BOISE ◆ STATE
U N I V E R S I T Y
WRITING CENTER

Hierarchy of Punctuation Marks

PUNCTUATION	DEGREE OF SEPARATION & EMPHASIS	RELATIONSHIPS	BETWEEN COMPLETE SENTENCES?	BETWEEN PARTS OF A SENTENCE?
Section (text gap)	Highest	Indicates a move to a new major section.		
Paragraph break	Higher	Indicates a move to a new topic. A paragraph break can sometimes be used for emphasis.		
Sentence final (. ? !)	High	Indicates the end of a sentence.	Yes.	No, except when creating an intentional (rhetorical) fragment.
Semicolon (;)	Medium high	Creates an anticipatory "question" to "answer" relationship.	Yes.	Only when separating parts of a series with internal punctuation.
Colon (:)	Medium	Signals a move from general to specific.	Yes.	Yes, but a complete sentence usually precedes the colon.
Dash (—)	Medium	Sometimes signals a move from specific to general. Also used for mid-sentence emphasis.	Yes, in less formal contexts.	Yes. A dash can go almost anywhere for emphasis—usually between phrases.
Comma (,)	Low	Separates major sentence components or provides clarity.	Yes, with *and, but,* etc.; or if an intentional comma splice is permitted.	Yes. But beware of separating required sentence components (e.g., subject and verb) with a single comma.
Zero (spaces between words)	Low	Can often be chosen to avoid over-punctuation or undue separation and emphasis.	Sometimes, with *and, but,* etc. between short sentences.	Yes.

Make us central to your writing!

Essential Points About the Table

- Punctuation *tells readers how to read* by indicating points of *separation* and *emphasis.* All punctuation separates parts of the sentence for a *reason*.

- Commas are not used to indicate a pause. Writers and readers perceive pauses for all sorts of reasons that have nothing to do with clear or correct punctuation. A better principle is to use commas in order to help readers see the structure of sentences and each sentence's most important idea. If in doubt about where to insert commas in a sentence, consider rewriting the sentence using words to clarify the sentence as opposed to using punctuation.

- If the word or words in question make up a sentence interrupter (appositive, nonessential modifying clause or phrase, or parenthetical statement), you must use *paired marks.*   You can choose from paired commas, parentheses, or dashes. If in doubt about which to use, try them all and decide which works best for the context