Punctuation Quick Guide

- This Quick Guide will cover the most common punctuation errors in writing.

**The Semi-Colon:**

A semi-colon can be used to separate two complete, closely related sentences.

Example: The participants in the first study were paid; those in the second study were unpaid.

You also use a semi-colon to separate elements in a list that already contain a comma.

Example: The rate of homelessness has increased in some cities including Los Angeles, California; Seattle, Washington; San Jose, California.

**Periods, Exclamation Marks, and Question Marks:**

Periods are used to separate two complete sentences. Periods signal the end of one thought and the beginning of a new thought.

Question marks are used to indicate a question at the end of a sentence; however, try to avoid using questions in academic writing. Instead, rephrase the question into a statement.

Exclamation marks signal excitement or emphasis that is not appropriate for an APA grad school paper, and therefore should not be used.

**When to Use a Comma:**

Commas have the most rules associated with them, but are most often used to separate two clauses, to indicate items in a list, or to introduce a name or date. Below are comma rules to know.

1. **Listing:** when including one, two, or three different things.

2. **After an introductory element,** a comma is appropriate if the rest of the sentence can stand alone as an independent clause.

3. Commas can be used before a concluding element, as long as the portion before the comma works as a sentence (independent clause) by itself.

4. Around interrupters, which are parts of a sentence that can be taken out from the middle while still leaving a complete sentence, commas are useful to show where the interrupter begins and ends.

5. **Commas can be used to join two complete sentences,** but a FANBOYS word (coordinating conjunction-for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so) must be used after the comma.
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6. Often, these tricky, complicated, annoying commas can be used to separate adjectives describing the same noun.

**When Not to Use a Comma:**

Do not use a comma to separate the subject from the verb.
INCORRECT: The 18-year-old client, is having suicidal ideations.

Do not use a comma in between two verbs or verb phrases:
INCORRECT: She laid out her paper, and began to study.

Do not use a comma in between a complete sentence and a fragment joined by a coordinating conjunction.
INCORRECT: Maria told me a writing coach appointment was still available, and that the help they give is invaluable.

Do not put a comma after the main clause if the subordinating clause follows.
INCORRECT: The group found a way to pass time, while, they waited for the professor feedback.

Do not put a comma in front of ‘that.’ ‘That’ signals an essential part of the sentence.
INCORRECT: The client didn’t like the social worker, that was assigned to him.

Do not put a comma in front of a prepositional phrase:
INCORRECT: He made it, to the internship right on time.