



# OWLS Writing Guides: PUNCTUATION

## USE THE COMMA ( , )

1. To separate items in a **series**.

- ✓ (series of words) – Sophomores, Juniors, and Seniors attended the assembly.
- ✓ (series of phrases) – She got paint on her shirt, on her shoes, and in her hair.
- ✓ (series of clauses) – They came to the party, they drank all the beer, and they refused to leave.

**Note:** Some writing guides suggest leaving out the last comma in a series: Sophomores, Juniors and Seniors attended the assembly.

2. To set off all types of **nonrestrictive elements** (information not necessary to the meaning of the core sentence).

- ✓ New Orleans, home of the po-boy sandwich, is a fascinating city.
- ✓ The marsh, once full of wildlife, is now covered in oil.
- ✓ John, who knows everything about physics, can't boil an egg.

**Note:** Do not put commas around essential (restrictive) information: The woman who is sitting four seats to the left is falling asleep. [The location of the woman is essential information].

3. To set off **introductory elements** (introductory or transitional words, phrases, or dependent clauses that come at the beginning of a sentence).

- ✓ In this box, you will find the treasure you seek.
- ✓ Hearing her name called, she rose from her seat in the jury room.
- ✓ After he left high school, he volunteered for two years.

4. Before a coordinating conjunction (for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so) when used to **connect main clauses**.

- ✓ We leave food out at night for the stray cats, and it is always gone by the morning.
- ✓ He ran a strong race, but he came in second.

**Note:** Do not use a comma if the coordinating conjunction connects compound subjects, verbs, or objects: He ran a strong race but came in second.

5. To **connect free modifiers** to a base sentence.

- ✓ The children sat in three straight rows, fidgeting and squirming in their seats.
- ✓ A few hours later we spotted two small dolphins, startlingly beautiful fish of pure gold, pulsing and fading and changing color.

## USE THE COLON ( : )

1. After a complete sentence that introduces a **list or a full-sentence quotation**.

- ✓ There are three major ways to cut your risk of heart disease: exercise regularly, eat a healthy diet, and reduce stress levels in your everyday life.
- ✓ Hemingway expresses the struggles of the writer this way: "There is nothing to writing. All you do is sit down at a typewriter and bleed."

## USE THE SEMICOLON ( ; )

1. To connect **closely related main clauses**.

- ✓ We prepared food for fifty guests; only ten diners showed up.
- ✓ He ran a strong race; however, he came in second.

2. To separate a **series of items** that themselves contains commas.

- ✓ The committee received suggestions from a veterinarian in Anchorage, Alaska; a lawyer in Medford, Massachusetts, who has handled animal cruelty cases; and an animal rescue worker in New Orleans, Louisiana, who is a specialist in rescuing wild animals in urban settings.

## USE THE DASH ( -- )

1. To mark any **sudden break and add emphasis**.

- ✓ She will finally receive her degree in May—if she survives her final exams.

2. To set off **elements added at the end of the sentence**.

- ✓ He packed the necessary items in the duffel bag—duct tape, a rope, and an axe.

3. To set off **interrupters**, especially when they contain commas (a dash works as a “strong” comma).

- ✓ The necessary items—duct tape, a rope, and an axe—were packed in the duffel bag.

**Notes:** A dash is not a comma substitute. Use it only sparingly, such as in the cases described above.

## USE PARENTHESES ( )

1. To set off and **de-emphasize** explanatory or less important details inserted into a sentence:

- ✓ Oswald was born in Honduras (although he lived there only seven years).

## USE THE APOSTROPHE ( ' )

1. To mark a **possessive**:

- ✓ That is Ann's yogurt, so please do not eat it. [singular word, not ending in “s”]
- ✓ The cats' tails were twitching in irritation. [plural word]
- ✓ The children's snacks filled the ice chest. [word that is plural without adding “s”]

**Note:** The possessive form of “its” doesn't use an apostrophe: That coat is losing its buttons.

2. To mark the missing part of the word in a **contraction (and other omissions)**.

- ✓ That's Ann's yogurt, so please don't eat it.
- ✓ It's ten o'clock. [originally "It is ten of the clock."]

3. To form **certain plurals** when clarity is an issue.

- ✓ The old typewriter doesn't type e's. (“The old typewriter doesn't type es” has a different meaning).