

BASIC RULES OF GRAMMAR

A **paragraph** is a unit of thought that develops an idea. A traditional paragraph contains a topic sentence that states the idea to be developed, plus additional sentences that develop the idea stated by the topic sentence. In U.S. formal academic English, paragraphs have three principal parts. These three parts are the topic sentence, body sentences, and the concluding sentence.

(<http://rs.ed.uiuc.edu/students/fwalters/para.html>)

Comma

Rule 1. To avoid confusion, use commas to separate words and word groups with a series of three or more.

Example: *My \$10 million estate is to be split among my husband, daughter, son, and nephew.* Omitting the comma after *son* would indicate that the son and nephew would have to split one-third of the estate.

Rule 2. Use a comma to separate two adjectives when the word *and* can be inserted between them.

Examples: *He is a strong, healthy man.*

We stayed at an expensive summer resort. You would not say *expensive and summer resort*, so no comma.

Rule 3. Use a comma when an *-ly* adjective is used with other adjectives.

NOTE: To test whether an *-ly* word is an adjective, see if it can be used alone with the noun. If it can, use the comma.

Examples: *Felix was a lonely, young boy.*

I get headaches in brightly lit rooms. *Brightly* is not an adjective because it cannot be used alone with *rooms*; therefore, no comma is used between *brightly* and *lit*.

Rule 4. Use commas before or surrounding the name or title of a person directly addressed.

Examples: *Will you, Aisha, do that assignment for me?*

Yes, Doctor, I will.

NOTE: Capitalize a title when directly addressing someone.

Rule 5a. Use a comma to separate the day of the month from the year and after the year.

Example: *Kathleen met her husband on December 5, 2003, in Mill Valley, California.*

Rule 5b. If any part of the date is omitted, leave out the comma.

Example: *They met in December 2003 in Mill Valley.*

Rule 6. Use a comma to separate the city from the state and after the state in a document. If you use the two-letter capitalized form of a state in a document, you do not need a comma after the state.

NOTE: With addresses on envelopes mailed via the post office, do not use any punctuation.

Example: *I lived in San Francisco, California, for 20 years.*

I lived in San Francisco, CA for 20 years.

Rule 7. Use commas to surround degrees or titles used with names. Commas are no longer required around *Jr.* and *Sr.* Commas never set off *II*, *III*, and so forth.

Example: *Al Mooney, M.D., knew Sam Sunny Jr. and Charles Starr III.*

Rule 8. Use commas to set off expressions that interrupt sentence flow.

Example: *I am, as you have probably noticed, very nervous about this.*

Rule 9. When starting a sentence with a weak clause, use a comma after it. Conversely, do not use a comma when the sentence starts with a strong clause followed by a weak clause.

Examples: *If you are not sure about this, let me know now.*

Let me know now if you are not sure about this.

Rule 10. Use a comma after phrases of more than three words that begin a sentence. If the phrase has fewer than three words, the comma is optional.

Examples: *To apply for this job, you must have previous experience.*

On February 14 many couples give each other candy or flowers.

OR

On February 14, many couples give each other candy or flowers.

Rule 11. If something or someone is sufficiently identified, the description following it is considered nonessential and should be surrounded by commas.

Examples: *Freddy, who has a limp, was in an auto accident.*
Freddy is named, so the description is not essential.

The boy who has a limp was in an auto accident. We do not know which boy is being referred to without further description; therefore, no commas are used.

Rule 12. Use a comma to separate two strong clauses joined by a coordinating conjunction--*and, or, but, for, nor*. You can omit the comma if the clauses are both short.

Examples: *I have painted the entire house, but he is still working on sanding the doors.*

I paint and he writes.

Rule 13. Use the comma to separate two sentences if it will help avoid confusion.

Example: *I chose the colors red and green, and blue was his first choice.*

Rule 14. A **comma splice** is an error caused by joining two strong clauses with only a comma instead of separating the clauses with a conjunction, a semicolon, or a period. A **run-on sentence**, which is incorrect, is created by joining two strong clauses without any punctuation.

Incorrect: *Time flies when we are having fun, we are always having fun. (Comma splice)*

Time flies when we are having fun we are always having fun. (Run-on sentence)

Correct: *Time flies when we are having fun; we are always having fun.*

OR

Time flies when we are having fun, and we are always having fun. (Comma is optional because both strong clauses are short.)

OR

Time flies when we are having fun. We are always having fun.

Rule 15. If the subject does not appear in front of the second verb, do not use a comma.

Example: *He thought quickly but still did not answer correctly.*

Rule 16. Use commas to introduce or interrupt direct quotations shorter than three lines.

Examples: *He actually said, "I do not care."*

"Why," I asked, "do you always forget to do it?"

Rule 17. Use a comma to separate a statement from a question.

Example: *I can go, can't I?*

Rule 18. Use a comma to separate contrasting parts of a sentence.

Example: *That is my money, not yours.*

Rule 19. Use a comma when beginning sentences with introductory words such as *well, now, or yes*.

Examples: *Yes, I do need that report.*

Well, I never thought I'd live to see the day . . .

Rule 20. Use commas surrounding words such as *therefore* and *however* when they are used as interrupters.

Examples: *I would, therefore, like a response.*

I would be happy, however, to volunteer for the Red Cross.

Rule 21. Use either a comma or a semicolon before introductory words such as *namely, that is, i.e., for example, e.g., or for instance* when they are followed by a series of items. Use a comma after the introductory word.

Examples: *You may be required to bring many items, e.g., sleeping bags, pans, and warm clothing.*

OR

You may be required to bring many items; e.g., sleeping bags, pans, and warm clothing.

NOTE: *i.e.* means *that is*; *e.g.* means *for example*

<http://www.grammarbook.com/punctuation/commas.asp>

Semicolons help you connect closely related ideas when a style mark stronger than a comma is needed. By using semicolons effectively, you can make your writing sound more sophisticated.

Connect closely related ideas

- Link two [independent clauses](#) to connect closely related ideas

Some people write with a word processor; others write with a pen or pencil.

- Link clauses connected by [conjunctive adverbs](#) or [transitional phrases](#) to connect closely related ideas

But however they choose to write, people are allowed to make their own decisions; as a result, many people swear by their writing methods.

- Link lists where the items contain commas to avoid confusion between list items

There are basically two ways to write: with a pen or pencil, which is inexpensive and easily accessible; or by computer and printer, which is more expensive but quick and neat.

- Link lengthy clauses or clauses with commas to avoid confusion between clauses

Some people write with a word processor, typewriter, or a computer; but others, for different reasons, choose to write with a pen or pencil.

Rules for Using Semicolons

- A semicolon is most commonly used to link (in a single sentence) two [independent clauses](#) that are closely related in thought.

When a semicolon is used to join two or more ideas (parts) in a sentence, those ideas are then given equal position or rank.

Some people write with a word processor; others write with a pen or pencil.

- Use a semicolon between two [independent clauses](#) that are connected by [conjunctive adverbs](#) or [transitional phrases](#).

But however they choose to write, people are allowed to make their own decisions; as a result, many people swear by their writing methods.

- Use a semicolon between items in a list or series if any of the items contain commas.

There are basically two ways to write: with a pen or pencil, which is inexpensive and easily accessible; or by computer and printer, which is more expensive but quick and neat.

- Use a semicolon between [independent clauses](#) joined by a [coordinating conjunction](#) if the clauses are already punctuated with commas or if the clauses are lengthy.

Some people write with a word processor, typewriter, or a computer; but others, for different reasons, choose to write with a pen or pencil.

Avoid using a comma when a semicolon is needed:

Incorrect: The cow is brown, it is also old.

Correct: The cow is brown; it is also old.

What's going on here? Both parts of the sentence are [independent clauses](#), and commas should **not** be used to connect independent clauses if there is no [coordinating conjunction](#). This mistake is known as a **comma splice**.

Incorrect: I like cows, however, I hate the way they smell.

Correct: I like cows; however, I hate the way they smell

What's going on here? The conjunctive adverb **however** signals a connection between two [independent clauses](#), and commas should **not** be used to connect independent clauses if there is no [coordinating conjunction](#).

Incorrect: I like cows: they give us milk, which tastes good, they give us beef, which also tastes good, and they give us leather, which is used for shoes and coats.

Correct: I like cows: they give us milk, which tastes good; they give us beef, which also tastes good; and they give us leather, which is used for shoes and coats.

What's going on here? It's unclear what the three list items are, since the items are separated by commas.

Incorrect: Cows, though their bovine majesty has been on the wane in recent millenia, are still one of the great species of this planet, domesticated, yet proud, they ruminant silently as we humans pass tumultuously by.

Correct: Cows, though their bovine majesty has been on the wane in recent millenia, are still one of the great species of this planet; domesticated, yet proud, they ruminant silently as we humans pass tumultuously by.

What's going on here? It's unclear where the first [independent clause](#) ends and the second independent clause begins.

Avoid using a semicolon when a comma is needed:

Incorrect: The cow is brown; but not old.

Correct: The cow is brown, but not old.

What's going on here? The [coordinating conjunction](#) **but** doesn't require a semicolon, since the second part of the sentence isn't an [independent clause](#).

Incorrect: Because cows smell; they offend me.

Correct: Because cows smell, they offend me.

What's going on here? The first part is not an [independent clause](#), so no semicolon is required.

<http://writing.wisc.edu/Handbook/Semicolons.html>

Single Quotation Marks

In the United States, we use **single quotation marks** [' '] to enclose quoted material (or the titles of poems, stories, articles) within other quoted material:

- "'Design' is my favorite poem," he said.
- "Did she ask, 'What's going on?'"
- Ralph Ellison recalls the Golden Age of Jazz this way: "It was itself a texture of fragments, repetitive, nervous, not fully formed; its melodic lines underground, secret and taunting; its riffs jeering—"Salt peanuts! Salt peanuts!"

<http://grammar.ccc.commnet.edu/grammar/marks/quotation.htm#footnote>

Rule 1. Spell out single-digit whole numbers. Use numerals for numbers greater than *nine*.

Correct *I want five copies.*

Examples: *I want 10 copies.*

Rule 2. Be consistent within a category. For example, if you choose numerals because one of the numbers is greater than *nine*, use numerals for all numbers in that category. If you choose to spell out numbers because one of the numbers is a single digit, spell out all numbers in that category.

If you have numbers in different categories, use numerals for one category and spell out the other.

Correct *My 10 cats fought with their 2 cats.*

Examples: *My ten cats fought with their two cats.*

Given the budget constraints, if all 30 history students attend the four plays, then the 7 math students will be able to attend only two plays. (Students are represented with figures; plays are represented with words.)

Incorrect

Example: *I asked for five pencils, not 50.*

Rule 3. Always spell out simple fractions and use hyphens with them.

Examples: *One-half of the pies have been eaten.
A two-thirds majority is required for that bill to pass in Congress.*

Rule 4. A mixed fraction can be expressed in figures unless it is the first word of a sentence.

Examples: *We expect a 5 1/2 percent wage increase.
Five and one-half percent was the maximum allowable interest.*

Rule 5. The simplest way to express large numbers is best. Round numbers are usually spelled out. Be careful to be consistent within a sentence.

Correct: *You can earn from one million to five million dollars.*

Incorrect: *You can earn from one million to \$5,000,000.*

Correct: *You can earn from five hundred to five million dollars.*

Correct: *You can earn from \$5 hundred to \$5 million.*

Incorrect: *You can earn from \$500 to \$5 million.*

Incorrect: *You can earn from \$500 to five million dollars.*

Rule 6. Write decimals in figures. Put a zero in front of a decimal unless the decimal itself begins with a zero.

Examples: *The plant grew 0.79 of a foot in one year.
The plant grew only .07 of a foot this year because of the drought.*

Rule 7. With numbers that have decimal points, use a comma only when the number has five or more digits before the decimal point. Place the comma in front of the third digit to the left of the decimal point. When writing out such numbers, use the comma

where it would appear in the figure format. Use the word *and* where the decimal point appears in the figure format.

Examples: \$15,768.13: *Fifteen thousand, seven hundred sixty-eight dollars and thirteen cents*
\$1054.21: *One thousand fifty-four dollars and twenty-one cents*

Note: If the number has no decimal point, authorities disagree on whether to begin using the comma with four-digit numbers or to begin using the comma with five-digit numbers. When writing out these numbers, I recommend using the comma where it appears in the numerical form.

Examples: 1,054 schools **OR** 1054 schools: *one thousand, fifty-four schools OR one thousand fifty-four schools*
12,154 schools: *twelve thousand, one hundred fifty-four schools*

Rule 8. The following examples apply when using dates:

Examples: *The meeting is scheduled for June 30.*
The meeting is scheduled for the 30th of June.
We have had tricks played on us on April 1.
The 1st of April puts some people on edge.

Rule 9. When expressing decades, you may spell them out and lowercase them.

Example: *During the eighties and nineties, the U.S. economy grew.*

Rule 10. If you wish to express decades using incomplete numerals, put an apostrophe before the incomplete numeral but not between the year and the s.

Correct: *During the '80s and '90s, the U.S. economy grew.*

Incorrect: *During the '80's and '90's, the U.S. economy grew.*

Rule 11. You may also express decades in complete numerals. Again, don't use an apostrophe between the year and the s.

Example: *During the 1980s and 1990s, the U.S. economy grew.*

Rule 12. Normally, spell out the time of day in text even with half and quarter hours. With *o'clock*, the number is always spelled out.

Examples: *She gets up at four thirty before the baby wakes up.*
The baby wakes up at five o'clock in the morning.

Rule 13. Use numerals with the time of day when exact times are being emphasized or when using A.M. or P.M.

Examples: *Monib's flight leaves at 6:22 A.M.*
Please arrive by 12:30 sharp.
She had a 7:00 P.M. deadline.

Rule 14. Use *noon* and *midnight* rather than *12:00 P.M.* and *12:00 A.M.*

Rule 15. Hyphenate all compound numbers from *twenty-one* through *ninety-nine*.

Examples: *Forty-three persons were injured in the train wreck.*
Twenty-three of them were hospitalized.

Rule 16. Write out a number if it begins a sentence.

Examples: *Twenty-nine people won an award for helping their communities.*
That 29 people won an award for helping their communities was fantastic! OR
That twenty-nine people won an award for helping their communities was fantastic!

<http://www.grammarbook.com/numbers/numbers.asp>

While it may be acceptable in e-mail or in chat rooms, **excessive colloquialism can diminish the quality of a formal written text.** Presentation may be improved by applying the following techniques:

Formal and informal English differ in word choice, word usage, and grammatical structures. Informal writing might utilize the words "contraption," "fire," "kid," "how come," and "quote" as a noun. A formal writer might prefer "device," "dismiss," "child," "why," and "quotation." Informal writing may sound more like conversation while formal writing may be more polished. An informal style may make listeners feel more comfortable when you are speaking, but a formal writing style can make a good impression.

Avoid the ampersand (&); write out the word "and."

Do not use contractions. Note that the full form of "can't" is one word: "cannot," not "can not."

Try to avoid the first and second person. Formal writing often tries to be objective, and the pronouns "I" and "you" tend to imply subjectivity. Phrases such as "I think that" can be deleted from a sentence when it is obvious that this is the author's opinion. Using the pronoun "I" is almost always acceptable in personal writing, and the pronoun "you" is almost always acceptable in letters and how-to's. In the most formal writing, the pronoun "I" is replaced by the pronoun "we"; this is known as the royal we or the editorial we. Formal writing generally avoids the pronoun "you" when it refers to people in general.

- You should sleep eight hours each night. (informal)
- One should sleep eight hours each night. (formal)
- Most people should sleep at least eight hours each night. (formal usage allowing for exceptions)

Do not start a sentence with a coordinating conjunction. In the written language, do not use coordinating conjunctions such as "and," "but," "so," or "or" to start a sentence. Coordinating conjunctions are meant to join words, phrases, and clauses; a coordinating conjunction is left dangling without a role to play when it comes at the beginning of a sentence. Consider attaching the sentence that starts with a coordinating conjunction to the previous sentence, substituting the period for a comma to produce a compound sentence. You can also use transitional adverbs such as "additionally" (or "moreover"), "nevertheless" (or "however"), "therefore" (or "thus"), and "alternatively" (or "instead" or "otherwise"). "Though" can be used at the end of a sentence: "This product here is much cheaper. It will last only half as long, though." Starting a sentence with "also" is useful in casual writing but should be avoided in formal English unless the word "also" is modifying a verb (usually in the imperative mood or an inverted sentence structure): "Also read Chapters Two and Three;" "Also included is a free ticket." A paragraph that starts many sentences with coordinating conjunctions may also lack smooth transitions.

Avoid vague words. Vague words are less formal^[18] and are open to interpretation; they do not express your ideas as well as more precise words would. "A few" or "enough" can often be replaced by something more precise.

RUN-ON SENTENCE (sometimes called a "fused sentence") has at least two parts, either one of which can stand by itself (in other words, two independent clauses), but the two parts have been smooshed together instead of being properly connected.

1. **Run-on Sentences:**

- Adam is a sweet boy he really loves animals.
- Adam is a sweet boy, he really loves animals.

To correct a run-on sentence, make it into two [simple sentences](#). Put a period at the end of the first subject and verb group. Start the second sentence with a [capital letter](#).

Correct Sentences:

Adam is a sweet boy. He really loves animals.

(Jill Singleton, *Writers at Work: The Paragraph*. Cambridge Univ. Press, 2005)

2. Sometimes two sentences are very closely related in meaning and full [end-stop punctuation](#) may seem too strong. A [semicolon](#) can then be used to divide the two sentences. . . .

Run-on: It was a beautiful day there was not a cloud in the sky.

Correct: It was a beautiful day; there was not a cloud in the sky.

(Phil Pine, *Master the SAT 2008*. Peterson's, 2007)

3. A **run-on sentence** can sometimes be prevented by using a [comma](#) and joining word ([coordinate conjunction](#)) to join sentences together.

Wrong: John went to the movies x Sue stayed home.

Correct: John went to the movies, and Sue stayed home.

(Christopher Smith et al., *How to Prepare for the GED*. Barron's, 2004)

4. "[Another way to correct a run-on sentence is to] change the **run-on** to a [complex sentence](#) by placing a [subordinating conjunction](#) before one of the clauses:

Run-on: I don't play tennis well I have a poor backhand.

Correct: I don't play tennis well *because* I have a poor backhand.

(P. Choy and D.G. Clarke, *Basic Grammar and Usage*. Cengage, 2005)

The rule that ***one should not end a sentence with a preposition*** comes from the Latin language and is often taught of the English language. The reasoning behind it is: a preposition often begins with a prepositional phrase and requires an object of the preposition. If the preposition is the last word in the sentence, the prepositional phrase cannot be completed. Ending a sentence with a preposition is, therefore, considered grammatically incorrect.

If a writer wants to eliminate controversy, it is better to avoid prepositions at the end of sentences whenever possible. The obvious and perhaps best way to do this is to simply rearrange the sentence.

Example: What are you thinking of? Revision: You are thinking of what?

Example: What are you doing that for? Revision: You are doing that for what?

Another way is to use additional words or phrases in the sentence to explain what is taking place.

Example: I am not going in. Revision: I am not going in the house.

Example: That is too far above. Revision: That is too far above my head.

Often, the preposition may be eliminated altogether giving the sentence a stronger structure.

Example: Where is he at? Revision: Where is he?

The *at* is obviously not necessary to the clarity of the sentence and should be eliminated.

There are times, however, when the use of a preposition at the end of a sentence may be acceptable when the sentence would sound awkward or too formal to do otherwise.

Example: I want someone on which I can depend. Revision: I want someone I can depend on.

The latter sounds more appropriate while the first sentence sounds very formal.

In the end, it is the writer who must decide whether or not to adhere to the prepositional rule. If writing a formal paper or letter, then, of course, don't end sentences with prepositions. For more casual writing, it is acceptable to do so. The key is to make a conscious decision concerning the use of prepositions at the end of sentences.

Deborah Bennet

English Prepositions List

There are more than 100 prepositions in English. Yet this is a very small number when you think of the thousands of other words (nouns, verbs etc). Prepositions are important words. We use individual prepositions more frequently than other individual words. In fact, the prepositions **of**, **to** and **in** are among the ten most frequent words in English. Here is a list of 70 of the more common one-word prepositions. Many of these prepositions have more than one meaning. Please refer to a dictionary for precise meaning and usage.

- aboard
- about
- above
- across
- after
- against
- along
- amid
- among
- anti
- around
- as
- at
- before
- behind
- below
- beneath
- beside
- besides
- between
- beyond
- but
- by
- concerning
- considering
- despite
- down
- during
- except
- excepting
- excluding
- following
- for
- from
- in
- inside
- into
- like
- minus
- near
- of
- off
- on
- onto
- opposite
- outside
- over
- past
- per
- plus
- regarding
- round
- save
- since
- than
- through
- to
- toward
- towards

Examples of Transitions:

Illustration

Thus, for example, for instance, namely, to illustrate, in other words, in particular, specifically, such as.

Contrast

On the contrary, contrarily, notwithstanding, but, however, nevertheless, in spite of, in contrast, yet, on one hand, on the other hand, rather, or, nor, conversely, at the same time, while this may be true.

Addition

In addition to, furthermore, moreover, besides, than, too, also, both-and, another, equally important, first, second, etc., and, again, further, last, finally, not only-but also, as well as, in the second place, next, likewise, similarly, in fact, as a result, consequently, in the same way, for example, for instance, however, thus, therefore, otherwise.

Time

After, afterward, before, then, once, next, last, at last, at length, first, second, etc., at first, formerly, rarely, usually, another, finally, soon, meanwhile, at the same time, for a minute, hour, day, etc., during the morning, day, week, etc., most important, later, ordinarily, to begin with, afterwards, generally, in order to, subsequently, previously, in the meantime, immediately, eventually, concurrently, simultaneously.

Space

At the left, at the right, in the center, on the side, along the edge, on top, below, beneath, under, around, above, over, straight ahead, at the top, at the bottom, surrounding, opposite, at the rear, at the front, in front of, beside, behind, next to, nearby, in the distance, beyond, in the forefront, in the foreground, within sight, out of sight, across, under, nearer, adjacent, in the background.

Concession

Although, at any rate, at least, still, thought, even though, granted that, while it may be true, in spite of, of course.

Similarity or Comparison

Similarly, likewise, in like fashion, in like manner, analogous to.

Emphasis

Above all, indeed, truly, of course, certainly, surely, in fact, really, in truth, again, besides, also, furthermore, in addition.

Details

Specifically, especially, in particular, to explain, to list, to enumerate, in detail, namely, including.

Examples

For example, for instance, to illustrate, thus, in other words, as an illustration, in particular.

Consequence or Result

So that, with the result that, thus, consequently, hence, accordingly, for this reason, therefore, so, because, since, due to, as a result, in other words, then.

Summary

Therefore, finally, consequently, thus, in short, in conclusion, in brief, as a result, accordingly.

Suggestion

For this purpose, to this end, with this in mind, with this purpose in mind, therefore.