# PUNCTUATION POWER

**Famous quotations from students**:

"My punctuation is not that hot, in fact it's not even warm."

"I had punctuation and grammar viciously driven into my head for eight years."

"I find training in grammar and punctuation to be quite a bore, especially with all the emphasis placed on subjects like dangling modifiers, etc., which really don't play a major role in my life in my opinion."

"My high school training in English consisted of several poorly-taught classes and one that was well-taught. The teacher for my junior year was the head of the school's English department. She was a very strict lady who preached nothing but grammar. For most of the semester we were bombarded with pronouns, clauses, participles and more. I admit that I hated every minute of it. But now I realize she was the only teacher who took time to concentrate on grammar or punctuation. Other teachers, most likely bored by the subject, skimmed over grammar in order to do more interesting things. Even though I hated her and the course, I learned more than I did in my other high school classes. Today I am more at ease when writing because of the class."

If you feel more like the first three students above than the last, don't despair. Contrary to what you may have heard, Americans do have rules—and very specific ones at that—for punctuation. If you can recognize a complete from an incomplete sentence, you can use the guidelines and formulas on these pages to become an *expert* in American punctuation. If you have difficulty distinguishing a complete sentence from an incomplete sentence, these pages should help you recognize why your incomplete sentence is incomplete and vice versa. And if you need yet more help with the fundamentals, see me and we'll work until you're up to snuff.

Here's our working definition of **a sentence: an unsubordinated subject, transitive verb, and object** or **an unsubordinated subject and intransitive verb**.

**Clause**: a group of words that contains a subject and verb. There are two types: dependent and independent. Dependent clauses have subjects and verbs, but they also have sentence destroyers (subordinating conjunctions), so they can only exist as parasites, attached to an independent clause.

A **Phrase**: a group of words, not a full sentence or clause, conveying a single (but incomplete) thought.

Personal Pronouns—he, she, it, they, etc.—do not subordinate a sentence, or, in other words, they do not make a sentence *dependent*.

**Demonstrative Pronouns** that point out (these, that, this, those) are like personal pronouns in that they, too, do not make a sentence *dependent*.

Many **conjunctive adverbs** also leave a sentence *independent* (not dependent). You should know these words and their "meanings":

**Conjunctive Adverbs**

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| also | likewise | then |
| besides | immediately | therefore |
| consequently | moreover | similarly |
| finally | instead | thus |
| first | nevertheless | still |
| otherwise | now | on the other hand |
| on the contrary | meanwhile | in fact |
| furthermore | sometimes | however |
| indeed | | |

For all but the shortest of *conjunctive adverbs*, like now and still, a comma is normally used to separate the conjunctive adverb from the body of the sentence.

Conjunctive adverbs get their name because they act as adverbs: they tell how, where, or why. And, at the same time, they serve as conjunctions, making connections clear.

There are two kinds of connectors that **do** make a clause dependent. They really must be memorized so that you can distinguish them from conjunctive adverbs.

**Subordinating Conjunctions**

| Common | Less Common |
|---|---|
| after | though |
| although | even though |
| because | whereas |
| before | as |
| if | whenever |
| since | till, until |
| when | unless |
| where | as if |
| while | as though |
| | as much as |
| | as long as |
| | in order that |

so that
wherever
how
whether

**Conjunctive pronouns**

who, whom, which, that

**Coordinating Conjunctions** leave a sentence *independent* (you should memorize these): **and, or, nor, but, for, yet, so**.

Recognizing clauses—independent and dependent—is the key to punctuation. When clauses are linked, and most sentences link clauses, they are linked in very predictable ways. Remember, when reading the following rules, that a subordinating conjunction, when used before an independent clause (IC), will make the independent clause *dependent* (a DC).

IC = Independent Clause
DC = Dependent Clause
PP = Prepositional Phrase
cc = Coordinating Conjunction
ca = Conjunctive Adverb

**THE RULES**:

IC ; IC
DC , IC
IC DC
I, interrupter, C
IC , cc IC
IC cc DC
IC ; ca , IC
IC , ca , DC
PP , IC

Note: **Participial phrases** are usually separated from the rest of the sentence by a comma or commas. A **participle** is a verb form that is used as an adjective. Here are two examples: **Developing** rapidly, the storm kept small boats in port; the storm, **developing** rapidly, kept small boats in port. In these examples, *developing*, which is formed from the verb *develop*, is used as an adjective, modifying the noun *storm*. There are two kinds of

participles: *present participles* (ending in *-ing*) and past participles (ending in *-ed*, *-d*, *-t*, *en*, or *en*: ask*ed*, sav*ed*, deal*t*, eat*en*, s*een*). A **participial phrase** is a phrase containing a participle and any complements or modifiers it may have.

Examples:

> ***Removing his coat***, Jack rushed to the river bank. [The participial phrase is made up of the participle *removing* and the complement *coat*, which is the direct object of *removing*.]
>
> ***Hesitating there for a moment***, he quickly grasped the situation. [The participial phrase is made up of the participle *hesitating* plus its modifiers—the adverb *there* and the adverb phrase *for a moment*.]

Other examples of participial phrases, using both present and past participles:

> Recognizing the importance of practice, teachers of composition, imitating the athletic coach, conduct regular practice sessions.
>
> Handicapped by their writing deficiencies, graduates seeking employment or advancement in their occupations are often denied desirable opportunities.

Note: It is quite possible to become a very good writer without being able to label the complements or modifiers in the participial phrase. You will not be a very good writer, though, unless you can (1) recognize participial phrases in your writing, (2) punctuate them correctly, and (3) place them next to the noun they modify. The importance of this third point is underscored by the unintentional absurdity of the following sentence, which is always good for a laugh: *Flying high through the air*, I saw the eagle from the cliff.

### A Note on the Colon and the Dash

A **colon** builds anticipation. Use a colon to introduce a quotation or a list if the structure of the sentence is already complete. Using a colon at the end of an incomplete sentence is incorrect.

**The Dash**—the dash is very flexible. It can substitute for a period ("You may say this business of marking books is getting the way of your reading. It probably will—that's one of the reasons for doing it"), for a colon ("Consider some of the things the blues are about—work, love, death, floods, lynchings"), for a semicolon ("One day I absentmindedly started crossing the street without looking up or down—the street was empty"), for a comma ("In order to communicate with the dying, we must ourselves understand—and try to feel—the process of dying"), or for opening and closing parentheses ("So I walked on and on—horses were too expensive—until I had wandered beyond railways, beyond stage lines, to a land of `varmints' and rattlesnakes").