Lecture 7
Punctuation, Part 2

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Commas

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We distinguish between eight correct types and two controversial types of commas. **Other commas are wrong.**

Types of Commas

Correct types:

- **listing**;
- **joining**;
- **serial**;
- **bracketing**;
- **introductory**;
- **separating**;
- **gapping**;
- **vocative**.

Controversial types:

- **splice**;
- **discretionary**.

Listing Commas

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They are also used in "**quick lists**"—e.g.:

> *Let* x, y *be real numbers.*
> *Most Polynesian languages have five vowels:* a, e, i, o, u.
> *A radical, comprehensive plan was conceived.*
> *She believed in the one, holy, universal, apostolic church of Haskell.*

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Nonparallel adjectives require no commas, as in the second example below:

> *Our method solves complex, third-order, nonlinear differential equations.*
> *Our method solves complex third-order nonlinear differential equations.*

Joining Commas

The joining comma (also called the "conjunction comma") is used between two **independent clauses** connected by *and*, *or*, or *but*.

Such commas are standard in formal writing—e.g.:

Addition is denoted by $+$, and subtraction is denoted by $-$.
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> *He entered his user name and pressed Enter.*

Joining commas can be used together with listing commas—e.g.:

> *Jane talked, Brian listened, and Alice read her emails.*

Serial Commas

The serial comma (also called the "Oxford comma") is **optionally** used before *and* (or *et*) and *or* in an **enumeration of three or more items**—e.g.:

They have offices in New York, Paris, and Tokyo.
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Serial commas are widespread in American English, especially in formal, nonjournalistic writing. In British English, they tend to be used mostly when they help parsing. Compare:

I admire my parents, Gandhi and Mother Teresa.
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Bracketing Commas

Bracketing commas (also called "interruptive commas") set off a **nonrestrictive phrase**—a phrase that could be removed without breaking the sentence.

They mark the phrase as parenthetical, although not as strongly as parentheses, and they emphasize less than long dashes—e.g.:

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Sometimes the opening or the closing comma *is* left out, if it coincides with the start or end of the sentence or with another punctuation mark.

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They can also be used around complements that we want to **parenthesize**—e.g.:

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In coordinations, bracketing commas can be used around the second term to mark it as a **parenthetical addition** or **afterthought**—e.g.:

General relativity is hard to understand, and even harder to explain.
The integers $\mathbb{Z}$ are an abelian, or commutative, group under addition.

Introductory Commas

Introductory commas are used after an adverb, adverbial phrase, or dependent clause placed at the **beginning of a clause**—e.g.:

If R is Noetherian, then R′ is Noetherian.
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This is hard to parse:

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There is no introductory comma if a sentence is inverted
(with the subject after the verb). This is wrong:

Between the Forum and the Campus Martius, is the Capitoline Hill.

Separating Commas

Separating commas stand before or after **direct speech**,
together with a verb such as *say* or *write*—e.g.:

> *Oscar Wilde wrote, "There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book."*
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No commas are needed when the quotation is **embedded** in the sentence—e.g.:

> *Yugoslavia's motto was "Brotherhood and Unity."*
> *She claimed that "technology has no value unless it makes people's lives better."*

Gapping Commas

The gapping comma indicates that some **words are omitted**.
In the following example, the comma stands for *is known*:

>   *Bangalore is known as the city of gardens; Mumbai, as the city of dreams.*

The sentence would be harder to parse without the comma.

Vocative Commas

The vocative comma is used to **address** or **invoke** someone or something—e.g.:

I know, Kim, I know.
Yes, minister.
Let's eat, grandma!

The need for this comma hardly ever arises in scientific and technical English.

Splice Commas

The splice comma **separates two clauses**. In Caesar's *I came, I saw, I conquered*, two splice commas separate three clauses. Comma splice is widely considered poor style, but sometimes it is unavoidable—e.g.:

It is peculiar, is it not?
The King is dead, long live the Queen!
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Most splice commas should be replaced by **periods** (.) or **semicolons** (;).
In the following examples, the replacement is easy:

Let $a = b$, then $a^k = b^k$.
You must register in time, otherwise you cannot take the examination.
We apologize for the repetition, however we do need your cooperation.

Discretionary Commas

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The last comma below is wrong:

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There are nevertheless circumstances where a discretionary comma is desirable to **help parsing**—e.g.:

Those who can, do; those who can't, teach.

Those responsible for sacking the people who have just been sacked, have been sacked.

Hyphens

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We distinguish between two main types of hyphens:

- The **intraword hyphen** joins two parts of a word. One part will usually be a prefix or suffix—e.g., *co-axial*, *un-English*, *mid-1990s*, *tax-free*, *20-fold*.
- The **interword hyphen** connects two words. The combined words then form a compound adjective (e.g., *well-designed*, *customer-oriented*), noun (e.g., *right-winger*), or verb (e.g., *binge-eat*).

Hyphens

Most hyphens can be avoided by joining the two word components directly
(e.g., *coaxial*) or by leaving a space (e.g., *well designed*).

- ▶ The American tendency is to avoid intraword hyphens by joining words directly.
- ▶ The British tendency is to avoid interword hyphens by using a space.

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Each hyphen plays a small role:

▶ In *non-addictive*, the hyphen **cleanly separates the prefix** *non-* from the
familiar word *addictive*, making this uncommon combination easier to parse.

▶ In *second-generation drug*, the hyphen **prevents the misreading**
second generation-drug.

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Hyphens can also help avoid ambiguity.
Distinguish between *re-prove* ("prove again") and *reprove* ("reprimand"),
between *co-op* ("cooperative," two syllables) and *coop* ("cage," one syllable).

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Prefixes and suffixes are not separate words. These are wrong: *meta language*, *non null*, *raccoon like*.

Finally, intraword hyphens are inserted between two syl-lables of a word split across two lines.

Interword Hyphens

When building compounds, we must often choose between three options:

► **hyphenated compounds** (e.g., *copy-editor*);

► **closed compounds** (e.g., *copyeditor*);

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Below, we review some general principles, but they are no substitute for a good dictionary, search engines, word frequency viewers, and sound judgment.

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What should you do about *middle school physical science curriculum*? Since the phrases *middle school* and *physical science* are established, they can be left as is. *Middle-school physical-science curriculum* would be correct but distractingly ugly.

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A similar case is that of **adverbs modifying adjectives qualifying nouns**. On the
model of *free-college plan*, you may be tempted to write *highly-sensitive information*
or *ever-stronger union*. But since adverbs modify adjectives but not nouns, these
hyphens resolve no ambiguities and are therefore undesirable. *Sensitive information*
cannot be *highly*, and a *stronger union* cannot be *ever*.

Hyphens are used to form compounds that seem to **defy the laws of grammar**.
A phrase such as *to stress test* is disallowed because a noun (*stress*) cannot modify a verb (*test*)—this would be the role of an adverb. To solve this, use a hyphen: *to stress-test*, *stress-tested*, etc. The hyphen usually disappears in related forms when it is not needed (e.g., *a stress test*, *stress testers*, *stress testing*).

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Besides "noun + verb," other problematic combinations include "adjective + verb" (e.g., *double-check*, *dry-clean*), "noun + adjective" (e.g., *vendor-specific*), and "noun + adverb" (e.g., *carbon-neutrally*). For some commonly used combinations, dictionaries record closed compounds (e.g., *to copyedit*, *to proofread*, *to spellcheck*).

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Besides enhancing readability, interword hyphens can also be used to build a **new concept** whose meaning might not be obvious from the constituent words.

Accordingly, a *bee-eater* is a bird and not just any eater of bees, and a *man-hater* is a person who hates men and not a hater who is a man. A similar convention explains *editor-in-chief*, *parent-in-law*, and *tug-of-war*. However, for some established phrases such as *black box* and *blue ice*, the hyphen is curiously missing.

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Hyphenated compounds used to be common. They appeared in *hay-stack*, *Oxford-street*, *tea-pot*, *to-day*, etc. The preference nowadays is for closed and open compounds—e.g., *haystack*, *Oxford Street*, *teapot*, *today*.

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Dictionaries can often help, and for compounds that are not recorded in them, **the preferable form is almost always the open compound**.

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- ▶ There is no awkward letter cluster justifying *farm-boy*.
- ▶ *Farm boy* literally means what it says.

The closed compound is not established, and the hyphenated form offers no benefits. By exclusion, we have *farm boy*, which is indeed about 20 times more frequent in print than either of the other two forms according to **Google Books Ngram Viewer**. (In retrospect, we could have started with that tool and saved ourselves some work.)

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An analogous but worse construction works in reverse: *Anglo-Welsh, -Scottish, and -Irish* abbreviates *Anglo-Welsh, Anglo-Scottish, and Anglo-Irish*.
When spoken, the phrase is indistinguishable from *Anglo-Welsh, Scottish, and Irish*, which is not what we mean. This alone is enough to discredit it.