

PUNCTUATION POINTERS

THE COMMA (,)

The comma sets off or separates words or groups of words within sentences.

1. Use a comma after a long introductory phrase or clause: "After working all day at the office, I went home for dinner."
 2. If the introductory material is short, forget the comma: "After work I went home for dinner."
 3. But use it if the sentence would be confusing without it, like this: *NOT*, "The day before I borrowed my boss's calculator."
BUT, "The day before, I borrowed my boss's calculator."
 4. Use a comma to separate elements in a series: "I enjoy drinking orange juice, tea, milk, and coffee."
 5. Use a comma to separate independent clauses that are joined by: *and, but, or, nor, for, yet* "We shopped for three hours, *but* we didn't make a single purchase."
 6. Use a comma(s) to set off *nonessential* elements in a sentence. Compare these two sentences:
"At the podium stood a man wearing a green suit." ["wearing a green suit" is essential to identify which man]
"At the podium stood Frank, wearing a green suit." ["wearing a green suit" adds nonessential information about Frank.]
- Recognize and correct comma faults (i.e., two sentences separated only by a comma).

NOT, He bought his first car last winter, it never ran well.

BUT, He bought his first car last winter. It never ran well.

OR, He bought his first car last winter, but it never ran well.

OR, He bought his first car last winter; it never ran well.

The comma fault can be corrected by any one of the three ways listed above.

If you use *however, moreover, therefore, consequently, nevertheless, or then* between two independent clauses (i.e., sentences by themselves), you must use one of the following: 1. period, 2. semicolon, or 3. comma plus conjunction between the two clauses.

NOT, It looked difficult, therefore, we did not try.

BUT, It looked difficult. Therefore, we did not try.

OR, It looked difficult, therefore, we did not try.

OR, It looked difficult, and therefore we did not try.

PARALLEL CONSTRUCTION

Parallel construction adds clarity, elegance, and symmetry to your writing. Words, phrases and statements are coordinated to be grammatically parallel: noun aligned with noun, verb with verb, and phrase with phrase. For example,

1. NOT: Speaking in public is sometimes harder than to write in private.
BUT: Speaking in public is sometimes harder than writing in private.
2. NOT: My partner is a man of action, decision, and who is bright.
BUT: My partner is a man of action, decision, and intelligence.
3. NOT: Sarah's office was painted, had carpeting put in and paneled last week.
BUT: Sarah's office was painted, carpeted, and paneled last week.
4. NOT: To teach, to supervise, and delegating work are a few of the tasks our office manager performs.
BUT: To teach, to supervise, and to delegate work are a few of the tasks our office manager performs.
OR: Teaching, supervising, and delegating work are a few of the tasks our office manager performs.

Not only does parallel construction add symmetry, it often reduces wordiness—see examples #2 and #3 above. Don't hesitate, however, to repeat a word if it makes your sentence clearer. For example,

1. NOT: She has and continues to seem competent.
BUT: She has seemed and continues to seem competent.
2. NOT: A secretary can program a computer to type a letter but not think.
BUT: A secretary can program a computer to type a letter but not to think.

When you proofread your work, check for parallel construction. The added clarity and economy will add polish to your style.