

There are ten punctuation questions on the ACT.

Commas (,)**Use a Comma to Set Off Introductory Clauses or Phrases.**

Use commas in these examples. The beginning clauses or phrases are introductory.

Incorrect: Before he began preparing for the ACT Ed talked to his advisor.

Correct: Before he began preparing for the ACT, Ed talked to his advisor.

Incorrect: Well I guess there is no way to tell when we can go swimming.

Correct: Well, I guess there is no way to tell when we can go swimming.

Incorrect: To get to the high school make a left on High Street.

Correct: To get to the high school, make a left on High Street.

A comma is not required after a short introductory prepositional phrase if the meaning is clear:

Correct: In September I'll leave home for college.

Do not use commas in these examples. The beginning clauses or phrases are not introductory.

Incorrect: Ed talked to his advisor, before he began preparing for the ACT.

Correct: Ed talked to his advisor before he began preparing for the ACT.

Incorrect: Make a left on High Street, to get to the high school.

Correct: Make a left on High Street to get to the high school.

Use a Comma Before a Conjunction That Begins a Clause.

Conjunctions: and, but, for, or, nor

Conjunctive word pairs: either...or, neither...nor, not only...but also

Clause: Part of a sentence that could be a sentence itself

Use a comma in this example:

Incorrect: I was in school on time but I was late for homeroom.

Correct: I was in school on time, but I was late for homeroom.

Use Commas to Set Off Parenthetical Expressions

A parenthetical expression does not provide essential information and it interrupts the flow of a sentence.

Use commas in these examples:

Incorrect: My brother who loves to play soccer wants to be a teacher.

Correct: My brother, who loves to play soccer, wants to be a teacher.

Incorrect: Last summer when I turned 16 I spent a month at a lake.

Correct: Last summer when I turned 16, I spent a month at a lake.

Do not use commas in these examples:

Incorrect: The girls, who play soccer, will miss the last class.

Correct: The girls who play soccer will miss the last class.
[The words "who play soccer" provide essential information.]

Incorrect: Everyone, who takes the ACT, should read this book.

Correct: Everyone who takes the ACT should read this book.
[The words "who takes the ACT" provide essential information.]

Use a Comma to Separate Items in a List

Use a comma in these examples:

Incorrect: The plane entered a long slow spiral.

Correct: The plane entered a long, slow spiral.

Incorrect: Pat liked warm soft breezy nights.

Correct: Pat liked warm, soft, breezy nights.

Incorrect: Ed liked his eggs poached his toast buttered and his coffee black.

Correct: Ed liked his eggs poached, his toast buttered, and his coffee black.

Do not use a comma in this example:

Incorrect: Ralph drove to the ACT test site in a bright, red convertible.

Correct: Ralph drove to the ACT test site in a bright red convertible.
[The word "bright" describes the color red, not the convertible.]

Semicolons and Colons

Semicolon (;)

Use a semicolon to connect independent clauses when the independent clauses are not connected by a conjunction.

Incorrect: The students entered the room, the ACT booklets were handed out.

Correct: The students entered the room; the ACT booklets were handed out.

Incorrect: The bird soared the fish swam.

Correct: The bird soared; the fish swam.

Do not use a semicolon in these examples:

Incorrect: Henry finished studying for the ACT; but he still had to take the test.

Correct: Henry finished studying for the ACT, but he still had to take the test.
[These two clauses are connected by a conjunction.]

Incorrect: Before he went home; Henry returned the Amsco ACT book to the library.

Correct: Before he went home, Henry returned the Amsco ACT book to the library.
["Before he went home" is an introductory clause.]

Colon (:)

Place a colon after an independent clause to introduce a list or illustration.

Incorrect: Bring these items to the ACT, an admission ticket, pencils, erasers, and a watch.

Correct: Bring these items to the ACT: an admission ticket, pencils, erasers, and a watch.

Incorrect: There is only one necessary personal trait, perseverance.

Correct: There is only necessary personal trait: perseverance.

Do not use a colon in these examples:

Incorrect: You should bring: an admission ticket, pencils, erasers, and a watch to the ACT.

Correct: You should bring an admission ticket, pencils, erasers, and a watch to the ACT.

Parentheses ()

Use parentheses to set off explanations or definitions, as in these examples:

Incorrect: The atmosphere on Venus the planet is not habitable is not like the atmosphere here on Earth.

Correct: The atmosphere on Venus (the planet is not habitable) is not like the atmosphere here on Earth.
[The words "the planet is not habitable" explain something about Venus.]

Incorrect: There is a paucity, scarcity, of information about the most distant parts of the galaxy.

Correct: There is a paucity (scarcity) of information about the most distant parts of the galaxy.
[The word "scarcity" defines paucity.]

Apostrophe (')

An apostrophe indicates a missing letter or letters in a contraction.

Incorrect

Correct

wont	won't (will not)
dont	don't (do not)
isnt	isn't (is not)
lets	let's (let us)
its	it's (it is)

The spelling "its" is correct for the possessive personal pronoun.

Use an apostrophe and the letter **s** after a singular noun to form the possessive unless the 's makes pronunciation too cumbersome.

Incorrect

Correct

Bens father	Ben's father
Carls' cat	Carl's cat
Louis' car	Louis's car
Moses's sister	Moses' sister

Use an apostrophe after a regular plural noun to form the possessive.

Incorrect

Correct

animal's rights	animals' rights
driver's education	drivers' education
colonies's products	colonies' products

Use an apostrophe to form the possessive of indefinite pronouns but not personal pronouns.

Incorrect

everyones' shoes
anyones' guess
it's history
her's shoes

Correct

everyone's shoes
anyone's guess
its history
her shoes

Periods, Question Marks, and Exclamation Points

Period (.)

Use the period to end a sentence unless the sentence is a question, a short interjection, or a command.

Examples:

I'm not sure what you mean by that.
That was a great play.
Never leave blank the answer choice for an ACT question.
You shouldn't touch a hot stove.

Question Mark (?)

Use a question mark after a direct question.

Examples:

What do you mean by that?
What time is it?
"Are you going to the prom?" he asked.

Exclamation Point (!)

Use an exclamation point at the end of a short interjection or a command.

Examples:

Great play!
Don't touch that!

Quotation Marks

Place double quotation marks around direct quotations.

Place single quotation marks around quotations within quotations.

Indirect quotations describe what has been said but not the speaker's exact words. Do not place quotation marks around indirect quotations.

Incorrect: The teacher turned to the class and said Let's talk about quotation marks.

Correct: The teacher turned to the class and said, "Let's talk about quotation marks."
[Enclose direct quotes in quotation marks.]

Incorrect: "When I think about history," the teacher said, "Lincoln's words "four score and seven years ago" always come to mind."

Correct: "When I think about history," the teacher said, "Lincoln's words 'four score and seven years ago' always come to mind."
[Lincoln's words inside another quote are enclosed with single quotation marks.]

Incorrect: Lincoln's words about the "obscurity of his address" turned out to be false.

Correct: Lincoln's words about the obscurity of his address turned out to be false.
[Remove the quotation marks from the indirect quote.]

Place periods and commas following a quotation inside the quotation marks.

Place semicolons and colons outside quotation marks.

Place question marks and exclamation points inside quotation marks if they belong to the quotation.

Incorrect: "I am taking the ACT next month", John said.

Correct: "I am taking the ACT next month," John said.
[Place the following comma within the quotation marks.]

Incorrect: A person who took the test said, "Don't leave any answers blank;" he added "That is one of the most important strategies."

Correct: A person who took the test said, "Don't leave any answers blank"; he added, "That is one of the most important strategies."
[Place the semicolon after the quotation marks.]

Incorrect: Who wrote, "To be, or not to be; that is the question?"

Correct: Who wrote, "To be, or not to be; that is the question?"
[The question mark is not part of the quote. Place it outside the quotation marks.]