APPENDIX
Punctuation

I know there are some Persons who affect to despise it, and treat this whole Subject with the utmost Contempt, as a Trifle far below their Notice, and a Formality unworthy of their Regard: They do not hold it difficult, but despicable; and neglect it, as being above it. Yet many learned Men have been highly sensible to its Use; and some ingenious and elegant Writers have condescended to point their Works with Care; and very eminent Scholars have not disdained to teach the Method of doing it with Propriety.
—JAMES BURROW

In music, the punctuation is absolutely strict; the bars and rests are absolutely defined. But our prose cannot be quite strict, because we have to relate it to the audience. In other words we are continually changing the score.
—SIR RALPH RICHARDSON

There are some punctuations that are interesting and there are some that are not.
—GERTRUDE STEIN

UNDERSTANDING PUNCTUATION

Most writers think that punctuation must obey the same kind of rules that govern grammar, and so managing commas and semicolons is about as interesting as making verbs agree with subjects. In fact, you have more choices in how to punctuate than you might think, and if you choose thoughtfully, you can help readers not only understand a complex sentence more easily but create nuances of emphasis that they will notice. It takes more than a few commas to turn a monotone into the Hallelujah Chorus, but a little care can produce gratifying results.

I will address punctuation as a functional problem: first, how do we punctuate the end of a sentence, then its beginning, and finally its middle? But first, we have to distinguish different kinds of sentences.

Simple, Compound, and Complex Sentences

Sentences have traditionally been called *simple, compound,* and *complex*. If a sentence has just one INDEPENDENT CLAUSE, it is *simple:*

> SIMPLE: The greatest English dictionary is the Oxford English Dictionary.

If it has two or more independent clauses, it is *compound:*

> COMPOUND: [There are many good dictionaries]^1,
> [but the greatest is the *Oxford English Dictionary*]^2.

If it has an independent clause and one or more SUBORDINATE CLAUSES, it is *complex.*

> COMPLEX: [While there are many good dictionaries]$_{\text{subordinate clause}}$
> [the greatest is the *Oxford English Dictionary*].$_{\text{independent clause}}$

(*Compound-complex* is self-explanatory.)

But those terms are potentially misleading, because they suggest that a grammatically simple sentence should *seem* simpler than one that is grammatically complex. But that's not always true. For example, most readers think that of the next two sentences, the grammatically simple one *feels* more complex than the grammatically complex one:

> GRAMMATICALLY SIMPLE: Our review of the test led to our modification of it as a result of complaints by teachers.

GRAMMATICALLY COMPLEX: After we reviewed the test, we modified it because teachers complained.

Those two terms do not reliably indicate how we are likely to respond to such sentences. We need a more useful set of terms.

Punctuated and Grammatical Sentences

We can make more useful distinctions between what we will call *punctuated* sentences and *grammatical* sentences:

- A punctuated sentence begins with a capital letter and ends with a period or question/exclamation mark. It might be one word or a hundred (see the Mailer sentence on p. 176).
- A grammatical sentence is a SUBJECT and VERB in a MAIN CLAUSE along with everything else depending on that clause.

We distinguish these two kinds of sentences, because depending on their structure, readers can respond to them very differently; the one you are now reading, for example, is one long punctuated sentence, but it is not as hard to read as many shorter sentences that consist of many SUBORDINATE CLAUSES. I have chosen to punctuate as one long sentence what I might have punctuated as a series of shorter ones; those semicolons and the comma before that *but* could have been periods, for example—and that dash could have been a period too.

Here is that long sentence you just read repunctuated with virtually no change in its grammar, creating seven punctuated sentences:

> We must distinguish these two kinds of punctuated sentences, because depending on their structure, readers respond to them very differently. The one you are now reading, for example, is a short punctuated sentence, consisting of just one subject and one verb plus what depends on them. But this paragraph is not as hard to read as many shorter sentences that consist of many subordinate clauses. I have chosen to punctuate as separate sentences what I could have punctuated as one long one. The period before that *but*, for example, could have been a comma. The last two periods could have been semicolons. And that period could have been a dash.

Though I changed little but the punctuation, those seven grammatical sentences, now punctuated as seven punctuated sentences, feel different from those same grammatical sentences in a

single punctuated sentence. In short, we can create different stylistic effects simply by the way we punctuate: punctuation is not governed by rules, but by choices.

Exercise A.1

We could revise the beginning of that revision on p. 238 into even shorter grammatical sentences:

> *We must distinguish two kinds of punctuated sentences. Depending on their structure, readers respond to them differently.* The one you are now reading is a short punctuated sentence. It consists of one subject and verb plus what depends on them.

Does that improve the original? If so, why? If not, why not?

Exercise A.2

You will find long sentences on pp. 161, 170, and 171. Repunctuate them into shorter ones. How do the changes affect the way you respond to them?

Punctuating the Ends of Sentences

Above all other rules of punctuation, a writer must know how to punctuate the end of a grammatical sentence. You have a lot of choices in how to do that, but signal it you must, because readers have to know where one grammatical sentence stops and the next begins. The punctuation of this one does not help us do that:

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

When you write that kind of sentence you create a *fused* or *run-on sentence,* an error you cannot afford to make, because it signals a writer who does not understand the basics of writing. Some use the term "illiterate" for this kind of error, an exaggeration, of course, because an "illiterate writer" is a contradiction in terms. Take the term as a measure of how intensely readers respond to such errors.

You can *choose* to separate pairs of grammatical sentences in ten ways. Three are common.

Three Common Forms of End Punctuation

1. **Period (or Question/Exclamation Mark) Alone** The simplest, least noticeable way to signal the end of a grammatical sentence is with a period:

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

   But if you create too many short punctuated sentences, your readers may feel your prose is choppy or simplistic (as on pp. 49–50). Experienced writers revise a series of very 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.

   Be cautious, though: combine too many short grammatical sentences into one long one, and you create a sentence that sprawls.

2. **Semicolon Alone** A semicolon is like a soft period; whatever is on either side of it should be a grammatical sentence (with an exception we'll discuss on p. 257). Use a semicolon instead of a period only when the first grammatical sentence is not long, no more than fifteen or so words, and the content of 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.

   Readers need to see a link between them:

   ✓ In 1967, Congress passed civil rights laws to remedy problems of registration and **voting; by 1995** Southern states had thousands

of sheriffs, mayors, and other officials from their African-American communities.

A few shared concepts would make the connections clearer:

✓ In 1967, Congress passed civil rights laws to remedy racial problems of **registration and voting**, particularly in the South; by 1995 Southern states had **elected** thousands of sheriffs, mayors, and other officials from their African-American communities.

A special problem with semicolons and *however* In one context, even well-educated writers often incorrectly end one grammatical sentence with a comma and begin the next grammatical sentence with *however.*

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

We don't know whether the *however* ends the first grammatical sentence or introduces the second. If it ends the first, the semicolon goes after the *however* (keep the comma before it):

✓ 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 semicolon goes before it (but keep the comma after it):

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

QUICK TIP: If you see more than ten or so words before a *however* and as many after, you probably should put the semicolon *before* the *however*, because that *however* probably begins a new grammatical sentence.

Many writers avoid semicolons because they find them mildly intimidating. So learning their use might be worth your time, if you want to be judged a sophisticated writer. Once every couple of pages is probably about right.

3. **Comma + Coordinating Conjunction** Readers also are ready to recognize the end of a grammatical sentence when they see a comma followed by two signals:

- a COORDINATING CONJUNCTION: *and, but, yet, for, so, or, nor,*

- and that conjunction is followed by another subject and verb.

  ✓ In the 1950s religion was viewed as a bulwark against **communism, so it was** not long after that that atheism was felt to threaten national security.

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

But choose a period if the two grammatical sentences are long and have their own internal punctuation.

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.

If any of the grammatical sentences has internal punctuation, separate them with semicolons:

✓ Baseball, the oldest indigenous American sport and essentially a rural one, satisfies our admiration for **precision; basketball,** our newest sport and now more urban than rural, speaks to our love of speed and **grace; and** football, a sport both rural and urban, 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:

✓ Once the upheaval after the collapse of the Soviet Union had settled down, the economies of its former satellites had begun to **rebound but Russia's** had yet to hit bottom.

Too many grammatical sentences joined with *and* and *so* feel simplistic, so avoid more than one or two a page.

QUICK TIP: When you begin a grammatical sentence with *but,* you either can put a comma at the end of the previous sentence or begin a new punctuated sentence by putting a period there and capitalizing *but.* Use a period + *But* if what follows is important and you intend to go on discussing it:

✓ The immediate consequence of higher gas prices was some curtailment of **driving. But the long term** effect changed the car buying habits of Americans, perhaps permanently, a change that the Big Three car manufacturers could not ignore. They . . .

Use comma + *but* if what follows only qualifies what preceded.

✓ The immediate consequence of higher gas prices was some curtailment of **driving, but that did not** last long. The long-term effect was changes in the car buying habits of Americans, a change that the Big Three car manufacturers could not ignore. They . . .

Four Less Common Forms of End Punctuation

Some readers have reservations about these next four ways of signaling the end of a grammatical sentence, but careful writers everywhere use them.

4. **Period + Coordinating Conjunction** Some readers think it's wrong to begin a punctuated sentence with a coordinating conjunction such as *and* or *but* (review pp. 17–18). But they are wrong; this is entirely correct:

   ✓ Education cannot guarantee a **democracy. And** when it is available to only a few, it becomes a tool of social repression.

   Use this pattern no more than once or twice a 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 instead of a semicolon if the two grammatical sentences are short. But readers are 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 experts; **so** it is no surprise that educators have followed that research with interest.

But then readers would probably prefer a period there even more.

6. **Comma Alone** Though readers rarely 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; not this:

   Women, who have always been underpaid, no longer accept that discriminatory treatment, they are now 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: though writers of the best prose separate short grammatical sentences with just a comma, many teachers disapprove, because a comma alone is traditionally condemned as a "comma splice," in their view, a significant error. So be sure of your readers before you experiment.

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

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

   But the same warning: though writers of the best prose do this, many teachers consider it an error.

Three Special Cases: Colon, Dash, Parentheses

These last three ways of signaling the end of a grammatical sentence are a bit self-conscious, but might be interesting to those who want to distinguish themselves from most other writers.

8. **Colon** Discerning readers are likely to think you are a bit sophisticated if you end a sentence with an appropriate colon: they take it as shorthand for *to illustrate, for example, that is, therefore*:

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

A colon can also signal more obviously than a comma or semicolon 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, capitalize the first word or not, depending on how much you want to emphasize what follows (note: some handbooks claim that the first word after a colon should not be capitalized).

QUICK TIP: Avoid a colon if it breaks a clause into two pieces, neither of which is a grammatically complete sentence. Avoid this:

> **Genetic counseling requires: a knowledge** of statistical genetics, an awareness of choices open to parents, and the psychological competence to deal with emotional trauma.

Instead, put the colon only after a whole subject-verb-OBJECT structure:

> ✓ **Genetic counseling requires the following: a** knowledge of statistical genetics, an awareness of choices open to parents, and the psychological competence to deal with emotional trauma.

9. **Dash** You can also signal balance more informally with a dash—it suggests a casual afterthought:

   ✓ Stonehenge is a **wonder—only** a genius could have conceived it.

   Contrast that with a more formal colon: it makes a difference.

10. **Parentheses** You can insert a short grammatical sentence inside another one with parentheses, if what you put in the parentheses is like a short afterthought. Do not put a period after the sentence inside the parenthesis; put a single period outside:

    ✓ Stonehenge is a **wonder** (**only** a genius could have conceived it).

Here's the point: You can end a grammatical sentence in ten ways. Three are conventional and common:

1. Period	I win. You lose.
2. Semicolon	I win; you lose.
3. Comma + coordinating conjunction	I win, and you lose.

Four are a bit debatable, but good writers use them, especially the first:

4. Period + coordinating conjunction	I win. And you lose.
5. Semicolon + coordinating conjunction	I win; and you lose.
6. Comma alone	I win, you lose.
7. Coordinating conjunction alone	I win and you lose.

Three are for writers who want to be a bit stylish in their punctuation:

8. Colon	I win: you lose.
9. Dash	I win—you lose.
10. Parentheses	I win (you lose).

Though some ways of punctuating the end of a sentence are flat-out wrong, you can choose from among many that are right, and each has a different effect. If you look again at the short sentences on pp. 174–176 and Mailer's long sentence on p. 176, you can see those choices in contrast. Those writers could have chosen otherwise and thereby created a different stylistic effect.

Intended Sentence Fragments

Most readers will think you've made a serious error if you inadvertently punctuate a fragment of a grammatical sentence as a complete one. Among the most common sentence fragments is a subordinate dependent clause detached from its main clause, especially one beginning with *because* (but see pp. 17–18):

> You cannot break a complex sentence into two shorter ones merely by replacing commas with periods. **Because if you do, you will be considered at least careless, at worst uneducated.**

Another common fragment begins with *which*:

> Most fragments occur when you write a sentence that goes on so long and becomes so complicated that you start to feel that you are losing control over it and so need to drop in a period to start another sentence. **Which is why you must understand how to write a long but clearly constructed sentence that readers can follow easily.**

Traditionally, a punctuated sentence that fails to include an independent main clause is wrong. At least in theory.

In fact, experienced writers often write fragments deliberately, as I just did. When intended, those fragments typically have two characteristics:

- They are relatively short, fewer than ten or so words.
- They are intended to reflect a mind at work, as if the writer were speaking to you, finishing a sentence, then immediately expanding and qualifying it. Almost as an afterthought, often ironically.

A good example of a passage with several fragments is the one by D.H. Lawrence in Lesson 9 (fragments are boldfaced):

> Now listen to me, don't listen to [the American colonist]. He'll tell you the lie you expect. **Which is partly your fault for expecting it.**
>
> He didn't come in search of freedom of worship. England had more freedom of worship in the year 1700 than America had. **Won by Englishmen who wanted freedom and so stopped at home and fought for it. And got it. Freedom of worship?** Read the history of New England during the first century of its existence.
>
> **Freedom anyhow? The land of the free! This the land of the free!** Why, if I say anything that displeases them, the free mob will lynch me, and that's my freedom. **Free?** Why I have never been in any country where the individual has such an abject fear of his fellow countrymen. **Because, as I say, they are free to lynch him the moment he shows he is not one of them . . .**

You should know, however, that writers rarely use sentence fragments in academic prose. They are considered a bit too casual. If you decide to experiment, be sure that your audience knows that you think you know what you're doing.

PUNCTUATING BEGINNINGS

You have no issues in punctuating the beginning of a sentence when you begin directly with its subject, as I did this one. However, as with this one, when a sentence forces a reader to plow through several introductory words, phrases, and clauses, especially when they have their own internal punctuation and readers might be confused by it all (as you may be right now), forget trying to punctuate it right: revise it.

There are a few rules that your readers expect you to follow, but more often you have to rely on judgment.

Five Reliable Rules

1. **Always separate an introductory element from the subject of a sentence with a comma if a reader might misunderstand the structure of the sentence, as in this one:**

   When a lawyer concludes her argument has to be easily remembered by a jury.

   Do this:

   ✓ When a lawyer **concludes, her** argument has to be easily remembered by a jury.

2. **Never end an introductory clause or phrase with a semicolon, no matter how it long is.** Readers take semicolons to signal the end of a grammatical sentence (but see p. 257). Never this:

   Although the Administration knew that Iraq's invasion of Kuwait threatened American interests in Saudi **Arabia; it** did not immediately prepare a military response.

   Always use a comma there:

   ✓ Although the Administration knew that Iraq's invasion of Kuwait threatened American interests in Saudi **Arabia,** it did not immediately prepare a military response.

   But if that introductory element is very long and complicated, consider revising it into a grammatical sentence:

   ✓ The Administration knew that Iraq's invasion of Kuwait threatened American interests in Saudi **Arabia, but** it did not immediately prepare a military response.

3. **Never put a comma right after a subordinating conjunction if the next element of the clause is its subject.** Never this:

   Although, the art of punctuation is simple, it is rarely mastered.

4. **Avoid putting a comma after the coordinating conjunctions *and, but, yet, for, so, or,* and *nor* if the next element is the subject.** Do not do this:

   But, we cannot know whether life on other planets exists.

   Some writers who punctuate heavily put a comma after a coordinating or subordinating conjunction if an introductory word or phrase follows:

   ✓ **Yet, during this period, prices** continued to rise.

   ✓ **Although, during this period, prices** continued to rise, interest rates did not.

   Punctuation that heavy retards a reader a bit, but it's your choice. These are also correct and for the reader, perhaps a bit brisker:

   ✓ Yet during this **period, prices** continued to rise.

   ✓ Yet during this **period prices** continued to rise.

5. **Put a comma after an introductory word or phrase if it comments on the whole of the following sentence or connects one sentence to another.** These include elements such as *fortunately, allegedly,* etc. and conjunctions like *however, nevertheless, regardless,* etc. Since readers hear sentences in their mind's ear, they expect a pause after such words.

   ✓ **Fortunately, we** proved our point.

   But avoid starting many sentences with an introductory element and a comma. When we read a series of such sentences, the whole passage feels hesitant.

   Three Exceptions: We typically omit a comma after *now, thus,* and *hence:*

   ✓ **Now it** is clear that many will not support this position.

   ✓ **Thus the** only alternative is to choose some other action.

Two Reliable Principles

1. **Readers usually need no punctuation between a short introductory phrase and the subject**:

   ✓ **Once again we** find similar responses to such stimuli.

   ✓ **In 1945 few** realized how the war had transformed us.

   It is not wrong to put a comma there, but it slows readers just as you may want them to be picking up speed.

2. **Readers usually need a comma between a long (four or five words or more) introductory phrase or clause and the subject:**

   ✓ When a lawyer begins her opening statement with a dry recital of the law and how it must be applied to the case before the **court, the** jury is likely to nod off.

Here's the point: These are strong rules of punctuation. Observe them.

1. Always separate an introductory element from the subject if a reader might misunderstand the structure of the sentence.
2. Never end an introductory clause or phrase with a semicolon.
3. Do not put a comma after a coordinating or subordinating conjunction if the next element of the clause is its subject.
4. Put a comma after a short introductory word or phrase if it comments on the whole of the following sentence or if it connects one sentence to another.

These are reliable principles:

1. Put a comma after a short introductory phrase or not, as you choose.
2. Readers need a comma after a long introductory phrase or clause.

Punctuating Middles

This is where explanations get messy, because to punctuate inside a grammatical sentence—more specifically, inside a clause—you have to consider not only the grammar of that clause, but the nuances of rhythm, meaning, and the emphasis that you want readers to hear in their mind's ear. There are, however, a few reliable rules.

Subject—Verb, Verb—Object

Do not put a comma between a subject and its verb, no matter how long the subject (nor between the verb and its object). Do not do this:

> A sentence that consists of many complex subordinate clauses and long phrases that all precede a **verb, may** seem to some students to demand a comma somewhere.

Readers generally dislike long subjects. If you keep them short, you won't feel that you need a comma.

Occasionally, you cannot avoid a long subject, especially if it consists of a list of items with internal punctuation, like this:

> **The president, the vice president, the secretaries of the departments, senators, members of the House of Representatives, and Supreme Court justices take** an oath that pledges them to uphold the Constitution.

You can help readers sort it out with a summative subject:

- Insert a colon or a dash at the end of the list of subjects:

  The president, the vice president, the secretaries of the departments, senators, members of the House of Representatives, and Supreme Court justices:

- Then insert a one-word subject that summarizes the preceding list:

  ✓ The president, the vice president, the secretaries of the departments, senators, members of the House of Representatives, and Supreme Court justices: **all** take an oath that pledges them to uphold the Constitution.

Choose a dash or a colon depending on how formal you want to seem.

Interruptions

When you interrupt a subject-verb or verb-object, you make it harder for readers to make the basic grammatical connections that create a sentence. So in general, avoid such interruptions, except for reasons of emphasis or nuance (see pp. 136–137).

But if you must interrupt a subject and verb or verb and object with more than a few words, always put paired commas around the interruption.

> A sentence, **if it consists of many complex subordinate clauses and long phrases and all precede a verb,** may seem to need commas.

But that sentence needs more than commas to make it clear. That *if*-clause should be moved to the end:

> ✓ A sentence may seem to need commas **if it consists of many complex subordinate clauses and long phrases and all precede a verb.**

Generally speaking, do not use a comma when you tack on a subordinate clause at the end of an independent clause, if that clause is necessary to understand the meaning of the sentence (this is analogous to a RESTRICTIVE RELATIVE CLAUSE):

> ✓ No one should violate the law just because it seems unjust.

If the clause is not necessary, separate it from the main clause with a comma.

> ✓ No one should violate the law, because in the long run, it will do more harm than good.

This distinction can be tricky at times.

You can use commas before and after short interrupting ADVERBIAL PHRASES, depending on the emphasis you want readers to hear. The general principle is that readers feel emphasis on what immediately precedes and follows a pause. Compare the different emphases in these:

> ✓ Modern poetry has become more relevant to the average reader **in recent years.**

> ✓ Modern poetry **has, in recent years, become** more relevant to the average reader.

> ✓ Modern poetry has **become, in recent years, more** relevant to the average reader.

✓ The antagonism between Congress and the president has created utter distrust **among every group of voters.**

✓ The antagonism between Congress and the president has created, **among every group of voters,** utter distrust.

Loose Commentary

"Loose commentary" differs from an interruption, because you can usually move an interruption elsewhere in a sentence. But loose commentary modifies what it stands next to, so it usually cannot be moved. It still needs to be set off with paired commas, parentheses, or dashes, unless it comes at the end of a sentence; in that case, replace the second comma or dash with a period.

It is difficult to explain exactly what counts as loose commentary because it depends on both grammar and meaning. One familiar distinction is between restrictive clauses and NONRESTRICTIVE CLAUSES (see pp. 18–20), including APPOSITIVES.

We use no commas with restrictive modifiers, modifiers that uniquely identify the noun they modify:

✓ The house **that I live in** is 100 years old.

But we always set off nonrestrictive modifiers with *paired* commas (unless the modifier ends the sentence):

✓ We had to reconstruct the **larynx, which is the source of voice,** with cartilage from the shoulder.

An appositive is just a truncated nonrestrictive clause:

✓ We had to rebuild the **larynx, ~~which is~~ the source of voice,** with cartilage from the shoulder.

You can achieve a more casual effect with a dash or parenthesis:

✓ We had to rebuild the **larynx—the source of voice—with** cartilage from the shoulder.

✓ We had to rebuild the **larynx (the source of voice) with** cartilage from the shoulder.

A dash is useful when the loose commentary has internal commas. Readers are confused by the long subject in this sentence:

> The nations of Central Europe, Poland, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Bosnia, Serbia have for centuries been in the middle of an East-West tug-of-war.

They can understand that kind of structure more easily when they can see that loose modifier set off with dashes or parentheses:

✓ The nations of Central **Europe—Poland, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Bosnia, Serbia—have** for centuries been in the middle of an East-West tug-of-war.

Use parentheses when you want readers to hear your comment as a *sotto voce* aside:

✓ The brain **(at least that part that controls non-primitive functions)** may comprise several little brains operating simultaneously.

Or use it as an explanatory footnote inside a sentence:

✓ Lamarck **(1744–1829)** was a pre-Darwinian evolutionist.

✓ The poetry of the *fin de siècle* **(end of the century)** was characterized by a world-weariness and fashionable despair.

When loose commentary is at the end of a sentence, use a comma to separate it from the first part of the sentence. Be certain, however, that the meaning of the comment is not crucial to the meaning of the sentence. If it is, do not use a comma. Contrast these:

✓ I wandered through **Europe, seeking a place** where I could write undisturbed.

✓ I spent my **time seeking a place** where I could write undisturbed.

✓ Offices will be closed July **2–6, as announced in the daily bulletin.**

✓ When closing offices, secure all safes **as prescribed in the manual.**

✓ Historians have studied social changes, **at least in this country.**

✓ These records must be kept **at least until the IRS reviews them.**

Here's the point: These are reliable rules of internal punctuation. Observe them.

1. Do not interrupt a subject and verb or verb and object with any punctuation, unless absolutely necessary for clarity.
2. Inside a clause, always set off long interruptions with *paired* marks of punctuation—commas, parentheses, or dashes. Never use semicolons.

3. Put a comma at the end of an independent clause before a tacked-on subordinate clause when that clause is not essential to the meaning of the sentence.

PUNCTUATING COORDINATED ELEMENTS

Punctuating Two Coordinated Elements

Generally speaking, do not put a comma between just two coordinated elements. Compare these:

> As computers have become **sophisticated, and** powerful they have taken over more **clerical, and** bookkeeping tasks.

> ✓ As computers have become **sophisticated and** powerful they have taken over more **clerical and** bookkeeping tasks.

Four Exceptions

1. **For a dramatic contrast, put a comma after the first coordinate element to emphasize the second (keep the second short):**

   ✓ The ocean is nature's most glorious **creation, and** its most destructive.

   To emphasize a contrast, use a comma before a *but* (keep the second part short):

   ✓ Organ transplants are becoming more **common, but** not less expensive.

2. **If you want your readers to feel the cumulative power of a coordinated pair (or more), drop the *and* and leave just a comma.** Compare these:

   ✓ Lincoln never had a formal **education and** never owned a large library.

   ✓ Lincoln never had a formal **education, never** owned a large library.

   ✓ The lesson of the pioneers was to ignore conditions that seemed difficult or even **overwhelming and** to get on with the business of subduing a hostile environment.

✓ The lesson of the pioneers was to ignore conditions that seemed difficult or even **overwhelming, to** get on with the business of subduing a hostile environment.

3. **Put a comma between long coordinated pairs only if you think your readers need a chance to breathe or to sort out the grammar.** Compare:

It is in the graveyard that Hamlet finally realizes that the inevitable end of life is the **grave and clay and that the** end of all pretentiousness and all plotting and counter-plotting, regardless of one's station in life, must be dust.

A comma after *clay* and *life* signals a natural pause:

✓ It is in the graveyard that Hamlet finally realizes that the inevitable end of all life is the **grave and clay, and that the** end of all pretentiousness and all plotting and counter-plotting, regardless of one's station in life, must be dust.

More important, the comma after *clay* sorts out the structure of a potentially confusing *grave and clay and that regardless.*

In this next sentence, the first half of a coordination is long, so a reader might have a problem connecting the second half to its origin:

Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* brilliantly dramatizes those primitive impulses that lie deep in each of us and stir only in our darkest **dreams but asserts** the need for the values that control those impulses.

A comma after *dreams* would clearly mark the end of one coordinate member and the beginning of the next:

✓ Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* brilliantly dramatizes those primitive impulses that lie deep in each of us and stir only in our darkest **dreams, but asserts** the need for the values that control those impulses.

On the other hand, if you can make sense out of a complicated sentence like that only with punctuation, you need to revise the sentence.

4. **As mentioned above, if a sentence begins with a phrase or subordinate clause modifying two following clauses that are independent and coordinated, put a comma after the**

introductory phrase or clause but do not put a comma between the two coordinated independent clauses:

✓ After the Soviet Union collapsed, Russia's economy declined for several years **[no comma here]** but the economies of former satellites to the west began to expand.

Punctuating Three or More Coordinated Elements

Finally, there is the matter of punctuating a series of three or more coordinated elements. Writers disagree on this one. A few omit it, but most insist a comma must always precede the last one:

✓ His wit, his **charm and his loyalty** made him our friend.

✓ His wit, his **charm, and his loyalty** made him our friend.

Both are correct, but be consistent.

If any of the items in the series has its own internal commas, use semicolons to show how readers should group the coordinated items:

✓ In mystery novels, the principal action ought to be economical, organic, and **logical; fascinating**, yet not **exotic; clear**, but complicated enough to hold the reader's interest.

Here's the point: Use commas to separate items in a series if the items have no internal punctuation. Use semicolons to set off items in a series only if they do.

Apostrophes

There are few options with apostrophes, only rules, and they are Real Rules (review pp. 15–16). Those who violate them are objects of abuse by those who police such matters.

Contractions

Use an apostrophe in all contracted words:

don't we'll she'd I'm it's

Writers in the academic world rarely use contractions in their professional writing, because they don't want to seem too casual. I've used them in his book, because I wanted to avoid a formal tone. Check with your instructor before you experiment.

Plurals

Except for two cases, *never use an apostrophe to form a plural.* Never this: *bus's*, *fence's*, *horse's.* That error invites withering abuse.

Use an apostrophe to form plurals in only two contexts: (1) with all lower case single letters and (2) with the single capital letters *A*, *I*, and U (the added *s* would seem to spell the words *As*, *Is*, and *Us*):

Dot your i's and cross your t's many A's and I's

However, when a word is unambiguously all numbers or multiple capital letters, add just *s*, with no apostrophe:

The ABCs	the 1950s	767s
CDs	URLs	45s

Possessives

With a few exceptions, form the possessive of a singular common or proper noun by adding an apostrophe + *s*.

FDR's third term　　the U.S.'s history　　a 747's wingspan

The exceptions include singular nouns that already end in *s* or with the sound of *s*. For these, add the apostrophe only:

politics' importance	the United States' role
Descartes' *Discourse on Method*	Sophocles' plays
the audience' attention	for appearance' sake

(Some handbooks give different advice on this issue, recommending '+ *s* in all cases. Whatever you choose, be consistent.)

For plural common and proper nouns that end in *s*, form the possessive by adding an apostrophe only.

workers' votes　　the Smiths' house

Form the possessive of a singular compound noun by adding an apostrophe and *s* to the last word:

the attorney general's decision　　his sisters-in-law's business

SUMMING UP

Rather than summarize this detailed material, I offer just four bits of advice:

- Always signal the end of a grammatical sentence.
- Always observe the five reliable rules on pages 248–249.
- Always set off long interrupting elements with commas.
- Never put a single comma between a subject and its verb or between a verb and its object.

Beyond that, use your judgment: punctuate in ways that help your readers see the connections and separations that they have to see to make sense of your sentences. That means you must put yourself in the place of your reader, not easy to do, but something you must learn. On the other hand, write a clearly structured sentence in the first place, and your punctuation will take care of itself.

Exercise A.3

These passages lack their original punctuation. Slash marks indicate grammatical sentences. Punctuate them three times, once using the least punctuation possible, a second time using as much varied punctuation as you can, and then a third time as you think best. You might also analyze these passages for features of elegance, especially how their sentences begin and end. You can even improve them some.

1. Scientists and philosophers of science tend to speak as if "scientific language" were intrinsically precise as if those who use it must understand one another's meaning even if they disagree / but in fact scientific language is not as different from ordinary language as is commonly believed / it too is subject to imprecision and ambiguity and hence to imperfect understanding / moreover new theories or arguments are rarely if ever constructed by way of clear-cut steps of induction deduction and verification or falsification / neither are they defended rejected or accepted in so straightforward a manner / in practice scientists combine the rules of scientific methodology with a generous admixture of intuition aesthetics and philosophical commitment / the importance of what are sometimes called extra-rational or extra-logical components of thought in the *discovery* of a new principle or law is generally acknowledged / . . . but the role of these extra-logical components in persuasion and acceptance in making an argument convincing is less

frequently discussed partly because they are less visible / the ways in which the credibility or effectiveness of an argument depends on the realm of common experiences or extensive practice in communicating those experiences in a common language are hard to see precisely because such commonalities are taken for granted / only when we step out of such a "consensual domain" when we can stand out on the periphery of a community with a common language do we begin to become aware of the unarticulated premises mutual understandings and assumed practices of the group / even in those subjects that lend themselves most readily to quantification discourse depends heavily on conventions and interpretation, conventions that are acquired over years of practice and participation in a community.

—Evelyn Fox Keller, A Feeling for the Organism: The Life and Work of Barbara McClintock

2. In fact of course the notion of universal knowledge has always been an illusion / but it is an illusion fostered by the monistic view of the world in which a few great central truths determine in all its wonderful and amazing proliferation everything else that is true / we are not today tempted to search for these keys that unlock the whole of human knowledge and of man's experience / we know that we are ignorant / we are well taught it / and the more surely and deeply we know our own job the better able we are to appreciate the full measure of our pervasive ignorance / we know that these are inherent limits compounded no doubt and exaggerated by that sloth and that complacency without which we would not be men at all / but knowledge rests on knowledge / what is new is meaningful because it departs slightly from what was known before / this is a world of frontiers where even the liveliest of actors or observers will be absent most of the time from most of them / perhaps this sense was not so sharp in the village that village which we have learned a little about but probably do not understand too well the village of slow change and isolation and fixed culture which evokes our nostalgia even if not our full comprehension / perhaps in the villages men were not so lonely / perhaps they found in each other a fixed community a fixed and only slowly growing store of knowledge of a single world / even that we may doubt / for there seem to be always in the culture of such times and places vast domains of mystery if not unknowable then imperfectly known endless and open.

—J. Robert Oppenheimer, "The Sciences and Man's Community," from Science and the Common Understanding