

Regular Lecture 7

Punctuation, Part 2

Prof. Dr. Jasmin Blanchette

Chair of Theoretical Computer Science and
Theorem Proving

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We cover 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

Listing commas are used to separate items in **enumerations** together with *and* or *or*—e.g.:

They have offices in New York, Paris and Tokyo.

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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.

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

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

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Joining Commas

Joining commas (also called “conjunction commas”) are used, especially in formal writing, between **independent clauses** connected by *and*, *or*, or *but*—e.g.:

Addition is denoted by +, and subtraction is denoted by −.

The data are incomplete, but we can already form a plausible conjecture.

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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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We refer to Bartos, Bassalat, et al. for details.

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Serial commas are widespread in American English, especially in formal, nonjournalistic writing. In British English, they are used mostly when they help parsing. Compare:

I admire my parents, Gandhi and Mother Teresa.

I admire my parents, Gandhi, and Mother Teresa.

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 mildly parenthetical—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.

Bracketing Commas

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Her paternal grandmother, who moved to Brazil, was originally Indian.

The invasion of Kyushu was planned for X-Day, which was set for November 1.

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In conjunctions, 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.

This mode is theoretically more powerful, since it allows user interaction.

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.

Even before she was elected, the president targeted journalists she disliked.

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According to the mine worker standard safety procedures are ineffective.

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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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Notice the capitalization.

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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 comma helps parsing.

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!

Such commas hardly ever arise 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 Queen is dead, long live the King!

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Most splice commas, including those below, should be replaced by **periods** (.) or **semicolons** (;).

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.*

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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 putting 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.

Thus, *a nonaddictive second-generation drug* is mainly American, whereas *a non-addictive second generation drug* is mainly British.

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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 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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meta language, *non null*, *raccoon like*.

Finally, when splitting a word across two lines, we insert an intraword hyphen between two syllables. To find out where syllables start and end, use a dictionary.

Interword Hyphens

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

- ▶ **hyphenated compounds** (e.g., *type-checking*);
- ▶ **closed compounds** (e.g., *typechecking*);
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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 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 cannot modify nouns, these hyphens resolve no ambiguities and are therefore undesirable. *Sensitive information* cannot be *highly*, and a *stronger union* cannot be *ever*.

Interword Hyphens

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 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*).

Interword Hyphens

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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Consider *farm boy*. It could also plausibly be written as *farm-boy* or *farmboy*.
But:

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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.)

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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*.