

Clients' Top 5 Grammar Questions (and answers)

1. Who or whom?

Sadly, even grammar experts can get this one wrong (and do). Though the who/whom distinction can be tricky, master it by remembering two words that don't begin with "w": subject and object.

Use "who" when you're referring to the subject of a clause (the person taking action) and "whom" when you're referring to the object of a clause (the thing/person being acted upon).

Examples:

Our admissions counselors support our students, all of whom go on to attend the world's leading colleges. *[The counselors are taking action, while the students are being acted upon.]*

Our students, who go on to attend the world's leading colleges, work closely with our admissions counselors. *[Here, the students are taking action.]*

2. Affect or effect?

If you can get it to stick, the key to using these two words correctly is simple: "Effect" is a noun, and "affect" is a verb (think "a" for "action" if you can't remember which is which). Affect means to influence. Effect means a result or consequence.*

Examples:

Our teachers affect our students in very positive ways.

Students experience the lasting effects of our academic program for years to come.

**Exceptions to the rule: In very rare instances, "effect" can be a verb, meaning "to bring about" (e.g., she effected change) and "affect" can be a noun, meaning mood (e.g., she had a cheerful affect).*

3. To hyphenate or not to hyphenate?

That is *always* the question, though there aren't always definitive answers. More often than not, the answer is, "it depends." So, here are some general guidelines:

- Use a hyphen if the sentence would be unclear without it (e.g., "we train our students to be small business owners" vs. "we train our students to be small-business owners").
- Use a hyphen when a compound modifier—two or more words that express one concept—precedes a noun (e.g., "students' long-term goals"); however, if one of the words is an adverb that ends in "ly," do not use a hyphen (e.g., "a successfully completed program").
- Use a hyphen to avoid duplicated vowels or tripled consonants (e.g., anti-intellectual, shell-like).
- Use a hyphen when numbers are spelled out (e.g., twenty-two).

4. Comma or semi-colon?

In the case of comma vs. semi-colon, assigning the proper punctuation isn't as easy as should be. The trick? Determining whether or not you're joining two independent clauses, and whether or not you're using a conjunction to join them (e.g., and, but, yet, or, nor, for, so).

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If you're using a conjunction to join two independent clauses, you'll need a comma (think "c" for "comma" and "conjunction").

To identify an independent clause, cover up the first part of the sentence and the conjunction. Can the second part of the sentence, after the conjunction, stand alone as its own sentence? If it can, insert a comma. If it can't, no comma necessary.

Example:

Our students are dedicated to their studies and think independently.
 ["Think independently" can't stand alone as its own sentence, so no comma.]

Our students think outside the box, and they use and develop their creativity in the classroom.
 ["They use and develop..." could stand alone as its own sentence, so a comma is necessary.]

Use a semi-colon to join two independent clauses *without* a conjunction.

Example:

Our students think outside the box; they use and develop their creativity in the classroom.

While commas are generally used in lists or a series to separate items, if the series is long, or individual segments contain commas, use semi-colons to separate items instead.

Example:

We believe the following: a high-quality education is individualized, broad-based, and challenging; faculty should push students out of their comfort zones; students should always try something new.

5. When do you use a serial comma?

Serial commas aren't for everyone, but they certainly won't kill you. Bad puns aside, the serial comma is the comma that precedes the conjunction in a series of items.

Example:

Students think creatively, strive for excellence, and challenge themselves.
 [The serial comma is the comma that comes before "and."]

The Chicago Manual of Style mandates the use of the serial comma in all instances. However, the *AP Stylebook*, used primarily by journalists, dictates that the serial comma not be used.*

Example:

Students think creatively, strive for excellence and challenge themselves.

*Exception to the AP Style rule: If segments of the series contain commas and/or conjunctions, a serial comma should be used for clarity. Example: Students think creatively, independently and discerningly, strive for excellence, and challenge themselves.

No matter which style your school prefers, make sure you use—or don't use—the serial comma consistently throughout all print and web materials.