

Using Commas, Semicolons, and Colons

(,) Commas, the most frequently used form of punctuation, are used –

to combine two complete independent clauses (with a conjunction)	Saul grabbed his rain coat, but it ended up being sunny. She was smart, and she knew it.
to set off introductory phrases from the rest of a sentence	Before cooking dinner, the chef gathered the ingredients. When Miss Emily Grierson died, our whole town went to her funeral.
to indicate added detail in a sentence (parenthetical phrase)	My best friend, Anne, gave me the tickets. Nobody, it seems, wants to eat the nut burgers.
To set off appositives (which rename or describe nouns and pronouns)	Yoko, <i>our new classmate</i> , is our best fielder. Spanish, <i>a Romance language</i> , is one of six official languages at the United Nations.
to set off a direct quotation	Dr. O’Neil wrote, “I respect the older guys,” in his blog.
to separate words in a list	She needs to pick up milk, sugar, beans, and rice.
To set off nonrestrictive clauses that begin with who, which, or that, and modify a noun or pronoun. A nonrestrictive clause is not essential to the meaning of the sentence.	Yoko, <i>who is our new classmate</i> , is our best fielder. Spanish, <i>which is a Romance language</i> , is one of six official languages at the United Nations.
To separate parts of an address or date	Janice lives at 42 Orchard Lane, Reedsville, PA. She moved there on Wednesday, December 4, 2019.

(;) Semicolons are used –

to combine two independent clauses (complete thoughts) without a conjunction	Saul grabbed his rain coat; it ended up being sunny. Tony is a careless driver; he has had three minor accidents this year alone.
to combine two independent clauses with a conjunctive adverb	Saul grabbed his rain coat; <i>however</i> , it ended up being sunny. Tony is a careless driver; <i>consequently</i> , he has had three minor accidents this year alone.
to separate items in a series when one or more of the items contain commas.	The sites being considered for the new Volkswagen plant are Waterloo, Iowa; Savannah, Georgia; Freestone, Virginia; and Rockville, Oregon.

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(:) Colons are used to signal that what comes next is directly related to the first part of the sentence –

to introduce a list with an intended pause	You need to bring four items to your appointment: something to write with, your professor's instructions, your notes, and any work you have already done.
to introduce an explanation with an intended pause	One thing was wrong: the chef did not cook the beans!
To direct attention to an elaboration	I sized him up as fast as possible: tight black velvet pants pulled over his boots, black jacket, a red-green-yellow scarf slashed around his neck.
to address somebody in a business letter or e-mail	Dear Mr. O'Neil:
to separate hours from minutes	I left the house at 4:59.