN** is typed like this: -

**DASH** is typed like this: --

\* **A hyphen makes compound words:**    *ten-year-old boy*    *nine-year cycle*

**It also separates prefixes:**    *self-respect*    *cross-cultural*

\* **A dash separates words as a comma does; it is like a stronger comma or sometimes like a colon. It SETS OFF words at the end or in the middle of a sentence.**

*Her poetry was characterized by two features -- strong images and complex tone.*

*The major features of her poetry -- strong images and complex tone -- were often praised by critics.*

**APOSTROPHES**

\* **to indicate POSSESSION:**

**Singular**

(before the "s")

*my brother's house*

*a woman's perspective*

*this society's restrictions*

**Plural**

(after the "s" unless the plural doesn't use "s")

*my brothers' house(s)*

*women's perspectives*

*many societies' restrictions*

\* **to stand for letters left out in contractions:** *can't, wouldn't, I'm*

\* **the great ITS/IT'S problem: possessive or contraction?**

**Its** is POSSESSIVE: *The college rewards its employees.*

**It's** is a CONTRACTION: *It's a long time until spring.*

**NOTE:** *Its'* doesn't exist!

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