

tipsheet

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Using Punctuation Between Clauses

When developing effective business writing, pay close attention to the placement of punctuation. Misplaced commas and semicolons have the potential to change the meaning and coherence of a sentence. The most common places for these punctuation errors are between clauses within a sentence. Below are some rules to help business writers avoid these mistakes.

A **clause** is a group of words that contains a subject and a verb to form part of a sentence. A **complex sentence** is a sentence made up of one independent (main) clause and one or more dependent (subordinate) clauses.¹

Below are two types of clauses:

- An independent (main) clause can stand alone as a simple sentence.
Ex: *While we were sleeping, three of the adults left.*
- A dependent (subordinate) clause is one subject and verb combination that makes only a half-sentence when standing alone.
Ex: *While we were sleeping, three of the adults left.*

Rules and Guidelines²

1. Use a comma before the coordinating conjunctions (and, but, or, for, nor, so, yet) when they join independent (main) clauses of a compound sentence.
Ex: *The siren cried out, and instantly a narrow lane was opened for the ambulance.*
2. Use a semicolon rather than a comma before the coordinating conjunctions (and, but, or, for, nor, so, yet) in a compound sentence if either clause is long or either clause contains a comma, colon, or dash.
Ex: *You may take the early morning flight, inconvenient but faster; or you may take the later plane, slow-traveling, perhaps, but more comfortable.*
3. Use a semicolon between independent (main) clauses if a coordinating conjunction (and, but, or, for, nor, so, yet) is not present.
Ex: *I bowled 225; however, I don't do that every day.*
4. In a sentence beginning with a "that" clause from which the "that" has been omitted, a comma is sufficient between the "that" clause and the principal clause.
Ex: *Our vacation is over, I am sorry to say. (Rephrased to include the "that" clause: I am sorry to say that out vacation is over.)*
5. When a dependent (subordinate) clause precedes an independent (main) clause, set off the dependent clause by commas.
Ex: *While you are baiting my hook, I will look for more worms.*

^[1] Holmes, Robert L., *Paragraph Writing Plus*, Loyola University Press, 1989. pp 439-440

² Holmes, Robert L., *Paragraph Writing Plus*, Loyola University Press, 1989. pp 441-442.

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