LBCC Writing Center: Punctuation Patterns

When first learning punctuation, it can be overwhelming. Even once you learn these rules, they are not always consistent (especially when it comes to comma use). Something is gained by punctuation—it's not just rules! Although punctuation can sometimes seem random, when used well, it can improve clearness and even increase the emotion in your writing. This handout shows the most common punctuation uses but is not a complete list; instead, it is a starting point for becoming a punctuation pro.

Let's start with the basics:

Sentences are complete when they have a subject, verb, and make a complete thought. Complete sentences are also known as independent or main clauses.
    [Independent clause].
    [Subject] [verb] [complete thought].
    I take the bus to school.

Coordinating conjunctions can be used to combine two independent clauses. You can remember these with the acronym BOYSFAN: *but, or, yet, so, for, and, nor*.
    [Independent clause], [coordinating conjunction] [independent clause].
    My car needed to be washed, **so** I went through the car wash.

Add a dash of punctuation:

Coordinating conjunctions can be used within a sentence without commas to combine phrases and words. A phrase is a combination of two or more words without the subject and verb needed to make a clause.
    Combining phrases: [Independent clause] [coordinating conjunction] [phrase].
        I like going for walks **and** talking about books.
    Combining words: [Independent clause] [coordinating conjunction] [word].
        I like my cat **and** dog.

Subordinating conjunctions can start a sentence and are followed by a comma. These are words, such as *if, because, since, when, while, although, after,* and *even*. They are called dependent or subordinate clauses and are formed when a clause is joined with a subordinating conjunction.
    [Subordinating conjunction] [clause], [independent clause].
    While I would rather eat halibut, my husband prefers salmon.

Subordinating conjunctions can be used within a sentence, without commas, as long as the subordinating conjunction appears in the second half of the sentence.
    [Independent clause] [subordinating conjunction] [clause].
    The children watered the plant **because** the soil was dry.

Semicolons (;) can connect two separate clauses that are closely related.
    [Independent clause]; [independent clause].
    The man stared at the painting for hours; he must have appreciated the artist's style.

Semicolons can be used with transitional expressions (such as *therefore, however, nevertheless, consequently, furthermore, moreover*). Transitional expressions are words that help guide your reader through a sentence.
    [Independent clause]; [transitional expression], [independent clause].

The train often blocks the street for ten minutes; **therefore**, I usually choose a different morning driving route.

Semicolons (;) and commas sometimes punctuate a list. Colons (:) can introduce a list.

If list items are simple, use commas between them.
[Independent clause]: {item A}, {item B}, and {item C}.
I like walking many types of dogs**:** Great Danes, Siberian Huskies, and Labs.

If list items use commas within the items, use semicolons to separate them.
[Independent clause]: {item A, phrase}; {item B, phrase}; and {item C, phrase}.
I walk many types of dogs**:** Great Danes, which are tall and gangly**;** Siberian Huskies, which are energetic**;** and Labs, which demonstrate attentiveness to my commands.

Short phrases can be inserted if surrounded by commas.
These are also known as nonessential clauses because they can be removed from a sentence without losing meaning.
[Independent clause], [nonessential clause], [clause].
- My Uncle Bob, who loves to go fishing, caught a huge trout yesterday.
- Picnics always seem fun, of course, until the ants and wasps show up.

A hyphen (-) connects two words together when they are one idea.
Examples are compound words and compound adjectives.
- one-fourth
- Linn-Benton
- brother-in-law
- quick-footed
- sugar-free
- merry-go-round

An en-dash (–)* is slightly longer than a hyphen.
It connects two words or numbers to indicate a range.
[Beginning of range]–[End of range]
- 1963–1982
- January–December
- Ages 3–6
- Questions 1–20

An em-dash (—)* is even longer than an en-dash.
It can be used to indicate an interruption in dialogue or can be used in place of parentheses around phrases interrupting a sentence. An em-dash can bring dramatic emphasis to a phrase, unlike parentheses, which reduce emphasis.
- "Sammy, do you think we should—"
- The dog—his tail wagged incessantly when greeting new people—raced to the door.

Punctuation plays a special role in dialogue.
Use commas and periods at the end of a statement within the quotation marks (" ").
- "The Martians are coming[comma]" he said. "Let's go meet them[period]"
- "The Martians are coming," he said. "Let's go meet them."

*These dashes are not keys on the keyboard. Search online for how to create the dashes. Word processors, operating systems, and browsers may use different commands.