

# Good Writing Practice

## Syntactic punctuation distraction

### Comma: Misusage

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#### Introduction

If the punctuation is distracting, so is the syntax. Often a comma is misused (not sufficiently explicit) for its intended function especially in the presence of another comma with a different function. Consequently, a stronger (1. semicolon, 2. colon), weaker (3. parentheses) mark of punctuation, or a lexical marker (4. direct statement) is necessary for clarity.

#### Stronger marks of punctuation

##### **Example 1: Semicolon**

(Material and Methods section)  
*Blowwhittaker, Boston, MA*

##### **Revision**

*Blowwhittaker; Boston, MA*

#### Notes

At the phrase level, a semicolon is useful to separate syntactic units one of which contains an internal comma.

The semicolon, a visual hybrid of a period and a comma, is intermediate in explicitness between a comma and a period. The period marks the end of a sentence; the semicolon marks an interrelation between independent clauses of a compound sentence and between syntactic units in apposition.

##### **Example 2: Colon**

(Results section: results statement)  
*This sensitivity correlated with enhanced T-cell accumulation in CCL25 expression sites, the intestinal epithelium, and the intestinal lamina propria.*



##### **Revision**

*This sensitivity correlated with enhanced T-cell accumulation in CCL25 expression sites: the intestinal epithelium, and the intestinal lamina propria.*

##### **Notes**

The pattern at first seems to be three objects (*sites, epithelium, and propria*) of the preposition *in*. However, a more explicit mark (colon) is necessary to distinguish the forecasting noun *sites* from the following two appositives. Unless the

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reader immediately knows that the intestinal epithelium and the lamina propria are CCL25 expression sites, the comma after *sites* mis-marks the first of three sites for T-cell accumulation.

A colon would be disruptive between core constituents of a sentence such as a transitive verb and direct object (*measures included: the Fugl-Meyer assessment*). Disruption is also a consequence between a present participle and its object (*several measurements including: the irregularity index*), and between a preposition and its object (*such as: approaches*).

For another perspective, a complete sentence should precede a colon. Thus, 'the following' is often added (*measurements including the following:*)

### Weaker mark of punctuation

#### Example 3: Parentheses

(Introduction section: Research problem)

Although the complex movement in tennis depends on many factors, such as players' somatic traits, grip force, and sometimes mental status, many researchers propose to investigate a variety of scaling variables for lower limbs, such as joint laxity, soft-tissue flexibility, and power output.

#### Revision

Although the complex movement in tennis depends on many factors (e.g., players' somatic traits, grip force, and sometimes mental status) many researchers propose to investigate a variety of scaling variables for lower limbs (e.g., joint laxity, soft-tissue flexibility, and power output).

#### Notes

In the Example, the commas segregating the examples of *factors* and *scaling variables for lower*

*limbs* are not distinguishable from the commas between the examples. In contrast, the parentheses explicitly segregate the secondary information from the primary.

Without the *e.g.*, the list would appear complete because of the *and*.

There is a punctuational hierarchy to differentiate secondary parenthetical information: em-dash (emphasis); comma (slight emphasis); parentheses (deemphasis).

### Lexical marking instead of punctuation

#### Example 4: Past participial phrase

(Introduction section: Research problem background)

Membrane-bound granules, which are caused by peroxidation, are composed of lipofuscin.

#### Revision

Membrane-bound granules, most frequently caused by peroxidation, are composed of lipofuscin.

### Notes

The comma segregating the adjective clause initiated by *which* is intended to mark extra information, not to restrict the meaning to a subgroup (usually marked by a comma-less *that are*). This non-restrictiveness of the adjective clause inexplicitly indicates that all membrane-bound granules are formed by peroxidation. However, such non-restrictive marking is often unknown by readers (and even the authors) necessitating the use of an explicit lexical modifier (adverb participial phrase) to clarify meaning.

Another example of inexplicit non-restrictive meaning *My brother, Harvey, is a physician* tests the subtlety of non-restrictive marking; that is, when questioned about how many brothers the punctuation indicates, even English as first language graduate students are unsure. The commas are intended to convey that the name *Harvey* is not necessary to indicate that there is more than one brother.

It would be immediately clear to write *Harvey, my only brother, is a physician* or *Harvey, one of my two brothers, is a physician*.

### Tabular Summary

The indicated replacement markers indicate that usage of either specific punctuation or a specific lexical modifier can clarify an inexplicit comma.

Misused comma	Revision	Replacement
1. Company, City, State	Company; City, State	Semicolon
2. Category, tissue, tissue	Category: tissue, tissue	Colon
3. Category, example, example, example	Category (example, example, example)	Parentheses
4. Noun, non-restrictive which-fronted adjective clause	Noun lexical modifier	Superlative adverb + past participial phrase



This is called the hash, pound, or number character. A hashtag is a keyword or set of keywords that is preceded by the # character. It is used in social media to create a thread of conversations around a specific theme or topic conveyed in short texts or microblogs. It is commonly used in Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, Pinterest, etc.

A dictionary of most common hashtags can be found at <https://www.hashtags.org/definition/~h/>.

For your info, EMWA is compiling a list of standardised hashtags for our social media use.



This is called the "at" sign or symbol. The @ sign is part of email addresses and social media user names ("handles"). Our EMWA handles are as follows: @Official\_EMWA (Twitter), @EMWA (LinkedIn), and @europeanmedicalwritersassociation (Facebook)

The two most important keys on your keyboard