

# AMA Manual of Style

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## Comma, Semicolon, Colon

Cheryl Iverson

Print Publication Year: 2007 Published Online: 2009

Publisher: Oxford University Press

ISBN: eISBN:

DOI: 10.1093/jama/9780195176339.021.146

Item type: section

Commas, semicolons, and colons can be used to indicate a break or pause in thought, to set off material, or to introduce a new but connected thought. Each has specific uses, and the strength of the break in thought determines which mark is appropriate. | Commas are the least forceful of the 3 marks. There are definite rules for using commas; however, usage is often subjective. Some writers and editors use the comma frequently to indicate what they see as a natural pause in the flow of words, but commas can be overused. The trend is to use them sparingly.

## Comma

Cheryl Iverson

Print Publication Year: 2007 Published Online: 2009

Publisher: Oxford University Press

ISBN: eISBN:

DOI: 10.1093/jama/9780195176339.022.338

Item type: section

Commas are the least forceful of the 3 marks. There are definite rules for using commas; however, usage is often subjective. Some writers and editors use the comma frequently to indicate what they see as a natural pause in the flow of words, but commas can be overused. The trend is to use them sparingly. Follow the accepted rules and use commas only when breaks are needed for sense or readability or to avoid confusion or misinterpretation. The comma is used to separate phrases, clauses, and groups of words and to clarify the grammatical structure and the intended meaning. Use

## Semicolon

Cheryl Iverson

Print Publication Year: 2007 Published Online: 2009

Publisher: Oxford University Press

ISBN: eISBN:

DOI: 10.1093/jama/9780195176339.022.339

Item type: section

Semicolons represent a more definite break in thought than commas. Generally, semicolons are used to separate 2 independent clauses. Often a comma will suffice if sentences are short; but when the main clauses are long and joined by coordinating conjunctions

or conjunctive adverbs, especially if 1 of the clauses has internal punctuation, use a semicolon. Use a semicolon to separate independent clauses in a compound sentence when no connective word is used. In most instances it is equally correct to use a period and create 2 sentences. The conditions of 52% of the patients improved greatly; 4% of the patients withdrew

## Colon

Cheryl Iverson

Print Publication Year: 2007 Published Online: 2009

Publisher: Oxford University Press

ISBN: eISBN:

DOI: 10.1093/jama/9780195176339.022.340

Item type: section

The colon is the strongest of the 3 marks used to indicate a decided pause or break in thought. It separates 2 main clauses in which the second clause amplifies or explains the first. This dictum is often believed to be in the Hippocratic Oath: First, do no harm. Do not use a colon if the sentence is continuous without it. You will need enthusiasm, organization, and a commitment to your beliefs. Not: You will need: enthusiasm, organization, and a commitment to your beliefs. Avoid using a colon to separate a preposition from its object or to separate a verb (including to