

Punctuation guidelines

- I. Full stop
- II. Comma
- III. Semicolon
- IV. Colon
- V. Dash
- VI. Quotation marks/Inverted commas
- VII. Hyphen
- VIII. Capital letters

Remember:

- **Good punctuation** makes a sentence **clear and easy to read and understand**, because it shows the grammatical structure of the text, its meaning, and often the relationship between words or clauses.
- With the exception of the cases described below, **the rules concerning punctuation**, especially commas, are **not as hard and fast** in English as in some other languages. Some writers use fewer marks of punctuation, but others prefer to use many. Whichever style you choose, be consistent.

I. Full stop

The full stop is used:

- to mark **the end of a sentence** (unless the sentence ends with a question mark or an exclamation mark):

The method proved to be very useful.
- in some **abbreviations**: e.g. (for example), etc. (and so on), p. (page), pp. (pages), fig. (figure), vol. (volume), dept. (department), usu. (usually), Brit. (British), Apr. (April).
- in **decimal numbers**: 0.25

Notes:

- **In BE** the full stop is not used in **the names of degrees**: BSc, MSc, MEng, PhD,
in **forms of address**: Mr/Ms/Mrs/Dr,
in some **other cases**: m, km, mph, hr, hrs
rpm (revolutions per minute)
- **In AE** the full stop is **more common**: Mr./Ms./Mrs./Dr./Ph.D./B.Sc.

II. Comma

In English, commas depend much more on recommendations and **usage** than on many rules and mechanical conventions. They prevent misunderstanding, so they should be used **at logical places**.

Compare the following sentences:

Eats, shoots, and leaves. (i.e. a robber, a murderer)

Eats shoots and leaves. (i.e. a panda) (a book title by L.Truss)

Commas can be organized into **four main groups** :

1. **Introducers**
2. **Coordinators**
3. **Inserters**
4. **Tags**

1. **Introducer comma**

The introducer comma is used **after any element placed before the first independent clause** in a sentence.

a) Linkers , e.g. However, ... Nevertheless, ... Therefore, ...	INDEPENDENT CLAUSE
b) Phrases , e.g. In this picture, ... In this paper, ...	INDEPENDENT CLAUSE
c) Dependent clauses introduced e.g. by When .., As .., If ...,	INDEPENDENT CLAUSE
d) -ing, -ed clauses , e.g. Based on, Substituting in, When completed,, On entering, ...	INDEPENDENT CLAUSE
e) If/When + adjective , e.g. If necessary, ...	INDEPENDENT CLAUSE
f) If/When + prepositional phrase , e.g. When in doubt, ...	INDEPENDENT CLAUSE

Examples:

a) *The advances in power electronics enabled motor users to control motors. **However**, they introduced a new problem.*

*We decided not to join the project. **Obviously**, that was a mistake.*

***Basically**, there is hardly any difference between these two approaches.*

***Unfortunately**, I missed the beginning of your lecture.*

b) ***In some cases**, the digital communication channel is used to get feedback from the customer.*

***In Fig. 3**, three coils instead of five are drawn for simplicity.*

c) ***If the experiment fails**, we will have to repeat it.*

***When he returns from the conference**, he will be able to tell us more.*

d) ***After leaving university**, she worked for a foreign company.*

***When completed**, the new building will house both the computer centre and the library.*

***Having identified the error**, he repeated the experiment.*

***On registering for the maths course**, he acquainted himself with the syllabus.*

e) ***If necessary**, I will write a more detailed report.*

f) ***When in doubt**, consult a dictionary.*

Notes:

- The comma is sometimes **left out** after **adverbs** and **short phrases** if the sentence is short.

Occasionally he worked in the laboratory.

In this case no change is necessary.

- If the **independent clause (IC)** comes **before the dependent clause (DC)**, there is **no comma**.

IC + DC: *We will have to repeat the experiment if it fails.*

DC + IC: *If the experiment fails, we will have to repeat it*

2. Coordinator comma

2.1. The coordinator comma used before a coordinating linker (and/or/but/nor/so/yet) **links independent clauses**.

INDEPENDENT CLAUSE	,	and/or/but/nor/so/yet	INDEPENDENT CLAUSE
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Examples:

*Teamwork is the norm, **and** team leaders need to understand how their technical expertise fits into their company's strategy.*

*You must start preparing the grant application as soon as possible, **or** you will miss the deadline.*

*At that college, students are not only exposed to lectures and seminars, **but** also have in-depth discussions with industry leaders.*

*We worked on today's supercomputers, **so** we had a relatively good idea of what it was going to be to build something with 1,000 times as much computing power.*

*The experiment was very well prepared, **yet** it failed.*

Note:

The comma is **not used** if the **independent clauses are short**.

Many students apply but few are admitted.

He lectures and runs seminars on electrical machines.

2.2. The coordinator comma links a series of **three or more equal elements** (nouns, adjectives, verbs, phrases). The series may also contain linkers. Usually, there is a comma before the linker (see 2.1.)

3 or more NOUNS	undergraduates, graduates, (and/or/but not) PhD students
3 or more ADJECTIVES	young, talented, hardworking, yet lacking ambition
3 or more VERBS	(he) reads, understands, speaks, and writes (English very well)
3 or more PHRASES	at home, in the hall of residence, (and/or/but not) on the campus

Examples:

Nouns: *What kept these products from success was high cost, technical difficulties, and poor marketing.*

Adjectives: *Stator windings of rotating machines are exposed to thermal, electrical, mechanical, and environmental stresses.*

Verbs: *When preparing a paper, students learn to search, read, plan, write, and revise.*

Phrases: *The lab is open on weekdays, at weekends, and sometimes also at night.*

Note:

With adjectives, the **comma is used** when they **can be joined by "and"**.

He has become a confident, independent, successful, and famous researcher. (= a confident and independent)

The comma is **not used** if the **adjectives modify each other**.

numerous English historical novels

(historical modifies novels, English modifies historical novels,

numerous modifies English historical novels)

3. Inserter comma

The inserter comma is placed **before and after any element** inserted into the middle of an independent clause.

INDEPENDENT CLAUSE (1st part)	,	inserted element	,	INDEPENDENT CLAUSE (2nd part)
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Examples:

Linkers and adverbs: *One can, **therefore**, conclude that the proposed method has a number of advantages.*

*Their approach is, **basically**, similar to ours in many respects.*

Prepositional phrases: *This solution, **in my opinion**, does not bring the desired effect.*

Non-defining clauses and phrases,

i.e. clauses and phrases that provide additional information about the preceding word/group of words (as the word is sufficiently defined in itself, the additional information can be left out and the sentence still makes sense).

Relative clauses: *Professor White [4], **who also researched this problem**, proposed a completely different approach.*

*We cannot hold the meeting on **Friday**, when most of the staff who are busy writing the final report, will not be able to come.*

-ing, -ed clauses: *Dr Brown, **chairing today's session**, will also be chairing the session tomorrow.*

*Their method, **based on the theory of**, proved very efficient.*

*Professor Sichel, **on returning from the conference**, passed the new facts to his team.*

Phrases in apposition: *Albert Einstein, **the author of the theory of relativity**, died in 1955.*

Note:

- There are **no commas in defining clauses**, i.e. clauses that define the preceding word(s).

Compare:

Defining *The gentleman **who chaired/chairing today's session** will also be chairing the session tomorrow.*

Non-defining *Professor Brown [4], **who**, will also be chairing*

Defining *The method **based on the theory of** proved to be very efficient.*

Non/defining *Their method, **based on**, proved*

For more information on relative clauses see A Remedial Course in English Grammar: Clauses (Relative clauses) and for more information on linkers see Guidelines for Academic Writing: Text structure.

4. Tag comma

The tag comma is placed **before elements added to the end of a sentence**.

a) INDEPENDENT CLAUSE	,	adverb
b) INDEPENDENT CLAUSE	,	-ing, -ed clause

Examples

a) *This system is more efficient and cheaper (,) too.*

*This is the same problem, **basically**.*

b) *We have done quite well, **taking into account** the circumstances.*

*We have done quite well, **given** the circumstances.*

The comma is not used

- if the **independent clause comes before the dependent clause** (see Introducer comma)
- with a **series of adjectives that modify each other** (see Coordinator comma)
- in **defining clauses** (see Inserter comma)

- **before “that”**, both in the meaning of “že” and “který” (even when “that” is left out):

*There are many geometries **that** (které) are different from the Euclidean geometry.*

*It is obvious **that** (že) in this case the equation does not hold.*

*The reviewer stated (**that**) the facts need clarification.*

*The explanation (**that**) he gave us was not convincing.*

- with **dependent clauses functioning as the verb’s object**, beginning with **wh-question words** (who, what, which, when, where, why)

*We do not know **who** is to blame for the errors in measurement.*

*I do not understand **what** you mean by that.*

*I do not know **where** to find the information.*

“**whether**” and “**if**” meaning “**zda**”

*I am not sure **whether/if** we will be able to keep the deadline.*

- in **decimal numbers**: 0.521

Useful advice

As has already been said, rules concerning the use of commas in English are not as strict as in Czech. Usage may vary, especially with adverbs and short phrases. When in doubt whether or not to use a comma, reading aloud the sentence you have written might help. With great probability, a comma would be useful in places where you pause when speaking.

III. Semicolon

The semicolon is used to **connect two independent clauses** into a sentence. The sentence may/may not include a linker or an adverb.

a) INDEPENDENT CLAUSE	;	INDEPENDENT CLAUSE	
b) INDEPENDENT CLAUSE	;	linker, adverb	, INDEPENDENT CLAUSE

Examples:

a) *My colleague did all the measurements and calculations; I analysed the results.*

b) *The cost of food has gone up in recent years; similarly, fuel prices have risen considerably.*

I wanted to solve the problem quickly; however, it was much more complicated than I had thought.

Many researchers dislike using this traditional method; personally, I find it still very useful.

Note:

The full stop or “**and**”, “**or**”, “**but**”, “**yet**” can be used **instead of the semicolon**.

My colleague did all the measurements and calculation(,) and I analysed the results.

The cost of food has gone up in recent years. Similarly, fuel prices have risen considerably.

IV. Colon

The colon introduces an explanation or a list.

1. Explanation

If the high price does not keep sales down, the quantity will: only 100 of these products have been made.

The size of this mobile serves its purpose: to be easy to handle by senior users.

2. List

The vast majority of telephone calls occur between spouses or close relations: parents and children, siblings, and so on.

V. Dash

Like the colon, the dash introduces an explanation or a list. Dashes can also be used to separate an inserted element from the rest of the sentence.

1. Explanation

All languages have the same purpose – they communicate thoughts.

One key outcome of this situation was unmanageable, inflexible systems unsuited to local needs – an undesirable outcome from the perspective of the local managers.

2. List

The nominally random number Netscape was based on just three values – time of day, process identification number, and parent-process identification number.

3. Separation of inserted element

This highly efficient method – developed in the USA at the beginning of this century – is being successfully applied in many other countries.

As with the inserter comma, the inserted element can be left out and the sentence still makes sense.

VI. Quotation marks/Inverted commas

Inverted commas are used **to enclose direct speech** and **quotations**. They may be single ‘...’ or double “....” (mainly in AE).

1.	“direct speech”
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Example:

'I have spoken to him', I said, 'on only one occasion' . (BE)

2.	“quotations”
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Examples:

According to XY “a word is characterized by the company it keeps”.

In the 1970s, a number of studies were conducted on the “mum effect”, i.e. the notion that people are reluctant to transmit unpleasant messages.

Notes:

- Both marks are written at the **upper level of the text**.
- The full stop, exclamation mark, question mark, and comma come **outside the quotation marks** in BE (see the example above) **inside the quotation marks** – in AE
“I have spoken to him,” I said, “on only one occasion.” (AE)

VII. Hyphen

The hyphen **joins together**

1.

WORDS	with	WORDS
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Examples:

adjective + adjective: *red-hot, dark-blue, socio-economic, Anglo-American*

adjective + -ing/-ed forms: *high-conducting, slow-acting, long-lasting
old-fashioned, long-lived, hard-earned*

noun + adjective or -ing/-ed forms: *life-long, life-saving, career-minded*

adjective + noun: *high-frequency (transformer), high-carbon (steel), high-temperature
(reactor), long-term (plans)*

adverb + adjective: *well-established (fact), well-known (scientist)*

noun + noun: *optimum-power design, inductor-capacitor (oscillator)*

numeral + numeral: *twenty-five, thirty-two*

numeral + noun: *64-bit (microprocessors)*

verb + adverb (used as a noun): *take-off, pick-up, set-up*

others: *state-of-the art (report), up-to-date (methods), do-it-yourself (job)*

2.

WORDS	with	PREFIXES
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Examples:

co-author, co-opt, non-smoker, non-essential, non-corrosive, non-existent

Notes:

- In some cases, the use of **the hyphen prevents ambiguity of meaning**. Compare:
re-formed (newly formed) but *reformed* (improved, made better)
re-mark (mark again) but *remark* (say a few words about something)
re-cover (cover again) but *recover* (return to the original condition)

- The combination **“verb + adverb” is hyphenated** when used **as a noun**
take-off, pick-up, set-up
is not hyphenated but is spelt as two words
when used **as a phrasal verb**
(to) take off, (to) pick up, (to) set up

Very often, however, the noun is spelled as **one word**:

slowdown, breakdown, breakthrough, fallout

- Compare also the **difference between**:

a well-established fact

that fact is (very) well established

a well-known scientist

that scientist is (very) well known

a state-of-the-art method

a method based on the state of the art

a do-it-yourself job

a job you (can) do yourself

64-bit microprocessors

microprocessors having 64 bits

When used **as attributes** (qualifying the following noun), the groups of words **are hyphenated**.

- Most **words formed with prefixes** are now spelled **as one word**.

anticorrosive, decentralized, hyperactive

The hyphen is often used with **“non-” and “co-”**, but even here usage varies.

non-existent or nonexistent, co-operate or cooperate, but co-author

- When using **two hyphenated words with the same second part**, it is quite common to write just the first part of the first word (with a hyphen, of course).

short- and long-term plans

The full version (*short-term and long-term plans*), is, however, clearer.

Apart from some of the recommendations given above, **usage of the hyphen varies**. It is advised to check it with a good dictionary and follow the policy of the relevant journal on this point.

VIII. Capitals

A capital letter is used for

- the **beginning of a sentence**:

These robots are saving time, lives, and money.

- **proper nouns and adjectives** formed from proper nouns, e.g.

*September, Monday, John, Prague, England, the English (people);
the English language, English (the language)*

- the **main words** (i.e. nouns, adjectives, and verbs) in **titles** and **positions of people, in titles of books, plays, names of institutions**, e.g.

*Dean of the Faculty; Admissions Officer, Doctor/Professor Brown;
Three Men in a Boat; Faculty of Electrical Engineering,
Faculty of Nuclear Sciences and Physical Engineering*

- **salutations and forms of address**, titles, greetings, and the complimentary close in letters, e.g.

*Dear Dr/ Professor/Mr/ Mrs/ Ms/Miss Brown/Sir/Madam;
Yours sincerely/Sincerely (yours); Faithfully yours; Yours faithfully*

- words **the writer considers to be important** for the text, e.g.

(our) Faculty, Department, Dean.

Notes:

- The pronoun **“I”** is **always capitalized**, but not **“me”** or **“my”**.
- Pronouns **“you”** and **“yours”** are **never capitalized** unless they are in a title or at the beginning of a sentence.