

Revising: Effective Use of Punctuation

Punctuation helps you clarify how a sentence should be read. It is useful to think of the comma, the semi-colon, the colon, and the dash as signs which assist a reader in grasping where a sentence is going.

The Comma

The comma is primarily a separating device. Think of it as road sign that signals to the reader the need to pause.

- Use a comma to a separate introductory element from the main clause.

If you don't like Kant, you certainly won't like Hegel.

- Use a comma before a coordinating conjunction (*for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so*) that joins two complete sentences. (Some people use the acronym FANBOYS to remember these words.)

I can read Kant, but I can appreciate Hegel.

Alert: Pairs of words, phrases, or dependent clauses joined by a coordinating conjunction should *not* be separated with a comma.

I like Kant and Hegel.

The Semi-Colon

The semi-colon is primarily a linking device used to join two complete sentences closely related in meaning. The two sentences are usually about the same length, too.

- Use a semi-colon to join two complete sentences.

I understand Hegel; I admire Kant.

- You can also use the semi-colon as a less confusing additional barrier between items that are already separated by commas.

We study the Cavalier poets Lovelace, Carew, and Suckling; the metaphysical poets Donne, Cowley, and Crashaw; and the religious mystics Herbert, Vaughan, and Traherne.

The Dash

Like the colon, the dash is a linking device, but it is not necessary that what precedes it be a complete sentence. Use it when the word or word group that follows it constitutes a summation, an amplification, a commentary, an explanation, or a reversal of what went before. You can use the dash very effectively to create special, dramatic emphasis, but use it only very occasionally. Overuse of the dash can make your prose appear fragmented and incoherent.

Over 104 pounds a year—this is how much sugar is in the average person’s diet.

Use dashes in pairs to enclose abrupt parenthetical elements that occur within a sentence.

Southern novelists—and Hemingway at his best—are the most important American writers of the post-war years.

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