

Punctuation and Sentence Structure Overview

Apostrophes: An apostrophe is a punctuation mark (‘) that appears as part of a word to show possession, to make a plural number, or to indicate the omission of one or more letters.

Three Uses of Apostrophes: In most cases an apostrophe is used to show possession. In such cases, one noun will always be followed by another noun, i.e., the one it possesses:

Ex: Gloria’s hat

Ex: Chase’s red car

1. To Show Possession: Singular and Plural Nouns

To make a singular noun that does not end in “s” possessive, add an apostrophe and an “s”

Ex: The cat’s master loves his cat.

To make a plural noun that does not end in “s” possessive, add an apostrophe and an “s”

Ex: The men’s restroom is closed for repairs.

Nouns Ending in “S”

To make a singular noun ending in “s” possessive, add an apostrophe and an “s”

Ex: John Keats’s death inspired Shelly’s famous elegy, “Adonais.”

If a singular noun ends with an “s” and contains an additional “s” sound elsewhere in the noun, add only the apostrophe to make the noun possessive.

Ex: Jesus’ birth in a stable symbolizes the close relationship between man and nature.

To make a plural noun ending in “s” possessive, add an apostrophe

Ex: The cat’s master loves his cats.

Compound Words or Group Words

To make compound words or groups of words possessive, add an apostrophe and an “s” to only the last word.

Ex: Singular: The chairman of the board’s decision was final.

Ex: Plural: The daughters-in-law’s dresses were ready for the wedding.

Separate and Joint Possessions

To make two nouns possessive that possess something separately, add an apostrophe and an “s” after each possessive noun.

Ex: Kari’s and Lynn’s bikes are in excellent condition. (They each have a bike.)

To make 2 nouns possessive that possess something jointly, add an apostrophe only to the second unit.

Ex: Cameron and Mitch’s car broke down last week. (They share a car.)

2. To Make Plural: Time and Money

To make units of time and money plural, use possession rules for singular and plural nouns.

Ex of Singular: A day’s wage, an hour’s wait, the dollar’s value

Ex of Plural: Two days’ wages, two hours’ wait, two dollars’ value (letter, number, and word plurals)

To make letters, numbers or words used as words plural, add an apostrophe and an “s”

Ex: Cathy had straight A’s.

Ex: Trey passed his classes with three 94’s and a 92.

Ex: Mindy completed the work with no if’s, and’s, or but’s.

3. To Indicate Omission: Contractions

To form contractions, use an apostrophe in place of the omitted letters.

Ex: He can’t find his wallet.

(The apostrophe takes the place of the omitted letters “n” and “o.”)

Ex: She isn’t here.

(The apostrophe takes the place of the omitted letter “o.”)

Rules for the Use of Commas

1. Use commas to separate parts of an address.

Ex: Margaret lives at 423 Long View, Jordan, Minnesota, and needs to be added to the database.

2. Use commas to separate numbers in a date.

Ex: Jamie's birthday is December 20, 1970.

***Do not use commas if the day precedes the month:**

Jamie's birthday is 20 December 1970.

3. Use commas to set off the name of the person spoken to:

Ex: "Julie, have you finished?" he asked.

4. Use commas to set off positive and negative replies:

Ex: "Yes, he did finish."

5. Use commas to separate questions from statements.

Ex: It is tedious, isn't it?

6. Use commas after long introductory phrases.

Ex: In the back of the little shed on my grandfather's farm, I found a valuable antique.

7. Use commas before coordinating conjunctions

(For, And, Nor, But, Or, Yet, and So = FANBOYS) joining independent clauses:

Ex: He saw the accident, but she did not.

8. Use commas to set off parenthetical expressions, particularly transitional expressions such as however, on the other hand, first, in fact, and for example:

Ex: It is, I believe, the right thing to do.

9. Use commas to set off contrasting expressions.

Ex: The dancers, not the instructors, let us down.

10. Use commas to set off modifiers that are not needed to identify the meaning of the term.

Ex: Jan Reagan, my niece, is fifteen years old. (The fact that she is my niece is not necessary to identify Jessica.)

Her only brother, Jack, sings. (Since she only has one brother, it is not necessary to name him.)

11. Use commas to separate two or more adjectives modifying the same noun.

Ex: The quiet, nervous crowd of students waited for their grades.

Do Not Use Commas To:

1. Do not set off modifiers that are essential because they identify the meaning of the term.

Ex: My son Jonathan is ten. (I have two sons; therefore, I have to name the one I mean.)

2. Do not separate compound (1) subjects, (2) verbs, (3) complements, (4) direct objects, or (5) objects of the preposition.

Ex: (1) **Wrong:** Bob, and Jack (2) **Wrong:** Lupe took the candy, and ate it. (3) **Wrong:** The apples were firm, and ripe. (4) **Wrong:** James saw Carla, and Tom. (5) **Wrong:** Give it to Juan, and me.

3. Do not separate (1) Subjects from verbs, (2) complements from verbs, or (3) objects from verbs.

Ex: (1) **Wrong:** I, want you to go. (2) **Wrong:** I am, sick. He is, my brother. (3) **Wrong:** I want, a cake for my birthday.

A comma splice is a type of run-on sentence where a comma is used to connect or “splice” together two complete thoughts (independent clauses).

A comma alone is not enough to connect two complete thoughts.

Four Common Ways to Revise Comma Splices:

1. Make two separate sentences from the independent clauses.
Ex: Comma Splice: It has been raining for days, the ground is muddy.
Revision: It has been raining for days. The ground is muddy.
2. Use a semicolon to connect the two independent clauses that are closely related.
Ex: Comma Splice: It has been raining for days, the ground is muddy.
Revision: It has been raining for days; the ground is muddy.
3. Use subordination. Make one of the thoughts, or independent clauses, dependent.
Ex: Comma Splice: It has been raining for days, the ground is muddy.
Revision: Because it has been raining for days, the ground is muddy.
Ex: Common dependent words: after, although, as, because, before, even, though, if, since, unless, until, when, and while.
4. Add a coordinating conjunction to connect the two independent clauses.
Ex: Comma Splice: It has been raining for days, the ground is all muddy.
Revision: It has been raining for days, so the ground is all muddy.

It is easy to remember coordinating conjunctions: Think **fanboys**: for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so.

More Information on Run-On Sentences

A run-on sentence is two complete thoughts (also called independent clauses) that run together without proper punctuation to connect them. The reader cannot tell where one thought ends and another begins.

Types of Run-Ons:

Balance Negative and Positive Clauses: stating what something is not while also stating what it is.

Run-on: Amy is not a nurse she is a doctor.

Revision: Amy is not a nurse; she is a doctor.

Illustration in the Second Clause: when an example is given in the second clause.

Run-on: She did well in college her grade point average was 3.6.

Revision: She did well in college. Her grade point average was 3.6.

Using “Then” in the Second Clause: “Then,” and similar words, indicate a passing of time

Run-on: Mary worked in Houston then she was transferred to Austin.

Revision: Mary worked in Houston, but then she was transferred to Austin.

Using a Conjunctive Adverb for a Transition: most commonly begin with: therefore, however, and moreover.

Run-on: He is committed to his work therefore he devotes almost all his time to patient care.

Revision: He is committed to his work; therefore, he devotes almost all his time to patient care.

Correcting Run-Ons

There are four simple ways to correct run-on sentences.

Separate Complete Thoughts: Make two separate sentences out of the two incomplete thoughts.

Run-on: My car broke down I was unable to attend my classes.

Revision: My car broke down. I was unable to attend my classes.

Use a Comma and Coordinating Conjunction: Separate two complete thoughts with a comma followed by the coordinating conjunctions – for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so (FANBOYS).

Run-on: We went to class no one was there.
Revision: We went to class, but no one was there.

Use a Semicolon: Connect the two complete thoughts (which could be two separate sentences) with a semicolon. Do not capitalize the first word after the semicolon unless it is a proper noun.

Run-on: When I got to school there was no place to park I ended up parking at the bookstore.
Revision: When I got to school, there was no place to park; I ended up parking at the bookstore.

Use Subordination: Make one of the thoughts (independent clauses) dependent. Common dependent words are after, although, as, because, before, even, though, if, since, unless, until, when, and while.

Run-on: It is raining today I need my umbrella.
Revision: Because it is raining today, I need my umbrella.

Sentence Fragments

Every sentence must have three components: a subjects, a verb, and a complete thought.
A sentence fragment occurs when one of these elements is missing.

Four Common Types of Fragments:

Dependent Clause Fragment: cannot be punctuated to stand alone. It must be connected to a complete thought.

Fragment: After Gloria brushed the dog.

Correct: After Gloria brushed the dog, she washed him with the garden hose.

While the fragment contains a subject and verb, it also contains a dependent word, so it needs to be connected to a complete sentence that finishes that thought.

-ing Fragment: When a word that ends in “-ing” begins a group of words, it often makes a sentence fragment.

Fragment: Trying to see craters on the moon.

Correct: The boys were trying to see craters on the moon.

The fragment does not contain the subject or verb – adding “the boys” makes a complete thought.

“To” Fragment: When “to” begins a group of words, a fragment often occurs.

Fragment: To do his part in helping the environment.

Correct: To do his part in helping the environment, Jack began recycling.

The fragment does not identify a subject –“Jack” is the subject and “began” is the verb that creates a complete thought,

Added-Detail Fragment: usually begin with transitions. Examples of transitions include like, for example, such as, and especially. These transitions should always follow a complete sentence.

Fragment: Such as fried Spanish gourd with wood fungus.

Correct: Jane liked exotic dishes, such as fried Spanish gourd with wood fungus.

The addition of “Jane liked” completes the requirements for a subject and a verb.