

# The Rhetoric of Punctuation

## LEVELS OF PUNCTUATION in sentences

¶

!

?

.

:

;

—

()

• • • (the ellipsis)  
• • • • (the ellipsis followed by a period)

,

7 Situations which are punctuated	Primary Convention	Alternatives
1. <b>Introductory elements</b>	X, SP.	X, X, X—SP.
2. <b>Interruptives</b>	S, X, P.	S—X—P. S (X) P.
3. <b>Afterthoughts</b>	SP,X.	SP—X. SP (X). SP: X.
4. Two or more <b>bound modifiers</b>	the big, old, black car the devious, irrational exam	omit the commas
5. <b>Elements in series</b>	X, Y, Z	A,B,C; X,Y,Z, P,D,Q. A (X), B (X), C (X), and D (X).
6. <b>Independent clauses joined with a coordinate conjunction</b>	SP, and SP.	SP (and SP). SP—and SP.
7. <b>Independent clauses <u>not</u> joined with a coordinator</b>	SP; SP.	SP: SP. SP—SP. SP (SP).

### Decision Principles:

- ★ Variety
- ★ Emphasis
- ★ Tone

KEY (for the table above)

SP = an independent clause

X = any structure *except* SP

coordinators are *and, but, or, nor, for, yet, so*

## Examples

The part of the sentence being set off—i.e., the *introductory element*, the *interruptive*, the *afterthought*, etc.—is in italics; other free modifiers which are not being illustrated are underlined.

### Situation #1: setting off introductory elements

When the semester began, everyone was tense.

Suddenly, they all began to laugh.

Without her computer, Maria is lost.

### Situation #2: setting off interruptives

When the semester began, everyone—*the instructor as well as the students*—was tense.

Suddenly, they all began (*in quiet bewilderment*) to laugh.

Without her computer, Maria—*a highly disciplined student*—is lost.

### Situation #3: setting off afterthoughts

When the semester began, everyone—the instructor as well as the students—was tense, *each assuming the worst of the others*.

Suddenly, they all began (*in quiet bewilderment*) to laugh: *laughter that seemed to come in waves, each one larger than the one before*. (Notice that here there are two afterthoughts.)

Without her computer, Maria—a highly disciplined student—is lost, *unable to function*.

Without her computer, Maria—a highly disciplined student, *oriented toward a single goal: intellectual stardom*—is lost, *unable to function*. (Notice that here there are two afterthoughts **within the interruptive** as well as one at the end of the clause.)

### Situation #4: setting off bound modifiers

When the long, difficult semester began, everyone was tense.

Without her computer, Maria—a highly disciplined, extremely focused student—is lost, unable to function.

### Situation #5: setting off elements in series

When the semester began, everyone was *tense, irritable, and smelly*.

Without her computer, her PDA, and her cell phone, Maria—a highly disciplined student—is lost, unable to function.

### Situation #6: setting off independent clauses joined by a coordinator

When the semester began, everyone was tense, *but they were also eager to learn*.

Suddenly, they all began to laugh, *and then they started to cry*.

Without her computer, Maria is lost, *but the computer (equipped with GPS software) is not*.

### Situation #7: setting off independent clauses NOT joined by a coordinator

When the semester began, everyone was tense; *they were also eager to learn*.

Suddenly, they all began to laugh—*then they started to cry*.

Without her computer, Maria is lost: *the computer (equipped with GPS software) is not*.

(Situation #7 is the one situation which should **not** be punctuated by a comma.)