**Grammar 101: Punctuation for Pauses, Omissions, and Parentheticals**

In the previous punctuation post, [**skroberts**](http://skroberts.livejournal.com/) discussed terminal punctuation—punctuation that ends sentences—and punctuation that is used to hang related thoughts together. In this post I'll be discussing punctuation that is used to give additional information, as in a parenthetical, punctuation that is used to pause or omit, and the almighty comma.

*With examples from Harry Potter, Stargate: SG-1, and Saiyuki.*

**Comma**
The most recognizable piece of punctuation outside of those previously discussed is the comma ( **,** ) . Oft abused, the rules that govern the proper usage of a comma are many, but if you can understand some of the underlying principles for why those rules exist, that should clear up some of the mystery and make remembering and following the rules much easier.

Let's start with the easy stuff. . . .

· A comma is used **in a series** to separate the items.

*Harry recognized the Polyjuice potion from its ingredients: shredded boomslang skin, fluxweed, lacewing flies, and powdered bicorn horn.*

*Sam had promised to teach Jonas wormhole theory, motorcycle riding, and lock-picking—not necessarily in that order.*

*Traveling with the three idiots meant he had to stop for longer periods of time, had to stop more often, and had to put up with their whining.*

The last comma in a series—the one just before the *and*—is a stylistic choice. If you'd like to read more about the debate regarding the usage of this comma, please see the previous feature [A Special Comma](http://community.livejournal.com/fandom_grammar/11158.html).

· A comma is used **with quoted material**. It is use to introduce and set off quoted material, as in dialogue tags, or to cite research.

*The Prior tilted his staff forward, his expression blank. "Since the Book of Origin said, 'Let all who believe share the bounty of the Ori,' will you not find it in your hearts to share?"*

*Sirius said, "We were fifteen. We were all idiots!"*

*"Dial the gate," Jack ordered.*

*"Hey pretty lady," Gojyo said, "care to be my good luck charm?"*

In this last example, it's important to note that the dialogue tag is interrupting the sentence and is therefore set off by a comma. If the dialogue tag were placed between two complete sentences, a period would follow *said*, and the next sentence would begin with a capital letter.

**Interrupting:** *"I believe I've asked," Hakkai said, "for you to be quiet."*

**Separate Sentence:** *"I should have checked the Map," Harry said. "Now every time I close my eyes I see Dumbledore in his underwear."*

· Commas are also used **in addresses**, **in dates**, **after salutations**, **when a title or degree follows a person's name**, and **in numbers**.

*Cheyenne Mountain, Colorado*

*October 31, 1981*

*Dear Gojyo, Please do not use beer cans as ashtrays.*

*Daniel Jackson, Ph.D.*

*38 minutes is 2,280 seconds*

· A comma is used with a conjunction to **join two independent clauses** in a compound sentence. This topic is discussed in detail in a previous feature on [Independent and Dependent Clauses](http://community.livejournal.com/fandom_grammar/4575.html); however, here are some examples of how to combine independent clauses with a comma.

*Sam sets up a force field to keep people out of her lab****, but*** *she forgets to hang her "do not disturb" sign before turning it on.*

*Harry stretches his arm out over the broom****, and*** *he closes his fingers around the snitch.*

*Sanzo is either going to shoot Gojyo****, or*** *he's going to shoot himself—either way, he won't have to listen to Gojyo any longer.*

· A comma is used after **introductory words such as exclamations, common expressions, adverb clauses,** and **names used in a direct address**.

*"****If you must know,*** *I've only died three times," Daniel said. "****Well,*** *that we know of."*

***Because no one could prove Daniel had died more than three times,*** *he kept up his lie (though he knew of at least two other occasions).*

*"****Harry,*** *you have to tell Dumbledore," Hermione insisted.*

*"****Shit,*** *I don't have time to monkey-sit," Gojyo groused.*

· Commas are also used to punctuate parenthetical expressions. A **parenthetical expression** contains qualifying or explanatory information for a thought. It can be removed from a sentence without changing the meaning of the sentence, but gives information that qualifies, clarifies, explains, and otherwise enhances the sentence.

*Daniel looked at the picture****, the one Ferretti took on that first trip to Abydos,*** *and thought about Sha're.*

Parenthetical expressions can be punctuated in a number of ways, which are covered below.

**Em Dashes**
An em dash ( **—** ) is used to indicate a break in thought or sentence structure; to introduce a phrase added for emphasis, definition, or explanation; or to separate two clauses. When used to define or to explain, the em dash is punctuating a parenthetical expression.

An em dash is about the length of a lower case m, which is how its name was derived. On a Mac, you can type an em dash by pressing shift + option + -. On a PC, you can make an em dash by pressing ALT + 0151. If your computer is unable to create this useful piece of punctuation you can use two hyphens (--) as an acceptable way to indicate an em dash.

Em dashes are covered extensively in the answer to a question on [Speech That Trails Off](http://community.livejournal.com/fandom_grammar/2828.html), though here are some examples of its use.

**Emphasis:** *Teddy Lupin had trouble getting dates. His father was a werewolf—a werewolf! Who could blame them?*

**Definition:** *Sam pounded the glyphs on the DHD—the Dial Home Device—and waited for the event horizon to form.*

**Explanation:** *It wasn't that Sanzo thought they were always idiots—Hakkai was mostly an idiot for choosing to associate with Gojyo—it was that they were idiots the majority of the time.*

**Separate Two Clauses:** *Neither shall live while the other survives—what did that even mean?*

When do you use an em dash? A lot of people have trouble knowing when to use a dash versus when to use a comma, a set of parentheses, or a semi-colon. Often it is easier to figure out if you should *not* use those other forms of punctuation. For cases in which the grammatical rules are less strict, you should decide how you want the sentence to sound and then punctuate accordingly.

**Emphasis:** The em dash is the only form of punctuation that can show emphasis in this way.

**Definition & Explanation:** These parenthetical expressions may be punctuated with a set of commas, a set of parentheses, or a set of em dashes. Please see the section on **Parenthetical Expressions** for deciding which punctuation to use in those cases.

**Separate Two Clauses:** Two clauses can be joined by an em dash, a semi-colon, or a conjunction and a comma. The flow of your sentence will help you make this distinction. If you want the clauses to have a distinct separation, you might prefer to use a conjunction and a comma. A semi-colon brings the two clauses together quite tightly (I recommend using a semi-colon when the thoughts are very closely related). An em dash is best used when the second clause is changing direction: *Goku wasn't usually distracted—he smelled meat buns.* An em dash is also effective when you want the reader to pause between the two clauses: *Daniel hadn't been human for long—this time around.*

**Parentheses**
The entire function of a set of parentheses ( **( )** ) is to offer parenthetical information—whether it is for an academic purpose or a non-academic purpose.

In a research paper this might be information to show the reference for cited material or the dates a historical figure lived.

*The Pharaohs of the Fourth Dynasty did not build the pyramids (Jackson, 1996).*

*Voldemort (1929–1998)*

For non-academic purposes, parentheses are also used to denote parenthetical expressions which are explained in detail below.

It should be noted that parentheses and square brackets always operate in pairs. If you have an open parenthesis, you need to also have a close parenthesis.

**Square Brackets**
Square brackets ( **[ ]** ) are editorial marks inserted into quoted text. They are used to clarify quotes and to alter the capitalization of something that is quoted (so that it fits into the sentence or paragraph).

**Clarify:** "He stepped into the Death Chamber and laughed."

*"He [Sirius] stepped into the Death Chamber and laughed."*

**Capitalization:** Even though it was originally thought that life developed on Earth independently, we now know that the Ancients recreated human life in their own image.

*"[W]e now know that the Ancients recreated human life in their own image."*

Use brackets for quoted material only if their use doesn't change the meaning of what's being quoted.

Square brackets are also used for information that you would normally put in parentheses when it is already in parentheses.

*Harry Potter was trained by one of the most powerful wizards of the age (Dumbledore [1881–1997] defeated the dark wizard Grindelwald in 1945).*

**Ellipsis**
The ellipsis ( **. . .** ) is used to indicate an omission or a pause. The word "ellipsis" literally means "something left out."

Ellipses are covered extensively in the answer to a question on [Speech That Trails Off](http://community.livejournal.com/fandom_grammar/2828.html), though here are some examples of its use:

**Omission:** The Anicents weren't always perfect, but they hadn't dominated the galaxy like the Goa'uld or corralled masses of followers to worship them, all for the selfish gain of power.

*"The Anicents weren't always perfect, but they hadn't . . . corralled masses of followers to worship them, all for the selfish gain of power."*

**Pause:** *"It's not that easy . . . being the Chosen One."*

**Trailing Off:** *"Will you just stop. . . ." Goku trailed off, the scent of meat buns catching his nose and his attention.*

For sentences that end with an ellipsis (because the sentence trails off), a period immediately follows the last word. The terminating period is placed as normal with the ellipsis following. If the sentence ends in an exclamaination mark or a question mark, the terminating mark follows the ellipsis.

**Period:** *"She is definitely a fine looking. . . ."*

**Question Mark:** *"Can someone just dial the . . . ?"*

**Parenthetical Expressions**
Ellipses show that sometimes part of a sentence can be removed while still retaining the meaning of a sentence. [Basic Sentence Structure](http://community.livejournal.com/fandom_grammar/23178.html) tells us that a sentence only needs a subject and a verb to be a complete thought; however a sentence can be more descriptive, informative, and interesting when parenthetical information is included.

A parenthetical expression can be removed from a sentence without changing the meaning of the sentence. As previously shown it can be punctuated by a set of commas, a set of em dashes, and, as one might expect, a set of parentheses. Each set of punctuation marks carries a different level of distance from the sentence.

**Parentheses** convey the greatest distance from the information in a sentence. The curved armatures of the marks make the parenthetical look like a capsule. That visual enclosure helps to isolate the information from the rest of the sentence.

If the parenthetical information is death dates or reference information, always use parentheses. You may also want to use parentheses when the parenthetical information tells about something that is happening outside of the narrative.

*Sirius hooked his foot around James's ankle, causing James to pinwheel his arms forward (it rather reminded Sirius of the time they turned the giant squid into the Octo-copter).*

*Daniel sighted down his weapon, watching the trailing wisps of smoke from the barrel (he'd grow used to the sight later, but it would take years), and tried not to wonder if the Jaffa had a family.*

**Em dashes** are also used to cause a break in the narrative. Though not as contained as a set of parentheses, em dashes can be used to isolate or to draw attention to parenthetical information.

*Mitchell nearly skipped—he didn't because he wasn't a twelve-year-old girl—but being on SG-1 with Sam, Jackson, and Teal'c was pretty exciting.*

*Gojyo did a double take—Hakkai was wearing an apron—and then wiped the beer off his chin.*

**Commas** separate the parenthetical expression according to the rules of punctuation without breaking the narrative. This is most effective when the parenthetical is closely related to the subject of the sentence.

*Hakkai folded their laundry, the third time he'd done the laundry in a month, and tried not to let it bother him that Gojyo was snoring under the growing pile of folded clothes.*

Commas can also be used to punctuate an appositive phrase (which are explained in detail in the previous feature [Prepositions and Phrases](http://community.livejournal.com/fandom_grammar/25147.html#cutid1)). As a reminder, an appositive phrase renames or identifies another noun or pronoun within a sentence. Because an appositive can be removed from a sentence without changing the meaning of a sentence, it is a parenthetical.

*Sanzo, a Buddhist monk, gunned down the youkai without blinking an eye.*

A parenthetical expression can appear at the end of a sentence. Parentheses always operate in pairs; however, a parenthetical punctuated with an em dash or comma may end with a period (or other terminal mark) if the parenthetical appears at the end of the sentence.

*Vala was still haunted by the memories of being a host—haunted by the cries, the blood, and the look of fear on the faces of the children Quetesh slew.*

*He'd never grown used to being Harry Potter, the boy who lived.*

So, (ooh, comma after the introductory word—and hey, this is a parenthetical with a change of direction in the middle) that's the Grammar 101 on how to punctuate using commas (which are busy little marks), em dashes, parentheses, square brackets, and ellipses. The last Grammar 101 post is coming up in 2 weeks and will cover the last of the basic punctuation marks.