

## COMMAS AND DASHES

### COMMAS

Generally speaking, commas help organize parts of a sentence. While they often signal the natural pauses in the flow of a sentence, they are not breath marks; casually sprinkling commas over a long or convoluted sentence will not make the sentence more readable. Instead, think of commas as (1) links between ideas in a given sentence, whether those ideas are expressed in clauses, phrases, or single words, or (2) dividers that set apart clauses, phrases, or single words.

#### 1. Linking Commas

- a) For example, always use a comma to link a dependent (or subordinate) clause to an independent (or main) clause.

*Although she enjoyed chemistry, she struggled to stay awake during her quantum mechanics lectures.*

- b) You should also use a comma to link two independent clauses when you join those clauses with a co-ordinating conjunction (and, but, or, nor, so, for, yet).

*She fell asleep during most of her lectures, but she always managed to do well on the exams.*

However, if the clauses are short, you may omit the comma.

*The fire alarm sounded and students filed out.*

- c) Use commas to link three or more elements in a series – words, phrases, or clauses – that match in grammatical form.

*Place the solid in the beaker, stir thoroughly, and stand well back.*

#### 2. Dividing Commas

- a) Commas also **set apart** various components of the sentence from the main idea. Use a comma to set off an introductory word or a contextualizing phrase.

*During their first year at university, most Queen's students live in residence.*

*Fortunately, all residence staff members are trained in conflict resolution.*

However, if the phrase is short, you may omit the comma.

*In spring the birds return to Canada.*

- b) In the same way, use commas to set apart words, phrases or clauses that add extra but non-essential information to a sentence. These “by the way” or “sidebar” phrases add important details, but omitting them does not change the essential meaning of the sentence. Always frame such phrases with commas.

*When she met her assigned roommate, Bob Russell, Shari wondered if Residence Admissions had made a serious mistake.*

## DASHES

If your “by the way” information is more complex – a phrase involving internal punctuation, for example – use dashes to set it off from the rest of the sentence.

**On your computer, type a dash as two hyphens to distinguish a dash from a hyphen.**

1. Use a dash to set off an interruption in your sentence.

*When she met her assigned roommate - Bob, the very bearded, very friendly, but very clearly male Linguistics major - Shari wondered if the Residence Admissions office had made a serious mistake.*

As evidenced in the preceding example, dashes signal a stronger, more emphatic shift than commas do.

2. In addition to setting off complex “by the way” phrases, dashes can be used to emphasize a change in thought or emotion in a sentence.

*He enjoyed going to the campus pub on Thursday night - but he truly loved attending his 8:30 a.m. biochemistry lecture on Fridays.*

3. Dashes may also be used to link a list to the main part of a sentence. Although colons also serve this function, you may choose to use a dash when less formality and more emphasis seems appropriate.

*After the road trip, the car was crammed with evidence of a successful holiday - burger wrappers, maps, postcards, coffee cups, film canisters, ferry receipts, and one unclaimed sock.*