

Elementary rules of usage

In a series of three or more terms with a single conjunction, use a comma after each term except the last.

red, white, and blue	honest, energetic, but headstrong	He opened the letter, read it, and made a note of its contents.
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Enclose parenthetical expressions between commas.

The best way to see a country, unless you are pressed for time, is to travel on foot	Well, Susan, this is a fine mess you are in.	Horace Fulsome, Ph.D., presided. BUT: The novelist Jane Austen presided.
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Nonrestrictive relative clauses are parenthetical. A nonrestrictive clause is one that does not serve to define or limit the antecedent noun.

In 1769, when Napoleon was born, Corsica had but recently been acquired by France.	Nether Stowey, where Coleridge wrote <i>The Rime of The Ancient Mariner</i> , is two miles away.	Our oldest daughter, Mary, sings. BUT: My cousin Bob is a talented harpist.
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Place a comma before a conjunction introducing an independent clause.

The situation is perilous, but there is hope.	I have heard the arguments, but am still unconvinced.	He has had several years of experience and is thoroughly competent.
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Do not join two independent clauses with a comma. If a conjunction is inserted, however, a comma is appropriate.

It is nearly half past five; we cannot reach town before dark.	Mary Shelley's works are entertaining. They are full of engaging ideas.	Mary Shelley's works are entertaining, for they are full of engaging ideas.
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Use a colon after an independent clause to introduce a list of particulars, an appositive, an amplification, or an illustrative quotation.

Your dedicated whittler requires three props: a knife, a piece of wood, and a back porch.	There was a directness about animal burial: there was no stopover, no wreath or spray.	This reminded her of Wilde: "We are all in the gutter, but some of us are looking at the stars."
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Use a dash to set off an abrupt break or interruption and to announce a long appositive or summary. Often, a comma or colon will do.

His first thought on getting out of bed – if he had any thought at all – was to get back in again.	The rear axle began to make a noise - a grinding, chattering, teeth-gritting rasp.	The shorter days, the drop in temperature, the falling leaves – all were proof of the start of winter.
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The number of the subject determines the number of the verb.

The bittersweet flavor of youth – its trials, its joys, its adventures – is not soon forgotten.	One of those people who are never ready on time.	Everybody thinks he has a unique sense of humor.
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Use the proper case of pronoun.

Will Jane or he be hired, do you think?	Who knocks? Is it a man whom we will receive?	Blake and I stayed home.
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A participial phrase at the beginning of a sentence must refer to the grammatical subject.

On arriving in Chicago, he was met at the station by friends.	Young and naive, I thought the task easy.	Without a friend to counsel him, he found the temptation irresistible.
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Elementary principles of composition

Use the active voice.

My first visit to Boston will always be remembered (by me).	I will always remember my first visit to Boston.	There were a great number of dead leaves lying on the ground.	Dead leaves covered the ground.	The reason he left college was that his health deteriorated.	Failing health compelled him to leave college.
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Put statements in positive form.

He was not very often on time.	He usually came late.	You can make a good impression by being neat and punctual.	You will make a good impression if you are neat and punctual.	not honest; not important; didn't remember	dishonest; trifling/trivial; forgot
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Use definite, specific, concrete language.

A period of unfavorable weather set in.	It rained every day for a week.	He showed satisfaction as he took possession of his reward.	He grinned as he pocketed the coin.	In proportion as the manners, customs, and amusements of a nation are cruel...	In proportion as men delight in battles, bullfights and gladiator combats...
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Her superior training was a big factor in her winning the match.	She won the match because she was better trained.	A feature of the entertainment was the singing of Alice Jones.	Alice Jones sang soul classics in a warm, deep voice.	We are instituting many meaningful changes in the curriculum.	We are improving the curriculum in many ways.
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Omit needless words.

the question as to whether	whether	there is no doubt but that	no doubt (doubtless)	acts of a hostile character/nature	hostile acts
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in a hasty manner	hastily	he is a man who	he	in spite of the fact that	though (although)
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In many cases, the rooms lacked style.	Many of the rooms lacked style.	Her story is a strange one.	Her story is strange.	The job was attractive in terms of salary.	The salary made the job attractive.
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He is regarded as being the best dancer.	He is regarded as the best dancer.	Many have certainly tried to copy him.	Many have tried to copy him.	Books are ordered by their respective topics.	Books are ordered by topic.
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Elementary principles of composition (continued)

Express coordinate ideas in similar form.

Formerly, science was taught by the textbook method, while now the laboratory method is employed.	Formerly, science was taught by the textbook method; now it is taught by the laboratory method.	the French, the Italians, Spanish, and Portuguese	the French, the Italians, the Spanish, and the Portuguese	A time not for words but action.	A time not for words but for action.
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Keep related words together.

He noticed a large stain in the rug that was right in the center.	He noticed a large stain in the center of the rug.	A dog, if you fail to discipline him, becomes a household pest.	Unless disciplined, a dog becomes a household pest.	He wrote three articles about his adventures in Spain, which were published.	He published three articles about his adventures in Spain.
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Place the emphatic words of a sentence at the end. The other prominent position in the sentence is the beginning – any element in the sentence other than the subject becomes emphatic when placed first.

Humanity has hardly advanced in fortitude since then, although it has advanced in many other ways.	Since then, humanity has advanced in many ways, but it has hardly advanced in fortitude.	This steel is principally used for making razors, because of its hardness.	Because of its hardness, this steel is principally used for making razors.	She could never forgive deceit or treachery.	Deceit or treachery she could never forgive.
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A few matters of form

A sentence with an expression in parentheses is punctuated outside the last mark of parenthesis as if the expression were absent.

I went to her house yesterday (my third attempt to see her), but she had left town.	He declares (and why should we doubt his good faith?) that he is now certain of success.	(When a wholly detached expression or sentence is parenthesized, the final stop comes before the last mark of parenthesis.)
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For the titles of literary works, use italics with capitalized initials. Omit initial *A* or *The* from titles preceded by the possessive.

<i>A Tale of Two Cities</i>	Dickens' <i>Tale of Two Cities</i>	Wharton's <i>Age of Innocence</i>
Formal quotations used as documentary evidence are introduced by a colon and enclosed in quotation marks.	A quotation grammatically in apposition or the direct object of a verb is preceded by a comma.	When a quotation is followed by an attributive phrase, the comma is enclosed within the quotation marks.
The man said: "Bracy Cove is exposed to southeast winds, and is unfit for anchorage."	Mark Twain says, "A classic is something that everybody wants to have read."	"I can't attend," she said.
Often the comma should be inside the marks, though logically it seems not to belong there.	Quotations introduced by <i>that</i> are indirect and not enclosed in quotation marks.	Proverbial expressions and familiar phrases of literary origin require no quotation marks.
"The Fish," "Poetry," and "The Monkeys" are in Marianne Moore's <i>Selected Poems</i> .	Keats declares that beauty is truth, truth beauty.	He lives far from the madding crowd.

An approach to style

Write with nouns and verbs, not with adjectives and adverbs. No powerful adjective can make up for a weak or inaccurate noun.

Use orthodox spelling. Oversimplified spellings are distracting and exhaust the reader's impatience.

Do not use fancy words or foreign languages.

Avoid the use of qualifiers like *rather*, *very*, *little*, *pretty*.

Do not affect a breezy manner.

Well guys, here I am dishing the dirt about your disorderly classmates, after pa\$\$ing a weekend in the Big Apple trying to catch the Columbia hoops tilt and then a cab-ride from hell through the West Side casbah.	Clyde Crawford, who stroked the varsity shell in 1958, is swinging an oar again after a forty year break. Clyde quit last spring as executive sales manager of the Indiana Flotex company and is now a gondolier in Venice.
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Do not construct awkward adverbs, or attempt to dress up words, by adding *-ly* to them.

He climbed tiredly to bed.	He climbed wearily to bed.	The cord lay tangledly beneath her chair.	The cord lay in tangles beneath her chair.	overly; muchly	over; much
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Words and expressions commonly misused

Among. Between. When more than two things or persons are involved, *among* is usually called for. When, however, more than two are involved but each is considered individually, *between* is preferred: "an agreement between the six heirs."

As good or better than. Expressions of this type should be corrected to "as good as his, or better (if not better)."

Compare. To *compare to* is to discuss similarities between things of a different order; to *compare with* is to discuss differences between similar things.

Etc. Least open to objection when it represents the last terms of a list already given almost in full, or immaterial words at the end of a quotation.

However. Do not use it to replace "nevertheless" at the start of a sentence. When it comes first, *however* means "in whatever way/to whatever extent".

Less. Should not be misused for *fewer*. *Less* refers to quantity, *fewer* to number.

People. *The people* give political support or opposition; *the public* gives artistic appreciation or commercial patronage. For numbers, use *persons*.

That. Which. *That* is the defining, or restrictive, pronoun (tells which one); *which* is the nondefining, or nonrestrictive (adds a fact).

While. Means "at the same time". Avoid it as a substitute for *and*, *but*, or *although*. As substitute for *and* or *but*, *while* is best replaced by a semicolon.