



Commas, Periods, Semicolons, Colons...

What's the Difference?

Helpful Tips for Comma Use (there are a lot of places to use a comma!)

- Before a coordinating conjunction that joins two independent clauses (complete sentences).
- The coordinating conjunctions, also known as FANBOYS: For, And, Nor, But, Or, Yet, So.
- After an introductory phrase, clause, or word.
- In between all items in a list.
- To prevent confusion—there's a big difference between *Let's eat, Grandma!* and *Let's eat Grandma*. Don't be a Grandma-eater. Use a comma.

When to Use a Period

- To end sentences that are not questions or exclamations.
- In abbreviations (Mr., Mrs., a.m., i.e., Dr., Ph.d., etc.)

When to Use a Semicolon (;)

- To join two independent clauses (complete sentences) that are closely related in subject.
 - Example: *My grandma makes great mashed potatoes; I would rather eat mashed potatoes than eat Grandma.*
 - Incorrect: *My grandma makes great mashed potatoes; and good green beans.*
- A quick and easy test for semicolon use is to read each half of the sentence as if it were its own, separate sentence. Is one side of the semicolon a sentence fragment? Can't use a semicolon there!
- Between two independent clauses that use a transitional expression (moreover, nevertheless, similarly, therefore, etc.)
 - Example: *Grandma does not approve of cannibalism; therefore, we will not eat Grandma.*

When to Use a Colon (:)

- After an independent clause (complete sentence) to direct attention to a list, quote, summary, or explanation.
- According to convention (i.e., in a heading, in writing time, in a ratio, etc.)

Things to Watch Out For

- The “wimpy” comma—commas are not strong enough to hold apart two independent clauses.

- Incorrect: *My brother once tried to take a bite out of Grandma, she was not happy with his appetite.* (This is incorrect because both halves of the sentence are independent clauses—wimpy comma!)

- Correct: *My brother once tried to take a bite out of Grandma, and she was not happy with his appetite.* (This is correct because we use a coordinating conjunction “and” along with the comma to join the two halves of the sentence.)

- You do not need a comma before the first or after the last item in a list.
- Overuse of exclamation points where a period is needed—it is very rare that an exclamation point is used in a formal essay at all