

Commas, Semicolons, and Colons – But Mostly Commas

A **comma** is a delicate kink in time, a pause within a sentence, a chance to catch your breath (Karen Elizabeth Gordon in *The New Well-Tempered Sentence*, p. 21).

Not all of us catch our breaths at the same time, however, so inserting commas whenever you feel inclined to pause may not always be accurate. Pay attention to Gordon's italicized sentences below for both titillating and innocent sentences that will help **the comma guidelines** stick!

Items in a Series

--*The rest of the story can be figured out by gossip, slander, and false report.*

--*He is walking up walls, crawling sideways, and turning somersaults as he approaches the queen.*

Lengthy introductory material or short introductory material of significant

--*However, Bertrand's instincts concerning the medicinal uses of chrysanthemums had never failed us yet.*

--*After these inclement outbursts, he sends tulips, charwomen, and folding chairs.*

--*As far as I'm concerned, all phone calls are obscene.*

Nonessential information and/or words that interrupt the flow of thought

--*Raymond, who usually wears overalls, showed up in a green kimono.*

--*The green kimono, which normally fell to his knees, flapped flagrantly in the stirring heat.*

--*The final act of the play, which was unevenly hilarious, took place on a drifting barge.*

NOTE: To figure out whether or not information is essential, remove the information from the sentence and observe the effect. Nonessential information can be lifted from a sentence without significantly changing its meaning.

Nonessential closing material:

--*We never arrived, which upset a bunch of excitable, expectant aunts and uncles.*

--*He set out heartbrokenly for the receding border, there being no safety to count on in his homeland.*

Two or more independent clauses (complete sentences) joined by the following coordinating conjunctions--and, but, or, nor, for, so, and yet.

--*The suspect removed his grimy white gloves, but another pair lurked beneath.*

--*The left-handed members of the board were banging their soup spoons, and the agenda was engulfed by their roars.*

--*I haven't done it yet, so I don't think I could do it again.*

The name of a person spoken to in direct address:

- Come here, Nicholas, and hold my mouth shut with your big, spring-loaded hands.
- We'll have more than rhetorical and ontological questions, young lady, when we get to your whereabouts last night.

Two adjectives that modify the same noun and can be inserted between them without changing the meaning:

- She greeted him with open, entrenching arms
- He wanted to eat her peachy, creamy complexion with his souvenir spoon from Yellowstone Park.

Elements within addresses:

- Nimbo Moostracht, Vice President, Eurobanque, 28 Rue Des Ecouffles, 75004, Paris, France.
- I flew my horse from Morski, Louvelandia, to Southpaw, Califonica, in five nights of shooting stars.

Dates that include the day of the month next to the year:

- I was born on March 17, 1947, on a cold bed of river sand.
- She came out of the forest on May 7, 1956, to take her place among her fellow femmes fatales.

Direct quotations:

- "I've been wondering, Jasmine," said Jimmy shyly, "if you'd care to sit out this tango in my lap."
- As he usually did when entering a strange room or arrangement, he thought fondly and desperately of his motto, "Be cool," which never did him any good.

The **semicolon** is rarely called for. Pay close attention to its uses.

Independent clauses (complete sentences) not linked by a coordinating conjunction:

- Oh, I often click my tongue; it's my only revenge.
- Nadia was halted and removed in a squad car; they charged her with lurking with intent to loiter, and with wearing someone else's heart up her sleeve.
- The tower was too high; the dungeon was too low.

Phrases in a series, or elements in a series that include internal commas:

- Attending the kickoff of the global warming conference were a paranormal guttersnipe from Trinity College; seven Volga boatmen singing "The Song of the Volga Boatmen"; an extraterrestrial water sprite and his girlfriend from Tulsa, Oklahoma; a hypochondriac with his icepacks and hot water bottle; and a ferry-boater, in a tux, from the River Styx.

Clauses in a complex, compound sentence:

- Jacob, who was sitting on the balcony watching her out of the corner of his steel-gray eye, lunged forward to touch her as she passed by; but someone grabbed a fistful of his collar from behind and said, "Lay off my woman, you jerk."

The **colon** creates expectation in a sentence: something significant always follows it.

An explanatory phrase that follows a complete sentence:

--*I've led a sheltered life: I've gone from one shelter to another.*

--*Pain stood in the way like a sheet of glass: you could walk through it, but not without a certain noise.*

An appositive, a word or phrase that identifies the noun or pronoun that precedes it:

--*Besides sniffing cigars and snapping suspenders, there was one sure thing to be on the tycoon's agenda: money.*

A series or list when it follows a complete sentence:

--*Such are the blessings of which I am fully aware: a mother with wild young hormones; a pasture with satyrs and centaurs; a view of the roving heavens from my trundle bed.*

--*These are the reasons for his absenteeism: a fear of furniture; an aversion to numbers and dollar signs; a snakebite on his chin.*

Chapter and verse in biblical references:

--*Noah's long, wet story begins in Genesis 5:28.*

Work Quoted:

Gordon, Karen Elizabeth. *The New Well-Tempered Sentence*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1993. Print.