



How to Become a Grammar Ninja

Grammar Ninjas are ruthless, deadly, and articulate. Everyone wants to be one, yet why is it so hard to become one? Why is punctuation and grammar so important? Why do we even care if we're missing a comma, or a word is not capitalized? If I mess up in my writing, will the grammar police come after me? These are all good questions. Perhaps we should look at it this way. Take a look at the following examples:

“Let’s eat, Grandma!”



Scenario #1

“Let’s eat Grandma!”



Scenario #2

In the first example, the speaker is planning on settling down with a nice, home-cooked meal with his sweet old grandma. In the second example, the speaker is also planning on having a nice, home-cooked meal, but grandma is more of the main course instead of a dinner guest. Nobody wants to eat their grandma! Right?

So what’s the difference? Well, without a comma, you go from being the nice grandchild to being a homicidal maniac. I would say that, in this case, grammar was very important. Take a look at the next example:

“The panda eats shoots and leaves.”



Scenario #1

“The panda eats, shoots, and leaves.”



Scenario #2

In the first example, we have your standard cuddly panda bear whose favorite foods to eat are bamboo shoots and leaves. In the second example, we have an outlaw who has just shot up the Mongolian Grill and is now wanted by the police. In this case, too many commas, and we go from the “Animal Planet” network to “Cops”. See what happens? And we are just talking about commas. Could you imagine what happens when sentences don’t have periods?

Grammar Joke #1: Mrs. Question Mark comes up to Mr. Exclamation Mark sitting in his recliner and says “Do you always have to shout? Well? Do you? Huh?”



CAPITALIZATION: WITHOUT IT, WE'RE ALL JUST LOWER CASE LETTERS

The journey to becoming a Grammar Ninja begins with a single step, and every sentence begins with a capital, so the how-to's of capitalization seem like a logical place to begin. Here is a simple **checklist** which should help you understand when to capitalize letters:

- The first word of every sentence: *Yes, we are out of pickled pig's feet, Mr. Monegan.*
- The first word of a quoted sentence (not just a quoted phrase): *And then she said, "Well, that's not what your Momma told me last night!"*
- The specific name of a person (and his or her title), a place, or a thing (otherwise known as **proper nouns**). Proper nouns include specific locations and geographic regions; political, social, and athletic organizations and agencies; historical events; documents and periodicals; nationalities and their language; religions, their members and their deities; brand or trade names; and holidays: *Mr. Cooper told us that he had been to Kenya with five Germans, two Republicans, and a Nike shoe salesperson, while reading the Wall Street Journal on Memorial Day.*
- The abbreviation for proper nouns. Government agencies are probably the most frequently abbreviated. Remember to capitalize each letter: *The FBI finally caught up with Mrs. Langley..*
- Adjectives (descriptive words) derived (made from) proper nouns: *America is not a place where we frequently wave the Canadian flag.*
- The pronoun I: *I don't know why I love capital letters, but I do!*
- The most important words in a title: *This past July, I enjoyed reading The Wonderful World of Grammar and Punctuation.*

Let's apply what we've learned! For the following, mark a "C" if it is correctly capitalized. Then, fix the ones which are incorrect:

- | | |
|------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| 1. ____ sixty-third avenue | 11. ____ the San Francisco giants |
| 2. ____ Fourth of July | 12. ____ Chapter 14 |
| 3. ____ spanish | 13. ____ Randall P. McMurphy, sr. |
| 4. ____ burger king Restaurant | 14. ____ romance novels |
| 5. ____ a high school near me | 15. ____ Home economics Class |
| 6. ____ CIA | 16. ____ math |
| 7. ____ Louisville Slugger Company | 17. ____ History 101 |
| 8. ____ december 7th | 18. ____ Spring fever |
| 9. ____ Veneta, Oregon | 19. ____ the English countryside |
| 10. ____ Of mice and men (novel) | 20. ____ Matthew Knight arena |

Grammar Joke #2: The Past, Present, and Future walk into a bar. It was tense.

“Woman, without her man, is nothing.”
“Woman: Without her, man is nothing.”

Punctuation: The Colon is Not Just a Body Part!

As you saw earlier, punctuation has power. To communicate with proper punctuation could mean the difference between life and death. As you can see above, a few well placed punctuation marks can mean big changes in a sentence. The first type of punctuation we will look at is the simplest. Below is an easy checklist for the “stop sign” of the sentence: the **period**.

- At the end of a declarative sentence (a sentence that makes a statement): *I once saw Mr. Burgess wearing a tiara.*
- At the end of a command or request: *Here is some mouthwash. Please use it.*
- At the end of an indirect question: *Jojo asked if I knew where he had left his banana.*
- Before a decimal number, and between dollars and cents: *The average family raises 2.5 children, and has approximately \$1.27 in change between their sofa cushions.*
- After an initial in a person’s name: *A lot of people don’t know that F. Scott Fitzgerald’s first name was Fabio.*
- After an abbreviation: *On Oct. 31, weird people come to my door asking for handouts.*

Question marks are like periods, but with a funky curved thing up above them. Here are some rules for their use:

- At the end of a question: *Why do you look so sad, Beaver fan?*
- Inside a quotation mark when the quote is a question: *The Duck fan asked, “Is it because you lost the game, Beaver fan?”*

Exclamation marks also end a sentence, but always with so much more excitement! Below are a couple of useful rules for their use:

- At the end of a word, phrase, or sentence filled with emotion: *Hurry up! I think Mr. Gardner is coming!*
- Inside a quotation mark when the quote is an exclamation: *Brendan yelled, “Hurry up! I think Mr. Gardner is coming!”*

Quotation marks are often misunderstood. Where do those dang things go, anyway? Here are some tips:

- When directly quoting dialogue, not when paraphrasing: *Abraham Lincoln once said, “You can never trust a quotation that you find on the internet.”*
- For titles of chapters, articles, short stories, poems, songs, or periodicals: *My favorite song is “I’m Sexy and I Know It.”*

Semicolons are useful, but, why aren’t they full colons? Try these rules when using semicolons:

- Between two independent clauses (an independent clause is a complete thought. It has a subject and a predicate): *Mr. Hart played basketball this morning; surprisingly the backboard didn’t shatter when he dunked the ball.*
- Between elements in a series that uses commas: *The possible dates for your operation are Thursday, July 9; Saturday, July 11; or Monday, July 13.*

Grammar Joke #3: What’s the difference between a cat and a comma? One has claws at the end of its paws, and one is a pause at the end of a clause.



"The operation was a success, but your colon is now a semi-colon."

Colons are clean and efficient! Here are some rules for using your colons properly:

- Between two complete ideas when the second idea explains the first: *Mr. Best sold his comb: He apparently hasn't had any hair since 1994.*
- Before a list: *The Devil bought his son his favorite snacks: the eyes of a newt, the legs of a frog, and the souls of little children.*
- Between titles and subtitles: *Mr. Incredible: The True Story of Mr. Hart.*
- Between volumes and page numbers: *Japanese Manga 13: 22*
- Between chapters and verses: *John 3:16*
- Between hours and minutes: *It's 4:00 A.M. – time to milk the cows.*

Apostrophes are often put in the wrong place, or, like some brains, not used at all. Check it out:

- Where letters or numbers have been deleted – as in a contraction: *I looked at the young freshman boy and whispered, "It's (it is) okay to cry every so often."*
- At the end of a name where there is ownership (remember to also add an s after the apostrophe if the word or name does not end in an s already): *Mr. Lee's pride took a hit when his Beavers lost the Civil War.*

Commas are used as a pause in a sentence. They're the calm before the storm. A brief hesitation on this journey we call life. It also has these rules:

- Between items in dates and addresses: *Edgar Allan Poe died in Baltimore, Maryland, on October 7, 1849.*
- Between words in a list: *The best superheroes are Superman, Batman, and the Pizza Man.*
- Between equally important adjectives (be careful not to separate adjectives that describe each other): *Grammar can be mastered by intelligent, talented high school ninjas.*
- After a tag that precedes a direct quote: *Emily mumbled, "Yes, Ms. Hunt. I will not draw graffiti on your desks again."*
- In a quote that precedes a tag and is not a question or an exclamation: *"Yes, Ms. Hunt. I will not draw graffiti on your desks again," mumbled Emily.*
- Around nonessential clauses, parenthetical phrases, and appositives (A nonessential or nonrestrictive clause is a word or group of words that are not necessary for the sentence's completion; a parenthetical phrase interrupts the flow of a sentence; and an appositive is a word or group of words that rename the noun preceding them): *Cobyn's mother, Jennie (appositive), who has trouble with directions (nonessential clause), had to ask for help.*
- After introductory words, phrases, and clauses: *Hoping for the best, Teagan opened the gate to the cemetery.*
- Before conjunctions (Conjunctions are words that link two independent clauses together): *Benson wanted to try ballroom dancing before the prom, so he signed up for lessons at a local studio.*

Grammar Joke #4: My English teacher looked at me sternly and said, "Give me two examples of pronouns." I said, "Who, me?"