

Commas for lists

Commas can be used within sentences – between the opening capital letter and the concluding full stop – to separate items in a list.

The punctuation pattern looks something like this:

A , , , and/or .

For example:

We packed the picnic basket with sandwiches, fruit, bottled water and wet wipes.

When they saw the sea the children hurried, scurried, frolicked and tumbled across the beach to get to it.

In Kipling's famous story, the elephant's child found the great, grey-green, greasy Limpopo River.

They crept forward slowly, cautiously, quietly and in terror.

We are looking for actors, dancers, singers or strong all-round performers.

Notice two things:

- Word lists separated by commas can be nouns, verbs, adjectives or adverbs.
- You do *not* need a comma after the last item in the list or before 'and' (or sometimes 'or').

Addresses on envelopes are usually now written without punctuation.

Always remember that the purpose of punctuation is to make meaning clearer. For example, 'I like cooking my cat and my family' means something rather different from 'I like cooking, my cat and my family'.

Exercise

Create eight sentences on the opposite page. Each sentence should contain a list of words separated by commas – two each for nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs.

1 _____

_____ (2)

2 _____

_____ (2)

3 _____

_____ (2)

4 _____

_____ (2)

5 _____

_____ (2)

6 _____

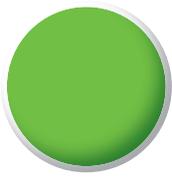
_____ (2)

7 _____

_____ (2)

8 _____

_____ (2)



Semicolons for lists

Sometimes a list gets complex. Instead of consisting of single items, it includes additional information about each item.

You might write the following sentence that uses commas:

I went to the supermarket and bought oranges, bananas, pears and cherries.

If, on the other hand, you want to write a more complex list, you will need commas within each item:

I went the supermarket and bought:
... oranges, Granny's favourite
... bananas because Paul, Rosie and I all like them with ice cream
... pears, several varieties, which all work well in smoothies
... and freshly picked cherries, succulent and shiny as they lay in their box.

In this case, you should use semicolons to separate the items:

I went to the supermarket and bought oranges, Granny's favourite; bananas because Paul, Rosie and I all like them with ice cream; pears, several varieties, which all work well in smoothies and freshly picked cherries, succulent and shiny as they lay in their box.

Note that you don't need a semicolon with the 'and' that comes before the final item ('freshly picked cherries').

Note too that you do not need a capital letter after a semicolon – other than for a proper noun – because you are in the middle of a sentence.

Semi-colons used to be used a great deal. See the writing of Charles Dickens or Jane Austen, for example. Over the years, semi-colons have gradually disappeared. Apart from, very occasionally, in a complex list, it is probably better not to use them. Good writers now use less punctuation than their predecessors did.

Exercise

- 1 Punctuate this sentence with commas and semicolons.

There were white-tusked old males with fallen leaves and nuts and twigs lying in the wrinkles of their necks and the folds of their ears fat slow-footed she-elephants with restless little pinky black calves only three or four feet high running under their stomachs young elephants with their tusks just beginning to show and very proud of them lanky scraggy old female elephants savage old bull elephants and there was one with a broken tusk and the marks of the full-stroke the terrible drawing scrape of a tiger's claws on his side. (7)

Adapted from *The Jungle Book* by Rudyard Kipling (1894)

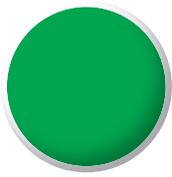
- 2 Write two long sentences of your own using semicolons to divide a complex list.

(a) _____

 _____ (2)

(b) _____

 _____ (2)



Collective nouns

Collective nouns are words used for a group or set of something:

- pack of cards
- pod of whales
- orchestra (of players)
- gang of thieves

A collective noun is singular, so:

- The orchestra played under **its** conductor at Fairfield Halls.
- Farmer Smith has a flock of sheep which **grazes** in his paddock.

Of course, if there is more than one of the collective noun, it is plural:

- We heard three different orchestras under **their** various conductors at Fairfield Halls.
- Last week Farmer Smith bought Farmer Wright's flock so now two flocks **graze** in his paddock.

'Two' means 2. 'Too' means too much of something. (We were too full to eat pudding.) Or it means in addition to. (I think so too.) Use 'to' in every other case.

Lovely is an adjective, not an adverb. 'That's a lovely dress.' 'Her singing is lovely.' (Not, 'She sings lovely'.)

Exercise

- 1 Draw lines to link each of the following collective nouns with what it refers to.

division	beavers	
cete	geese	
company	lions	
pride	witches	
quiver	ships	
colony	soldiers	
parliament	badgers	
fleet	actors	
coven	owls	
gaggle	arrows	(10)

2 Use each of the collective nouns above in a sentence of your own. Use some of them as plurals.

(a) _____
 _____ (2)

(b) _____
 _____ (2)

(c) _____
 _____ (2)

(d) _____
 _____ (2)

(e) _____
 _____ (2)

(f) _____
 _____ (2)

(g) _____
 _____ (2)

(h) _____
 _____ (2)

(i) _____
 _____ (2)

(j) _____
 _____ (2)