

Learning Commons: Writing Centre/Writing FAQs

Grammar and Mechanics

When do you use a semi-colon to separate two independent clauses instead of a colon?

You use a semi-colon to separate two independent clauses when they are closely related in meaning. For example: My vacation starts next week; I will be visiting Istanbul for the first time. You use a colon to separate two independent clauses when the second explains or summarizes the first. For example: The difficulty in international travel is clear: expensive airfare makes it inaccessible to many people. Remember that both semi-colons and colons can be used in place of periods. If you could not replace a semi-colon or colon with a period, it is not the correct choice for punctuation.

What is a comma splice? How can I correct one?

A comma splice error occurs when you use a comma to separate two independent clauses. For example: Michel is learning to kayak, he is spending all of his free time on the water. This type of error can be corrected in several ways. First, you could add a coordinating conjunction after the comma. For example: Michel is learning to kayak, so he is spending all of his free time on the water. Second, you could replace the comma with a semi-colon. For example: Michel is learning to kayak; he is spending all of his free time on the water. Third, you could use a conjunctive adverb or transitional expression to join the two independent clauses. For example: Michel is learning to kayak, hence he is spending all of his free time on the water. Fourth, you could incorporate a subordinating conjunction into the sentence. For example: Because Michel is learning to kayak, he is spending all of his free time on the water. If none of these options are appealing, remember that you can always rewrite the sentence completely.

What does it mean when my instructor tells me that my sentence is not grammatically parallel?

This means that two or more related items in your sentence are not in the same grammatical form. Parallelism is important because it creates rhythm in our writing, and facilitates comparisons or contrasts. Example: My brother Mike is handsome, intelligent, and has wealth. Revised: My brother Mike is handsome, intelligent, and wealthy.

What is a misplaced modifier?

A “modifier” is a word or phrase that is not grammatically necessary for a sentence, but adds information by modifying/adding specificity to a necessary part of the sentence. A misplaced modifier means that the modifier in the sentence is too far away from the word it modifies, leading to confusion. Example: The teacher gave us advice about studying in his office. [Was the teacher just giving advice about studying in general, or about where to study in particular?]

What is a dangling modifier?

A dangling modifier occurs when the modifier is not clearly linked to the subject in the main clause of the sentence. The modifier is often left "dangling" at the beginning of the sentence. Example: Sprinting after the taxi, my head began to ache. [Was your head sprinting after the taxi?]

When I use quotation marks in a sentence, does my punctuation go inside or outside the quotation marks?

A general rule to follow is to put your punctuation inside the quotation marks if you are not using a citation. Put them outside the quotes and after the in-text parenthetical reference if, indeed, you are citing the source.

What is a sentence fragment?

A sentence needs to have a subject, verb, and complete thought in order to be complete. A sentence fragment is a piece of a sentence punctuated as if it were a complete sentence; It is literally a "fragment" of a sentence, and will be missing either a subject, verb, or complete thought. Example: He was alone. Standing at the entrance to the shop. In this example, note that the first three words actually do form a complete sentence. This sentence is very short, but it contains the three required elements. The italicized portion, however, is a fragment. There are several ways to revise a fragment, the most common of which is joining it to a neighbouring sentence that will provide the missing piece.

Do I capitalize the first word after a colon?

Generally, no. Even if the first word after a colon begins a stand-alone statement, the current trend is away from capitalization. Example: It was a splendid night: the sky was clear except for a few picturesque clouds, the moon was full, and even a few stars shone through.

When do I use a, an, and the?

A, an, and the are parts of speech called "articles" that give readers a clue as to how specific an item being discussed is. "The" is the most specific article, showing readers that whatever is being referenced is one of a kind. For example, if you wanted to discuss a specific symphony by Bach, you would refer to it as "the symphony" using an article. If you wanted to discuss any symphony by Bach, you would use "a symphony". "An" has the same use as "a", but is used with nouns that begin with vowels. For example, you can have an apple or an orange, but you would have a banana or a blueberry. Alternately, you could have the (specific) watermelon sitting on top of that crate over there.

What is a preposition? How do I choose which preposition to use?

Prepositions can be tricky for writers, no matter how familiar they are with writing in English. A preposition is a part of speech that indicates the relationship between a noun and other elements of a sentence. The preposition might indicate a relationship in terms of space, time, or distance. Unfortunately, there are no specific rules that you can memorize for using or choosing prepositions, but you can determine which one would be appropriate to use based on the relationships the words determine. The best way to become comfortable with choosing and using prepositions is by paying close attention to preposition use in reading. You can easily find lists of prepositions in many dictionaries or by searching online. If you are concerned about preposition use, keeping a list of these handy and noting how they are used in what you read will be very helpful.

What are coordinating and subordinating conjunctions?

A coordinating conjunction joins two or more ideas that are of equal importance within a sentence. The coordinating conjunctions are easy to remember using the acronym FANBOYS: for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so. When choosing which of these conjunctions to use, be sure that you have chosen the one that best show the relationship between the ideas. For example: "Zohra is studying law and Spanish, but she is also interested in biology." A subordinating conjunction joins ideas that are not equal in terms of importance. If you are writing a sentence where one idea depends on another in order for the sentence to make sense, you would use a subordinating conjunction. Common coordinating conjunctions include: as, because, although, after, so that. For example, "Because Heidi likes hiking, Sharon suggested they visit Squamish over the weekend."

How do I use commas correctly? When do I use semicolons?

Comma and semicolon use is frustrating, partly because it often isn't taught clearly and partly because there are so many rules governing it. One of the most common misconception about comma use is "commas go anywhere you would pause when talking". Even if this were true, it would lead to confusion; thankfully, there are some simple rules you can memorize that will help you use commas correctly any time you write. Although there are some additional, more specific rules, they tend to fall under one of these main categories. Semicolons should only be used in two situations: they are used to join two independent clauses and to separate lists of lists. Please see the section on semicolons for more details.

Eight Basic Comma Rules

1. Commas should be used to separate independent clauses that are joined by coordinating conjunctions (FANBOYS – for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so).

For example: Shira liked to sleep in, but she couldn't do that any more because of her new job. She liked her job very much, so she didn't mind setting an alarm.

2. Commas should be used after introductory material unless a dependent clause follows the main clause, except in cases of extreme contrast.

For example: Julian wasn't going to the party because he didn't drink. (No comma due to the dependent clause)

I was still exhausted, although I had slept thirteen hours straight. (Comma used because of contrast)

Last week, I talked to the immigration lawyer. (Introductory material)

3. Commas should be used to set off non-essential information from the rest of the sentence. Non-essential information is anything within a sentence that isn't necessary for it to make sense or be grammatically correct.

For example: Sadaf, who is a biology major, can't decide between graduate school and working as a lab assistant. Graduate school is expensive, however, attending would provide better opportunities for the future.

4. Commas should be used to set off three or more words, phrases, or clauses in a series.

For example: Vancouver has beautiful mountains, forests, and ocean.

5. Commas should be used near the end of a sentence to indicate a contrast or pause/shift:

Spiders are arachnids, not insects.

Mr. Barrett went to Woodstock, didn't he?

6. Commas should be used to set off free modifiers (phrases near the end of the sentence that refer back to the beginning or middle).

For example: April ran back to her car, slipping on the ice.

8. Commas should be used where necessary to prevent confusion or misreading.

For example: To George, Harrison had been an idol. (As opposed to "To George Harrison had been an idol." That is unclear, as it implies that the musician George Harrison was an idol to someone not named in the sentence, or that

someone not named had been an idol to George Harrison.)

Citation

What is an in-text or parenthetical citation, and how do I use one?

In-text and parenthetical citations are the same thing: they are the “mini” citations used with MLA and APA style within the body of the paper to show where the information that has been quoted or paraphrased originated. The exact information included in an in-text citation differs depending on which citation style you use. Generally, the in-text citation will include the author’s last name or, if no author is listed, an appropriate substitute (review the guidelines for the style you are using to see what these substitutes are and how to use them) and either the page number where the information you are using was found or the year of publication for the source. These citations are enclosed in parentheses and placed after the information that came from the source. In-text citations should be used any and every time source material has been incorporated into your paper. This means that they go with direct quotes, paraphrases, and summaries, and they are absolutely required in all of these situations. Please review the research and citation resources that are available to you, and then come to the Writing Centre or talk to your instructor if you have questions or concerns about using and citing sources.

If I'm using sources in my essay, and I find an interesting quote by John Smith in a book by Nancy Woo, who do I cite as my source? Should I cite Smith or Woo? I am using the MLA style of documentation.

When quoting an indirect source like this, either indicate in your sentence that the quote is found in Woo or use "qtd. in" at the beginning of your parenthetical citation to indicate that you're relating Smith's words as he is quoted in Woo.

When do I use "Works Cited" instead of "References" or "Bibliography" for my documentation page?

"Works Cited" is the title given to the page that contains all the cited sources when using MLA Style. "References" is the term used by many different documentation systems, including the APA system, as the heading for the list of sources cited. "Bibliography" is the broadest of the three terms, referring to a general list of information about sources. Often, more advanced research-based projects will require both a references/works cited page and a bibliography; the references/works cited page will only include sources that were referenced in the body of the paper and the bibliography will include all sources that you reviewed during the research process.

What is an annotated bibliography?

An annotated bibliography is a list of the sources you used for research with commentary on each source. This commentary is placed beneath the full citation and usually deals with the source’s usefulness in your research, how you plan to use it, how it fits into the body of research done on your topic, and so on. Sometimes, you may be asked to produce an annotated bibliography that simply includes summaries of your sources, so if you are required to create one, be sure you know what your instructor wants you to include in the annotations.

Style

Do I really need an engaging title?

Having an engaging (thought provoking) title isn't mandatory in essay writing, but it certainly helps to get the reader's attention. Remember that a title can be informative, it can reveal the writers' attitude toward the subject, and it can be used to introduce humour and/or irony.

What is point of view?

“Point of view” can refer to a couple of things – it can either mean the position you are taking on the topic or the way you use phrasing and pronouns in a piece of writing. Generally, confusion arises surrounding the second type of “point of view”, so that is what we will focus on here. There are three points of view: first person, second person, and third person. First person point of view uses pronouns like “I” and “we”, and the writer speaks from his or her own experience and opinion. For example: I believe that it is important to protect our oceans. The writer is using “I” and is sharing a personal viewpoint. Second person point of view uses the pronoun “you” and addresses the reader directly; this point of view has been used throughout these resources. Another example: You may not understand how vital it is to begin protecting our oceans now, but think about a future without them. Third person point of view uses pronouns like “he”, “she”, “one”, and “it”. For example: One needs to see the value of the world’s oceans before the importance of protecting them is clear. Third person point of view will be required or strongly encouraged for almost all of the writing you will do in an academic or professional setting. First person should be avoided unless it is specifically requested or you are writing personal correspondence. Second person point of view should be generally avoided for most types of projects, but it is the standard for things like instructions or anything else where a writer needs to walk a reader through the steps in a process. Second person should only be used when requested or necessary for clear communication. When writing, be sure that you keep your point of view consistent throughout an essay.

What is reflexive language and how can I avoid it?

When reading, have you ever run across a statement such as, “This essay will be about the relationship between drought conditions in North America and soybean prices.”? If so, you’ve seen self-reflexive language. This simply refers to the practice of a sentence or portion of the essay referring back to itself. It should be avoided because it is repetitive and is stylistically a poorer choice than simply introducing the idea. The example above could be revised as, “Droughts in North America affect soybean prices globally because [here you would include the specific main idea of the essay].” Common self-reflexive phrases include “I will tell you...”, “This essay will be about...”, “In the next several pages we will...”, and “This essay will develop the idea that...”.

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