



The Catholic University of America
Writing Center Handout

Punctuation Part I: Commas, Semicolons, Colons, Dashes

Punctuation enables a reader to understand your intent and to follow your ideas. Although there are general rules for punctuation use, punctuation can also be determined by a style guide or the rhetorical intentions of the writer.

Comma

The comma is used in a great variety of circumstances. Here are the most common uses:

To separate coordinated main clauses:

- The city of Wishywash has a devoted hero, and his name is Super Fred.

To separate items in a list (use a comma before the conjunction to avoid confusion)

- Super Fred wears shiny tights, a spandex suit, and a chartreuse cape.
- He flies over the city, listens for people in distress, and tries to help them.

To mark the end of an adverb clause, long prepositional phrases, or a series of prepositional phrases at the beginning of a sentence:

- Although Super Fred now considers Wishywash home, he has not always lived there.
- On a far away planet in a distant galaxy beyond the Milky Way, little Fred was born.

To separate a series of adjectives that each qualifies a noun in the same way:

- Super Fred is a brave, kind, thoughtful, and generous hero.

To set off parenthetical words or phrases or nonessential clauses:

- It is an unfortunate fact, however, that Super Fred's help is not always helpful.
 - Super Fred, who is more enthusiastic than sensible, often makes problems worse.
- Do *not* use commas with essential clauses (ones which affect the main meaning of the sentence)
- The woman who is screaming right now is an actress.

To set off a person's name when he or she is being directly addressed:

- Let's hope, Super Fred, that this time you are actually helpful.

To separate a participial phrase or a verbal phrase:

- Hearing a screaming woman, Super Fred felt alarmed.
- He flew off, determined to rescue her from harm.
- The woman, acting in a dramatic death scene, was not impressed to be rescued.

To distinguish indirect from direct speech (See also the "Punctuation Part II" handout):

- "You are a useless superhero," she scolded irately.
- The mayor of Wishywash pleaded, "Super Fred, please don't rescue anyone else!"
- "I was only trying," said Super Fred, "to be helpful."

Semicolon

The semicolon may be thought of as a kind of super comma; it separates sentence parts that need a more distinct break than a comma can signal. Use the semicolon:

To unite two sentences that are closely connected and do not have a conjunction:

- A tear rolled down Super Fred's cheek; he felt like a failure.

To unite two sentences joined with a conjunctive adverb:

- The actress apologized to Super Fred; moreover, she gave him a ticket to the show.

To separate items in a series when any element in the series contains a comma:

- Because Super Fred can fly, he likes to visit such places as Tokyo, Japan; Paris, France; Cairo, Egypt; and Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.

Colon

The colon promises the completion of something just begun and can only be used after an independent clause. A colon should be used in the following instances:

To introduce a list of items or an appositive phrase:

- Super Fred loves three things: his chartreuse cape, the city of Wishywash, and bananas.
- Whenever the Wishywashians see a banana, they think of their hero: Super Fred.

To introduce a phrase that explains a statement made in the preceding clause:

- Bananas are essential to Super Fred: They are the secret to his superpowers.

To introduce a quotation when the quote follows a noun:

- Super Fred believes strongly in the axiom of Socrates: “The unexamined life is not worth living.”

Dash

The dash is longer than a hyphen (when typing a dash, type two hyphens in a row with *no spaces* before or after them) and is generally informal. It can be used in two ways:

To replace commas around a parenthetical phrase:

- Super Fred—despite his shortcomings—is loved by the citizens of Wishywash.

To replace a colon in connecting phrases:

- Wishywash would not be the same without Super Fred—he is the superhero it needs.

For further information, please use the following link via Purdue OWL:

https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/general_writing/punctuation/punctuation/index.html