

Punctuation – Vidcast Transcript

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Hi, everyone! This is Heather from the Purdue Writing Lab. In this video, we will be talking about punctuation. If it's been a while since you've taken a course on punctuation, don't fret. This video is meant to offer a refresher on some of the common types of punctuation that you can use in your writing.

In this video, we'll cover semi-colons, colons, dashes, and commas. Before we get started, I want to offer a sense of comfort by saying that even though talking about punctuation can feel confusing or overwhelming, be gentle with yourself! If you need more support, check out the Purdue Online Writing Lab. There, we have a collection of free materials full of examples and guidelines for proper punctuation.

You might be asking why we're talking about punctuation during a writing workshop for thesis and dissertation writers. Clear punctuation and easy to follow sentences help your reader follow your argument more easily. Of course, it's important to prioritize and address larger concerns about argument development and organization in your writing first. Still, we hope that this video about punctuation helps you address the clarity of your writing on a sentence level. Once you feel confident with your content, you can give yourself time to reflect on your sentence level clarity and proper punctuation use.

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Instead of starting with our typical five-minute journaling activity, I thought it would be fun to talk about the importance of punctuation using a fun example. On this slide we have two passages that use the exact same written text with different punctuation.

The first example is a love letter. It reads:

Dear John,

I want a man who knows what love is all about. You are generous, kind, thoughtful. People who are not like you admit to being useless and inferior. You have ruined me for other men. I yearn for you. I have no feelings whatsoever when we are apart. I can be forever happy. Will you let me be yours?

Gloria

Very romantic!

The second example is a breakup letter. Using different punctuation, Gloria calls off her relationship with John. She writes:

Dear John,

I want a man who knows what love is. All about you are generous, kind, thoughtful people, who are not like you. Admit to being useless and inferior. You have ruined me. For other men, I yearn. For you, I have no feelings whatsoever. When we are apart, I can be forever happy. Will you let me be?

Yours,
Gloria

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The first type of punctuation we're going to cover in this video is the semi-colon. Semi-colons allow writers to --

- Signal the **closeness of the connection between two independent clauses** & shift the **emphasis toward the second one**.
- In case you need a refresher, independent clauses are parts of a sentence that are made up of a subject and verb and offer a complete, independent thought that can stand alone.

On this slide, we have two examples of how you could combine two independent clauses together in a compound sentence.

Take a moment to compare these two examples. Feel free to pause here and resume when you're ready.

In the first example, the two independent clauses feel balanced or equally important. The second example with the semi-colon allows the writer to sound more direct and blunt with the shorter, punchier ending clause of "they drive me crazy." Here, we can see that a simple change in punctuation can help you alter the tone of your writing.

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Semi-colons also allow you to increase the **formality** of the sentence. Again, I encourage you to pause the video here and think through the differences between these two examples. Like we've established previously, semi-colons used to combine two independent clauses help you

to add weight to your second clause. In the second example, it sounds like the parent—the subject of the sentence—is about to have a very serious conversation with their son’s teacher, and the emphasis here is placed on the impending conversation.

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Finally, semi-colons allow you to **Clarify** items in a series in the presence of extra commas. The example reads:

I propose to study the anxious, depressive, and emotional reactive symptoms of the children; the stress and depression of the at-home parents; the resulting long-term social, emotional, and behavioral outcomes of dependent children; and the adultification of these children.

If the writer had chosen to only use commas, it would be difficult for the reader to differentiate between the separate components of the list provided here. As such, semi-colons used in this way can help to offer a sense of clarity.

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Moving onto our second type of punctuation that we’ll cover today, let’s shift gears and talk about colons. This type of punctuation helps you to **Signal a list** that is usually promised in the independent clause that comes before it.

Remember, the portion of the sentence that comes before the colon here should be a complete, independent clause. For example, if we look at the examples we have listed here, we could simply say “Before I went to the store, I listed the three things I needed to buy,” and that sentence could stand on its own. The addition of a colon and the subsequent list of “eggs, butter, and bananas” offers a clarification of the items that the speaker needed from the store.

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Colons can also be used to signal that the **second sentence illustrates or explains the first one (Requires an independent clause on either side of the punctuation.)**

- Ex. My job keeps me super busy: at times, I act like a college student and have to stay up all night.
- Ex. Parents of military dependents have frequently expressed concern over the lack of academic support for their children: given the statistically lower GPAs of these children, their parents’ concerns appear to be warranted.

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Perhaps one of the most common ways writers use colons in academic writing is to Introduce a **quote**. This can be a helpful way to offer some variety in the way you introduce your supporting

evidence. For examples, if you want to change things up beyond writing signal phrases like “The researchers write, argue, assert, posit, suggest, and so on, you could use a colon to introduce a quote.

Remember, the portion of the sentence leading up to the colon must be an independent clause.

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The next type of punctuation that we’ll discuss is the dash. Keep in mind that dashes should be used **sparingly** in your writing or else your prose might become choppy and hard to follow. Colons allow you to add a sense of **emphasis**. We can contrast this with parentheses, which remove emphasis.

Pause here for a moment and read through the examples below. How does tone shift between these three sentences? Let’s chat about this during our small group discussion.

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Dashes also allow us to **Clarify bonus information** if setting off that bonus information with commas would be confusing to the reader. As you can see in the second example here, it’s unclear that when the speaker says “items”, they are referring to milk, flour, and salt. Instead, in this sentence, it sounds like there are undisclosed items missing from the cupboards in addition to milk, flour, and salt.

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Now, let’s talk about commas. Keep in mind that we will be covering four way to use commas. Feel free to pause as needed.

First up, commas can be used to join two independent clauses using a comma and a coordination conjunction. On this slide, you can see the formula for using a comma in this way as well as the example, “The dissertators wanted to make progress with their writing projects COMMA SO they signed up for the Intensive Writing Experience”

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In addition to combining two independent clauses with the help of a coordinating conjunction, commas can also tie together a dependent clause and an independent clause. This can help you offer a sense of clarification for you reader. Some introductory key words that you can use here include *after, although, because, since, when, and while*

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We're halfway done with commas, folks! How is everyone hanging in there? In this example, we see that commas can be used to separate three or more words, phrases, or clauses written in a series. The example we have here is, "I need to revise my chapter for **clarity, concision, and grammar.**"

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Let's pause for a moment to continue talking about ways to use commas to separate three or more words or phrases in a list. How here knows about the Oxford comma? The Oxford comma or serial comma is the final comma that appears in a list of things. It is used before words like "and" or "or" in a list of three or more items. While there has been some debate about whether or not the Oxford comma is needed, it's best to use it for the sake of clarity.

As we can see in this comedy post from the Oatmeal, the Oxford comma allows you to clearly separate three or more items in a series. In the bottom example that does not use the Oxford comma, readers might think that the writer is simply offering the names of the rhinoceri they invited to a party.

If you're still on the fence about the Oxford comma, remember that, in 2014, three truck drivers successfully sued Oakhurst Dairy and won over \$5 million dollars in a class-action lawsuit about overtime pay. The case was won over a missing Oxford comma in the drivers' contracts. The lack of the Oxford comma changed the definition of what warranted overtime pay for the workers, and they were able to win in court.

In short, when in doubt, use the Oxford comma!

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Finally, commas can be used to set off **non-essential** words in the middle of a sentence. In the first example, the sentence implies that the speaker only has one sister and could only be talking about one specific person. As such, the sentence requires a pair of commas because the offset information is not essential to being able to understand who the speaker is talking about.

In the second example, on the other hand, the lack of commas here implies that the speaker has multiple—at least two or more—sisters, and because of this, the sentence does not require the use of commas. This clarifying information is needed or essential to maintain meaning and clarity.

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Okay, I know we covered a lot today. Take a deep breath! Stretch if you need to! We've made it to our closing activity. This exercise includes two different parts. I encourage you to take five minutes or so to get started, and you're welcome to return to this activity later. Different academic fields tend to gravitate toward certain types of punctuation. This activity is meant to help you get a sense of writing conventions in your field.

You can start by reading through a portion of an article that you have referenced in the past.

- Use the search function to look up these various types of punctuation.
- Note the most common use of each kind
- Does this generalize to the field as a whole? Did you know this already, or is it new information?

Once you're done, open the writing project that you are currently working on.

- Use the search function to look up these various types of punctuation.
 - Is each instance used correctly?
 - Is each instance used according to disciplinary conventions?
- Choose a couple of sentences of your own that you have found to be problematic and revise them for punctuation.

We'll share our answers together during our next group conversation!

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Thank you again for joining me today! I hope this presentation offers some insight into how to use different types of punctuation. Again, think of this video as a primer for general punctuation usage. If you need or want more help, don't fret! Check out the Purdue OWL, and schedule a virtual appointment with us at the lab.

Happy writing and revising, everyone. Until next time...