



GRAMMAR 101

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LESSON #1

Punctuation I

Introduction

Welcome to Grammar 101, or what I affectionately have subtitled “Breezing through Grammar: A Quick Review for Editors and Proofreaders.” Grammar is one of the foundations of writing and editing, along with style, structure, organization, and approach. To be an effective editor or proofreader, a thorough knowledge of grammar is a must. This course is designed to help you achieve that with a review of the rules and mechanics of grammar.

The best place to start is with punctuation, which is “the act, practice, or system of inserting various standardized marks or signs in written or printed matter in order to clarify the meaning and separate structural units” (*Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary*, 11th edition). Most people give little thought to punctuation. Some believe these small marks serve little purpose other than to clutter the page. Some authors have dared to write *and publish* their works sans punctuation. For example:

- [James Joyce’s Episode 18 of Ulysses](#) is a stream of consciousness in eight run-on sentences of 24,000+ words;
- [E.E. Cummings](#) abandoned the traditional concepts of rhythm and punctuation;
- William Faulkner also used the [stream of consciousness](#) in *The Sound and the Fury*, dispensing with grammar, spelling, and punctuation.

Certainly, these authors were professionals, knew their craft, and guaranteed sales for their publishers. They could get away with breaking the basic rules of grammar and writing. But 99.9 percent of experienced authors and 100 percent of new authors shouldn’t attempt to do so. Editor Lynne Truss wrote *Eats, Shoots & Leaves* as a response to the declining grammatical use in both the United Kingdom and the United States.

Most people don’t think much about punctuation. Of course, editors must. We have it for a purpose: to avoid ambiguity, to assure clarity, and to prevent grave misunderstandings. A misplaced comma in a sales contract cost Lockheed Martin Corp. \$70 million in 1999, according to *CNN Money*. In 2018, Oakhurst Dairy in Portland, Maine, settled a \$5 million lawsuit all because of a missing comma in legislation regarding overtime pay.

I'll say it again. Editors and proofreaders must know, or have the resources to research, all punctuation—which mark to use and why. That's what this lesson and the next in this course will review.

I once edited a manuscript for a client and added quite a few commas along the way. She questioned me in several instances, and I gladly explained to her why the sentence needed a comma and demonstrated how a comma, or a missing one, changes the meaning of the sentence. A couple of months later I received a package in the mail from her. Inside was a card that said, "I thought of you when I saw this in a gift shop and had to get it for you." I unwrapped the inner packing protecting a plaque that read:

LET'S EAT GRANDMA
LET'S EAT, GRANDMA
COMMAS SAVE LIVES

No doubt all grandmothers everywhere appreciate this comma!

Punctuation marks have a purpose. Professional editors and proofreaders must know their purposes—when to use them and when to lose them.

Because of the number of punctuation marks and their rules, we are going to cover only the thorny situations of problematic marks. We will address punctuation according to the order *CMOS* (*The Chicago Manual of Style*, 17th edition) discusses them. You will need to study the *CMOS* sections I mention to complete your study of punctuation.

When I reference a section in *CMOS*, please stop and read it.

Once you've mastered punctuation, you will never read a book, an article, or even a billboard without mentally editing the copy!

Period (*CMOS* 6.12–15)

We don't need much instruction on periods, for I'm confident you know that a period is used at the end of declarative and some imperative sentences:

I want to ride my bike.
Shut the door.

When an entire sentence is enclosed within parentheses and brackets, the period goes inside the closing mark.

I want to ride my bike. (Walking is so boring.)

When the phrase or even a complete sentence within parentheses is included within another sentence, the period goes outside the closing parenthesis.

I want to ride my bike (raining or not).

A period is used with many abbreviations, although the trend is moving away from using it in some instances. Using or omitting periods can be style decisions. Whatever the choice, applying the period consistently throughout the manuscript is vital.

Period:	etc.	Ms.	Inc.	Dr.
No Period:	NASA	DOJ	U of M	PhD
Style Choice:	p.m.	P.M.	PM	

Comma (CMOS 6.19–21)

The comma indicates the smallest mark of separation and the shortest pause within a sentence. It can also take the place of a word.

Let's start with the *serial comma*, then move on to other areas. In fiction and nonfiction, standard practice is to use the serial (Oxford) comma when you have three or more elements in a series. Other fields (e.g., journalism) do not use the serial comma. This course focuses on general fiction and nonfiction; therefore, we will use serial commas. Following are a couple of examples of serial commas:

I am going to the store to buy apples, oranges, and peanut butter.
Janet cleaned the kitchen, I washed the windows, and Jay mowed the lawn.

Abbreviations such as *i.e.*, *e.g.*, *et al.*, *etc.*, take a comma following the period unless the abbreviation ends the sentence.

John, Mary, Bob, et al., are riding in the bus.
Please make sure you trim all the trees: apple, cherry, plum, etc.

Commas and Clauses (CMOS 6.22–28)

A clause is a group of words that include a subject and predicate (verb). A sentence is a clause, one of four kinds: independent, dependent, relative (adjective), and noun. This paragraph contains three independent sentences.

Do you recall the terms *independent clause* and *dependent clause* from your school days? An independent clause contains a subject and a verb. It expresses a complete thought and can stand alone as a sentence. A dependent clause also has a subject and verb but does not express a complete thought and cannot stand alone. It must be joined to an independent clause. Let's quickly review these clauses. One of these requires a comma, while the other doesn't. When independent clauses are joined by a conjunction (*and*, *or*, *but*, etc.), a comma precedes the conjunction.

John will clean the garage, and I will paint the storage shed.
↑ independent clause ↑ independent clause

A dependent clause that precedes an independent clause is set off by a comma.

If you fail to write down your goals, you will likely never know when you get off track.
↑ dependent clause ↑ independent clause

If the dependent clause follows the main (independent) clause, it doesn't take a comma if it is restrictive (necessary) to the meaning of the main clause. If the dependent clause is nonrestrictive (not necessary), it should be set off with a comma.

Restrictive: You will likely never know when you get off track if you fail to write down your goals.
↑ independent clause ↑ dependent clause

Nonrestrictive: I couldn't find the supervisor, who likes to take several breaks.
↑ independent clause ↑ dependent clause

A *relative clause* is a type of dependent clause. It has a subject and a verb but can't stand alone. It's sometimes called an adjective clause because it functions as an adjective and answers the questions which one? how many? what kind? They can be either *restrictive* or *nonrestrictive*. A restrictive relative clause provides necessary information for the sentence, is usually introduced by *that* or a form of *who* (*whom*, *whose*), and never uses a comma.

My sister who went to college is the head of the family business.
↑ restrictive (necessary information)

The house that is blue belongs to me.
↑ restrictive (necessary information)

The writer of the first sentence wants us to understand that of all the sisters, only the one who went to college heads the family business. The second sentence is similar in that we understand there are several houses, but the writer's house is the blue one.

A nonrestrictive relative clause is not necessary to understanding the sentence (it could be left out without changing the meaning) and is set off by commas. It can be introduced by *which* (or a form of *who*). The information within the commas is like a parenthetical statement.

The tree, which is blocking my view, has to be removed.
↑ nonrestrictive (not necessary)

The fireman, who is in the tree, is after a scared cat.
↑ nonrestrictive (not necessary)

As you can tell, these nonrestrictive clauses could be removed without changing the meaning of the sentence. They give extra but unnecessary information.

Appositives are nouns that rename or explain the noun before it. They can also be nonrestrictive (not necessary) or restrictive (necessary).

My sister, Mary, is coming for a visit.
My sister Mary is coming for a visit.

In the first example, Mary is nonrestrictive. The commas indicate that the speaker or writer has only one sister and her name is Mary. The second example indicates that the speaker or writer has more than one sister but only Mary is coming for a visit. Whenever you see “my husband, [name],” or “my mother, [name],” the name (the appositive) is set apart by commas. A person has only one wife, one husband, one mother, one father; therefore, their names are not necessary and thus nonrestrictive.

Commas and Coordinate Adjectives (CMOS 6.36–37)

Coordinate adjectives are a series of adjectives that modify (describe) the same noun. You can identify them from noncoordinate adjectives if you can separate the adjectives with “and” without losing the sense of the sentence.

Noncoordinate adjectives denote attributes and a comma does not separate them. In fact, these adjectives have a hierarchy:

- Quantity or number
- Quality or opinion
- Size
- Shape
- Age
- Color
- Proper adjective (often nationality, another place of origin, or material)
- Purpose or qualifier

You cannot insert “and” between noncoordinate adjectives and still make sense.

Coordinate: The bus ride was a long, exhausting trip. (You could say long and exhausting.)

Noncoordinate: My goal is to buy a spacious tropical island. (It doesn’t make sense to say a spacious and tropical island. *Spacious* is “size” and *tropical* is “qualifier.”)

Commas and Phrases (CMOS 6.29–32)

A *participial phrase* looks like a verb, but it functions as an adjective, so it modifies a noun. A comma separates the participial phrase from the rest of the sentence. The noun must follow the phrase or else you end up with a dangling participle (sometimes called a dangling modifier—more on these in Lesson 6). If the phrase comes within the sentence, it is separated by commas.

Caring about her appearance, Joan took her time dressing and applying her makeup.

↑ participial phrase, describes Joan

The dogs, having been released from their leashes, chased each other around the park.
↑ participial phrase, describes dogs

Commas and Introductory Words (CMOS 6.33–35)

Introductory words and phrases are almost always set off from the sentence with a comma. A comma is not necessary after a short two- or three-word phrase that acts as an adverb (answers the questions how, where, when, how much, how often).

On Wednesday I started my Pilates class.
The day before my sister left, I wrecked the car.

Not phrases (6.45) set off an antithetical clause following the main clause on which it depends. Use commas when the *not* phrase is inserted for clarification.

The purpose of the preface is to introduce the theme, not to present all the facts of the treatise. ↑ *not* phrase

We are taking my car, not John's, to town.
↑ *not* phrase

You are to turn left, not right.
↑ *not* phrase

Commas, Correlatives, and Extras (CMOS 6.46–52)

Common comma problems occur with correlative conjunctions: “not . . . but,” “not only . . . but also,” and “not” phrases and clauses. If a comma is used for emphasis, be sure to use a comma before the *not only* phrase as well as the *but also* phrase. In other words, if you determine a comma is needed, you'll need to use two.

Wrong: I went to college in Canada not only to earn my diploma, but also to live in a different culture.

Correct: I went to college in Canada not only to earn my diploma but also to live in a different culture.

Correct: I went to college in Canada, not only to earn my diploma, but also to live in a different culture.

Semicolon (CMOS 6.56–60)

The semicolon separates major elements of the sentence. A semicolon is a stronger break than a comma but lesser than a period. It joins independent clauses when the conjunction is omitted.

I ordered my schoolbooks yesterday; they should arrive in a week.

A semicolon separates independent clauses joined by conjunctive adverbs (*however, therefore, etc.*). Note that a comma follows the conjunctive adverb.

I ordered my schoolbooks yesterday; however, they won't arrive for another week.
I ordered my schoolbooks yesterday; therefore, I won't have them for my first class.

A semicolon is used in a complex series, especially if any phrases include commas.

My itinerary includes stops at Dublin, Ireland; Edinburgh, Scotland; and London, England.
The builders will frame the garage; the electrician will run all the wiring and replace the electrical box; and my crew will blow in insulation, put up drywall, and mud and tape the joints.

Semicolons and colons are placed outside closing quotation marks.

Colon (CMOS 6.61–67)

A colon introduces, adds to, or explains something in a sentence.

Only one item remains on my to-do list: rest.
Four students comprise the top 10 percent: Mary, John, Bob, and Paige.

A colon is used after *as follows* or *the following* when introducing a list.

The following students report to the principal's office:
Meagan
Josh
Mark

A colon is used following other introductory statements that are complete sentences.

Wrong: My pets' names are:
Hogan
Sabrina
Patches

Correct: I have three pets:
Hogan
Sabrina
Patches

A colon is used in formal salutations.

The Honorable Abraham Lincoln:

A colon is used to introduce a speaker, such as in a play, and replaces a comma in introducing a quotation.

Question Mark (CMOS 6.68–70)

Using a question mark correctly seems pretty simple and straightforward, but maybe there are a few things you don't know about this impressive mark.

Obviously, a question mark indicates a direct question.

Where are you going?

The new *Star Trek* movie—are you going to see it?—starts Friday.

Pay close attention to 6.70. A question mark stays with the portion of the sentence that is asking the question. (This applies to exclamation points too.) This situation often trips up writers. As an editor, you must know how to treat this structure.

Did you say, “I’m having a baby”?

Who said, “Will you go with me?”

When you have a question within a question, as in the above sentence, do not use two question marks. Just put the one question mark before the closing quotation mark.

Exclamation Point (CMOS 6.71–74)

An exclamation point shows great surprise or strong emotion.

I won the lottery!

Using an exclamation point instead of a question mark emphasizes the emotion rather than the question.

How could you believe such a lie!

Place the exclamation point within quotation marks if it is part of the quoted material. Use exclamation points sparingly. Using them too often decreases their impact and becomes annoying to the reader.

Summary

Every punctuation mark has a purpose, and as an editor or proofreader, you must know that purpose and how to correctly apply all marks of punctuation.

You studied several sections in *CMOS*, and we covered the most problematic uses of punctuation:

- period
- comma
- semicolon
- colon
- question mark
- exclamation point

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LESSON #1 ASSIGNMENTS

Access Lesson 1 Assignments file.