

Punctuation! A review of the comma, the dash, and the paragraph.

REFERENCES:

**COURT REPORTING: BAD GRAMMAR/GOOD PUNCTUATION
(MARGIE WAKEMAN WELLS)**

**ENGLISH GUIDE FOR COURT REPORTERS (2ND EDITION)
(LILLIAN I. MORSON)**

**THE GREGG REFERENCE MANUAL
(WILLIAM A. SABIN)**



By: Treva Maricle, CCR, RPR

Let's not confuse "style" with punctuation rules. We have rules that dictate exactly where punctuation goes. There are a few gray areas when punctuating the spoken word, but you can usually find a rule for placing a mark of punctuation where it should go.

Style is how you do your "by lines" or if you stitch a spelling with all caps or upper and lower case. Typing your dates 9/24/11 or 9-24-11 is style.

Remember that it is reference, not preference, meaning you punctuate according to a reference, not your preference to punctuate because it is your "style."

Always be open to learning and improving the readability of your transcripts!

What is a run-on sentence?

“A run-on sentence is two independent sentences combined in such a way that it looks as if they are one unit, one sentence.” (Wells)

Examples:

Our morning session begins at 8:30, our afternoon session begins at 1:30.
(Wrong, wrong, wrong!)

Our morning session begins at 8:30; our afternoon session begins at 1:30.
(Yes!)

Our morning session begins at 8:30. Our afternoon session begins at 1:30. (Okay!)

If the two sentences are closely related in thought, a semicolon is best.



Examples:

A. I think I began working, plus or minus, the first part of June or the first part of July, I just don't recall. (Wrong!)

A. I think I began working, plus or minus, the first part of June or the first part of July. I just don't recall. (Yes!)

A. More or less. Sometimes it would be more, sometimes it would be less. (Wrong!)

A. More or less. Sometimes it would be more; sometimes it would be less. (Yes!)

A. More or less. Sometimes it would be more. Sometimes it would be less. (Okay!)

What is a comma splice?

Rule: “Do not use a comma between two independent clauses that are not joined by a coordinating conjunction (*and, but, or, or nor*). This error of punctuation is known as a comma splice and produces a run-on sentence.” (Gregg)

Examples:

There's a list of the ones that we surveyed and found problems on, there's another list of those that met the policy and paid. (Wrong!)

There's a list of the ones that we surveyed and found problems on; there's another list of those that met the policy and paid. (Yes!)

There's a list of the ones that we surveyed and found problems on.
There's another list of those that met the policy and paid. (Yes!)

Commas and parentheticals.

Rule: “Words, phrases, or clauses that are not necessary to complete the structure or the meaning of a sentence.” (Gregg)

Rule: “A parenthetical is always surrounded by punctuation.” (Wells)

Examples:

We took a little break, Doctor, and you provided me with what looks like a report from a subsequent visit.

And, Mrs. Smith, when is the next office visit that you remember?

So, Carol, are you the oldest in your family?

I, on the other hand, would prefer to be at the beach this afternoon.

She was, in fact, the first to appear on the scene.

And, of course, it may differ from year to year.

Commas in a series.

Rule: “Use a comma before the *and* that separates the last two items in a series to provide exactness to the items. If the last two items belong together as a single unit, omitting the last comma will show this.”
(Morson)

Rule: “When three or more items are listed in a series and the last item is preceded by *and*, *or*, or *nor*, place a comma before the conjunction as well as between the other items.” (Gregg)

Rule: “When the series has commas between the items and a coordinate conjunction before the final item in the series, put a comma before the final conjunction.” (Wells)



Examples:

On the menu today is tuna, turkey, and egg salad.

The meeting was open to doctors, lawyers, and support personnel.

Sometimes there are phrases and clauses in a series.

He had what appeared to be a full thickness fenestrated tear of his subscapularis, some tendinopathy in his biceps tendon, and some degeneration in his acromioclavicular joint.

The comma before “and” is sometimes referred to as the “legal” comma.

For example, who would you rather be?

Upon her death, Mrs. Smith left \$600,000 to Mark, Debbie and Robin.


Mark gets \$300,000; Debbie and Robin each get \$150,000.

Upon her death, Mrs. Smith left \$600,000 to Mark, Debbie, and Robin.

In this instance, Mark, Debbie, and Robin will each get \$200,000.

Some of us use the comma before *and*; some of us don't. It depends how we were taught and when we were taught.

With these three references saying to use it, I choose to use it.



More examples:

His favorite foods are fried shrimp, boiled crawfish, beans and rice.


“Beans and rice” here is considered as one element.

What if??

His favorite foods are fried shrimp and boiled crawfish and beans and rice.

No punctuation needed!

The bottom line is that a serial comma adds clarity and makes a simple list easier to read.



More examples:

Her chores were to wash the dishes, to mop the floor, and to empty the trash.

I came, I saw, and I bought the T-shirt.

Well, that would have been Mr. Lindberg performing that task, Mr. Miller writing his opinion letter, and counsel for the company putting the finishing touches on it.

The word *so*.

Rule: “When *so* starts a dependent clause, answers the question *why*, always implies the reason for doing something, it doesn’t take a comma in front of it.” (Wells)

Examples:

Q. I'd like to get a copy of these so I can have them in my paperwork.

Q. Why don't you tell me when the first time was you started having problems with drugs so I can get an idea of where that falls in our time frame.

A. And I was focused on getting me and my uncle to a safe spot so we can get out and run.

Q. If you have a recollection and you're not confident in it and it's just sort of a guesstimate, please explain it that way so that the record is clear.

Rule: “When *so* means *therefore* and starts a new sentence, it is a conjunctive adverb. It takes a period or a semicolon in front of it and no comma after it because it is one syllable.” (Wells)

Examples:

Q. There's a dash under the penalty column; so that would mean that apparently from September 30th, 2010, the bill was paid timely.

A. If it's older than that, it goes off the system; so I don't know if that was paid or not.

Rule: “Never put a single separating comma after a coordinate conjunction” (Wells)

And remember, the coordinate conjunctions are *and*, *but*, *or*, and *nor*.

Examples:

Q. So, what is the significance of there not being any distinct capsular contracture? (Wrong!)

Q. So what is the significance of there not being any distinct capsular contracture? (Yes!)

Q. Is that something that has to be done inframammary, or, can it be done axillary? (Wrong!)

Q. Is that something that has to be done inframammary, or can it be done axillary? (Yes!)



Q. And, who hired you for that position? (Wrong!)

Q. And who hired you for that position? (Yes!)

A. And, again, I'm looking at No. 5 at the bottom of that page. (Yes!)

“Again” is a parenthetical and is surrounded by commas.

A. Or, it was put on at a later date. (Wrong!)

A. Or it was put on at a later date. (Yes!)

Rule: “Do not put a single separating comma after a one-syllable conjunctive adverb: *so, this, hence, then, still, yet, plus.*” (Wells)

Examples:

- A. It's so unimportant to them what happened that they didn't ask for the files themselves; yet they're asking the Court to impose these massive sanctions for the gap between the files they didn't even ask for.
 - A. Still there was no response after my many attempts to contact him.
 - A. Hence the reason for calling the authorities.
-



Rule: “Use a separating comma after any form of a single-word parenthetical.” (Wells)

Examples:

Well, that’s how I’ve always done it.

Oh, whatever you think is best.

Now, that’s what I’m talking about.

Paragraphing.

Paragraphing is important to the readability of your transcript. As a general rule, you should try to paragraph three or four times in a page-long answer.

Paragraph where there is a change of topic or a shift in focus of the topic.

A Respond in as narrow a fashion as could be to the requests made by the TSSB. And then as you said, I mean, preemptively, see where could the TSSB be possibly going and how could I work on that. How could I -- how could I try to defend the company if something were to happen? Mind you, at that point, you know, without the TSSB saying this is what we're going to do and this is when we're going to do it, there's a certain level of shadow-boxing. You don't know exactly what it's going to be. So there was that aspect of it as well. As I said previously, there was -- at some point, there may have been a discussion of, you know, the prospect of a rescission. At some point, there could have been -- there was certainly discussion of, hey, let's get the financial statements audited so that we can really not only have your reliance on it but show that an auditor had separately looked at them so that the TSSB could rely on them to demonstrate that the company had the financial wherewithal to pay all its investors. As I said, I mean, did I foresee compliance problems? Compliance being different from an enforcement action or a regulatory action or something of that nature, I can draw that distinction.

(Ughhhhh!)



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As I said, I mean, did I foresee compliance problems? Compliance being different from an enforcement action or a regulatory action or something of that nature, I can draw that distinction. (Much easier on the eyes!)



Paragraph when there's a change in speakers.

Example:

Well, I asked -- he says, "Can you help me up?"

And I said, "Just don't pass out on me."

And I got him up. And he had his arm in a bad position, and I seen blood running. So I sat him on the bed. That's when I called the main office and asked for help.

Paragraph when the person being addressed changes.

Example:

MS. NAVARRO: Objection. Relevance.

THE ARBITRATOR: Your objection is overruled. I'm going to allow it. It's relevant.

Are you trying to get him to explain what the job is like?

You can also paragraph when a question or answer is interrupted and a new sentence or question begins.

Example:

Q. So that's the drug program; is --

A. Yes, the drug program.

Q. -- that correct?

Now, did you do all these at the same time, or did it depend on what was needed?

Paragraphs come in all sizes!! I know it's shocking, but it is acceptable to have a one- or two-word paragraph.

Example:

Q. So that's a no or yes?

A. It's a no.

Q. Okay. Thank you.

Did any part of your body hit anything in the car?

Everyone's opinion may differ on where to paragraph in a long question or answer, but with attention to this issue and with practice, you will develop a feel for it.

And please don't think that paragraphing is "padding" the record. It goes back to readability. Your number one goal is to have a transcript that is useful and easy to read.

Some words and phrases to alert you to paragraph are: *at the same time, by the same token, consequently, for example, in contrast, in general, on the other hand, specifically.*

And while we're talking about padding the record, what is up with beginning a new line when you go into colloquy?

Example:

MR. SMITH:

I'm objecting to that question.

MR. JONES:

Why? What's your problem?

MR. SMITH:

I was almost falling asleep and wanted to speak up and remind you I'm here.

MR. JONES: I'm going back to my questioning.

That is a style.

I think that is padding the record!

The throwaway words.

Definition: “A throwaway word is a word that is used parenthetically and has no real meaning in the sentence.” (Wells)

A few of these are: *you know, like, I mean, okay, you understand,* and *you know what I'm saying.*


Punctuation will surround them in the middle of a sentence. If the throwaway starts a sentence, it will be followed by a comma.

Examples:

But that's the only training that you have to have, you know, before you go to the academy.

I was going to, like, decide whether I wanted to go to school that day or not.

I mean, I'd always thought about it, but then I had just decided, you know, I'm not getting any younger.



When “about” can be substituted for “like,” it is okay to not set it off in commas.

I mean, like, the last time I was, you know, with her, she, like, finally hired some decent older people, you know, that can run an office.

Can you have too many commas in a sentence??

The dash.

Court reporters use the dash mostly to indicate an interruption. But there are other reasons to use a dash besides an interruption.

The court reporter's nightmare!!

Example:

Q. Would 10 percent have been a general number --

A. Yes, sir.

Q. -- in your business that would --

A. Yes.

Q. -- reflect your markup?

Rule: “When an interruption occurs and the speaker does not stop talking, use a dash for the interruption and a second dash in front of the continuation of the original thought.”

(Wells)



Rule: “Do not capitalize the first word after a dash unless it is a word that is always capitalized. “ (Wells)

Examples:

So I would say that we ended up -- we represented a lot of individuals, yes.

And it may have been -- Chuck may have come along after a couple of years.

A comma before the dash is not needed.

Examples:

Before we started your deposition, -- well, tell me exactly what you reviewed before you walked in here. (No!)

Before we started your deposition -- well, tell me exactly what you reviewed before you walked in here. (Yes!)

When there is a complete sentence following the dash, it is not capitalized.

Rule: Use a dash when the sentence structure is broken, that is, when a sentence is begun and is not completed. (Wells)

Examples:

Q. After 1998, where was the --

A. Then I moved and opened my own practice.

Q. And what does “full time” mean as a patrolman as far as hours or --

A. Forty hours a week, insurance, benefits.

Q. If you'd like it read back, yes. But that is the exact question.

A. I'm just trying to make sure I --

Q. That's the question.

A. I remember negotiating with Charles Smith, but I just -- I don't remember if -- because we -- you know, what we did is -- I do remember that we had -- what do they call -- employment-type contracts.

Rule: “When the sentence begins with a word or words that represent the topic of the conversation and is then broken off, use a dash.” (Wells)

Examples:

Q. The neck brace -- was she required to wear that 24 hours a day?

Q. Mr. Jones -- was he present when you arrived?

What if?

Q. What about Mr. Jones? Was he present when you arrived?

A. One point that is relevant to the facts -- and I'm sure you're familiar with it -- is that the mobile home had to be existing on that site as of that date.

Rule: “Put a dash before and a period after words like *correction* and *no* or *strike that* when they are used after an interruption of the sentence.” (Wells)

Examples:

Q. And Sunday morning after you left Winnsboro, did you have any other medical treatment at all at any time after -- strike that.

You were seen at Winnsboro at the Franklin Medical Center?

Q. And the day before when you go and do all your pre-med, you spend the night there in the hospital -- no.

Did you spend the night somewhere else and then go back in the morning?

Rule: “Use dashes when a speaker is interrupted but includes some additional remarks before continuing with the original idea.”
(Morson)

Examples:

Q. After completion of high school --

A. Louisiana State University.

Q. Please let me finish. -- where did you next attend school?

Rule: “When the sentence within the sentence is a question, use an interrog before the second dash.” (Wells)

Examples:

Q. As you were entering the hospital -- it was to visit your sister, right? -- which entrance did you use?

A. The answer to the question -- can you hear me now? -- is for me to know and you to find out.

Q. The memo said, “Please report to the main office” – didn’t I give you a copy? -- “at 453 Maple Drive on Saturday, October 1.”

Depending on the speaker’s inflection, I also use “-- okay? -- “ within a question or answer.

Example:

First thing -- okay? -- is we went to Wal-Mart -- okay? -- to meet Debbie.

Fragment Rule:

“Punctuate anything that stands for a complete thought the same way you would punctuate the full sentence.” (Wells)

Examples:

Q. And during that time that your work was restricted by the chiropractor, did you go in at all, or did you just stay home and stay away?

A. Not to work. I may have stopped by, you know, occasionally, but not to work.

Q. Fair enough. I'm not going to quarrel. It's okay. Really.

Rule: “When the words *object*, *objection*, et cetera, are used alone, put a period after them before the reasons for the objection are enumerated.” (Wells)

Examples:

MS. LONG: Objection. Form of the question. Vague.

MR. BROWN: Nonresponsive. Objection.

MR. JONES: Objection to relevance.

Rule: “When the words after the *yes* or *no* simply reflect or “echo” the words of the question, use a comma after the *yes* or *no*.” (Wells)

Examples:

Q. Do you believe that experience would have been important in this case?

A. Yes, I do.

Rule: When the words after the *yes* or *no* do not repeat or echo the words of the question but provide additional information, use a period after the *yes* or *no*.

Examples:

Q. When you say you and Bob Smith moved there, did you have a firm where you were both members of the same firm?

A. No. We were just sharing office space.

The word “okay.”


Rule: “When *okay* is at the beginning of a sentence, use a period after it.”
(Wells)

Examples:

Q. Okay. What did you do next?

Q. Okay. All right. Okay. So you didn't actually see the collision?

THE COURT: Okay. I'm with you now. I'd forgotten what 2C was.



Rule: “If the word *okay* is followed by direct address, put a comma after *okay* and a period after the direct address.” (Wells)

Examples:

Q. Okay, Mr. Jones. Well, when did you see him next?

A. And I said, "Okay, Mr. Brown. I will." Okay?

Rule: “When *okay* is at the end of a sentence, use a period or interrog in front of it for the statement or question and a period or interrog after it, depending on the intonation of the speaker.” (Wells)

Examples:

Q. I can repeat my question if you didn't hear it. Okay?

Q. That is exactly what I needed to know. Okay.

A. I'm not going to answer the question the way you want me to. Okay? Let's please move on.

Tidbits!

In making your transcripts more readable and visually appealing, keep Mr., Dr., Mrs., Miss, Ms., or any other abbreviated title of address on the same line as the name.

Also include the month and the day on the same line.

In case you ever wondered, these are always two words: *a lot, all right, no place.*

Always rules:

Rule: “Put colons and semicolons outside of the quotation mark with no exceptions in the entire language.” (Wells)


Example:

You said, “Don’t ever step foot in here again”; isn’t that correct?

Rule: “Put periods and commas inside of the quotation mark with no exceptions in the entire language.” (Wells)

Example:

Wiser is responsible for saying, "These are the limits on our use of this data."



**You show me your reference,
and I'll show you mine!**

I have several copies of “Bad Grammar/Good Punctuation” for sale.

The price is 59.95 plus \$5 mailing. Please contact me at TrevaRPR@gmail.com if you would like to purchase a copy.

This is an extraordinary reference book for court reporters!! It is a mainstay on my desk!
