

Basic Rules of Punctuation and Grammar

B.W. Van Norden

(version of 10 August 2018)

The following rules are almost universally followed by publishers, not just in academia but also in popular media. The rules in Part 1 are taken from William Strunk and E.B. White's *The Elements of Style*, 4th ed. (Longman, 1999), which is a classic guide to usage and composition. I added the rules in Part 2 to address mistakes that are common among contemporary students. Sample sentences are in italics.

More comprehensive reference works on formatting and usage include the following:

- Center for Teaching and Learning. *Using Sources*. Yale University. <https://ctl.yale.edu/writing/using-sources> (accessed 10 August 2018). This resource has a particularly valuable section on “Understanding and Avoiding Plagiarism.”
- Modern Language Association. *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*, 8th ed. Modern Language Association, 2016. This guide to format and usage tends to be favored by teachers of literature. An online version can be found here: <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/747/01/>
- University of Chicago Press Staff. *The Chicago Manual of Style*, 17th ed. University of Chicago Press, 2017. This guide is favored by many social scientists and philosophers. Yale-NUS College students can freely access it online: https://www-chicagomanualofstyle-org.libproxy1.nus.edu.sg/tools_citationguide.html

I. Strunk and White's Original Rules

1. Form the possessive singular of nouns by adding 's. (An exception to this rule is that the possessive form of the pronoun *it* is *its*. The word *it's*, with the apostrophe, means *it is*.)
 - *If you own a car, it's a good idea to change its oil every 5,000 miles.*

Commas

2. In a series of three or more terms with a single conjunction, use a comma after each term except the last. (This is sometimes called an “Oxford comma.”)
 - WRONG: *Rachel Ray finds inspiration in cooking her family and her dog.*
 - RIGHT: *Rachel Ray finds inspiration in cooking, her family, and her dog.*
3. Enclose parenthetical expressions between commas.
 - *My dog, who is usually quite friendly, barked at her ferociously.*

In the preceding sentence, the phrase within commas is said to be “nonrestrictive,” because it provides additional information about the noun phrase (“my dog”). However, you do not use commas around a “restrictive” phrase, one that identifies which of several things you are referring to.

- *My cat who has brown spots is friendly, but my cat who has gray spots is shy.*
4. Place a comma before a conjunction introducing an independent clause.
 - *He is a jerk, and he smells bad.*
 5. Do not join independent clauses by a comma. (This mistake is called a “run-on sentence” or a “comma splice.”)
 - **WRONG:** *James Joyce was one of the greatest English-language writers, his works are set in Dublin.*
 - **RIGHT:** *James Joyce was one of the greatest English-language writers. His works are set in Dublin.*
 6. Do not break sentences in two. (In other words, don’t use a period where you should use a comma, colon, or dash.)
 - **WRONG:** *He was an interesting talker. A man who had traveled all over the world, and lived in half a dozen countries.¹*
 - **RIGHT:** *He was an interesting talker, a man who had traveled all over the world, and lived in half a dozen countries.*

Other Punctuation: Colons, Semicolons, Dashes, and Hyphens

7. Use a colon after an independent clause to introduce a list of particulars, an appositive, an amplification, or an illustrative quotation.
 - *His backpack contained the usual camping supplies: food, flashlight, compass, first-aid kit, etc.*

Do not confuse colons (:) and semicolons (;). A semicolon is typically used to separate two complete sentences whose meaning is closely connected.

 - *The intellectual part of his nature was already effaced; he had power only to feel, and feeling was torment.²*

Intuitively, a colon indicates a slightly “stronger” break than a comma, while a semicolon indicates a slightly “weaker” break than a period.
8. Use a dash to set off an abrupt break or interruption and to introduce a long appositive or summary.
 - *In a child-centered family, the star athlete gets all the attention. Everything else—the parents’ marriage, siblings—is secondary.³*

Do not confuse hyphens and dashes. Use a hyphen to indicate that two words are to be read together as a compound adjective.

 - *In 1991 Todd Marinovich had a three-year, \$2.25 million contract as a first-round draft choice with the L.A. Raiders.⁴*

Notice that a dash (—) is longer than a hyphen (-). The keyboard shortcut for a dash on a Mac is option+shift+-. In addition, in MS Word, you can write two hyphens next to one another (with no spaces between them and the surrounding words) and it will automatically convert them to a dash.

Grammar and Composition

9. The number of the subject determines the number of the verb.
 - WRONG: *“Then you wake up at the high school level and find out that the illiteracy level of our children are appalling.”*⁵
 - RIGHT: *Then you wake up at the high school level and find out that the illiteracy level of our children is appalling.*
10. Use the proper case of the pronoun. (*I, we, she, he, they,* and *who* are subjects of the verb. *Me, us, her, him, them,* and *whom* are objects of the verb or preposition.)
 - *I gave it to him, but I don’t know whom he sold it to, so don’t blame me.*
In the preceding sentence, the first *I* is the subject of the verb *gave*, while *him* is the object of the preposition *to*. *He* is the subject of the verb *sold*, and *whom* is the object of the preposition *to*. Finally, *me* is the object of verb *blame*.
11. A participial phrase at the beginning of a sentence must refer to the grammatical subject.
 - WRONG: *Being in a dilapidated condition, I was able to buy the house very cheap.*⁶
 - RIGHT: *I was able to buy the house very cheap, because it was in a dilapidated condition.*
- ...
14. Use the active voice.
 - WRONG: *My first visit to Boston will always be remembered by me.*⁷
 - RIGHT: *I shall always remember my first visit to Boston.*⁸
- ...
17. Omit needless words.
 - WRONG: *I’m gonna have to say The Great Gatsby, because he lived a life of just hiding his true self, and he tried to make people love him for who he wasn’t, and he went out and tried to, you know, buy expensive cars and clothes and, you know, trying to make people love him.*⁹
 - RIGHT: *The book that most influenced me is the Great Gatsby, because Gatsby hid his true self, and tried to make people love him by buying expensive cars and clothes.*
- ...

II. Van Norden's Supplemental Rules

23. Titles of books, plays, albums, and periodicals are put in italics. Titles of articles, songs, and poems are put in quotation marks.
- My favorite story in *Dubliners* is "The Sisters."

Quotations

24. Put brief quotations in double quotation marks.
25. Put commas and periods inside quotation marks.
26. An "index" (the number or symbol that identifies a footnote) goes to the right of all other punctuation. The following examples illustrate Rules 24, 25, and 26:
- *Another time she asks Susan, "Is it sunny all the time in the world where you live?" And Susan replies, "Yes, it is, and unlike most people, I don't freckle."¹⁰*
 - *"I never thought I'd someday be playing a superhero, certainly not at my age," says the 47-year-old Spiner with a laugh.¹¹*
27. Use single quotation marks to identify quotations embedded in double quotation marks.
- *It wasn't until a chance encounter with a Hollywood producer during a visit to Los Angeles that Walker considered acting as a career. "I was having dinner, and this guy came up to me in the restaurant and said, 'You're really funny. I have a part in a movie for you,'" she recalls. "I thought, 'What a weirdo.'"¹²*
28. Longer quoted text (approximately 4 lines or more) should be set as block quotations. Block quotations are distinguished from the rest of the paragraph by having a left margin indented more than the main paragraph. Do not put quotation marks around a block quotation!

Parentheses

29. If a comment in parentheses is part of a sentence, the final punctuation goes outside the parentheses.
- *After his breakdown and removal from the school boarding house, his parents sent him to a London psychoanalyst in the belief, apparently, that his troubles were attributable to homosexuality (a condition his father considered only marginally less heinous than Bolshevism).¹³*
- A parenthetical comment within a sentence can enclose an exclamation point or question mark when the sense requires it:
- *We all smoked except for Morey Amsterdam (wasn't he the smartest one of all?), and we smoked a lot!¹⁴*

- *Wendy is whining in frustration like any out-of-control adolescent would (sadly, she's in her 20s!), but Pauline is trying to teach her adult responsibility.*¹⁵
30. If a sentence begins and ends within parentheses, the punctuation goes inside the parentheses.
- *Poker books are full of rules and principles for playing good poker. (This book is no exception.) Some rules, however, are more important than others.*¹⁶

Words Commonly Misused

31. "Cannot" is one word.
32. Use "whom" only when it is the object of a verb or preposition.
- *And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.*¹⁷
33. The words in the left column are contractions (of a pronoun and either *is* or *are*), while the words in the middle column are possessive forms of the pronoun:
- | | | |
|------------------|--------------|---|
| • <i>they're</i> | <i>their</i> | <i>They're going to sell both of their cars.</i> |
| • <i>you're</i> | <i>your</i> | <i>You're going to have to wash your dog more often.</i> |
| • <i>it's</i> | <i>its</i> | <i>It's time for America to re-examine its national priorities.</i> |
| • <i>who's</i> | <i>whose</i> | <i>Who's giving the next presentation? It depends. Whose presentation was last?</i> |

¹ William Strunk, Jr., *The Elements of Style*, 1st ed. (1918),

https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/The_Elements_of_Style/ (accessed August 28, 2015).

² Ambrose Bierce, "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge" (1890),

<http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/375/pg375.txt> (accessed August 28, 2015).

³ Barbara Kantrowitz, Adam Rogers, and Allison Samuels, "Don't Just Do It for Daddy," *Newsweek* (December 9, 1996): 56.

⁴ Kantrowitz et al., "Don't Just Do It for Daddy."

⁵ President George W. Bush, "Remarks to the U.S. Conference of Mayors," Washington, D.C., January 23, 2004.

⁶ Strunk, *The Elements of Style*.

⁷ Strunk, *The Elements of Style*.

⁸ Strunk, *The Elements of Style*.

⁹ Helen Salas, Miss Nevada Teen 2004, in response to the question "What book has most influenced you?" Cited in <http://www.cosmopolitan.com/entertainment/celebs/news/a26402/embarrassing-beauty-pageant-quotes/> (accessed August 29, 2015).

¹⁰ Jeff Jarvis, review of *Suddenly Susan*, *TV Guide* (November 23-29, 1996): 16.

-
- ¹¹ Michael Logan, "Star Trek VIII: Making *Contact*," *TV Guide* (November 23-29, 1996): 41.
- ¹² Hilary de Vries, "Portrait of a Profiler," *TV Guide* (December 7-13, 1996): 40.
- ¹³ John Carey, "Introduction," in Graham Greene, *Brighton Rock* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993), p. xv.
- ¹⁴ Mary Tyler Moore, *After All* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1995), pp. 133-134.
- ¹⁵ Laura Schlessinger, "Dr. Laura's Prime-Time Checkup," *TV Guide* (August 30, 1997): 32.
- ¹⁶ Dan Harrington and Bill Robertie, *Harrington on Cash Games*, vol. 1 (Henderson, NV: Two Plus Two Publishing, 2008), p. 19.
- ¹⁷ John Donne, *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions* (1624), Meditation 17, <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/23772/23772-h/23772-h.htm> (accessed August 28, 2015).