



THE MECHANICS OF WRITING



Introduction

The **mechanics of writing** refers to the conventions, such as punctuation and capitalization, that help writing be read and understood. In earlier years, students were introduced to capitalization and where it is called for in written work. Students were introduced to common **punctuation marks**, symbols used to separate words, phrases, clauses, and sentences, add emphasis, and clarify meaning, and practiced punctuating sentences and paragraphs. At the upper elementary level, students begin writing and

reading sentences that are more complicated and require other marks of punctuation. These are the focus of this section.

Note to the Teacher

For more detailed information about the period, comma, question mark, exclamation mark, hyphen, apostrophe, and quotation marks, teachers can refer to the NAMC Lower Elementary Language Arts manual.



Punctuation

Background Information

Punctuation not only helps writers clarify meaning and establish tone, but also helps readers understand what and how the writer wishes to communicate. Proper punctuation is essential to clear and effective writing.

By the time they reach the upper elementary stage, most Montessori students will have become accustomed to using common punctuation marks such as the period, comma, question mark, exclamation mark, hyphen, apostrophe, and double quotation marks. Since students will see and use these punctuation marks every day, teachers need only observe to ensure that students understand and can use them correctly. Students experiencing difficulty in using one of these common punctuation marks correctly can receive a presentation providing opportunities to review.

Teachers can also help by encouraging students in their reading to think about punctuation marks. How are they used? How do they add interest to a story, poem, or essay? By noticing and discussing punctuation marks in writing they encounter, students will develop a better understanding of how and when punctuation marks are used and find it easier to use correct and effective punctuation in their own writing.

This section begins with a look at how the use of commas expands as the students explore more complicated sentences. The section then describes some punctuation

Did You Know?

- The word punctuation comes from the Latin word *punctuare*, which means to mark with points or dots.
- All written languages have their own punctuation traditions, and these are often very different from those used in English. For example, in German, nouns are capitalized. In Spanish, exclamatory and interrogative sentences are introduced with inverted punctuation. Example: ¡Buen provecho! (Enjoy your meal!)

Did You Know?

An American poet and painter became famous for his eccentric punctuation and phrasing. Edwin Estlin Cummings (1894–1962) had such a reputation for varying the rules that some publishers thought he had legally changed his name to e.e. cummings (all lowercase). This was not the case, although Cummings did not seem to mind when his name was published in lowercase.

marks that will be new to many students. Finally, the section will provide basic information on writing and punctuating effective business letters and emails.

Note to the Teacher

On NAMC's Curriculum Support Material, the teacher will find a list of prepared simple, complex, compound, and compound-complex sentences that may be printed and revised as needed for presenting punctuation activities. The teacher will also find a sheet of large-font punctuation marks that can be printed onto transparency film and cut into small strips for students working with punctuation review exercises on index cards. (While punctuation marks can certainly be cut out of paper, small paper strips can be awkward to handle and obscure letters and words in the sentences to which they are being applied.)



Expanded Uses for Commas

As the section on sentence analysis in the NAMC 9–12 Language Arts 1 manual discusses, students at the upper elementary level start working with more complicated kinds of sentences, such as compound, complex, and compound-complex. Each kind of sentence involves conventions in punctuation, especially in the use of commas. Here are some examples:

- In compound sentences, a comma is usually used before the coordinating conjunction, especially when the clauses are longer than a few words each. Example: He washed all the dishes and wiped the counters, and I sorted the papers and jars for recycling.
- In complex sentences, when the dependent clause precedes the independent clause, the dependent clause is followed by a comma. Example: After she finished making a sketch in pencil, she began adding color with paint.
- In sentences preceded by a prepositional phrase that is long or that might create confusion with the subject, the phrase is usually followed by a comma. Examples: Between his birthday and the first day of school, rain fell every day. At the beginning, classes were held in the annex.

Students will soon discover that the comma is indeed the most frequently used punctuation mark in the English language! Commas are commonly used after words that introduce independent clauses, such as conjunctive adverbs, transitional

expressions, interjections at the beginning of a sentence, and terms of address. Here are some examples:

- with a conjunctive adverb: My sister usually practices the tuba after school; however, today she and her band have gone to buy music. (“however” is the conjunctive adverb)
- with a transitional expression: Some people demonstrated what they had learned in the dance lesson. For example, Lee and Max demonstrated a beautiful waltz step, and Lesley and Sam performed an energetic jive. (“For example” is the transitional expression)
- with an interjection at the beginning of a sentence: Yes, we will leave immediately. No, we will not take our binders.
- with a term of address: Mali, please put your boots in the closet. Thank you, dear, for making that cup of tea.

Commas have other common uses, such as these:

- to enclose non-restrictive appositives. Examples: By the time we reached Cleveland, Ohio, we were hungry. We decided to ask Ernesto, the traveler we had met that morning, to join us for dinner.
- to separate parts of an address in a sentence. Example: Please send the package to Ms. Sari Lore, 125 Crater Court, Orlando, Florida 12345.
- to enclose the year in a specific date. Example: On October 14, 2023, our family celebrated a special event.

(However, if only the month and year is given, and no specific day, no comma is needed. Example: We celebrated something special in October 2023. We had started preparing in summer 2022.)

- to clarify numbers with four or more digits. Examples: \$4,990; 2,325 km; 8,000 nails; 4,500,000 orbits. However, commas are not used when referring to four-digit years (e.g., 1867, 1992, 2003) or to page numbers and street addresses (e.g., page 2365, 59917 Castle Street).
- to separate terms usually used together. Examples: The boards for the walls of the new shed measured 5 ft, 8 inches. My part in the play comes in Act 1, Scene 2, line 8. We found what we were looking for in Chapter 7, page 186.
- to add a title to a person’s name. Example: This letter is addressed to Janelle Kunin, M.D., and Ross Parker, Ph.D.
- to open and close informal letters. Examples: Dear _____, Sincerely yours, Best regards, Affectionately,
- to indicate who is speaking in dialogue. Example: “It’s too bad,” she said, “that I forgot to bring my band music today.”

Like other aspects of writing, conventions involving commas can change over time and are not always used by everyone in the same way. One example is **serial commas** (also called series commas), the use of a series of commas to separate each item in a list of grammatically equivalent words, phrases, or clauses. For many years, most grammarians did not use a comma before

the coordinating conjunction in a list of three or more items unless leaving out the comma created confusion in the sentence. Example: I looked for apples, oranges and mangoes, while he looked for squash, celery, onions, potatoes and yams.

However, because the convention about serial commas did not apply to every instance, people were often unsure about how many commas were needed to make a long list clear. Gradually, many grammarians began recommending serial commas for all lists of three or more items. In the example

just shown, every item is now usually followed by a comma, right up to the last item: I brought apples, oranges, and mangoes, while he brought squash, celery, onions, potatoes, and yams.

A chart in this section summarizes the common uses for commas.

Did You Know?

Another interesting use for commas involves separating **coordinate adjectives**, two or more adjectives that modify the same noun. Example: The smiling, wiggling baby charmed everyone in the room.

Sometimes it is difficult for people to tell the difference between coordinate adjectives and **non-coordinate adjectives**, a situation where two or more adjectives appear to modify the same noun, but actually one adjective modifies the other. Non-coordinate adjectives are not separated by commas, and in most cases, non-coordinate adjectives must appear in a certain order to make sense. Example: The high germinating temperature required by that plant makes it almost impossible to grow. In this sentence, “high” modifies the adjective “germinating,” and it is not possible to reverse the order of these non-coordinate adjectives and still have the sentence make sense.

Grammarians use two helpful tests to tell the difference between coordinate and non-coordinate adjectives and apply the appropriate punctuation:

- If the order of the adjectives can be reversed without changing meaning or creating nonsense, separate the adjectives with a comma. For example, there is little difference in meaning between these sentences: The smiling, wiggling baby charmed everyone in the room. The wiggling, smiling baby charmed everyone in the room.
- If “and” can be inserted between the adjectives, separate the adjectives with a comma. For example, it is possible to say this: The smiling and wiggling baby charmed everyone in the room.

ACTIVITY 1

Exploring Expanded Uses for Commas

By the time we reached Cleveland,
Ohio, we were hungry.

(sentence containing a non-restrictive appositive)

By the time we reached Cleveland,
Ohio, we were hungry.



Purpose

To recognize where commas are needed in sentences for sense and clarity.

Material

Whiteboard and marker.

Short sample of any text heavily punctuated with commas (for example, a few paragraphs from a story with dialogue), one copy per student.

Twenty or more commas, each printed on a strip of transparency film.

Set of 30 or more pairs of prepared index cards. One card in each pair will show an example of a sentence containing a comma. Below the sentence (in parentheses) will appear a brief statement of the grammatical situation that requires the comma. The other card in the pair will show the same sentence, but with commas removed (other punctuation, such as periods, retained). Make two or more pairs for each of these grammatical situations: (1)

compound sentence; (2) complex sentence; (3) sentence preceded by a long prepositional phrase; (4) sentence containing a conjunctive adverb; (5) sentence containing a transitional expression; (6) sentence containing an interjection at the beginning; (7) sentence containing a term of address; (8) sentence containing a non-restrictive appositive; (9) sentence containing a specific date and year; (10) sentence containing numbers with four or more digits; (11) sentence containing a title after a person's name; (12) sentence containing dialogue; (13) sentence containing a list of grammatically equivalent words, phrases, or clauses; (14) sentence containing two coordinate adjectives; (15) sentence containing two non-coordinate adjectives.

Summary chart, Common uses for commas (see NAMC's CSM).

Teacher-prepared review sheet, Identifying where commas are needed (template available on NAMC's CSM).

Teacher-prepared review sheet: Practicing inserting commas where needed (template available on NAMC's CSM).

Language Arts journals and pencils.

Presentation

- Most Montessori teachers introduce this concept later in Year 4 and gradually present in more detail in Years 5 and 6, as students learn about new grammatical concepts (e.g., complex sentences). To allow opportunity for introduction or review of grammatical situations that require commas, this activity is presented in parts.
- Announce that the students will have the opportunity to explore many interesting uses for the comma.

Introduction

- Review what the comma looks like and its usual role in a sentence (makes the reader pause).
- Invite the students to suggest some sentences that contain commas. Write the sentences on the whiteboard, then review the role of the comma in each sentence.
- Distribute the sample of text heavily punctuated with commas. Ask the students to pay particular attention to the commas. Ask the students to point to a few examples of where a comma is used and describe how the comma affects its sentence.

- Invite a student to read aloud the first sentence of the sample, making sure to pause slightly at the comma. Then invite other students to continue reading aloud, one sentence at a time.
- Repeat, but this time invite the students to read the sample as though the commas were removed. Discuss the results. How did the absence of commas affect the ability of the students to read? How did the absence of commas affect the sense of the text?

Common Uses for Commas

- Explain that as students work with more complicated sentences, they will encounter more uses for commas.
- Choose six pairs of prepared index cards, each pair showing a different example of a grammatical situation that requires a comma. Select sentences suitable for the students' experience and skills. For example, for Year 4 students, start with three uses of commas with which the students are familiar in their reading, such as in dialogue, after dependent clauses, and to separate items in a list. Sort the cards into two piles: sentences with commas and sentences without commas.
- Demonstrate the first prepared index card showing a sentence with a comma. Example: By the time we reached Cleveland, Ohio, we were hungry.

- Invite a student to read the sentence aloud. Discuss the grammatical situation that requires a comma (or commas) in the sentence. (The commas are needed to clarify the non-restrictive appositive.) Review grammatical terms as needed. If needed, define and discuss new terms. Turn the card over.
- Ask a student to look in the second pile for the second card of the pair. This card will show the same sentence just discussed, but without commas.
- Invite a student to read this second card aloud, then describe the effect of removing the comma (or commas) from the sentence.
- Demonstrate the comma strips. Invite a student to place one of these commas wherever a comma is needed in the sentence. When the student has finished, turn over the first card of the pair and invite the student to self-correct.
- Repeat this process with the remaining pairs of cards.
- In successive activities, present additional pairs of cards, up to three grammatical situations at a time, until all have been discussed.
- Encourage the students to use the cards and comma strips later for review. A student can shuffle the cards into two piles (with commas and without commas), choose a sentence without commas, then place comma strips wherever the student thinks commas are

needed. The student can check his/her answer on the matching card showing commas.

- Ask the students to use their journals to write two new examples of sentences using commas in the grammatical situations discussed in the activity.

Further Review

- When all of the common uses for commas have been presented, demonstrate the summary chart, Common uses for commas. Review the chart briefly with the students, and encourage the students to refer to the chart when carrying out projects.
- Demonstrate the review sheet, Identifying where commas are needed, and work through a few examples with the students. Encourage the students to use the review sheet as another way of practicing identifying where commas are needed.
- Demonstrate the review sheet, Practicing inserting commas where needed, and work through a few examples with the students. Encourage the students to use the review sheet as another way of practicing inserting commas.
- Ask the students to write ten sentences using commas in a variety of different ways. Encourage the students to use contrasting colors for the commas.