



Punctuation Marks of Clarity and Emphasis: The Comma and the Dash

Use a Comma (,) to:

- Separate independent clauses, clauses that could be complete sentences, connected by *and*, *but*, or *for* (what are also called coordinating conjunctions).
e.g., We went to the movies, and then we drove downtown for a fancy dinner.
- Enclose explanatory information, such as definitions or appositives (nouns or noun phrases that describe or explain the words they follow).
e.g., His texts, particularly those written for school, often included epigraphs, brief quotations appearing at the opening of a document.
- Set off parenthetical expressions or exclamations.
e.g., She, of course, arrived first; Ah, I see; Well, if I were you.
- Precede nonrestrictive modifiers, phrases that add information to but do not restrict the meaning of words they modify. They usually begin with *which*.
e.g., He designated the play as “incandescent,” which was his usual adjective of choice for all things artistic.
- Separate items in a list or series.
e.g., She ordered milk, eggs, butter, and cheese.
- Follow a long prepositional phrase or opening clause in a sentence.
e.g., Waiting for the sun to come up, she sat quietly on the beach.
- Introduce quotations.
e.g., The speaker asserted, “Our economic policies must change!”
- Coincide with conventions for dates, numbers, addresses, and titles.
e.g., July, 14, 1989; 12,482; Roosevelt High School, Columbus, Ohio; Elizabeth Stephens, Ph.D.

Use a dash (—) to

- Draw attention to the closing portion of a sentence (but not another complete sentence).
e.g., Roger would attend the party—assuming he wasn’t grounded for failing his history exam.
- Set off explanatory or illustrative information that you want to emphasize (dashes indicate more emphasis than commas).
e.g., The NASA program—now commonly regarded as unnecessary—received a large budget increase.
- Enclose interrupting elements or expressions that you want to emphasize.
e.g., Rebecca’s contribution—as always—was far more complicated than necessary.
- Enclose lists that contain commas.
e.g., What he wanted—money, fame, and power—was hard to attain.