

Proper punctuation is essential to clear writing. Below is a list of common punctuation marks and their appropriate usage in academic writing. This is a guide, not an exhaustive list of every rule. The Writing Lab consultants are happy to answer any questions!

### The Simple Sentence: The Base for all Creative Punctuation.

Format:           Independent Clause [.]

Example:       Iliff students love to write papers.

Clause:	A group of words that contains a subject and a verb.
Independent Clause:	A clause that forms a complete thought.
Dependent Clause:	A clause that does not form a complete thought. It is often preceded by a subordinating conjunction (see below).

### Use a Comma...

1. ...to separate two independent clauses with a coordinating conjunction.

Format:           **Independent clause 1** [,] *coordinating conjunction* independent clause 2 [.]

Examples:       **Iliff students love to write papers**, *and* they enjoy visiting the Writing Lab.

**The writing process can be fun**, *but* it requires hard work.

Coordinating Conjunction: A word that joins clauses, phrases, or words together.

Coordinating conjunctions include: and, but, for, or, nor, so, yet.

2. ...after dependent clauses, phrases, or words.

Format:           **Subordinating conjunction** *dependent clause* [,] independent clause [.]

Example:       [Dependent Clause] **Because** *Iliff students love to write excellent papers*, they visit the Writing Lab for advice.

However, the reverse is not true. Do not separate a sentence that begins with an independent clause followed by a dependent clause with a comma.

Incorrect:       She did not go to the movie, because her paper is due tomorrow.

Correct:        Because her paper is due tomorrow, she did not go to the movie.

Correct:        She did not go to the movie because her paper is due tomorrow.

[Dependent Phrase] *When in doubt*, visit the Writing Lab.

[Dependent word] *Consequently*, the student had a fun evening.

Phrase: A group of words that does not contain a subject or verb.

Common subordinating conjunctions include: after, although, as, as if, as much as, as soon as, because, before, if, in order that, since, unless, until, while, when, whenever.

Attached to an independent clause, a subordinating conjunction creates a dependent clause (see box 1).

3. ...in a sentence with a non-essential clause, phrase, or word.

Format:       **First part of an independent clause** [,] *non-essential clause or phrase* [,] **rest of the independent clause** [.]

Example:       [Non-essential phrase] **Some students**, *on the other hand*, **dislike writing papers**.

[Non-essential word] **Iliff students**, *however*, **write well**.

Non-essential Clause, Phrase, or Word: A clause, phrase, or word that is not necessary to the meaning of the sentence.

To test whether or not the non-essential clause, phrase, or word is really non-essential, ask yourself:

- ◇ Does the sentence still make sense without the clause, phrase, or word?
- ◇ Does the clause, phrase, or word interrupt the flow of the original sentence?

If the answer is yes to either of these questions, then set off the non-essential clause or phrase with commas.

### Do Not Use a Comma...

1. ...in a sentence with an essential clause or phrase.

Format:       **First part of independent clause** *essential clause or phrase* rest of independent clause [.]

Examples:       **Many Iliff students** *who are concerned about writing well* have visited the Writing Lab.

**The students** *who write papers at Iliff* are on the quarter system.

Essential Clause, Phrase, or Word: A clause, phrase, or word that is essential to the meaning of the sentence.

Remember: Clauses beginning with *that* are always essential!

Example: She knew that the Writing Lab was open yesterday.

2. ... to separate the subject from the verb!

Incorrect: The students of Iliff, are writing final papers.

Correct: The students of Iliff are writing final papers.

Incorrect: The student opened her laptop, and began to type.

Correct: The student opened her laptop and began to type.

[The subject (the student) controls both verbs (opened and began).]

### When to Use a Semicolon

1. When joining two independent clauses, only use a semicolon when they are closely related in topic.

Format: **Independent clause 1** [;] *independent clause 2* [.]

Example: **Iliff students love to write papers**; *they write them every quarter.*

2. Use a semicolon to join two independent clauses with an independent marker.

Format: **Independent clause 1** [;] *independent marker* [.] independent clause 2 [.]

Example: **Iliff students love to write papers**; *however*, at times the writing process is difficult.

Common *independent* markers include: also, consequently, however, moreover, therefore, thus.

3. Use a semicolon instead of a comma to separate items in a list when there is already a comma in one or more of the items.

Example: She loves to research Genesis, particularly the creation stories; the poetic literature of the Bible, such as the Psalms; and the prophets.

### How to Use The Dash—Sparingly

1. To emphatically present information

Example:      It was the only thing between the student and her summer break—the final paper.

2. Use a pair of dashes to present an aside or explanation.

Example:      The TIC II paper—his last one before graduation—is due on Tuesday.

Hint: Dashes tend to be overused in writing; use them sparingly.

### The Colon

1. Use a colon to introduce a list.

Example:      She needs three things to write well: her laptop, coffee, and silence.

Colons should not separate the verb from the rest of the sentence.

Incorrect: The three things she needs to write well are: her laptop, coffee, and silence.

### Recommended Reading

Cook, Claire Kehrwald. *Line By Line: How to Edit Your Own Writing*. The Modern Language Association of America. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1985.

O’Conner, Patricia T. *Woe Is I: The Grammarphobe’s Guide to Better English in Plain English*. New York: Riverhead Books, 2003.

The Purdue Online Writing Lab: <http://owl.english.purdue.edu>