

- Use commas before or after a quotation: "Let's see," said Tina. Or: Tina said, "Let's see." But don't use a comma after a quotation that ends with an exclamation point or a question mark: "Have I forgotten anything?" she wondered. "Sunscreen!" she exclaimed.

LET ME INTERRUPT

- Use a comma after an introductory phrase if a pause is intended: *As usual, she checked to make sure the stove was turned off. Of course, it always was. You see, Tina was a bit compulsive.*
- Use commas around an aside—information that could just as well go in parentheses: *Her upstairs neighbor, the one without the tattoos, promised to collect her mail.*
- Use commas around *which* clauses: *The airport bus, which was usually on time, never came. So she took a taxi, which cost her an arm and a leg.*

But don't use commas around *that* clauses: *The bus that she had planned to take never came, so she grabbed the first taxi that she saw.*

For more on *which* and *that*, see page 3.





Semi-Avoidance: The Unloved Semicolon (;)

The semicolon is one of the most useful but least used punctuation marks. For whatever reason, many of us avoid it. Maybe it intimidates us; it shouldn't. (See, wasn't that easy?) If a comma is a yellow light and a period is a red light, the semicolon is a flashing red—one of those lights you drive through after a brief pause. It's for times when you want something stronger than a comma but not quite so final as a period. Here's when to use it.

- Use a semicolon to separate clauses when there's no *and* in between: *Andy's toupee flew off his head; it sailed into the distance.*
- Use semicolons to separate items in a series when there's already a comma in one or more of the items: *Fred's favorite things were his robe, a yellow chenille number from Barney's; his slippers; his overstuffed chair, which had once been his father's; murder mysteries, especially those by Sue Grafton; and single-malt Scotch.*





 **Let Me Introduce You:
The Colon (:)** 

Think of the colon as a traffic cop, or punctuation's master of ceremonies. Use it to present something: a statement, a series, a quotation, or instructions. But remember that a colon is an abrupt stop, almost like a period. Use one only if you want your sentence to brake completely. Keep these guidelines in mind.

- Use a colon instead of a comma, if you wish, to introduce a quotation. *I said to him: "Harry, please pick up a bottle of wine on your way over. But don't be obsessive about it."* Many people prefer to introduce a longer quotation with a colon instead of a comma.
- Use a colon to introduce a list, if what comes before the colon could be a small sentence in itself (it has both a subject and a verb). *Harry brought three wines: a Bordeaux, a Beaujolais, and a Burgundy.*
- Don't use a colon to separate a verb from the rest of the sentence, as this example does. *In Harry's shopping bag were: a Bordeaux, a Beaujolais, and a Burgundy.* If you don't need a colon, why use one? *In Harry's shopping bag were a Bordeaux, a Beaujolais, and a Burgundy.*

NOTE: If what comes after the colon is a complete sentence, you may start it with a capital letter. *My advice was this: Bring only one next time.*

Huh?
 **The Question Mark (?)** 

The question mark is the raised eyebrow at the end of a sentence. It's used with a question, of course, but also to show skepticism or surprise. (*"Lost? My luggage got lost on a direct flight?"*) Here are some of the most common questions about questions.

- What do you do when a sentence has a series of questions? This gets an either/or answer.

You can put the question mark at the very end: *Would Tina have to buy a new hair dryer, toothbrush, swimsuit, camera?*

Or, for emphasis, you can put a question mark after each item (you don't need capital letters for each item, since it's still one sentence): *Would Tina have to buy a new hair dryer? toothbrush? swimsuit? camera?*

- How do you introduce a question within a longer sentence? The simplest way is to use a comma and start the question with a capital letter. *The question was, How long should she wait for her luggage?*

The same is true if the question is a quotation: Introduce it with a comma. *Tina cried, "What next?"*

But if the introduction is a complete sentence, especially if it's a long one, a colon works better. *The question she asked herself was this: How long should she wait for her luggage?*

Too Much of a Good Thing:

The Dash (—)

We could do with fewer dashes. In fact, the dash is probably even more overused these days than the exclamation point—and I admit to being an offender myself (there I go again).

The dash is like a detour; it interrupts the sentence and inserts another thought. A single dash can be used in place of a colon to emphatically present some piece of information: *It was what Tina dreaded most—fallen arches.* Or dashes can be used in pairs instead of parentheses to enclose an aside or an explanation: *Her shoes had loads of style—they were Ferragamos—but not much arch support.*

Dashes thrive in weak writing, because when thoughts are confused, it's easier to stick in a lot of dashes than to organize a smoother sentence. Whenever you are tempted to use dashes, remember this:

- Use no more than two per sentence. And if you do use two, they should act like parentheses to isolate a remark from the rest of the sentence: *After the flight, Tina looked—and she'd be the first to admit it—like an unmade bed.*
- If the gentler and less intrusive parentheses would work as well, use them instead. *Tina's luggage (complete with her return ticket) appeared to be lost.*

By the way, don't confuse the dash with the hyphen (see below). The dash is longer. If you want a dash but your computer keyboard doesn't have one, use two hyphens (--).

Between and Betwixt:

The Hyphen (-)

A hyphen is not just a stubby version of the dash. The two of them do very different things. While the dash separates ideas or big chunks in a sentence, the hyphen separates (or connects, depending on how you look at it) individual words or parts of words: *My mother-in-law works for a quasi-official corporation that does two-thirds of its business with the government.*

When a word breaks off at the end of a line in your newspaper and continues on the next line, a hyphen is what links the syllables together. But the kind of hyphen most of us have problems with is the one that goes (or doesn't go) between words, as in terms for some family members (*mother-in-law*), or in two-word descriptions (*quasi-official*), or in fractions (*two-thirds*). Here are some guidelines for when you need a hyphen and when you don't.

