



www.umt.edu/writingcenter 243.2266

Comma, Semicolon, and Colon Rules¹

(Note: a **clause** is a group of words that contains a subject and a verb. An **independent clause** can stand alone as a complete sentence. A **dependent clause** will not stand alone.)

1. Independent clause.

Heavy rain makes freeway driving a challenge.

2. Independent clause ; independent clause.

Writing is difficult; it takes a lot of effort.

3. Independent clause ; therefore , independent clause.

however
in addition
nonetheless
indeed
in fact
nevertheless
then
consequently
furthermore
moreover

Montana's annual rainfall is below average; moreover, temperatures are warmer.

4. Independent clause , but independent clause.

or
yet
for
and
nor
so
(then)

Four inches of snow fell in two hours, yet many drivers refused to put on chains.

¹Adapted from:

Bazerman, Charles, and Harvey, Wiener. *Writing Skills Handbook*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 2001
Silverman, Jay; Hughes, Elaine; Wienbroer, Diana Roberts. *Rules of Thumb*. New York: McGraw Hill, 2009

5. After dependent clause , independent clause.
Although
As (As if)
Because
Before
If
Since
Unless
Until
When(ever)
Whereas
While

**After we moved the furniture, we cleaned the carpets.
While I read the newspaper, my children ate breakfast.**

6. Independent Clause after dependent clause.
although
as (as if)
because
before
if
since
unless
until
when(ever)
whereas
while

**We cleaned the carpet after we moved the furniture.
My children ate breakfast while I read the newspaper.**

7. Use commas before and after an insertion or interruption (non-essential or non-restrictive element) in a sentence/independent clause. You may opt for dashes, but don't overuse these.

Start of Independent clause , insertion, *end of independent clause.*

Roast leg of lamb, one of my favorite dinners, is not part of a heart healthy diet.

Donuts—a guilty sin—are not part of a heart healthy diet.

Some people, it seems, like to procrastinate.

Mary Olsen, the officer, left the building at 1:19 P.M.

(Note: *An independent clause/sentence, in italics, will remain intact if insertion is removed.*)

8. Use a comma after an introductory element or a lead-in that introduces a sentence/independent clause.

Lead-in or introductory phrase/word , **independent clause.**

Prepositional phrases

However

Therefore

Unfortunately

After my chemistry class, I have an hour break. Therefore, I will have time to eat lunch.

Angie is afraid of heights. However, she chose to peek over the edge of the cliff.

Until yesterday, I had no worries.

Luckily, my flight is not delayed.

9. Use a comma in a series of three or more elements (words, phrases, or clauses) that match in grammatical form and are of equal importance in a sentence.

Marriage requires sexual, financial, and emotional discipline.

The law requires that we stop at red lights, signal before turns, and slow down in school zones.

10. Quotations:

“Education is the best provision for old age,” wrote Aristotle.

Aristotle wrote, “Education is the best provision for old age.”

“Education,” wrote Aristotle, “is the best provision for old age.”

He asked, “When do the visitors from Japan arrive?”

Who said that the visitors from Japan arrive tomorrow?

Who said, “The visitors from Japan arrive tomorrow”?

11. Dates:

February 2010

February 10, 2010

Wednesday, February 10.

People arrived on Wednesday, February 10, 2010, to learn about commas.

12. Places and Addresses:

My family settled in Butte, Montana, before I was born.

I wrote to Ms. Rachel Salter, 650 Pine Road, Missoula, MT 59801.

13. Use a **colon** after an independent clause to introduce related material or to introduce a list. Do not use after *are*, *include/including*, or *such as*.

The lunch menu offered a variety of choices: soup, sandwiches, quiche, and salads.

Shakespeare’s Hamlet ponders his mortality: “To be, or not to be. That is the question.”

I love any kind of seafood: scallops, shrimp, crab, or lobster.

This is the last straw: you’re fired.