

**BOOKLET TWO:
Punctuation, Paragraphs, Essays**

Print this booklet and bring it to every class session.

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Punctuation One: commas, dashes, parentheses

The first three punctuation marks we will study are sentence interrupters—that is, they are used to “interrupt” the normal flow of a sentence but not to end it. The most common sentence interrupter is the **comma** (,). Another is the **dash** (--). Yet another are called **parentheses** ().

One way to understand the differences among these three interrupters is to imagine what effect they have on the reader. How do they sound when read aloud? Well, if you were to read aloud a sentence using each of these three interrupters, the **comma** would be pronounced at the same pitch as your normal speaking voice, only with a slight pause for clarity. The **dash**, however, is a more dramatic mark—indicating a slightly louder pitch in voice for flair and emphasis. By comparison, **parentheses** are generally considered a whisper (since you’re using them to add extra information to your sentence that is not really essential). Hear the difference? Memorize those three general guidelines and you will begin to master these sentence interrupters.

Of the three, **the comma is the most common and most useful mark in your repertoire of punctuation.** So we’ll spend the majority of this lesson on the four basic uses of the comma. By memorizing the names of each, you will begin to master this important punctuation mark:

1.) Coordinator

The comma is used as a **coordinator** when we place it **before coordinating conjunctions in compound sentences:**

The travelers flew to Canada, but their luggage was shipped to New Mexico.

My library books were overdue, so I had to pay a huge fine.

2.) Introducer

The comma is used as an **introducer** when we place it **after beginning word groups** such as phrases, dependent clauses, and most transitional words:

Walking into the gymnasium, the students noticed it was set up for a blood bank.

As we toured the ancient village, we saw the ruins of an old church.

3.) Linker

The comma is used as a **linker** when we set off **items in a series:**

Katrina met with a counselor, the Dean of Students, and the Financial Aid Director.

The old truck blew a rod, dropped its transmission, and came to a dead stop.

4.) **Insertter**

The comma is used as an **insertter** when we **set off non-essential phrases and clauses** that appear **in the middle of a sentence or at the end of it:**

Chan, who is only fifteen years old, has become a brilliant pianist.

The waves pounded into the wharf, which was slowly being knocked to pieces.

Exercise One: For each of the sentences below, write the name for the comma use in the space provided:

1. The Chumash Indians fascinate modern ethnobotanists because of their use of the native plants in their religious rituals, medicine, hunting, and daily life.

2. Some anthropologists believe that the Chumash shamans would ingest specific roots and plants to induce religious visions, and they further speculate that those visions form the basis for the fascinating and colorful cave art that can still be found in many locations.

3. Because the Chumash knew the medicinal properties of the native flora so well, they had numerous uses for them.

4. For example, the bark of the willow tree contains the same medicinal qualities as that of our modern-day aspirin.

5. Also, the cure for lesions or severe cuts was to apply a paste made up of crushed poison oak.

6. The Chumash were able to utilize several commonly found plants for hunting, and the best known of these uses was to grind up the roots of the soap plant and to put the paste in a pond to stun the fish so that they would be easier to catch.

7. Because the spring flowers of the ceanothus bush made a good lather, they were used daily for washing and scrubbing.

8. The Chumash, who are recognized widely for their basketry and canoe-building skills, should also be known for their profound and interesting use of the native flora.

Exercise Two:

1. Write one original sentence on the topic of J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit* that requires a comma before the coordinating conjunction to join two main clauses.

2. Write one original sentence on the topic of J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit* that requires a comma after an introductory word group.

3. Write one original sentence on the topic of J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit* that requires commas to set off items in a series.

4. Write one original sentence on the topic of J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit* that requires commas to set off a non-essential phrase or clause *in the middle of a sentence*.

5. Write one original sentence on the topic of J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit* that requires a comma to set off a non-essential phrase or clause *at the end of the sentence*.

Punctuation Two: semicolons, colons, endmarks

If commas are like speed bumps on the sentence road, the **semicolon** (;) is a yellow light; it means “slow down” and proceed with caution. **The semicolon is more than a comma but less than a period. It is best used to balance two equal ideas in a compound sentence.** Many writers use them to tighten contrasts or to add more information to the first clause, as in the following example:

Arlington National Cemetery draws thousands of visitors each year; it is a final resting place for many of America’s soldiers.

The semicolon is also useful to join two independent clauses that are connected by transitional words such as however, consequently, therefore, and so on:

The puffer fish is a Japanese delicacy; however, it can bring on an agonizing death if not prepared properly.

If the semicolon is a yellow light on the sentence road, then **the colon** (:) is a green light: it says, “more ahead, keep going.” It **can be used after a complete sentence to indicate that a list will follow:**

Jimmy needed to buy a few supplies for his camping trip: a portable cappuccino maker, a solar-heated mattress, a battery-powered raft, and a high-tech stove.

Or it can be used after a complete sentence **to introduce an explanation:**

Halloween is often a scary experience for a small child: witches and goblins seem to lurk around every shadowy corner.

There are three main end stops in punctuation:

The period (.) **is used to stop most normal sentences.** It is the red light of punctuation; it says, “stop here and take a breath.”

Jane passed her math quiz with flying colors.

The question mark (?) **should come at the end of all direct questions.**

How do you get to Shoreline Amphitheater from here?

The exclamation mark (!) **should be used sparingly to express extreme surprise.** Overused, it is the most obnoxious of all punctuation marks; it tends to insult the reader by beating him over the head with something the writer believes to be important.

Stop yelling at me!

Exercise One: Find one good example of a comma, semicolon, and colon usage on this handout. Copy them in the space below. Study them. Notice how they are used and why.

Exercise Two: Write an original sentence on the topic of J. R. R. Tolkien's story *The Hobbit* that uses a semicolon correctly. Write another that uses a colon correctly.

Exercise Three: Use the space below to rewrite two closely-related sentences from your most recent chapter summary using a semicolon instead of a period. Compare the two versions. How is the semicolon different from the period?

Writing Paragraphs

A paragraph is an organizational convenience for the reader. It's easier to follow a written discussion if it is broken down into bite-sized pieces, and this is essentially why paragraphs exist—to assist the reader in seeing how the parts of an essay relate to the whole. Think how difficult it would be to follow a page or more of writing if it weren't broken down into paragraphs. Thus, mastering the art of the paragraph is an essential skill in writing. Traditionally, readers have certain expectations of paragraphs. They expect them to exhibit three primary traits: *unity*, *coherence*, and *development*.

UNITY

If a paragraph contains information on a single topic, we say it is unified. Some paragraphs even begin with a *topic sentence*, which breaks down for the reader not only the main **topic** of the paragraph but also its **focus**—that is, what *about* the topic the writer will narrowly cover in the succeeding sentences. So long as the sentences in the paragraph actually develop this single focus, we say the paragraph has unity. Aim for unity in your paragraphs.

COHERENCE

To cohere is to “stick together.” When a paragraph demonstrates **coherence**, we mean it develops its focus in *a continuous discussion*. To achieve this easy flow of ideas and examples, we must **order** our sentences so that **each sentence logically follows the sentence before it**. Gaps in reasoning have a tendency to break the continuity (or “flow”) of a paragraph. A simple tool to aide in coherence is the occasional use of **transitional words and phrases**, which **make explicit** the **connections between ideas** and/or examples. (Warning: overuse of transitions has the opposite effect, making the paragraph sound like it has been artificially cobbled together in spite of its illogic.) Aim for coherence in your paragraphs.

DEVELOPMENT

A standard paragraph contains five to ten sentences—some more, some less, depending upon the topic. We say a paragraph is developed if it satisfies the reader with enough *details* to substantiate the topic. The topic sentence is usually a general statement, and the sentences that follow usually go into **concrete, specific detail** about the topic. It's hard to overdo specifics; they are the stuff that readers are looking for. Thus, we say an underdeveloped paragraph is “too skinny” because it lacks the details readers crave. Aim for development in your paragraphs.

Examine the following paragraph for unity, coherence, and development. How does the topic sentence announce its topic, then narrow it to a particular focus? How do the order of sentences create a logical flow of ideas? When the discussion shifts gears, what transitions are used to assist the reader in following those shifts? Do the sentences in the paragraph develop the focus (and only the focus) by means of concrete, specific details—details that bring the topic to life and help the reader to experience the topic through sensory images?

Although Bilbo Baggins demonstrates luck and courage when he fights the giant spiders, it isn't until the chapter, "Barrels Out of Bounds," that he shows how intelligent he is. The scene in the palace of the wood elves is where Bilbo shows just how smart he really is. First, he takes his time to look around the palace, just like a real life burglar cases a potential house to rob. Using his magic ring, he figures out a possible exit using the empty barrels that go out a trap door and down river. Next, he waits until the right time—again, just like a real burglar who waits until the residents of the house are gone. The big party is just the right time because he knows the elves will be distracted by their celebration. Then, after the jailer has passed out from too much wine, he takes the keys, opens the cell doors, and rescues the unhappy dwarves from their prison. He even quietly returns the keys before they all escape! Lucky Bilbo has developed courage in his quest to help the dwarves recover their gold, and he has also revealed just how smart he is, making the reader wonder if Gandalf was right when he said there was more to the little hobbit than meets the eye.

Exercise: Write a paragraph of your own about an important trait that Bilbo Baggins demonstrates in *The Hobbit*. In the first sentence, be sure to narrow your topic to a particular focus. Then develop your ideas in a clear and continuous manner, using brief transitions if necessary. Get as specific in your use of details as you can. End your paragraph with a closing sentence that reminds your reader of the focus.

The Writing Process

Those who study the writing process say that **when we sit down to write something**—an email, a memo, a poem, an essay—**we work our way through a series of steps**. Often the steps are not purely chronological, but rather they are *recursive*—that is, we move back and forth among the steps. For the purposes of study, let's break the process down into those steps. By examining each step in the writing process, perhaps we can make ourselves more aware of how we produce an effective piece of writing so that we can repeat the act at will.

- (1) **Prewriting**: This is the stage before we seriously commit to any given idea; we're just **playing with ideas by getting them down on paper**. Getting our ideas on paper (or the computer screen) is half the battle; once they're there, then we can begin to manipulate them into language that will communicate those ideas to somebody else.
 - The first prewriting strategy is called **clustering**. To begin *clustering*, write your topic in the middle of a piece of paper. Circle your topic and simply start to form clusters of ideas, thinking and writing at the same time. It's like brainstorming, where one idea leads to another. Keep *clustering* until you have jotted down all the details you can think of about your topic. When you are finished clustering, examine the ideas and relationships among the ideas to see if they reveal a topic that could be narrowed into a main or controlling idea.
 - Another prewriting strategy is **listing**. *Listing* is similar to clustering in that you record your ideas as they come to mind. However, in *listing* you jot down words or phrases in rows or columns, like a shopping list. This method allows you to prewrite freely without too much initial worry about organization. When you are finished *listing*, examine the ideas and the relationships among the ideas to see if they reveal a topic that could be narrowed into a main or controlling idea.
 - Yet another method of prewriting is **freewriting**. It is similar to both of the other prewriting methods in capturing ideas in free association. In *freewriting*, however, you write longer phrases without worrying about correct spelling, punctuation, organization, or grammar rules. If you are unable to focus on a writing topic, you simply write what is on your mind at that given moment. Ideally, one thought will lead to another until you discover a topic and a direction. When you are finished *freewriting*, examine the ideas to see if they reveal a topic that could be narrowed into a main or controlling idea.
 - A final strategy of prewriting is to ask **journalistic questions**: Who? What? Where? When? Why? This is a more structured way to examine a topic and to make sure you have covered all the angles. When you are finished answering all the *journalistic questions*, examine your answers to see if they reveal a topic that could be narrowed into a main or controlling idea.

- (2) **Drafting**: You will notice that the objective of all four prewriting strategies is to arrive at a **main or controlling idea**, often called a **thesis**. *Thesis* is a Greek word meaning point. Have you ever found yourself reading something and thought, “Well, what is your point?” In order to clearly communicate to the reader, therefore, we must have a goal in mind, a point, a *thesis*. The drafting stage is the beginning of the actual writing process. Now that our prewriting has led us to a main idea, we begin drafting (trying out) **sentences and paragraphs that develop that idea**.
- (3) **Revising**: This word is easily understood by looking at its two parts: *re* means *again*, *vise* means *to look*. To revise, then, means **to look again**. Look back over what you’ve written. What have you left out? What’s not clear? What important details need to be added? Have you made your point?—in other words, have you proven your thesis?
- (4) **Editing**: The final stage in the writing process is *editing*. *Editing* is similar to revising. In fact, many people don’t distinguish between the two. But, for our purposes, we’ll refer to the *editing* stage as **the correction stage**: this is where we look over our paper for errors in spelling, mechanics, and grammar. In this stage, we correct any errors and print-out (or write-out) the final draft—the finished product.

Exercise: Imagine that you’ve been given the assignment to write an interpretive essay on the topic of J. R. R. Tolkien’s novel *The Hobbit*. What is the book about for you? Of the four main themes in the book—luck, greed, magic, and metamorphosis—which one informs your appreciation and understanding of the book the most? Try out your favorite prewriting strategy. There are four to choose from: clustering, listing, freewriting, or the journalistic questions. If one doesn’t work so well for you, try another. Fill a Journal page with your ideas, then write your thesis in a complete sentence at the bottom of the page.

Writing Essays

The Title: The title to an essay is something like the sign outside a store: just as a good sign should indicate what's inside the store, a good title should indicate what the essay's about. One famous writing teacher, John Trimble, says a title should be "accurately descriptive." The title should be longer than one word but shorter than a sentence. And it should give a strong hint as to what your thesis is. An example of a weak title might be simply "Luck." A better title would be "Bilbo: The Lucky Hobbit." See how that begins to describe what the essay's about? An even better title might be "When Skill Isn't Enough, Luck Steps In." This title is more specific as to what Tolkien might be trying to say about luck in *The Hobbit* and therefore work as a more accurate description of the content of the essay.

The Opener: The beginning of any piece of writing establishes a relationship between reader and writer. It introduces the writer (and his ideas) to the reader. Therefore, the opening paragraph is of vital strategic importance. Most writers agree that an opener must achieve at least two goals: (1) it must grab, or "hook," the reader's attention, and (2) it should state the main idea that the essay will develop (its thesis). Most readers respond with confidence in a writer who achieves these two goals early in the essay. And that's what you want as a writer: for your reader to have confidence in you.

The Middle: The middle of an essay (sometimes called the *body*) is where the writer really goes to work. Here, the thesis is developed by means of examples within a continuous discussion. There are so many things that happen within the course of a successful essay that we can't cover them all within the scope of this course. So we'll address two key ingredients—two traits that every essay must achieve: *specificity* and *continuity*.

The thesis provides the general expression of the writer's main idea. But in order to "prove" the thesis—that is, to convince the reader that a writer's thesis makes a valid point—the writer must develop the idea by drawing upon specific examples for support. For the purposes of our hypothetical essay on Tolkien's *The Hobbit*, we must ask ourselves the question, "What examples do I see in the book where good luck comes to the aid of Bilbo and the dwarves when their skill isn't enough to rescue them?"

In order to support his points, then, the writer must cite those relevant passages by either quoting, paraphrasing, or summarizing them. To *quote* is to copy the exact words of the author within quotation marks ("). To *paraphrase* is to put the author's ideas into your own words. To *summarize* is to reduce a longer passage into a shorter one, while replicating the author's sense of proportion and emphasis. We have plenty of practice in the skill of summary by now. Probably you will find the skills of quoting and paraphrasing most effective for an essay of the kind we're describing here.

Continuity is achieved in writing by using transitional words and phrases that link ideas together, revealing their logical relationships. To achieve a continuous discussion, each sentence must logically follow the one that comes before it. The lists of transitional

words below is, of course, incomplete; but they will serve to offer examples of the logic behind transitions.

Linking Transitions:

<u>Giving Examples</u>	<u>Giving Additional Information</u>	<u>Contrasting Ideas</u>	<u>Showing Results</u>
in other words	furthermore	however	as a result
for example	also	in contrast	consequently
for instance	likewise	on the other hand	therefore
as an illustration	of course	on the contrary	thus
that is	moreover	otherwise	
		nevertheless	

Transitions that indicate order:

<u>Time</u>	<u>Space</u>	<u>Importance</u>
first	at the top	first of all
second	below the top	next
third	next	besides that
to begin with	at the bottom	to begin with
next	in front of	also
then	next to	in addition
finally	outside	most important
in the past	inside	for one thing
now	here	best (or worst) of all
soon	on the right	moreover
in the future	on the left	furthermore
before	in the center	above all
then		
during		
finally		

Application: As you draft the middle (or body) of an essay, develop your ideas with specific examples and use the transitional words that signal the logical relationship between your ideas and examples.

The Closer: The end of a piece of writing is also very important. It is the writer's last chance to make his point in an assertive way. Because most essays build their ideas to a kind of culmination, the reader looks to the end of an essay for final clarity and insight into the subject. One great writing teacher, John Trimble, recommends that every closer contain three things; he calls them the "three imperatives." (An *imperative* is an essential ingredient.) His three imperatives are: (1) focus on your main point, (2) gratify your reader with at least one last new twist to make your point memorable, and (3) end with emotional impact.

Source: John Trimble, *Writing with Style*, 2nd ed. Prentice Hall, 2000.