27

Punctuation Mastery

Punctuation is grammar made visible. At an expert level it is not decoration but a system of signals with near-grammatical rules.

27.1 The comma

27.1.1 Where commas are required

1. After most introductory elements: ***After the vote,*** *the chamber emptied.* ***Frankly,*** *I doubt it.* ***Having signed,*** *she left.* (Very short openers may drop it: *In 2019 we moved.*)
2. Around non-defining relative clauses and other parentheticals: *The CEO****, who founded the firm,*** *resigned. The plan* ***, however,*** *failed.*
3. Between items in a series: *We need flour, eggs(,) and milk.* — on the serial (Oxford) comma, see below.
4. Before a coordinator joining independent clauses: *The experiment failed****, but*** *the team learned a great deal.*
5. Between coordinate adjectives: *a long, tedious meeting* (test: *long and tedious* works) — but not cumulative ones: *a little old stone cottage*.
6. After a quotation before the tag: *"I'm ready," she said.*

27.1.2 Where commas are forbidden

- Between subject and verb: ✗ *The results of the second and much larger trial, were negative.*
- Between verb and object: ✗ *She said, that she agreed.* (no comma before an indirect *that*-clause)
- Around defining relative clauses: ✗ *Students, who cheat, will fail* means all students cheat.
- Splicing two sentences: the **comma splice** — ✗ *The server crashed, nobody noticed.* Repair with a full stop, semicolon, coordinator, or subordinator: ✓ *The server crashed; nobody noticed. / The server crashed, but nobody noticed.* (Literary exceptions — *I came, I saw, I conquered* — are deliberate and rhythmic.)

Usage Note

The **serial comma** (*red, white, and blue*) is house style at most American publishers and at Oxford; most British newspapers omit it. Use it consistently, and always insert it when omission creates ambiguity: *I thank my parents, Ayn Rand(,) and God.*

27.2 The semicolon and the colon

- **Semicolon** joins two closely related independent clauses: *The lab was silent; everyone was watching the gauge.* Also separates list items that contain commas: *Delegates came from Lyon, France; Turin, Italy; and Basel, Switzerland.*

- **Colon** introduces what fulfils the promise of the first clause — a list, an explanation, a quotation, an elaboration: *She had one goal: revenge. Three cities were shortlisted: Lyon, Turin, and Basel.* What precedes a colon must be able to stand alone: ✗ *The shortlisted cities were: Lyon, Turin. . .* → drop the colon or rewrite (✓ *The shortlist comprised three cities: . . .*).
- Capital after a colon: BrE lowercase; AmE often capitalizes a full sentence after the colon. Be consistent.

27.3 Dashes, parentheses, hyphens

- The **em dash** (—) sets off interruptions with emphasis: *The witness — if we can call him that — changed his story twice.* BrE often prefers a spaced en dash (–) for the same job. Limit to one pair per sentence.
- **Parentheses** whisper what dashes shout: asides the reader may skip. Punctuation goes outside unless the whole sentence is parenthesized. (Like this.)
- The **en dash** (–) marks ranges and connections: *pages 12–15, the London–Paris route, the 2024–25 season*.
- The **hyphen** (-) binds compounds. Hyphenate compound modifiers before a noun: *a well-known author, a five-year plan, an up-to-date list* — but not after: *the author is well known; the list is up to date*; and never with *-ly* adverbs: ✗ *a highly-paid job* → ✓ *a highly paid job*. Distinguish *re-cover* (cover again) from *recover*; *twenty-four-hour shifts* from *twenty four-hour shifts*.

27.4 The apostrophe

- Possession: singular *the judge's ruling*; regular plural *the judges' ruling*; irregular plural *the children's books*; classical names ending in *-s* allow *Socrates'* or *Socrates's*.
- Contractions: *it's* (= it is/has), *who's* (= who is), *they're, you're, let's*.
- Never for plurals: ✗ *apple's for sale, the 1990's, two PhD's* → ✓ *apples, the 1990s, two PhDs*.
- The possessive pronouns have none: *its, hers, ours, theirs, whose*.
- Time and money possessives: *a day's pay, two weeks' notice*.

27.5 Quotation marks

- AmE: double quotes, commas and periods *inside*: *"Call it 'luck,"' she said.* BrE: often single quotes, punctuation placed by logic: *'Call it "luck"', she said.*
- Question and exclamation marks go inside only if they belong to the quotation: *Did she really say "never"?* vs. *She asked, "Why me?"*
- Scare quotes signal distance — use sparingly: *the "upgrade" broke everything.*

27.6 Restrictive punctuation as meaning

Punctuation changes truth conditions. Classic contrasts:

- *The players, who were exhausted, asked to stop.* (all) vs. *The players who were exhausted asked to stop.* (some)
- *Let's eat, Grandma.* vs. *Let's eat Grandma.*
- *The panel interviewed the finalists, who impressed them.* vs. *. . . the finalists who impressed them.*

- *She didn't leave, because she was angry.* (she stayed — anger was the reason) vs. *She didn't leave because she was angry.* (ambiguous: perhaps she left for another reason)

Exercises

Exercise 27.1 Punctuate

Insert all necessary punctuation.

1. after the merger was announced the share price which had been falling for months doubled
2. the recipe calls for flour butter sugar and three large eggs
3. there was only one problem nobody had tested the parachute
4. my brother who lives in oslo is visiting my sister lives here
5. its been a year since the company lost its licence

Exercise 27.2 Comma splice repair

Repair each splice in two different ways.

1. The deadline passed, nobody had submitted anything.
2. She is a brilliant negotiator, her deals prove it.

Exercise 27.3 Hyphenation

Add or remove hyphens as required.

1. a well respected twenty year old critic
2. the strategy was ill conceived but the ill conceived plan succeeded anyway (fix both halves)
3. a quickly-assembled team of highly trained engineers
4. they signed a five year, thirty million dollar contract

Exercise 27.4 Meaning by punctuation

Explain the difference in meaning within each pair.

1. (a) The staff, who joined after 2020, get no bonus. (b) The staff who joined after 2020 get no bonus.
2. (a) She said the manager is lying. (b) She, said the manager, is lying.
3. (a) Re-sign the contract. (b) Resign the contract… I mean, resign from the post.