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CREATING SEPARATION AND EMPHASIS IN YOUR WRITING PART II: USING PUNCTUATION WITHIN SENTENCES

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Last month I began a discussion on style — separation and emphasis in your writing — by discussing how to join independent clauses. I wrote about using punctuation to show the reader the relatedness of your ideas, and I covered how to use those punctuation marks correctly. I also promised that I would cover using punctuation correctly to create separation and emphasis within a sentence.

All writers want to add elegance to their writing, but many are often too busy or lack the confidence to try. I'm positive that once we cover how to correctly introduce ideas or set off ideas you will have the confidence to drop in a dash or add those parentheses!

Introducing ideas: commas and colons

Crafting any well-written document requires that you link your ideas for the reader. While there are many useful writing techniques for linking ideas, one of the most common is introducing the reader to your idea in general and then moving to the specifics of that idea. (In fact, I just used this type of construction in the last sentence.) When you use this type of construction in one sentence, you have two punctuation options: the comma and the colon. (See, I just did it again!)



Tenielle Fordyce-Ruff

Using a comma is the most common and more conventional way to introduce your reader to an idea. It simply tells the reader that you have concluded the introduction and are beginning the heart of the idea in your sentence. Use a comma after most introductory phrases to help your reader understand which ideas in the sentence to concentrate on.

But, a comma does not emphasize the idea that follows the introductory phrase. If you want to emphasize the heart of your idea, use a colon instead of a comma.

Using a colon is the strongest way to create emphasis. A colon tells the reader



that key information is coming. It signals the importance of the idea that follows it. For instance, adding a colon before a list of elements for a cause or action or a key fact the case turns on can help ensure the reader understands the importance of the information that follows.

Because colons create so much emphasis, however, it is important to use them correctly. You don't want to draw your reader's attention to a grammar error! First, the part of the sentence *before* the colon must be an independent clause. This means that you could replace the colon with a period and the clause could function as a grammatically correct sentence. Second, make sure that if you are introducing a list you punctuate the list correctly. Use commas for simple lists (lists of items without any internal punctuation) and semi-colons for complex lists (lists of items that contain internal punctuation). Additionally, if the list has three or more items, you should use serial commas — place a comma between the last two items. For instance, "Negligence has four elements: duty, breach, causation, and damages."

Setting off ideas: dashes, parentheses, and commas

The ideas legal writers want to express are often complex. Words and ideas within sentences must be defined or explained. Because of this complexity, many sentences in legal writing contain interrupters — words that break from the main idea of the sentence.

These interrupters can be set off with dashes, commas, and parentheses. The choice of which mark to use depends on how much emphasis you want to draw to the interrupter.

Using a colon is the strongest way to create emphasis. A colon tells the reader that key information is coming. It signals the importance of the idea that follows it.

Using dashes creates the most emphasis. Dashes signal to the reader that the information set off is important or crucial, and may even be more important than the information in the main sentence. For instance, "I have known — and still know — many attorneys whose work I respect" focuses the reader's attention on the fact that I still know. The dashes emphasize my current knowledge.

A few quick words to help you use dashes correctly. If the interrupter comes in the middle of the sentence be sure to use a pair of dashes. You can, however, use a dash to set off information at the beginning or end of the sentence. In those instances, the first word or terminal punctuation replaces the second dash. Additionally, make sure to use dashes and not hyphens.

Using parentheses provides the reader with a visual distinction, but also signals to the reader that the information in the interrupter isn't crucial to her understand-

ing of the sentence. Parentheses are used instead to set off useful or interesting information. Because of this, they do not add emphasis to the ideas within the parentheses; indeed, readers frequently skip over that information. For example, “I have known (and still know) many attorneys whose work I respect” does not emphasize my current knowledge. My use of parentheses here told the reader that my current knowledge was not crucial information, and, therefore, the reader may have skipped the parenthetical information entirely.

Finally, using commas to set off interrupters creates no emphasis. Because the use of commas is so common, a reader smoothly absorbs the information in the interrupter. Take, for example, “I have known, and still know, many attorneys whose work I respect.” The commas here create a balanced sentence and draw no particular attention to any part of the sentence.

Conclusion

I hope this discussion of style has helped you understand how punctuation

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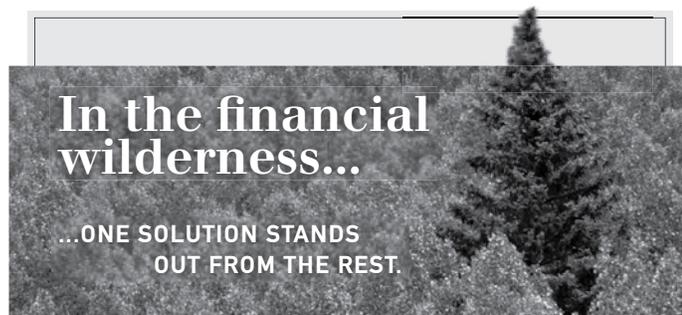
can add elegance and emphasis to your writing and helped you have the confidence to spice up your writing with a dash or two.

Sources

The idea for the using punctuation for separation and emphasis came from a Boise State University Writing Center Handout on punctuation hierarchy available at <http://www.boisestate.edu/wcenter/resources.html> (last visited August 10, 2010). The punctuation rules are from Anne Enquist & Laurel Currie Oates, *Just Writing: Grammar, Punctuation, and Style for the Legal Writer* (3d ed. 2009).

About the Author

Tenielle Fordyce-Ruff is a member of *Smith, Fordyce-Ruff & Penny, PLLC*. She clerked for Justice Roger Burdick of the Idaho Supreme Court and taught *Legal Research and Writing, Advanced Legal Research, and Intensive Legal Writing* at the University of Oregon School of Law. She is also the author of *Idaho Legal Research, a book designed to help law students, new attorneys, and paralegals navigate the intricacies of researching Idaho law*. You can reach her at tfordyce-ruff@sfrplaw.com.



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