

Punctuating Sentences

from Joseph M. Williams, *Style: Ten Lessons in Clarity and Grace* (New York: Pearson Longman, 2005) 229-234.

Quite simply, a punctuated sentence begins with a capital letter and ends with a full stop or question/exclamation mark. The hallmark of a literate writer is knowing how to punctuate clauses correctly:

1. The full stop (or question/exclamation mark) alone:

'In 1967, Congress passed civil rights laws that remedied problems of registration and **voting. This** had political consequences throughout the South.'

Be cautious of creating too many short punctuated sentences. Your readers may feel your prose is choppy or simplistic. Experienced writers revise a series of short grammatical sentences into *subordinate clauses* or phrases, turning two or more grammatical sentences into one:

- ✓ 'When congress passed civil rights laws to remedy problems of registration and **voting in 1967, they** had political consequences throughout the South.'
- ✓ 'The civil rights laws **that Congress passed in 1967 to remedy problems of registration and voting** had political consequences throughout the South.'

2. The Semicolon alone: The semicolon is like a 'soft' full stop; whatever is on either side of it should be a grammatical sentence. Use a semicolon only when the first grammatical sentence is not long and the second grammatical sentence is closely linked to the first:

'In 1967, Congress passed civil rights laws that remedied problems of registration and **voting; those** laws had political consequences throughout the South.'

A SPECIAL PROBLEM WITH SEMICOLONS and '*HOWEVER*': In one context, even well-educated writers often incorrectly use a comma to end one grammatical sentence when they begin the next sentence with '*however*'. They should use a semicolon. The punctuation in this next example is confusing because we don't know whether the '*however*' goes with the first grammatical sentence or with the second:

'Taxpayers have supported public education, **however**, they now object because taxes have risen so steeply.'

If the '*however*' introduces the second grammatical sentence, then the writer must use a semicolon to signal where the first grammatical sentence ends:

- ✓ 'Taxpayers have supported public education; **however**, they now object because taxes have risen so steeply.'

Rule of thumb: If you see more than ten or so words before a '*however*' and as many after, you probably need to change the comma before to a semicolon or full stop, because that '*however*' probably begins a new grammatical sentence.

3. Comma + COORDINATING CONJUNCTION (*and, but, yet, for, so...*):

'American intellectuals have often followed **Europeans**, **but our culture** has proven inhospitable to their brand of socialism.'

When readers begin a coordinated series of three or more grammatical sentences, they accept just a comma between them, but only if they are short and have no internal punctuation:

'Baseball satisfies our admiration for **precision**, **basketball** speaks to our love of speed and **grace**, **and** football appeals to our lust for violence.'

An exception: Omit the comma between a coordinated pair of short grammatical sentences if you introduce them with a *modifier* that applies to both of them:

- ✓ 'By 1995, the economies of the Soviet Union's former satellites had *begun to rebound* **but** Russia's had yet to hit bottom.'

4. Full Stop + Coordinating Conjunction (*and, but, yet, for, so...*):

Some readers believe that it is wrong to begin a sentence with a coordinating conjunction such as *and* or *but*. But they are wrong; this is entirely correct:

'Education cannot guarantee a **democracy**. **But** without it , democracy cannot survive.'

✓ Use this pattern no more than once or twice per page, especially with '*and*'.

5. Semicolon + Coordinating Conjunction:

Writers occasionally end one grammatical sentence with a semicolon and begin the next with a coordinating conjunction:

'In the 1950s religion was viewed as a bulwark against **communism**; **so** soon thereafter atheism was felt to threaten national security.'

Use a comma there if the two grammatical sentences are short. But readers are often grateful for a semicolon if the two grammatical sentences are long with their own internal commas:

'Problem solving, one of the most active areas of psychology, has made great strides in the last decade, particularly in understanding the problem-solving strategies of expert; **so** it is no surprise that educators have followed that research with interest.'

6. Comma Alone: Though readers do not expect to see just a comma separate two grammatical sentences, they can manage if the sentences are short and closely linked in meaning, such as cause-effect, first-second, if-then, etc.

'Act in haste, repent at leisure.'

Be sure, though, that neither has internal commas; this would be confusing:

'Women, who have always been underpaid, no longer accept that discriminatory treatment, they are doing something about it.'

A semicolon would be clearer:

- ✓ 'Women, who have always been underpaid, no longer accept that discriminatory treatment; they are now doing something about it.'

A warning: writers of the best prose do this, but many teachers disapprove, so be sure of your reader(s) before you experiment!

7. Conjunction Alone: writers can signal a close link between short grammatical sentences with a coordinating conjunction alone, omitting the commas:

- ✓ 'Oscar Wilde violated a fundamental law of British **society and** we all know what happened to him.'

(Again, though writers of the best prose do this, many teachers consider it an error.)

8. Colon: the colon can work as short hand for '*to illustrate*', '*for example*', '*that is*', '*let me expand on*', '*therefore*.'

- ✓ 'Dance is not widely **supported: no** company operates at a profit, and there are few outside major cities.'

A colon signals more obviously that you are balancing the structure, sound, and meaning of one clause against another:

- ✓ Civil disobedience is the public conscience of a democracy: mass-enthusiasm is the public consensus of a tyranny.'

If you follow the colon with a grammatical sentence, you can choose to capitalise the first word or not. Capitalising the first word emphasises what follows more clearly and is especially useful for titles, introductions and conclusions.