

Commas, Colons, and Semicolons—Oh My!

—

A Punctuation Crash Course

Punctuation is an
art.

Semicolons (;)

- 1) Use a semicolon as a soft period between two complete sentences. Rhetorically, this shows the ideas are of equal importance and have a close relationship.

I've seen all the Lord of the Rings movies; I've read all the books, too.

- 2) Use semicolons as hard commas to distinguish complicated items within lists.

The party consisted of Gandalf, a wise wizard; Sam, a brave friend; and Frodo, an unlikely hero.

Colons (:)

- 1) Use a colon as a soft period between two complete sentences. This punctuation signals that one idea is more important than the other.

That was the fateful moment when Ron realized the truth: He was in love with Hermione Granger.

- 2) Use a colon as an introduction to a list, but only after a complete sentence. (Watch out for verbs or prepositions before a colon!)

Hogwarts has four houses: Gryffindor, Hufflepuff, Ravenclaw, and Slytherin.

NOT

The four Hogwarts houses are: Gryffindor, Hufflepuff, Ravenclaw, and Slytherin.

- 3) Use a colon (after a complete sentence!) to introduce a quotation, making the quote feel more formal or set apart.

Snape gave his instructions: “Turn to page three-hundred and ninety-four.”

Em Dashes (—)

- 1) Use two em dashes to interrupt your own sentence with a phrase and then get back to what you were saying.

Rand al'Thor held The Sword That Is Not a Sword—he was the Dragon Reborn, after all—and overlooked the destruction of the battle field.

- 2) Use an em dash to connect a complete sentence with an incomplete sentence.

Siuan Sanche was the most powerful woman in the world—the Amyrlin Seat.

- 3) In dialogue or very informal prose, use an em dash to show an interruption in someone's speech.

“But Perrin's eyes are—”

“Golden, I know. That's why we call him Perrin Goldeneyes now.”

Commas (,)

- 1) Remember that commas are a rhetorical choice and are a smaller beat than any other punctuation mark.
- 2) Pay attention to how you connect complete sentences with incomplete sentences (phrases). Your key ingredients are commas and conjunctions!

Kaladin glared at Syl. She just laughed at him. She zipped away as a ribbon of light.

Kaladin glared at Syl, but she just laughed at him and zipped away as a ribbon of light.

Although Kaladin glared at Syl, she just laughed at him, and he watched her zip away as a ribbon of light.

NOT

Kaladin glared at Syl, she just glared at him she zipped away, as a ribbon of light.

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Bonus resource! Check out *Rhetorical Grammar: Grammatical Choices, Rhetorical Effects* by Martha Kolln and Loretta Gray.

