

QUICKGUIDE™ TO GOOD WRITING & GRAMMAR

The wordpower ⇨™ Guide to Getting It Right

REMEMBER THIS ABOUT PUNCTUATION

When you write, you tell the reader how you want him to “hear” your sentence. That’s all punctuation is for: visual cues, signposts, to direct your reader’s ear. Punctuation is the only method we have to inform the reader how we want her to read our words.

Use this test: Speak your sentence aloud as if you were in front of an actual audience. Imagine you are standing at a podium in front of a group and are delivering a speech to them. (You might want to exaggerate a little as you do this.) If it sounds right with your punctuation, you’ll probably be correct with that colon or dash, that comma or period.

SEMICOLONS

In general:

Use a semicolon (1) when you want to come to a **complete stop**. It does not take the place of a comma; it is more like a period. Why is it used instead of a period? Because it (2) **connects** two halves of a single sentence which, by their nature, are linked because **they complete and complement** each other. Examples:

- 1) First we caught the fish; then we ate them for dinner.
- 2) It was a strange, foreign world; nothing made sense to him anymore.

In the first sentence above, you could also have used a comma. Why, then, choose a semicolon? Because it happens to conform here with your intention as writer: you *meant* to pause a bit longer. It sounds, in fact, like two sentences in this case; thus it passes the first test. You meant for your audience to pause a little longer between the two parts of the sentence.

Could you have simply used a period, separating the two halves completely? Yes. But you’d have to be careful because the sentences would then be abrupt, and starting with “then” is usually not a good policy because it is a linking word by its nature. So link the two halves with a semicolon; it’s the most logical way.

Semicolon as separator in a series

There is another use for the semicolon. Here it again serves as a separator, and is again meant as a means of helping the reader: when you present a **series** of things and want to organize them into groups. In most of these cases, it is used because the things you present are already laden with commas, and to add another comma could be confusing. Some examples make this clearer:

- 1) She finally went shopping and bought bread, rolls, English muffins; milk, cream, half and half; napkins, paper plates, and plastic forks.
- 2) He was distraught because of his recent divorce. She got his favorite easy chair, a gift from his father; their one and only Picasso, picked up on the vacation in Paris; the two kids; and the summer house in Innsbruck.

In the first sentence above, you’ve added the semis because it logically organizes the lengthy list of grocery purchases. Commas could possibly have worked, but you’ve made your sentence clearer because you’ve already grouped the grocery list into similarly-classified goods (the breads are all together, etc.).

In the second sentence, you use the semis because all the commas could otherwise make the sentence confusing. The Picasso could possibly have been construed as the gift from his father, for example, or the kids could have just been picked up on their vacation.

COLONS

In general:

Use a colon when you want to:

- 1) **Emphasize** what follows, as if it were the punch line or climax. In this case, it serves as a “dramatic,” or emphatic, lead-in to what follows
- 2) Introduce a **series**: cars, horses, chairs, flowers, computers...

Examples of **emphasis**:

- 1) As if his drug addiction weren’t enough, they had another problem: money.
- 2) He was filled with mixed emotions: boredom, consternation, nostalgia, elation.

Examples of **series**:

- 1) The daily work plan calls for the following: meeting at 8 a.m., proposals submitted by 3 p.m., project completed by five, final meeting at six.
- 2) These are some of the things on her Christmas wish-list: Giorgio perfume, a Dunhill leather attaché case, a platinum Rolex, and a private audience with the Pope.

But:

Some of the things on her Christmas wish-list were Giorgio perfume, a Dunhill leather attaché case, a platinum Rolex, and a private audience with the Pope.

COMMAS

Commas are one of the punctuation marks for which there is room for honest differences of opinion. The reason for this is because only the original writer knows how a given sentence is intended, where he wants to pause, where she intends a direct run-in with the rest of the sentence. In many cases, however, commas are easy.

In general:

When you would **naturally pause** for a second in a sentence, put in a comma. It’s a mild separator. (A semicolon, on the other hand, is stark and distinct, like a period.) Most mistakes are made when you use a comma instead of a semicolon; yet there are some semicolons where you could have used a comma and still be correct (this sentence is an example of that).

Some clear-cut examples of necessary commas:

- 1) According to his watch, it was only 3 o’clock.
- 2) Without a doubt, she was the most stunning lady in the room.
- 3) When, if ever, do you expect to finish your dissertation?
- 4) It seems to me, Jason, you’ve got yourself one hell of a problem.
- 5) Listen, buddy, I don’t owe you a thing, so bug off.

You may come up with some not-so-clear-cut examples, in which case you should consult a grammar book or go with your instinct. If anything, the tendency now is toward a reduction of commas.

A comma is **optional** before the last “and” in a sentence, so **both** of the following are correct:

- 1) I’ll take that vodka with tonic, lemon, and lime.
- 2) I’ll take that vodka with tonic, lemon and lime.

QUOTATION MARKS

In general:

Use quotation marks when you:

- 1) **Quote** somebody directly and verbatim
- 2) Name a **magazine** or **article** (not books: they are underlined on a typewriter, or put in *italics* on a word processor. You can also italicize the magazine name or article title).
- 3) Use a word **ironically**, tongue-in-cheek, or condescendingly
- 4) To set off a single word or phrase referred to (e.g., The word “slowly” is an adverb.)

A thumb rule: **enclose the final punctuation point as well in quotation marks.** While not foolproof, this works 90% of the time:

- 1) “Wow!” cried Lilly from the Valley, “Like, this is totally too unreal!”
- 2) “They designed an ambitious landscaping plan,” Ed explained, “that included three acres of flowering plants and Australian cajuput trees.”

Do not include the final punctuation mark in quotes with colons or semicolons:

The reporter found the “smoking gun”: a secret memo corroborating the minister’s complicity.

HYPHENS

Hyphens are much abused. Recognize that hyphens are single, short typographical lines—they are not dashes.

In general:

- 1) Insert a hyphen when two or more words together form a single adjective.
- 2) Use a hyphen when two or more words together form a single noun (the hyphenated “wish-list” in the example under COLONS above is an example of this).

Examples of two or more words together functioning as a single **adjective**:

- 1) The jet-black Camaro zipped along the rain-soaked highway.
- 2) She was a heavily made-up old actress, not the young one they assumed her to be. (A hyphen after the adverb “heavily,” or any *-ly* adverb, is optional.)

Examples of two or more words used as a single **noun**:

- 1) She thought he was a real son-of-a-bitch.
- 2) She seemed to him to be a real man-hater.

PARTS OF SPEECH

You should know these by sight and by definition: Nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, prepositions.

COMMON ERRORS

You should know the difference between these often-confused words:

lay, lie	council, counsel	stationery, stationary
all ready, already	affect, effect	waiver, waver
altogether, all together	personal, personnel	ingenious, ingenuous

There are many more you could add to the list, but the above are representative.

OBJECTS

There are two types of objects: **direct** and **indirect**. It’s easy to distinguish between the two.

Direct Object. At the first sign of a verb, ask the question, “*What?*”

Example: I throw the ball. “Throw” is the first (and only) verb. I throw *what?* The *ball*, of course—and it’s the direct object (“ball”).

Indirect Object. The indirect object is simply the response to the question—explicit or implicit—of “**to whom?**” (or “**to what?**”). Try it: “I throw the ball to the boy.” “Boy” is the indirect object. In this example, the “to” is stated explicitly in the sentence: “...to the boy.”

An indirect object, however, does not necessarily contain the word “to” in the sentence. English commonly leaves out the “to,” but implies it nonetheless. Let’s rephrase the sentence just a bit: “I throw the boy the ball.” Even though it’s not actually written (or said), the “to” is implied, as in “I throw [to] the boy the ball.” To see if it’s the indirect object, just **add the “to” mentally**. Does it make sense? If it does, you’ve hit the indirect object. Awkward or not, it still makes sense, so it’s an indirect object.

WHO VS. WHOM

The distinction may be becoming extinct, but for many people it is still one of those criteria of good literacy. The reasons for the two forms, by the way, go far back to the early days of the English language, and expressed the distinction between the subject and the direct or indirect objects. Today that distinction has been rendered all but unnecessary.

So why learn the difference? Because it shows that you, as a writer, *know* that difference. It shows that you have command of the nuances of the language and control of your medium—and because it is still, despite its waning importance, used often enough by good writers so that it remains necessary. It can lend the mark of formality, or distinction, or elegance.

Whom is an **object, either direct or indirect**. It’s that simple. (If you still have trouble distinguishing objects, you can read the appropriate section here and consult Strunk & White’s excellent little book, *The Elements of Style*.)

Whom is also used as the object of a preposition (again, it’s still an object). Any time you use any preposition—with, to, from, through, toward, etc.—follow it with **whom**. Examples:

- 1) With whom are you going to the dance?
(*Whom are you going to the dance with?* is a strange admixture of formality and informality. Don’t use it like this.)
- 2) She was talking with me and whomever that other guy was.
(It might sound wrong, but it’s not: the *with* demands the *whom* form.)

SUBJECT VS. OBJECT: HM & HE, HER & SHE, ME & I

The pronouns *him*, *her*, and *me* are objects, both direct and indirect. That’s it. Use them whenever *he*, *she*, and *I* are the recipients of some action, **or when they follow any preposition**. You can come up with dozens of examples, but here are a few:

- 1) She and they went to the movies. He went with me and her.
- 2) The only one left is he.
(Just reverse the sequence. Would you say *Him is the only one left?* Of course not — yet that’s exactly what you do when you say *The only one left is him*.)

A test: Does it make sense when you say the sentence backwards, i.e., beginning with the pronoun?